



Dangerous Obsession

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Description: He broke my heart and sent me away... So why is he following me around town? Handsome, muscular and dangerous – Leo Gusev was the love of my life, until he shattered my heart into a million pieces. I never recovered from the blow. But clearly, neither did Leo. When I'm attacked in a dark alley late at night, Leo is there to save me with his bullets. But his heroic act might cost us both our lives... Years ago, Leo made sure no man could get his hands on me. He stopped at nothing – scaring off dates, paying people to disappear, and ultimately, disappoint me. He says he did it all to protect me... But I'm not sure I believe him. I know his family's dark past better than anyone... And I know what his father is capable of. Everything changes when I find out I'm expecting... and my baby will not be a child of the bratva. Even if it means losing Leo... His dark lifestyle might break me, but I won't let it break my child.

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LEO

She's there, in the brightly lit window of the gallery where her art hangs on exhibit, stroking a brush of bright blue paint onto a canvas. As always, her hair is tied up beneath a rag on her head, hiding the chestnut waves I once ran my fingers through. I can't touch her, only watch. The distance has been painful but I know my father keeps his promises and his threat to kill her and her father—a detective with the NYPD—wasn't an empty one. So I watch from a distance daily, and when I can't be here, Tucker or Clem does it for me.

The paintings are exquisite. Willow's talent seems limitless. When she graduated from Julliard I was never more proud. I was there, watching her, noticing the somber expression on her face, the pain in those hazel eyes. It should have been a joyous day for her, but joy left her face when she became Reba Sanders. She lost everything dearest to her because she dared to fall in love with me.

“All available units, we have a code 11-59 in progress on Fifth Avenue west of Broadway. Male subject, six-foot-four with a baseball bat. Potential female injured and two children on the scene....” The police radio scanner crackles as the dispatcher awaits response and I turn it down. My focus is on Willow. The scanner is just a tool I use to know where the cops are at all times so I can avoid trouble. I'm not doing any jobs for the family right now, so I can just relax and watch her work.

A few men enter the gallery and move away from the windows that line the front of the building. Willow glances at them and smiles, waving a hand before returning to

her concentration. I see it there still—the pain—but it's faded a bit now. It's been twelve years. She's moved on. Not a hint of interaction with her father even though they live in the same city, walk the same streets. I've made sure of it, sending a bit of help at times when needed.

I raise my binoculars up and focus them on her face. Fine age lines have started to gather near the corners of her eyes, a hint of aging appearing finally. She's stunning even in her thirties. I was her age when it happened, when my father forced her out of my life—or well, when I forced her out of my life because my father gave me an order with a threat behind it. I still hold bitterness about that event, but for her sake, I sent her away. To safety.

I start to lower my binoculars when I notice one of the men who entered the gallery moves toward her. She sets her brush down and turns to face him, wiping a bit of paint off her fingers onto her smock. She talks to him, smiling warmly. My chest tightens. She's mine. I don't share. Not even a little. In fact, every man who has come her way for the past twelve years has been paid off or sent away by my hand. Her unplucked beauty will only be harvested by me, when I find a way to convince my father she's not what he thinks.

The man leans an elbow on the tall table next to her. Her palette jostles, and a brush topples to the ground. She leans down to pick it up at the same time the man does and they bump heads. Both of them straighten as they begin laughing and hold their heads. Willow's laughter is magical; what I wouldn't give to hear that right now. The fact that this man gets to enjoy that melodic sound while I sit forty yards away in my car on a dark street stirs my anger. Both for the man and for my father.

She nods her head at him and slips off her stool, calling something to someone across the gallery. I can't see the person to whom she is speaking but I gather that she is telling them she's leaving. With a gift like hers she does nothing herself. The gallery has people for her assistance. I've never seen her clean a paintbrush or put paints

away once, not in all the time I've been observing her. She reaches down and grabs her bohemian-style handbag and slings the strap over her shoulder, still talking and smiling with the man.

I tense, lowering the binoculars. The man's back is to me; I can't see his face even if I tried. I don't like where this is going either. Willow has dated exactly fourteen men—once each. They don't come back for a second date. I make sure of that. And that means I have to find out who this bastard is so I can make sure he doesn't come back either. But I can't do that if they walk off into the night.

When they exit the front of the gallery and stroll off down the dark sidewalk, I know I have to follow. If I follow with my car, they will see the headlights and be suspicious, so I climb out of my car silently, touching the piece on my hip to make sure it's still there. My phone lays on the seat of my car, but I don't need it. What I need is to follow her, make sure she's not doing anything stupid like inviting him up to her apartment only a few blocks from here. He'd regret that greatly, I'm afraid.

Keeping a safe distance, I trail them. I can barely hear her laughing at his stupid jokes. His voice is gruff. There is a hint of an accent, but I can't place it. He sounds older too, like me. Willow always goes for older men. The oldest being a man my father's age who took her to a show on Broadway and then to dinner at some fancy restaurant. I persuaded him to leave her alone, though it took a bit of force. Like, Tucker and Matty following him around for several days with not-so-friendly reminders that Willow is mine.

They turn a corner and I see the coffee shop more than a block away. The man points at it, which only makes me more upset. She agreed to coffee with him? She doesn't even know him. Doesn't she know this is New York City? Sleazeballs of all kinds live here. I pick up the pace, coming closer to them as they continue down the street. It's darker here, where large scaffoldings tower over the sidewalk casting dark shadows the streetlights can't touch. I get a sense this creep isn't all he's cracked up

to be, but I won't ruin her evening if all she wants is coffee.

When his arm reaches behind her, and his hand finds the small of her back, I rest my hand on my weapon. If he so much as breathes on her, he's mine. My fingers itch to draw the gun, but I stay calm, keeping pace behind them about fifteen yards now. I stick to the shadows and hug the brick building. He glances behind himself, but I'm nearly invisible in my all-black attire shrouded in the darkness. I see the glint in his eye, but before I can react, he swings her off the sidewalk and into the alley.

"What? No!" Willow's yelps send a shot of adrenaline up my spine. I draw my weapon and hurry to the alley. "Let me go!" she shouts, and I turn off the safety.

"Hold still, bitch," the man says gruffly, and when I peek around the corner, he has his hands on her, inside her smock.

"Get off me! Help!" Willow pummels him with her fists and he drags her father into the blackness of the alley. I round the corner and advance on them slowly. I don't want to startle him, because if he has a gun on him, he could hurt her before I get a shot off.

"I said, hold still!" The man smacks her, and as she is recoiling and covering her face, he reaches for her slacks and starts to pull them down.

"Motherfucker," I growl under my breath and I can't control myself any longer. Willow's creamy legs are exposed to the night air and I take off, sprinting toward the man. He never sees me coming. I plow into him with my shoulder, launching him into the dumpster a few yards away. He slams into it with a sickening thud, and I don't even stop to see if she's alright. I hear her crying, but all I'm thinking about is finishing this sick pervert off.

"You're going to regret that," he snarls as he stands up but I'm there already, kicking

him in the groin hard. I hear the breath forced up out of his lungs as he doubles over and I chamber a round and aim at his chest.

“You sick fuck. You should know better than to put your hands on a woman.” My finger trembles over the trigger and he stands. I see the shimmer of metal reflecting the tiniest bit of light, and without thinking, I fire. The gun booms as it discharges, echoing down the alley, and the man drops to the ground. I still don’t get a good look at his face, but now he’s not my concern.

“What the hell!” Willow’s cries force me to turn to her. With shaking hands, she pulls her slacks up. Her bag is on the ground by her feet. I move toward her and pick it up and hand it to her.

“We have to go, Willow.” I grab her by the elbow and walk her deeper into the alley, past the dumpster. The man utters gurgling breaths as blood pours out of his body. I can’t even see where I shot him.

“Who the hell are you? You just killed that man!” She doesn’t fight me. She falls into line beside me with stutter-steps. “You know my name?”

I don’t answer, I keep moving. I need to get her to my car and out of here. If that guy doesn’t die, she’s going to be a primary witness. If that happens, she’ll be reunited with her father and that will mean my father’s orders to keep her away from her father will be impossible to uphold.

“Stop, you’re hurting me,” she whines and plants her feet. I turn to face her again and see headlights at the end of the alley. A car pulls in, and I press her against the wall, holding a hand over her mouth. She whimpers and squirms, but here we are safe for now. As long as they don’t drive deeper into the alley, they won’t see us.

“Shut the fuck up.” I stare at the car, which stops. Its headlights shine down onto the

pavement where the man lays bleeding out. Two men get out of the car, the same two men I saw enter the gallery with Willow's attacker a bit ago. From this angle, I can see clearly that the man on the ground covered in blood is none other than Romeo Leoni—underboss for the Italian mob. "Fuck's sake," I hiss, suddenly realizing the error of my ways.

"Mmm, mmmm." Willow tries to knee me in the groin, so I turn my hip against her body and pin her there while I put my lips right beside her ear.

"If you don't fucking stop, you're going to get us killed. That man who tried to hurt you is mafia."

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Her chest heaves beneath my frame, but she stops fighting me. I lower my hand from her mouth but I don't let her go. Her breath smells sweet, like she's had a glass of wine, though I don't recall having seen her drink this evening. She shifts, pushing at me, but I remain there pinning her to the wall. That car is going to move, and when they do, they're going to have to go somewhere. We need to get out of her.

"Who are you?"

"You have to come with me, or they'll kill you." I keep my voice low and my gun ready.

"Leonid?" she asks, shock seeping into her tone. "Holy hell..." There is no hiding the surprised, not from me or the men down the alley.

I hear shouts erupting and know we're made. I hook an arm around her waist and we bolt, racing down the rest of the alley. "Goddammit, woman." She has no clue what she just did by alerting them to our presence. Life could have gone on for her like it was, for me too. She paints, I watch. But now they will hunt us both until they find us, and then they will try to kill us.

"God, Leo, let me go." Now her fists strike me, pounding my chest as I hold her to my side and move as quickly as I can away from the danger. I hear feet slapping on the pavement first, then a gun goes off. The bullet ricochets and I know I have no choice but to fight. "Oh my god," Willow squeals, no longer fighting me.

"I told you, they'll kill you. Move faster," I order, now letting her go. We can get to my car more quickly if she just runs. I fire over my shoulder and grab her hand. She

cries out and covers her ear with the other hand. “Move, woman.” We run and turn back toward the street the gallery is on, enjoying a few seconds of respite from the bullets as the assailants can’t find us.

“Who the fuck are you now?” she calls out, barely keeping up.

“Just hurry up, for fuck’s sake.” Another round goes off over my head and I turn and fire again. My car is within sight; just a block away now. But the men are gaining on us. By the time we reach the car and climb in, they are only a half a block away. I fire my gun out the open window and they duck behind another car to take cover while I fire up my engine.

“Leo, they’re going to kill us!” Willow is hysterical now, clawing at the handle on the door. I reach over and push her head to her knees where she will be safe. The car has bullet proof glass but if these guys have armor piercing rounds she’s a goner.

“Stay down.” I pull out and floor it, firing off a few more rounds, but as I pass the two men cowering behind the front of a van, I meet their gaze. In the light streaming out of the gallery window onto the sidewalk, I know they get a good look—good enough to ID me. I’m fucked now.

I race off into the night, fleeing the scene, but these damn Italians know exactly who I am—or they will when they do even the slightest bit of research. I’m sure they’ve memorized my license plate by now, and if the man in the alley doesn’t die instantly, he will alert them to the fact that he followed the woman from the gallery. She’ll be simple to ID.

“Fuck’s sake, Willow, didn’t anyone ever tell you not to talk to strangers!”

She remains doubled over, crying, and all I can think is that hell just rained down in my life in a way I never expected, bringing heaven directly to my arms again. But

fuck if I won't have an impossible time trying to keep her safe now. She should have just refused that man the coffee.

2

WILLOW

Doubled over, unable to breathe, I hug my knees and pray the shooting stops. I'm frantic, panicked even. The guy just wanted a cup of coffee at the shop around the corner before they closed. This wasn't supposed to happen. I've accepted a similar invitation plenty of times over the years and nothing like this happened before. My mind is racing so fast with fear about what just happened and what could have happened had Leonid not showed up when he did. I can't even think straight.

"Calm down," he says, but how do I calm down? That man could have raped me—or worse, killed me. I saw the weapon he tried to pull on Leo before that shot went off. He never had a pure intention, despite being friendly and kind with me at the gallery. I can't calm down.

I feel sick, like I'm going to throw up or something. My breathing is jagged, stutter-breaths making me gag as mucus runs down the back of my throat from so much crying. I gag, coughing and gasping for air, but he just keeps driving like a maniac. I'm thrown into the door, then back so hard I almost land in his lap. It's not safe. I grasp at the handle again, then the dashboard, and realize I need to buckle in.

The force of gravity on my body makes it hard to straighten in the seat but I manage. My hands shake as I buckle the seatbelt across my body and begin to feel more stable despite his erratic driving. No doubt Leo is trying to evade someone who may or may not be following us. Those men were very angry, shouting and shooting at us. Their friend is probably dead thanks to Leo, and I'm safe. One of those two things makes me very grateful he was there.

I wipe my face clean, trying to avoid vomiting and Leo shoves a handkerchief into my hand. He says nothing while I blow my nose and can finally breathe again. My body feels jittery, like I've had far too much coffee and I have energy to run ten marathons. It's just the adrenaline of the incident. How can he even drive after that? Doesn't he feel shock setting in like I do?

Pressing my head against the headrest, I look over at him and try to read him. There is no trace of fear on his features—furrowed brow, pursed lips, white knuckles on the steering wheel. He's angry, not afraid. It's like nothing fazed him, like he's used to this or frustrated that it's happening. I'm confused. Leo is a sweet boy, albeit raised by a very wealthy businessman, so why is he here with a gun in the middle of the night right when I need him?

"I don't think they're following us," he mumbles, but he doesn't slow the car down. "That's good."

"I, uh...." I try to form words, to thank him or question him, but the only thing that escapes is a murmur of unintelligible sounds followed by another desperate attempt on the part of my stomach to turn itself inside out. I grip the door handle again, bracing myself as he barrels through an intersection just after the light turns red. His driving is terrible, and I wonder if he always drives this way or if it's just because of what happened.

"Slow down..." I manage, but my voice is weak and shaky. I'm not a pushover; I'm a powerful, strong woman. I have to be because I basically live alone with no connections in this world except a few people at the gallery and a friend I made in college. I notice him glance at me then look down at his speedometer. The car slows a little, but the erratic driving continues, weaving in and out of cars, turning without a signal, running red lights.

Leo was my world at one point. I was twenty; he was in his thirties. But we were

good together. We dated for two years. We made plans to have a life together. I loved him so much it hurt—in a good way. Until it hurt in a very bad way. I still don't understand why he sent me away or if he even knows how it destroyed my ability to trust any man for years. I spent five years not even dating. I pushed men away in college and told them it was because I was focused on my art and my career. Really I just didn't want anything to do with men.

I don't know what's wrong with me either, because I can't seem to find one to give me more than one date anyway. I'm sure it's me, not them. If it were one or two guys I'd think those guys were jerks, but twelve in the past seven years? No, there is something definitely wrong with me, and maybe that something is why Leonid just dumped me and sent me packing. Why his father made those threats I don't know either, but the millions he paid me to vanish after saying I made his son weak paid for my college and my current lifestyle.

“You need to take me home.” My voice shakes, betraying my emotions, but I clear my throat ready to stand up to him. I know him. He isn't like the men on the street back there. He isn't going to hurt me.

“You're not going home.” A car pulls out in front of us with oncoming traffic in the other lane of a narrow street and Leo slams on the breaks. I'm glad I strapped in, because even with the belt I'm thrown forward. “Idiot!” he screams as he lays on the horn, but I finally get a little relief from the speeding death trap of his driving.

“Yes, I am going home. You can't just whisk me away and pretend you own me. Won't your father kill me if he sees us together? It's been what, twelve years? You think he changed his mind.” My inner bitch comes out, lashing out at him, but I can't help it. “Where are you going?”

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“It’s not safe to go home, Willow. That guy picked you up from the gallery. If he didn’t die instantly, he’s already told his friends who you are and where to find you. IT will take them literally ten minutes to locate you and where you live. You are never going home.” Leo lays on his horn several more times and the man reaches out his window and flips him off, which only makes Leo honk more.

“It’s Reba now, first of all. And second of all, I can handle myself.” I cross my arms over my chest indignantly and glare at him as he comes to a full stop behind the man who tries to parallel park in a spot half the size needed for his car.

“Handle yourself?” he asks in a snarky voice. Then he laughs, a laugh that says he has no confidence in me whatsoever.

“I’ve taken self-defense courses. I own a small guy, pepper spray. I live in a secure building on the fifteenth floor. We have guards and people have to be buzzed in.” I don’t see what the problem is. I live in one of the largest cities in the country. I was raised here. I know how to handle myself.

“That guy was the mob, dumbass. His men don’t play by the rules. You’d be dead before you even had a shower. Now be quiet and let me think.”

I bite my tongue, though I want to go off on him. I have never encountered anyone involved in organized crime that I know of, though I did have my suspicions about Leo’s father for a time. He finally gets a break in the traffic and goes around the slow driver, but the freedom of movement in the car doesn’t make me feel any better about being trapped here with him. I moved on, put his face and the memory of our relationship in my past and I refuse to allow him to order me around now.

“We’re here,” he snaps as he pulls into a parking garage. He finds the first parking spot available and shuts off the car. “Now you need to do exactly what I say when I say it. You have no idea how much danger you’re in.”

“Because of you,” I spit, unbuckling my belt. “You interfered and you didn’t have to. I have pepper spray in my purse. I’d have protected myself.”

“Come off it, Willow. The man had your pants around your ankles before you even knew what was happening. You’re lucky I was there.” Leo climbs out of the car and I try my handle only to find it won’t open. I yank and yank, but until he opens it from the outside it doesn’t budge. Angrier now, I climb out and start across the garage away from him, but he catches up to me and grabs my elbow. “This way.”

I have no choice but to follow him to the elevator, where we rise to the third story and turn down a narrow hallway. Apartments like this are ridiculous. He probably pays three times what I pay and has half the square footage, not to mention how filthy things are. The carpet we walk on is sticky, the walls smudged with greasy handprints. But god does he smell good as I walk in the wake of his cloud of cologne. Just like I remember.

“In here.” Leo unlocks a door and pushes it in, glancing over my shoulder before following me through the door. He’s nervous too, probably that someone really did follow us. I don’t blame him. The way those guys were shooting, I was terrified. I was scared of him too, but he’s familiar, safe even. If I had stayed on the street or in that alley instead of coming with him, I’d be dead by now. I’m sure of it.

“What a crappy place.” I move farther into the room, clutching my bag to my side. Everything I see looks broken, run down, or filthy. The entire place isn’t any bigger than my living room. Ten by twelve maybe, with two doors on the left side of the studio unit. A metal-framed bed is tucked in one corner with a dresser squeezed between the foot of the bed and the opposite wall. A single window on the wall above

the bed has a crack in the corner; it's frosted too, so no chance for a view.

"You live here?" I ask, dropping my pale yellow bag on the leather couch. Just thinking of how dirty it will be when I pick it up makes me decide instantly I'll probably have to buy a new bag. New clothes too. My smock might be light blue, but my white slacks aren't going to stay white if I sit down here.

"It's a safe house. Just be thankful you're not on the street." Leo shuts the door, but instead of a deadbolt inside, I see him take a key off his keychain and slide it into a lock on the inside. He's locked us both in, but I can't unlock it. That makes my body tense again, though I can feel the adrenaline surges slowing now that I'm safe.

"Safe house? What are you a cop?" That would make his father proud, I'm sure. He hates my father, Detective Tom Akers.

"Don't worry about what I am."

"This feels more like a prison than a safe house. You lock me in and keep the key? Say I can't go home." I lean against a counter situated along the wall. The cupboards are painted dark brown, probably to hide more dirt. The sink is stained with rust; it looks like rusty water will come out of the tap if I turn it on.

"Like I said, be thankful you're safe." Leo takes a chain off his neck and slips the key onto it, then puts it back on. It's the first time I get a good look at him. He's strong. The jacket he wears fits him nicely, stretched across broad shoulders. He was always good looking, but age hasn't done anything but add a certain smolder. The silver at his temples is attractive, along with the salt in his beard. He's forty-three now, or forty-four. I forget when his birthday is. God, why am I doing this to myself?

He drove me away, forced me to leave him alone "for my own good." I never wanted the millions his father offered me. I wanted Leo. I was in love, and he ran a knife

through my heart with his words. Let me tell you, five million dollars does not erase love, even when it pays for your entire future and helps you start your career as an artist easily. If Leo knew how many paintings I did of his face, his lips, the glimmer in his eyes when he's happy...

"Look, I have to make a few calls. There's no food here. We'll need to order groceries and—"

"Food? Exactly how long are we staying here? I have a showing at the gallery tomorrow. I have to go home and shower. I have a coffee date with a friend and—"

"You're not going home, Willow!" His explosive voice startles me. I back along the counter past the old ice-box style fridge until my hand finds a door. "It's not safe. Okay? I will figure out what to do next."

I jiggle the handle, and the door opens. It's just a closet. I just want privacy before I start crying again. "I ... Can I shower?" I ask him, moving to the next door. It has to be the bathroom. A safe house has to have a toilet, right?"

"Fine," he snaps as he pulls out his cell phone. I manage to pry the door open. It feels like it is painted shut, but it's just swollen in the humidity. At least the place has central air, or it would be sweltering here.

Inside the bathroom with the door shut, I slump onto the toilet and let the tears come. I dreamed of the day I'd see Leo again my whole life. Yeah, I put my feelings away, but I never stopped hoping. At times I knew I'd tear him to pieces, let him know how bad he hurt me by hurting him back. At other times, I believed I'd be swept off my feet, swoon and fall for him over again.

I never in a million years believed he'd be the one to save me from something so horrific as an assault in an alley. I can tell he wants to protect me, keep me away from

those men who he fears will track me down, but this isn't good. The only thing more dangerous than a couple of thugs on a street corner is breaking his father's rules. Because it's not just my life on the line. Alexsi threatened my father too, and if he knows I'm with Leo now, he will kill us both.

I'm damned if I stay, and damned if I leave.

What the hell do I do now?

3

LEO

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We're going to be here a while and Willow doesn't seem to understand that fact. Killing a high-ranking member of the Italian mafia would be bad enough if I weren't their sworn enemy. And my father being the Pakhan—head of the Bratva—means this won't be seen as just any attack. It will be seen as an act of war between the already feuding families. I have to tell my brothers what I've done immediately before they hear it from the other side in the form of threats and bullets.

I dial Sven's number first, realizing I should probably call Dominic not Sven. But Dom being our newly appointed leader is green in the saddle, proving himself by being overly hard on everyone. Dad's approval is all that matters to him right now, not the fine details. I wait for the phone to ring, but it goes straight to voicemail, another frustration. If Sven can't help me, I'm not sure where to turn, because I know the instant my father hears about it he will order Willow's death and her father's as well.

Pacing the creaking floorboards and leaving blood tracked on the carpet, I dial Rome's number. He's the youngest, and probably won't side with me any more than the others, but he isn't a snitch. If I call Matty, he'll just hang up and call Dominic or my father immediately. His loyalty is skewed at times; or maybe mine is. Either way, I need this on the downlow until I decide what to do with Willow.

"Yo, Leo, what's up?" Rome's words are slightly slurred, a good indication that he's spent this evening drinking.

"Baby, what's going on?" A woman's voice comes across the line and I know Rome isn't alone.

“Look, do you have a minute?” I’m not intending to wait for him if he doesn’t. I’ll just have to call Sven until he answers.

“Yeah, what?” Rome is irritated; I can hear it in his tone. The line is muffled but I hear him say, “I’ll be back.” After a few seconds, the line clears up again. “What do you need, Leo? I was about to—”

“I don’t want to hear about your sexcapades. Just listen, man. I’m in trouble.” As I say the words I feel my shoulders tighten. I’m not afraid in the least, but I understand the delicacy of this conversation and the situation. Things could be explosive, or they could blow over—my bet is the former. And if they get explosive, it’s not just going to be me in the cross hairs.

“What did you do now?”

The words wash over me attempting to drown me in shame, but I’ve been buried in the shit-pile long enough that it doesn’t really affect me that much. After my best friend turned out to be the mole attempting to murder my brother and seize control of the family, nothing could make me feel worse. Except maybe if Willow got hurt in the middle of this mess. All I wanted to do was protect her and keep her from danger. Now I’ve really fucked things up.

“I shot an Italian. I didn’t know who he was ’til after it happened and he got a very good look at me and probably my license plate. He’s going to come full bore.” I run a hand through my hair and sit down. With the confession made, I can take a load off. I know my family will have my back when it comes to the shooting and its consequences. It’s Willow I’m concerned about.

“What the fuck? How are you so fucking stupid? You know you should be talking to Domini—”

“Fuck Dominic. Don’t you think there is a reason I called you?” I hear the water in the bathroom shut off. Willow is done with her shower and will be coming out here soon. I don’t want her to hear what I have to say to my brother. I need to make this quick.

“So spit it out. What has you so freaked out.” Rome’s grumbles don’t encourage me. If he so much as breathes a word of this to Dominic, I’m going to hurt him.

“I’m not going to kow to anyone on this, Rome. You all know how I feel. Things are going to go my way or I’m just going to disappear.” I don’t even have to bring her name into this conversation. Even talking in code, Rome knows the only thing that has ever mattered to me my whole life. Every one of my brothers knows I have followed Willow every day for twelve years. If not me, one of our men. I may never have been able to touch her, but she’s mine. She’s always been mine.

“Fuck’s sake, Leo. You stepped in again? Only this time she saw you....” Rome’s tone changes from anger to exasperation. “Do you even know what Dad will say? He’s fucking dying and you do this?”

“The man was about to assault her,” I protest angrily.

“And you could just walk the fuck away. One in three women get assaulted in their life and—”

“I knew I should never have called you, you heartless bastard. I can’t believe you’d say those things. You know what she means to me.” I’m ready to hang up but Rome calms me.

“Fine, I get it. I’m sorry. Look, I can’t deal with it tonight. Where are you?”

I take a deep breath. “The safe house on Thirty-Third.”

“Stay put. Someone will call you. Dammit, Leo, you know you’ve probably started a war, over a woman who is off limits? This is bad...”

Rome hangs up and I lock my phone and jam it into my pocket. I’m pissed, both at him for being such an asshole, and myself for not handling this more tactfully. I could have tied the man up and never let him see my face. Instead I had to pull my gun and shoot him.

The bathroom door squeaks open and I turn to see Willow emerge wrapped in a towel. Her makeup is gone, but she is every bit as stunning without it. I stand and face her, ready to calmly explain what’s going on, but she scowls at me.

“My clothes are filthy. I didn’t realize I was going to be taken at gunpoint and forced off the street when I chose white this morning.” Her angry glare is sexy, the way we used to bicker until I kissed her. Being in the same room with her again is challenging my sense of loyalty to my father. It always did. It’s why he said she made me weak, because I often sided with her instead of listening to him. I walk toward her and shrug.

“I can get you new clothes.” As I advance I see her shoulders square. She’s still upset, even after I saved her fucking life.

“And what will I sleep in?” Her arms cross over her chest, forcing her tits to bulge up out of the towel. Their round, smooth curves attract my eye, which she huffs at. “My face is up here.”

Her hair drips on her shoulders, rivulets of water running across her chest and into her cleavage. The sight of her makes my cock tighten; I can feel myself swelling. I grab her by her arms and pull her towel away from her body. I take her nipple into my mouth, sucking it hard, my tongue swirling around the areola. She’s writhing on my tongue and I’m getting so excited. I can’t wait to get my hands on her. I know she

wants me, I can see it in the way she looks at me.

I grip Willow's hips and her hands push at my chest. "Leo... don't." I know she's protesting, but if she didn't want me ogling her body, she should have put on her dirty clothes. She bats at my shoulders and I straighten.

"You can't tell me you haven't fantasized about us reuniting." Pulling her against my body, I grind my hips against her pelvis.

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“So you save me from one piece of shit only so you can do to me what he was going to do?” Her words are a strong rejection, but the tone she uses and the way her eyes search me while her tongue flicks over her lips tells me something different. I wanted to do this the second we got into that car, but getting her to safety and then alerting my brothers were both more important things to do. Now I want her. I’ve wanted her and waited for this too long.

I kiss her hard, biting her lip, my hands still on her hips. "Willow, you want this. I know you do." I'm not going to give up. I start rubbing her pussy, feeling her wetness, feeling how ready she is for me. She moans softly into my mouth and her hands grip my shoulders. I move my hand up and down, teasing her, and I'm getting more and more turned on. If she didn't want me she wouldn't be so fucking turned on. Her pussy is slick with moisture.

"God, I've wanted this for more than a decade," I grunt. She whimpers as I pull her tighter against my body, the dampness of her skin pressing against my clothing. Her tits squeeze between our chests and she shakes her head. She feels good, good enough to make me nut right in my pants.

"You don't get to come back into my life and demand things of me. Not after what happened." Willow resists me, but the lust haze in her eyes betrays her. She licks her lips and turns away from me when I go to kiss her again.

"I've missed you too." I kiss her neck, nibbling on her earlobe, and she shivers. I can feel her getting wetter. Willow's hands go to my shirt and she looks at me. She's naked in front of me and I'm already hard as a rock. I push her to the bed and she topples onto it, her legs falling open. I can see the moisture on her sex, and I can't

wait to taste her.

"This doesn't mean I'm okay with you stealing me off the street and locking me up here." Willow trembles but she doesn't protest as I kneel on the bed and push her legs apart—kiss her up thigh to her pussy. "Just because I'm attracted to you still, the way you touch me... It doesn't mean we're doing this." Her eyes dare me to do it, to dive in and have my way with her. She always was a little feisty, even if we never got to this point in our relationship. She was young. I let her take it slow. But her virginity is mine for the taking now.

"I bet you taste like honey and caramel." I bury my tongue deep in her, licking her clit and her hole. She moans loudly and I groan. I love hearing the sounds of her pleasure. I love being the one who makes her feel good. If anyone gets to pluck this cherry, it's me.

I tease her with my tongue, rubbing her clit, tasting her, licking her. Her hands lace through my hair, tugging at it. I move down and push my tongue into her pussy. Her hips buck against my face and she moans quietly, her hands gripping the sheets. I lick her faster and her hips rock against my mouth. She's shuddering and her moans are getting louder, so I push three fingers inside of her.

"You like the way I eat you?" I ask her, breathing my hot breath against her slit.

"Oh god..." Her whimpers indicate pleasure. I knew she wanted me.

"I'm the only one who gets to suck this clit... Mmmm, god, you taste amazing." I bury my face in her valley again and her whimpers turn more frantic. Her hands claw at my hair.

I pump my fingers in and out of her, my mouth working her clit and pussy. She rocks against my fingers and her moans are louder still. I'm so turned on I don't think I can

wait much longer. I want to be in her, feel her tightness around me.

"Leo, I'm going to..." I thrust my fingers into her faster, my fingers pressing against her G-spot. She whines loudly, about to come. I curl my tongue against her clit and her body shudders, her pussy clenching around me. She moans loudly and her juices flow over my face. I lap them up.

"Oh god..." She breathes out, her body still spasming. Her legs and hips shake violently as her thighs grip my face, and I continue to lick her until she pulls my hair. "Stop... stop..." she whimpers, but I know she enjoys it. Still, I want to be in her more than ever now. I rise up, tearing my shirt off over my head and losing my pants. I push my boxers down as I kick my shoes off and step out of my clothing. Willow looks nervous.

"I know you're still a virgin," I tell her, stroking my cock. It feels good, like a tender bruise you can't help but continue to touch.

"How the—"

"And based on the way your body responds to my touch, I am betting you can't wait to get this in you." She lays back and I see the mixture of desire and frustration flit across her face briefly as I climb onto the bed with her. "This is going to hurt... Next time will be better." I had my tongue on that tight pussy of hers. I know her hymen is going to tear and she's going to bleed, but plucking a cherry from a tree yields juice, and it's time to harvest.

"But..." she whimpers as I slide my cock across her slit. She's so wet. I'm tempted to just fuck her brains out, but I choose to be gentle.

I press into her slowly, letting her body adjust to my size. Her face contorts and she bites her lip. Pain in her expression compels me to go slow, and when she yelps, I

know it's done. She's tight. I've never felt anything so good. Her body is made to be fucked by me. I push in farther, burying myself to the hilt. Her pussy wraps around me, hot and wet. I'm throbbing and I want to feel her come again. I can't stop myself. I start to move, pulling out and pushing back in again. I pull out and grind against her clit. She moans. Then I push back in again, deeper this time.

"Fuck, you're huge," she moans, and I can hear the way her body is aching just in her tone. But what's done is done, and now it's time to show her what she's been missing for more than a decade.

She yelps when I push in so deep, her body quivering. I groan, the feeling of her tightness around me so good. "It's time I fuck you now." I rub her clit, and she whimpers again. "Just relax. You'll enjoy it more if you do." And I know she will. I want to feel every part of her. I want to watch her face contort in pleasure and pain and feel her tighten around my cock. I want to feel her blood on my flesh as I slide in and out of her virgin pussy.

"Oh god... Oh my fucking god," she mutters, clawing at my ribcage. She clenches around me like a vice grip and I thrust harder, pushing until I hit her back wall repeatedly. Her face is so expressive, her mouth open, eyes staring into mine. "God, it's... I'm.... oh god." Her loss for words is erotic, pushing my buttons.

"Say you missed me," I order, dipping my hips to press into her and touch her g-spot. She keeps whimpering and her legs are shaking, but I know she's going to enjoy it if I go slowly. I pull out of her and go back in again. I do it a few more times, getting faster and harder with each thrust. Her pussy begins to throb around me and I can feel her body tightening.

I can tell she's going to come soon and I'm not going to let her. I don't want to stop. I want to cum so badly, but I want to enjoy this until I feel her body shake from the force of her orgasm. Until I hear her scream my name, I want to feel her clench

around me and I want to come with her. I want to know she's mine, and I'm not going to stop fucking her until she knows it too. She's mine, and she's going to fucking love it.

"I missed you," she whimpers, and I thrust harder. I want to make her come hard—feel her walls squeeze my cock and make me come inside of her. I want to fill her pussy with my cum and make her mine.

I'm fucking her harder when she suddenly screams, "Leo," her body shaking. Her pussy clamps down on me, and I can feel her tense up. Her pussy throbs around me and I can feel her squeezing me so tight. She's coming, her body shaking. I groan, and my hands grab her hips as I thrust into her harder, my own orgasm building up.

I'm throbbing and I know I'm going to come soon. She's so wet, she's fucking perfect. I've wanted her for so long. I thrust faster, grunting. I'm so fucking close. "Leo... oh god," she whines and her fingernails dig into my skin again. I can't hold back. I grip her hips and I thrust into her hard, once, twice, three times before I finally come. My cock pulses inside of her, my cum filling her pussy. She's still shaking from her orgasm, writhing beneath me. Her tits rub against my chest as I lower myself onto her and glide in and out of her a few more times.

I lean down and kiss her neck, then her ear. I'm still inside of her. I don't want to stop. I want to stay here, where the world can't touch us, where I've wanted to be for so long. I want to feel her against me. I want to smell her hair, hold her body so fucking tight. I don't want to let her go.

"I can't breathe," she gasps, and I realize my weight must be crushing her, so I roll to the side and pull her against my chest.

"Next time will be better..." I mumble as I feel the grasp of sleep pulling me into its darkness. Sexual release always makes me sleepy, and after that, I could sleep for

days.

WILLOW

Next time? What does he think this is? Does he actually believe that I'm coming back to him simply because he saved me from that man? And how—his father will kill me. I lie in his arms catching my breath and within a few minutes he's asleep, snoring in my ear. So why am I still lying here? Why is it that I can't pry his arm off my body and sneak away? That's what I want to do, to go home and pretend this didn't happen, that I didn't just have my life turned upside down. I have a showing for my art. I need to prepare.

Leo, though, he isn't just some one-night stand I gave my virginity to. He was the love of my life, and if I have to be honest—and I do, at least with myself—I still have feelings for him. Strong ones. Some of them are painful, but some of them are still tender, a longing in my heart for what should have been. But how do I forgive him for what he did to me? What his family did to me? And why did I just consent to having sex with him when things are so complicated? I will never get the gift of my virginity back, and I tossed it away like it was yesterday's trash.

Don't get me wrong; I wanted it. The minute we were alone in that car and the danger had subsided, I felt my heart yearning for him. Maybe not sex, but the familiarity of what life used to be like with him years ago. And when I left the bathroom, hoping he'd have something for me to wear and I saw his eyes, the way he looked at me. That's when I wanted him. I just know it will never work out. And he is now risking both of our lives by keeping me here.

His arm is heavy as I lift it off of me. I don't remember him being so muscular, such a strong physique, but then I only saw him without his shirt a few times back then. He was so respectful of my desire to wait until marriage for sex—a desire that changed over the years since no man would ever give me a second date. I sit up and wait for a moment, making sure he doesn't stir, then I tiptoe to the foot of the bed where the dresser sits. It's wedged in tightly between the bed and the wall, the drawers facing outward.

I pull the top drawer open, not really sure what I'm expecting to see. This isn't his house. For all I know the dresser is empty. The top drawer is filled with papers that are of no use to me. So I move on to the second drawer, it is full of books. Just my luck, I'm in a house with no damn clothing except my dirty white things. If there is nothing clean I will put them back on as a last resort, but maybe I shouldn't. Maybe that guy and his buddies will recognize me the instant they see me if I'm wearing all white.

My search continues to the third drawer, and when I open it I find what I need. There are a few t-shirts folded and stacked on one side of the drawer and a pair of jeans, and one pair of men's gym shorts on the other side. There are no panties, and this getup will look really stupid with my ballet flats but I have no choice. I pluck a shirt and the gym shorts from the drawer and close it silently. Leo fell asleep with the light on, so I tiptoed to the bathroom and put the clothes on quickly, taking my shoes. I don't really care much for dirty underwear so I leave them on the ground along with my other things. I don't have time to worry about if I get them back.

Looking into the mirror I take a deep breath and tie my damp hair up into a knot on the top of my head and brush the stray strands out of my face. My phone is in my bag, left out there on the table. If I can get out of this place, I can call a friend to stay for the night, but if Leo is right and those men really can track me down, it will be safer for me to just leave the city. Stuart can handle the showing, and after that I'm not sure what to do. Reba Sanders is a well-known artist now, but no one has ever

heard of Willow Akers. They can't.

My heart sinks at the realization that even now, when I need him most, I can't contact my father. I can't even contact anyone in the police department, for fear that my face will trigger someone's memory. I clamp my eyes shut and images flash through my mind, memories of seeing my face on the news as I tried to vanish into obscurity, leaving my father behind so he would be safe. The guilt I felt over leaving was only compounded when Mom left him. I will never know why she did it, maybe she was in too much pain over losing me. But he's alone now, and seeing the ghost of his daughter who disappeared without a trace but was always within reach might just break him too badly.

I need to get out of here, maybe out of this city for good. I can't reunite with my father, and if these men know who I am, there is no going back to my art either, at least not in New York. I push the door open to see Leo has changed positions. He no longer lays on his side, but flat on his back, hand splayed on his chest. He isn't snoring, but he doesn't stir when I walk over and pick up my bag, and with one more glance his direction I walk straight to the door and turn the knob, only to find it locked.

I jiggle the handle, and when I realize it's not budging, I look at where the deadbolts should be. I forgot that he locked this thing with a key from the inside. There is no way for me to unlock this without it. I want to slam my fist into the wood and scream, but it will only wake him, so I take a calming breath and readjust my purse on my shoulder.

Turning slowly, I face the challenge head on. Leo lays in the same position he was when I left the bathroom. I distinctly remember seeing that key hanging around his neck while he fucked the living daylights out of me. My pussy still aches from the way he claimed it, so for second, seeing him lying there nude send a hint of arousal coursing through my groin, but even the fantasy I've harbored for twelve years, of

him and me reconnecting, can't convince me to stay. I swore to Alessi Gusev I'd leave and never look back. I'm not about to put my neck on the line for Leo. He turned me away without an excuse. He doesn't deserve a second chance.

I move as nimbly as I can, only making the loose floorboard squeak once, and hover over Leo. He's perfectly still except the methodic rise and fall of his chest. And my luck has turned, because the clasp of his chain is around front, just above where the key is. I gingerly pick up the key, pinching it in the palm of my right hand while I use fingers from both hands to unhook the clasp. I broke a nail earlier this evening, which makes it difficult to grip the tiny claw clasp. I fiddle with it a second and before I realize what's happening my bag slides from its position on my back and slams into the side of the bed.

Leo's eyes snap open and his hand grabs my wrist faster than I can pull away. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he snarls, glaring at me. Startled, I whimper and try to pull away, but his grasp is too strong.

"I'm sorry... I—"

"Lay down and go to sleep, Willow."

I sigh, knowing my plan to get out of here is thwarted, at least for tonight. My shoulders droop and my bag drops to the floor as I pull my arm out of Leo's grasp. "At least let me shut off the lights," I mumble, moving toward the light switch on the wall next to the door. I stare longingly at the doorknob as I flip the light switch and turn to come back to bed.

"Naked," he orders, and I almost protest, but there is no point. He gets what he wants; he always did.

I strip off the t-shirt and shorts and climb into bed, lying as far away from him as

possible, but he pulls me into himself and holds me snugly there. His chest presses against my back; I can feel his heartbeat and breathing slowly regulate until he falls asleep.

Leo is the kind of guy every woman adores: strong, commanding, sexy. Dark wavy hair and stormy eyes should be a huge red flag for me given our history, but I can't help but find him attractive still. I already know in my gut that this is going to end badly. One way or another I'm going to be hurt, whether he flat-out rejects me again when his father learns I'm back in his life, or I am forced to run away out of fear of whatever the hell he's gotten us mixed up in. Leo Gusev is kryptonite.

I close my eyes and let sleep take me into its arms, though it's fitful sleep. I'm not used to sharing a bed with someone, so having Leo draped across me is uncomfortable. Dreams and nightmares plague my sleep—falling for him and being broken, running from him and being broken, being chased by men with guns. One particular dream torments me.

...I'm running, stumbling down an alley. My heart races with panic and adrenaline. Something—no, someone is chasing me. Their footsteps are loud; they're close. It's dark, so dark I can barely see where I'm going, but I know if I can just make it to the end of the alley I'll be safe, only no matter how fast I run my goal doesn't get any closer.

I try to scream, but my voice is muffled. I can't even speak, in fact, I can't breathe either. The air is stifling, so muggy it makes my chest heavy. Why is someone chasing me? What do they want? I try to turn and see them, but they're shrouded in blackness. The street lights behind them give me only a silhouette of who they are.

"Leo?" I call, wondering where he went, why he's not here.

And then I'm above myself, hovering, watching the scene unfold. The two Italian

men are chasing me, guns drawn. They close in as I try to run faster, but it's as if I'm on a treadmill. They advance while I stay stationary. I hear my voice screaming for Leo, pleading with him to come rescue me, but he's nowhere. And I'm different too—my hair dyed jet-black, my clothing not even my style.

I reach out for help, pleading for Leo to come, but the Italians are too close. They grab me, and suddenly I'm back in my body, trapped in their grasp. The chill of cold metal against my temple has me sobbing. I drop to my knees with my hands over my face and hear the sound of fists slamming against flesh. Leo is here. I look up, watching a man beat the hell out of the two Italians, but when he turns to face me, it isn't Leo staring down at me.

It's his father. And he has a gun too—pointed at my chest.

“I thought I told you never to show your face again.”

I startle away, heart racing, and jolt to an upright position in bed. I'm soaked in sweat, and so are the sheets. The bed is empty; Leo is gone. I feel moisture on my cheeks; I've been crying in my sleep and no wonder. That was a horrible dream. I'm glad to be awake now. I press a hand to my chest and try to calm my breathing. “It was only a dream,” I tell myself, but it was so real—so close to reality now—that it's hard to differentiate.

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I haven't had a nightmare like that in years, not since I finally moved past my grieving of my life. I perch on the edge of the bed while I force my eyes to adjust to the light. The sun is up, shining in through the single window in the apartment. That means it's after seven already. My stomach grumbles, ready for my morning coffee, but I doubt this place has anything other than brown water and dusty cups. The clothing I pulled out of the dresser last night still lays on the floor at my feet, so I pick it up and put it on. Leo can order me to sleep nude, but that doesn't mean I have to walk around this place completely naked all day. Besides, there is a chill in the air. It must be cooler today.

After relieving my bladder I snoop around the kitchen and confirm my suspicions. There is one can of tuna which is expired, a jar of jelly with a coating of dust so thick it won't wipe off with my thumb, and two bottles of beer, also caked in dust. The fridge isn't much different. The sole box of baking soda doesn't even keep the scent of mildew out of the ancient machine. I shut the door feeling frustrated and head back toward the bed. He better be bringing me food or I'm going to let him have it.

I sit and rifle through my bag, hoping to find my phone. I don't really have anyone I can contact for help, but I can at least look at my GPS to see where the hell we're at. But my phone battery is dead. It won't even turn on. I drop the useless device into my bag and look around the room. There is nothing to do, except maybe watch TV, but the fear of seeing my face plastered on that screen again keeps me from doing that. If Stuart reports me missing, they'll broadcast my alias and face together, and then it's all over. Alessi knows, my dad knows, and Leo is as good as dead.

My eye catches on something, the corner of a paper sticking out of the top dresser drawer. I remember last night when I was searching for clothing, I found the drawer

full of papers, photographs, and mail. It makes me curious. I stand and open the drawer and pull out a few sheets of paper.

There are bills from various places, the water company, a trash service. It's boring and mostly useless to me, but it gives me something to do. I unearth a few photos of things around the city, Central Park, Washington Square, some subway shots. But when I find a picture of Leo and his brothers all holding weapons, standing on a street corner looking like thugs, I shudder. I keep looking and find more images, scarier images. Pictures of Leo's older brother shaking hands with a man I know to be involved in organized crime. I've seen that face on the news and in my father's case files when I was younger.

But what does it for me, what scares me the most, is when I find an image of Alexsi Gusev on the front page of a newspaper clipping. I sink onto the mattress and curl up to read the article snipped out of the paper seven years ago. Alexsi was accused of murder and money laundering. The paper reports that he is connected to the Bratva and may be a high-ranking member. This all makes so much sense now—my father a cop, Leo's father a mobster. God, no wonder Alexsi chased me off.

Now I wonder if it was his doing that Leo forced me to leave too. Who the hell did I just have sex with last night? And how can I get away from him before anyone else finds out I'm in bed with the Bratva?

5

LEO

Isat outside the front of the bookstore for at least twenty minutes before walking inside. I know Dominic is here and I know he's not happy with me. My brothers have no ability to keep their mouths shut. I should have known better than to call for help the other night. It's all about loyalty and fidelity to the cause, only, that loyalty is

strictly to be given to the cause. They aren't loyal to me; they have no reason to be. Their lives are wrapped up in the Gusev name and business. Without it they are nothing, and that's the way it's always been.

I, however, see things differently. Loyalty has to run both ways. They should have my back as much as I have theirs, but every one of these fuckers deserted me when I tried to stand up to my father twelve years ago. Things would be so different today if I'd had her by my side this whole time. There would be an entire generation of Gusev children making new memories by now, building a family legacy. But my father's orders were to be obeyed and that made me a rebel.

I stalk toward the cash register where the teenager we have working for us is cashing out a customer. I don't recognize the elderly lady whose grin seems oddly out of place for such a dank little bookstore, but I'm glad the neighbors still patronize the place. It's getting harder and harder to clean cash with so few sales happening. We're relying entirely on what Sven does at the port and I know Dominic is struggling to handle things as he takes control with Dad getting sicker by the day seemingly.

"Is that him?" I hear Dominic call. I know he's talking about me. The teen looks at me nervously and I wave her off. She looks relieved as I pass by and stroll into Dominic's office. It's tiny, a single light hanging from a chain in the middle of the square room. His desk takes up most of the space, with barely enough room to sit behind it and walk around its end, while still leaving space for a single chair across from him. He wears a t-shirt and a dark blue windbreaker. It's typical to see him dress down when he plays manager for a day. Last thing he needs are the cops looking around here wondering how this little bookstore survives while he wears Armani.

"I'm here," I tell him, glancing over my shoulder down the hall before I shut the door and sit down. He's typing away at his calculator so I keep my mouth shut until he's finished. He looks up at me with a salty expression, lips pursed, forehead wrinkled.

“What the hell is going on, Leo? Rome called me, said you’re in deep shit with that woman again. We told you to lay off last time something stupid happened.”

He’s referring to a time when I had to step in to intervene in Willow’s life and protect her from a very sour business deal. She was going to be taken for a ride financially and her art is worth far more than she knows. “I never showed my face back then, and you know it.”

“No, but you couldn’t just let her live her life and learn the hard way.” Dom puts his calculator into his desk drawer and types something into the small laptop in front of him. “You’ll never learn.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I adjust the way I’m sitting and try not to let him ruffle my feathers too much. I feel like a caged lion in this dump of an office, always have. The cream wallpaper feels like it closes in on me, suffocating me.

“It means, you need to keep your nose out of her business. She isn’t yours, and she never will be. You need to back off. I’m warning you.” He looks me dead in the eye and purses his lips more tightly. “It’s going to backfire and someone’s going to get hurt.”

I don’t know if I should take that as a threat or if he is trying to warn me. He’s my big brother. I’d like to think he cares about me enough that it’s a warning, but given my family and how my father raised him, my gut tells me it’s a threat.

“Who’s getting hurt, Dom? Me? Are you threatening me if I don’t leave her alone?” I lean forward and cross my hands on the edge of his desk. I’m not going to be pushed around by him or anyone else. The Italians are going to be on my tail if they haven’t already found the safehouse. If my brothers can’t back me up, I’ll just roll without them. I will protect Willow at all costs.

“It’s not a threat, Leo.” Dominic’s shoulders relax and drop slightly. I can tell he’s holding back his temper. His is worse than mine. I know he doesn’t want to hurt anyone; he just wants people to respect that he’s the leader, and that means his own brothers following his orders.

I’m not playing that game.

“Listen to me. She isn’t who you think she is, and if things play out in the wrong way, it’s going to be a shit show for the whole family. Okay?” His cryptic message isn’t making sense to me. He’s not coming across clearly.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? She isn’t who I think she is? She’s the fucking woman of my dreams. You know that. I’ve had it bad for her for years. I’ve watched everything she said and did for more than a decade. Protected her from anything and everything. I’m not turning her over to a man who wants to rape her.”

“That man, Romeo Leoni, is dead and there is a price on your head now.” He glares at me down his nose and I’d like to put my fist in his face.

“Yeah, well better him than her.” I sit back, folding my arms over my chest. “I’m not afraid of their bounty. I know my own strengths and weaknesses and I would hope my brothers have my back.” My words hit their target.

“Your family has your back, but you have to follow my instructions.”

“Oh, that means leaving her to be chased down by them? No way to defend herself?” I stand, infuriated. “I’m not doing that. You know I love her.” My temper is getting the better of me.

“You know her father is a detective. He hunted Dad down. He was on to us. And you fell in love with her and you had no clue. She’s dangerous. If she tells her father who

we are—”

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“Oh for fuck’s sake. For real? Dad sacrificed my entire future with Willow to save his ass from prison?” I rake a hand through my hair and shake my head. Of all the selfish things—God I hate my family sometimes. “Look, I’m not backing off. If you can’t help me save her, and protect me from our sworn enemy, then stay the fuck out of my life.”

I yank the door open and storm down the hallway. Dominic has no heart at all. He never has. He got his wife by kidnapping her and forcing her to respect him until she developed such bad Stockholm syndrome she told him she loves him. I can’t even understand women these days. I barge out to my car and climb in. I’m so frustrated by what’s happening, I’d be happy if I never speak to my brothers again. At least not until they understand me and what I want.

Pulling out into traffic I notice a black sedan a few car lengths back. It looks similar to the one I saw in the alley the other night, but I try not to let my imagination run away with me. I turn toward Broadway. There are a host of pharmacies on the strip and I need to pick up a few essentials for the safehouse, not to mention a few things to help Willow change her appearance. Neither one of us can afford to walk around looking like ourselves right now. We have to lay low until the heat dies down a little, and that means we’re in it for the long haul.

When I turn the corner, I notice the car follows, so I decide to take a little drive instead of stopping at the drugstore. Three more turns and over a mile out of my way, and that damn sedan is still following me. It has to be the Italians. I speed up and try to weave in and out of traffic to take evasive measures, but even when I run a red light and push my accelerator to the floor, they take the risk of bombing the intersection and nearly cause an accident. They are gaining on me, and I can’t risk

causing a commotion, so I duck down an alley and hope they don't see where I turn.

The car zips past the alley, and I back out and turn the opposite direction. I take a few deep breaths, frustrated it's come to this. I will have to stay in the safehouse for a few days now to make sure they're not able to trace me back there. I know Willow isn't their primary target; I am. But they won't let her live either, especially when they know what she means to me, and I know they will find that out too. I haven't been exactly secretive about how I watch over her.

I find a parking spot and put a few quarters into the meter, then jog the few blocks to the pharmacy. If they circle around and see me walking, I know it will be a drive-by and I will be caught in the direct line of fire. Luckily, there is no sign of them. I peruse the aisle, picking up a few groceries, some hair dye, a pair of scissors, and some pain killers. At the register I see toothpaste and toothbrushes, so as an impulse buy, I toss a few on the counter.

"Going into hiding?" the young teen jokes. His curly hair hangs in his face and he wears glasses too large for his face. I don't laugh at his stupid joke because life is too real to make a mockery of what my situation is. I just glare at him and pull my debit card out of my wallet. "Sheesh, tough crowd. That will be forty-two ninety-eight."

He takes my card and swipes it. The register makes a few sounds and he hands the card back to me. I take it and the sack of things I purchased, and turn toward the door, but I see the sedan roll past slowly, along with a man walking the street. I know him. He's one of the men who were shooting at me that night.

"Fuck," I grumble, and turn my back quickly. I hope they don't recognize me by the back of my head, and I wait a second. There is a pregnant mother in line, two folks back from the counter.

"Uh, excuse me, sir. Can you move now?" the teen says, gesturing with his hand. I

back up and allow the next customer to move up to the counter, then glance over my shoulder. I need to get out of here, draw them away if necessary. There is no need for innocent people to be caught in this mess.

Creeping toward the door, I try to keep myself out of sight on the street until the last second. I peek out and see the man's back is to me, and I rush the opposite direction. There is no going back for my car now. They have to have seen it now; it's probably why that guy is on foot searching. I have to lift a car.

I turn quickly down the first side street and make sure no one is around, then put my elbow into the passenger window of an old Chevy sedan. It's rusted out and filthy inside, but it's not some fancy new tech. I can hotwire this in a few seconds with just my pocket knife. I just have to do it before they see me, or this car will be trashed, because I know it won't perform like my car. And I'll have no choice but to run.

6

WILLOW

There is nothing interesting to watch on TV; this safehouse has the crappiest cable package I've ever seen. This time of day is just news and soap operas and I have too many interesting things in my life to ever be interested in such base entertainment. I'm an artist, a traveler. Boring TV dramas of wealthy people who can't keep it in their pants and lie to everyone don't appeal to me. I toss the remote and glance at the dresser where the proof of who Leo really is is stashed, then look away quickly, as if just looking at it will kill me.

Leo and his brothers are dangerous, his father too. When Alessi paid me that money and handed me a new identity with the threat of killing me and my father if I didn't take it and run, I had no idea who he really was. I just took him seriously because the size of the weapon pointed at my chest was terrifying. And the only time I tried to get

back into contact with my father a man was there to stop me with the same threat.

I don't understand why Leo is after me now? Why now? Why twelve years later when I had a new life and I was doing fine. I'm thankful he protected me from that Italian guy but he could have just dropped me off at any police station and let me go. Why are he and his father trying so hard to keep me away from my father?

Frustrated that I'm still locked up here with nothing to eat or drink, I curl up in a ball on the couch and close my eyes. Sleep is the only escape from this nightmare I'm living. My phone is dead, so even if I wanted to just scroll my socials, I can't. My stomach hurts. I think I'm dehydrated and I just want to go home.

When I hear keys jingle I sit up immediately. My eyes are a little tired but my body is wide awake the instant the door opens. Leo is back, and I hope he brought food with him. I turn to watch as he struggles in the door with a few bags of groceries and locks the door behind himself. The chain around his neck is just long enough to reach the lock without having to take it off. For some reason that detail irritates me more than it should. When I see the label for a can of soup through the translucent bag, I rush over to him and help him with the things.

"You brought food?" I ask, unburdening him of the bags. I carry them to the counter along the far wall near the fridge and set them down.

"A little. We'll have to do a grocery delivery service for a few days if we're going to eat better." Leo hovers behind me while I pull items from the bags. There is barely anything worth eating, but I'm so hungry I'd eat liver and onions. "I already placed an order for stuff to be delivered tomorrow morning."

"You didn't get any water?" I rifle through the second bag, but the only thing in it is a box of hair dye, some tooth care items, and a pair of scissors. I spin around and scowl at him. "I'm literally dying of thirst."

“Don’t be so dramatic. Just get a cup and fill it at the tap.” His callous tone makes me glad he left me years ago. Who would want to be married to that attitude?

“The water is brown.” I turn back to the few items on the counter and see that he managed to purchase painkillers. “At least I’ll have pain relief from the headache I’ll have due to dehydration.” I pick up a pack of cold meat and open the fridge and the stench of stale air wafts out. It smells like this thing hasn’t been opened in years, but it’s cold. I put the cold meat, along with a pack of cheese slices into the fridge and shut it, then eye the two beers. They’re cold and wet, but I know better than to drink alcohol when I have no clean water. It will only dehydrate me twice as fast.

“So what do I do then?”

“Drink your own piss; I don’t care.” Leo picks up the bag of toiletry items and pulls out the hair dye. “We have a bit of work to make this look natural, but it’ll have to do. Can’t afford a salon.” He flips the box over and reads the back, leaning against the counter top with the sink behind him.

The thought of drinking that brown water disgusts me. Does he actually plan on drinking it himself? Probably not. He probably had his fill of water while he was out and doesn’t even care if I die. My stomach churns as I open the cupboard and find only dust-covered glasses. I can’t even have a drink without doing dishes.

“This is so gross. What sort of safe house is this? People with the amount of money your father has should have nicer things.” My comment draws a glare from him and he lowers the box and looks at me.

“What do you mean?”

I swallow hard, eyes wide. I was sworn to secrecy. I am not allowed to tell Leo about the payoff or the danger his father put me in. All this time I wondered if he knew

about it, but his excuse for sending me away was that I would be safer, that his father didn't like me. Boy did I learn that the hard way. And given what I know about his family now, I know I have been safer. Bratva life doesn't even rank on the scale of danger I've encountered in my life and I'd like to keep it that way.

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“What did you mean, Willow?” he asks again, setting the dye down. I glance at it and change the subject.

“You won’t look good with that color. Black isn’t going to match your skin tone.”

Leo chuckles. “The dye isn’t for me, dumbass. It’s for you. You have to change your appearance. It won’t matter what I look like because they already know who I am and they know what they’re messing with. If you change your appearance and your name, you have a shot at getting away from this safely.”

“No! No way,” I hiss, backing away. I’m not even thirsty anymore. Now I just want to leave. I walk over to the door and try to open it, forgetting he locked it. “I’m not dying my hair and changing my identity.”

“Why not? You did it before.” He watches me, amused by how I tug at the doorknob. “That’s not going to open,” Leo says, dangling the key from a finger. He drops it and it falls back against his chest. “You are going to change your appearance and name because you are going to stay safe. I haven’t spent the past twelve years of my life stalking everything you’ve done just to watch you get yourself killed now.”

My blood runs cold at his confession. “You what?” I ask, my words barely a whisper.

“Get away from the door, Willow.”

“Stop calling me Willow! No one calls me that.” I am angry and I have a right to be. This whole thing is over my head. I just want to go back to my art and for Leo to leave me alone.

“Yeah, I know. You tried to hide from me, change your name and enroll in art school... It didn’t work. I have people.” Leo advances toward me as I move to grab my bag. Everything I even own in life anymore is in this bag, and I need it when I snatch that key from his neck and leave.

“I didn’t do it to hide from you. Your father never gave me a choice.” As the words march off my tongue—tiny soldiers who prepared a mutiny against me—I realize what I’ve done and I cover my mouth.

“What do you mean, ‘my father never gave you a choice?’ “

I turn my back to him, afraid of the wrath that will rain down on me now. Alexsi Gusev is my worst nightmare. Worse than the Italian bastard who tried to rape me. Worse than the idea of living on the street alone. I used to think I knew what fearing him meant, but knowing who he is now—head of the Bratva—now I know what fear means. It’s no wonder Leo sent me away; he feared his father too. A strange sensation of pity and understanding washes over me as I realize Leo did what he did because he was forced to, just like me. But that sensation passes when he forcibly turns me to face him.

“What the hell did you mean by that!” His shout startles me and I whimper and drop my bag.

“He paid me... five million dollars. He told me to leave you alone, and never speak to my father again. He gave me an envelope with a new identity in it. He had already applied and been accepted at Juilliard. I...” I’m lost for words. Things are starting to make sense to me now. Leo never wanted to get rid of me. His father was afraid of mine for some reason. But Leo was a grown man, not a kid. He should have stood up for me, fought for me.

I wrestle my arms out of his grip but he fights me until he has both of them pinned

between us, and he backs me against the wall.

“I don’t believe you, Willow.” His body is firm against mine, holding me in place. His breath is hot; deep furrows crease his forehead.

“I’m Reba now....” I can’t breathe. The desire to kick him in the balls and run is so strong, but my heart is warring with my mind. This man wanted me all along, so much so that he followed me for twelve years and watched over me? Who does that? Why?

“You are my Willow. You will always be my Willow, and you are going to do what I say so you can be safe. Do you understand me?” He leaves no room for argument, but I make a sliver of space anyway.

“Fuck you,” I hiss, still fighting him. I can’t give in to him. I can’t be with him. He is dangerous, more so than I ever knew. If he has the resources to follow me around for twelve years day and night, what can’t he do?

“Okay,” he growls before clamping his mouth over mine. I squirm, pushing against his chest and writhing to free myself but he is so strong. His tongue forces my lips open, thrusting into my mouth. I could bite him, but I don’t want to. Don’t get me wrong. I want to bag this guy for being a creep and breaking my heart, but I want him to dominate me in ways I’ve never experienced—ways that I’ve only ever seen in movies or read in books.

Leonid Gusev is walking cocaine, addictive and impossible to give up, even when it destroys you. And I’m here fighting my goddamn heart because even though he’s the biggest asshole I’ve ever met, he’s the only one I’d ever want. He kisses me more forcefully and I can’t protest anymore. I kiss him back, whimpering into his mouth.

I’ve kissed my fair share of guys, but I’ve never been kissed like this. This is not a

friendly kiss. This is a kiss from someone that wants to possess me. He's staking his claim, claiming what is his. I try to push him away but I'm weak, and my body is responding to him like it always has.

I arch into him as he grabs my bottom, lifting me into the air. He carries me to the bed and throws me down, grabbing my wrists and pinning them above my head. He is a predator, devouring me with his eyes.

"I'm not playing around with you, Willow," he hisses. "I'm going to take you on this bed, and I'm going to make you beg me to stop."

The way he says it is dirty, dark, and laced with a Russian accent that makes it sound even dirtier. I try to free myself but I can't. His arms are too strong.

I never thought I'd ever fuck a mobster.

I never thought I'd ever want to fuck a mobster.

He leans down, his lips against my ear. "You're so damn wet, Willow. I can smell you. Do you know how good it smells to me? Like vanilla and sunshine. You smell like a dream."

I may smell like a dream but I feel like I'm in a nightmare. Why wasn't Leo this way years ago?

"I hate you. You're a stalker and a bastard," I protest, pushing against his hips with my feet but he forces my legs apart and slides between them as he pulls my shirt up over my head. The chill of the air has my nipples hardening, though they were already well on the way. He knows how to turn me on, like he's been in my head.

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He smirks at me, that dirty, sexy smirk that makes me want to kiss him. "I'm going to fuck you so hard you'll hate me so much you'll never be able to get me out of your mind."

He leans down and takes my nipple into his mouth, sucking it, biting it. I try to push him away but I don't really want to. His mouth is on me, all over me, and it feels so good. I moan and arch into him.

"I'm going to fuck you right now, Willow, until you can't walk straight."

He slides down my body, stripping me, tossing my shorts to the floor, and ripping my panties off. I'm completely naked with a mobster on top of me. This is insane. This is so crazy, but it feels so good I can't protest. He slides a finger inside and I'm already wet for him. He growls and bites my neck, and I'm begging him to fuck me before I realize what I'm doing. He strokes my clit with his thumb and I'm ready to explode.

"God, oh god..." I writhe beneath him as he masturbates me with one hand and frees his cock with the other. "Please... Leo..." I beg, and he slides inside.

I'm so tight that he's almost too big but he's so long that he stretches me perfectly. I gasp and cry out as he fills me completely. He groans and grunts as he starts to fuck me, pulling out and slamming back in, grunting like an animal.

"You're so tight, Willow. You feel like a fucking vice grips."

I can't speak. I can only moan as he strokes my clit and fucks me, hard and fast. I come with a scream and a shudder. He keeps going, riding me on the wave of the

orgasm.

I'm too sensitive, too full, but he doesn't stop even when I say to. He just picks up the pace, fucking me mercilessly, grunting and growling.

"Leo, I can't... You're too big... please... I can't... oh god..."

But he doesn't stop. He just fucks me harder and harder until I'm screaming again, and this one just won't stop.

"Oh god, oh my god..." I moan as I come, over and over again, each one harder than the last, until I'm nearly insane with pleasure.

He fucks me until I'm too sore to think, too sensitive to move, until my throat is sore from screaming. And then he pulls out and rolls onto his side, pulling me against him. I'm too tired to resist, and I can't even speak. I lie there limp like a rag doll as he grinds against my backside. His cock is so thick and hard it drives between my ass cheeks and through my juices.

"You're so fucking sexy, Willow." He whispers to me. "I can't wait to fuck your tight little asshole."

"What?" I sputter out. I'm too exhausted to react. He's going to do what?

"You heard me," he whispers, pinching my nipple as he brushes his lips against my ear.

"I don't know if I can take that." I moan, but I'm so turned on by the idea that I'm rubbing my ass against his cock. The springs strain beneath our grinding bodies, squeaking. Any idea of leaving him is gone. Now all I want is him inside me again, another orgasm.

"It's going to hurt like hell," he whispers to me, his cock throbbing between my cheeks. "But I'll make it feel good. I'll make you scream."

"Oh god..." I moan, grinding back against him. My whole body is on fire. I don't know if I can handle this. I don't know if I can handle him. But I want to try. I want to try so bad. I'm so sensitive, I can't think. I can't talk. I can't do anything except feel him, throbbing between my cheeks.

"You're going to be my good girl, aren't you?" he whispers to me.

I've never wanted anything more.

"Yes! Fuck, yes." I groan as he pinches my nipple and slides his cock between my cheeks again. I've never wanted anything more.

"You're going to take my cock in your ass, aren't you?" he growls, sliding the tip against my tight opening. I can't help but whimper, all my muscles tense and trembling.

"Yes!" I moan, as he slides inside, slowly, just a little bit. My whole body is on fire. I can feel every inch of him, as he stretches my tight entrance wide around his head. The pleasure is almost too much to bear. I can't think, I can't breathe. I just need him inside me.

"You're going to take my whole fucking cock, aren't you?" he whispers into my ear. I can feel him throbbing inside me, stretching me. It's searing pain and it's everything I can do not to scream, but I grit my teeth and nod and he thrust in, his shaft nearly tearing me in two.

Leo lets out a grunt of satisfaction and I bite down on the pillow and cry out loudly, but as he begins to thrust, I relax into it and realize this is better than anything I've

ever felt.

He grips my hips hard and pulls me back against him, his cock pushing deeper and deeper inside me. I can feel every inch of him, as he pounds into me. He's so deep. I can feel him in my stomach. I can feel him in my throat. I can feel him in my fucking heart.

"You like it, don't you?" he grunts, and I can only nod. I can't say anything. I can't even think. I'm just a mass of raw nerves, burning with pleasure and pain. He thrusts deeper and deeper; I feel like I'm going to pass out in euphoria.

"You're my good girl, aren't you?" he says again. I nod, trying to say yes, but all that comes out is a whimper.

"I can't hear you." He pulls my hair and my head is pulled back. I arch my back and try to say yes as loud as I can, but it comes out as a moan.

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"That's not good enough." He thrusts hard, and I can feel him digging into me, but it's not enough. I need more. I need him deeper, I need him harder. I need him to make me a fucking mess.

"Yes!" I'm almost screaming. I'm so fucking close...

"You're going to be my good girl, aren't you?" He thrusts hard, and I feel my muscles tightening.

"You're going to be my good girl, aren't you? ... Tell me you're my good girl," he says, and I can't take it any more.

"Yes! Yes! I'm your good girl." I'm screaming now, and I'm coming. My pussy is pulsing and clenching, as my whole body spasms against him. He buries his cock deep inside me and it twitches. I can feel him coming too, his hot, sticky seed filling me up. I can feel him throbbing inside me, pulsing as my ass tightens around his shaft.

And when he's done, he pulls out of me and I lie there twitching still, tiny spasms jittering over every muscle in my frame. Then I feel his hot breath on my cheek. "Stop fighting me. You're mine. I haven't invested this much into you for this entire time for you to walk away now. You'll do as I say, and you'll be safe."

Leo climbs out of bed and I hear his belt buckle jingle before he walks away.

How the hell does he get to me like this? And how do I convince my heart that he's the enemy, not the remedy?

LEO

Willow draped across my bed makes me a satisfied man. Her curves look good wrapped around my cock and I have to admit, I like her spunk. She's feisty now, not like she used to be—meek, timid, impressionable. Life has really forced her to grow up and she's become a goddess in her own right. Now if she would only just fucking listen to me so I can keep her out of danger.

“Get up,” I order as I walk back to the counter where I felt the hair dye. I trust I have convinced her to listen to me now. A workout like that has to have drained some of the fight in her. I pick up the box and the scissors and turn around to see her still lying there. “You can enjoy the afterglow next time. Get up.”

Willow rolls to her side and glares at me, but she forces her body off the mattress and crosses her arms over her perfect tits. Her shoulders curl in; she's closed off to me, but she doesn't get to be that way. Not if she wants to live.

“Come in here. Let's get this over with.” I gesture to the bathroom and walk in, waiting on her. It's a few minutes before she walks in, and I almost scream her name, but I see her face appear in the doorway and I can tell she shed a few tears before joining me.

“I don't want black hair, Leo. It's impossible to lift color out of your hair once you go to such a dark shade.”

I look down at her body and notice she put her panties on. It's a shame, because I really like her naked.

“It's temporary,” I tell her, showing her the box. She inspects it and I see her features

soften.

“Fine, if you think it will keep me safe.”

Willow walks in and sits on the lid of the toilet and I get everything out and mix it up. The tiny gloves they provided in this box won't fit my large hands, so I'll end up with black fingers for a few days, but it's a small price to pay. I turn to her with the squeeze bottle in hand and she rolls her eyes at me.

“The man died, Willow. The Italian is dead, and they aren't going to let it slide. He was an underboss.” I squirt some dye down the center part on her hair and start to work it in with my fingers as I talk to her. “There is a bounty on my head; I don't know how much. I just know my family will protect me, but they won't protect you. By now they Italians know who you are. I'm sure they've been to the gallery, probably ransacked your place.”

“God, my stuff? Can we go look? You know, make sure nothing was damaged...” She tries to look up at me but I turn her head back to facing forward.

“You're moving too much.” The dye drips from my fingers as I massage it into her long hair. Maybe I should have gotten two boxes. I didn't realize how long her hair was.

“I don't see why they would care about me.” Her arms finally fall, no longer shielding her breasts. She's growing more comfortable with me by the minute. That's a good thing. Comfortable with me means one step closer to trusting me, and that's what we need. I can't be screaming orders all the time.

I squirt more dye onto her hair and comb my fingers through her long locks. I'll give it a cut later, but I'm sure that will mean another disagreement.

“They probably don’t give a rat’s ass about you, but they know I do. They’ll either use you to get to me, or they will harm you to draw me out.” My fingers turn jet black as I finish getting the dye worked all the way to the tips of her wavy hair. The color stripes her back where her hair hangs too, but I don’t tell her that. I glance at my watch and note the time. “We have to let this sit for twenty minutes.”

“You actually care?” she asks, and I can hear sarcasm in her tone but I know her question is genuine. She has a right to be hurt and angry with me; she just can’t let it affect her ability to follow orders. Without my family to back me up, she’s as good as dead.

“If I didn’t fucking care, I would have let that man have you. Got that?” Admitting how I feel has never been a strength of mine and she irritates me by getting into her feelings. As I snap out the words, she jolts, frightened by my sudden raise in volume and frustration. “Just listen to what I tell you, and you’ll be fine.”

Turning my back to her, I walk to the sink and turn the water on. The blackness from my hands rinses off and swirls around the sink until it drains and the water runs clear—well, as clear as this water will ever get. Willow’s right; the water looks disgusting. I need to speak to the landlord about it.

“Thank you for caring,” she says in a tone so low I almost don’t hear it. I pretend I don’t hear it because what the hell am I supposed to say to that anyway? “So they’re really bad people?”

I look into the mirrored door of the medicine cabinet as I grab a bar of soap from the sink and lather my stained hands. “You have no idea.” I shake my head and look at her reflection where her eyes meet mine. “I once got a package from them, the finger of one of my soldiers. He stole from one of their food carts—or they say he did. He just got the wrong change back and didn’t tell the vendor. So they came after him, and eye for an eye. They cut his fingers off one by one, then his hand, mailed it to

me. They left him to die in an old, abandoned building in Yonkers.”

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“God, that’s horrible.” She shudders, hugging her arms over her chest again, this time in fear over what I just said.

“That’s not even the worst they’ve done, but I’ll spare you the details.”

“I believe you.”

When the twenty minutes is up, I turn on the shower and nod at it, indicating she should get in. She does, but she doesn’t expect me in there with her. She acts startled and surprised when I move the shower curtain and climb in, leaving my clothing in a pile on the floor.

“What are you doing?” she hisses, covering herself as if we didn’t just fuck.

“Turn around,” I order, forcing her hips to rotate. She obeys, and I guide her into the water where the black dye begins to rinse across her body in angry-colored rivulets. I massage her hair, letting the excess dye wash away in the flow of water.

“Why are you doing this?” she asks, but I don’t respond. I don’t know why I’m doing this. I just want to be here with her, touching her. Her skin beneath my fingers is silky. I feel addicted to it, like if I don’t touch her I’ll somehow suffocate or drown.

I wash her in silence, using only my hands and the bar of soap from the sink. The puddles on the bathroom floor, left when I had to climb out to get the soap, will dry, and time will pass, but this moment is priceless. It will live on in my memory like so many others I’ve had over the years.

“I have no tampons,” she mumbles as I tilt her head back. “Or clean water. I mean, we’re changing my appearance. Can we at least go to a store close by? I want to get some things.”

I ponder her request as I watch the last of the black dye swish down the drain. Trust is a two-way street. If I expect it from her, then I have to give it to her.

“Yeah, let’s get dressed. I just don’t want to be out after dark.”

In less than twenty minutes we are out the door and headed to the market around the corner. She shops for the things she needs, carrying a few bags on her arm as we stop at a second store, but my senses are on high alert. I don’t feel comfortable having a jaunt to the grocery when there are assassins out to get me and my family isn’t being the least bit protective of me.

“Let’s hurry this up,” I snap, irritable. Feeling exposed makes me that way.

Willow scowls and turns toward a giant stack of bottled water. “We need a case. I have to hydrate.”

I glance at the door. I have a feeling someone is watching us, hunting me. “Fuck’s sake,” I grumble and pick one up, and just as I do, I hear the bell hanging above the store’s door jingle. When I turn to look, I notice one of the Italian’s there. I don’t think he’s seen us yet.

“Fuck... head to the back,” I bark and her eyes go wide.

She scurries with her bags down the row and I pick up a case of water and follow her. Near the back of a store there are three doors—a men’s room, a women’s room and a janitor’s closet. “Where? What are we doing?”

“In there,” I say, nodding my head at the women’s room door, and she darts into it. With another glance over my shoulder to make sure we haven’t been made, I lock us into the room and set the case of water down. They know we’re here and I feel gut-sick. I whip my phone out and dial Dom’s number as Willow cowers in the corner.

“God, what’s happening!” she wails quietly and I glare at her.

“Dom, buddy, I need your help,” I’m speaking before the line fully connects.

“What’s going on?” Dominic sounds irritated to hear from me, and after our last conversation I know why.

“I’m barricaded in a women’s restroom in the markets. I need you to come and draw them away from us.”

“Us? You have her out with you? You idiot.” His disdain for anything Willow aggravates me. “Ditch her and get out of there; shoot your way out if you have to.”

“Dominic, I’m not ditching her.” I look at Willow whose eyes widen farther if that’s possible. She looks like she wants to cling to me, a scared little waif. “Send someone to help.”

“You know Dad’s orders. I can’t help you if you rebel against him.” Dominic hangs up and I’m left with my anger and a very scared woman. I turn to her and sigh.

“We have to just hunker down here until they’re gone. If they don’t already know we’re here, that is.” My gut usually isn’t wrong, but I’m praying it is this time. I crack the door and peek out. The men are still standing there; there are two of them now. We just have to wait and pray. I won’t risk a shootout with Willow again. I won’t lose her.

“What if they come looking?” she asks, and I look up to see her crying. She wipes at her tears and runs a hand through her hair. The black dye stained her scalp in places and it’s obvious right now it’s not her natural color. Just another giveaway that she isn’t who she’s pretending to be.

“They will,” I tell her, peeking out the door. I see an exit door near the side of the building. If we just run, we can make it. “Load as many waters into your bags as you can carry. Fill your pockets. We have to make a run for it.”

Willow scurries, shoving bottled water into every place imaginable, and when she’s ready, I peek again. The men are standing there talking to the cashier.

“We have to run. On the count of three... One.... Two.... Three....” I dart into the store, grabbing Willow’s hand to drag her along. We hide behind the shelves, ducking and making our way to the exit, when the bathroom door swings shut and slams loudly. It draws the attention of the men, who run toward it, but one of them spots me and pulls his gun. I’m faster, firing off a few rounds to cover her as she races through the door and up the sidewalk. More rounds boom into the air, slicing through the plate-glass windows as I charge out the door and chase Willow down. We’re out, but they know which way we went. We have seconds to get to safety, and she’s already eyed a good spot.

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A woman sits on her front stoop, smoking a cigarette. Willow runs up to her and I am there only seconds later. “Please, hide us...” she begs, and the woman glances at us confused, but she doesn’t hesitate.

The woman says, “It’s open,” and we duck into her apartment before our pursuers leave the store.

I stand there leaning against the door and hear the men approach and question the woman, who misdirects them by telling them we ran away. Willow wraps her arms around me and drops her bags. She’s scared as fuck, and my chest is pounding from the workout. I hate my brother. He’s going to hear about this.

8

WILLOW

“Will you slow down!” My short legs just don’t keep up with Leo’s stride as he leads me back to the safe house. That woman—Ethel—was nice enough to hide us from those jerks but when she saw the blood on Leo’s chest she asked us to leave before they came back. I can’t blame her. I know Leo isn’t actually hurt, but I wouldn’t want his blood on my things either.

“Hurry up, Willow. They are still searching. We need to get back to the house and hunker down. I should have never let you talk me into leaving.” He carries his gun in his hand, ready to cap anyone who looks at him crossly. He never even asked if I’d like him to carry something, so my arms feel like they’ll fall off. Evading barbarians who think violence is the answer in life while carrying sacks of groceries and water

bottles is exhausting.

I don't respond to him. I have no response. I just do my best to keep up with him and hold my tongue so he doesn't snap at me again. The gym shorts I'm wearing are rubbing my inner thighs raw and going without a bra for this long can't be good for the longevity of my perky boobs. He could have at least let me stop by a boutique and buy some decent undergarments. My only choice now will be to hand wash them in the sink and leave them strewn over the shower rod to dry.

"We needed water, you know?" I mutter as we turn the corner. The entrance to the safehouse building looms and Leo whips around and scowls at me.

"You need a bullet in your head too?" His chest is heaving and the bloody spot on his shirt is growing larger by the minute.

"We need to see how bad that is." I nod at it and notice for the first time a cut in the fabric. It wasn't a bullet. He likely got snared by some of the glass from the broken windows or something.

"So what? You're a nurse now?" He reels around and continues to the door, holding it open for me to pass by him. I ignore his snarky remark and follow him to the door of our unit. I already feel safer now that we're back, but I won't admit that to him, not with the way he is treating me like this is all my fault. I accepted an invitation to have coffee with a good-looking man. I had no idea any of this would transpire.

Leo moves toward the small dining table and lays his weapon down after we're safely locked inside. I set the bags on the counter and grab a bottle of water and crack it open. The fresh liquid quenches my thirst like an oasis in the desert. I don't think I've ever gone this long without having water to drink—or coffee. It's been nearly forty-eight hours since I had a cup, so maybe that is why I have a nagging headache.

“Well, Doc?” Leo says, and I turn to see him sitting on one of the chairs, shirtless. His corded abs are a well-defined six-pack and I feel pain in my lip before I realize I’m biting it. He stares at me like I’m an idiot while I collect myself. Leo is really fucking hot. I’ve always thought that. And age hasn’t changed him a bit either; it only made him smolder more. “Yoo hoo,” he says, waving a hand around. “You want to check this out?”

The way he says the words doesn’t sound like he wants me to check out his wound, but more so that he acknowledges my attempt at showing him I care about him, even if it is only because he saved my life and he has to protect me now. I set the water down and sort through the bags until I find the one with paper towels in it. They’re an off brand, not what I normally buy, but they are better than a dirty rag in brown water. With a few paper towels and a fresh bottle of water in hand, I kneel between his legs and pour some water over his chest carefully. He tenses, so I know it stings a little, but not a single muscle on his face changes expression.

Leo watches me clean his wound. His half smirk and hungry eyes unnerve me, but it’s his confidence and refusal to show that he’s in pain that turns me on. I dab the paper towel over the bloody spot on his chest, adding water and drying it up a few times until the wound is mostly clean. It’s deep. He should have stitches, but I know he won’t consent to that. And I’m not about to sew him up. So instead I try to not look him in the eye while I work, though I do squirm a little.

Watching Leo in action, protecting me, herding me like a lost little sheep, it was eye opening. And arousing. It was the stuff movies are made from, where the heroine needs a hero to whisk her off her feet to safety, only it was real life. By no means am I an indigent waif, and anyone who knows me knows I hate those types of shows, but fuck was that sexy. He’s an ass sometimes, but I never have to worry if I’ll be safe. That is something I’ve wanted to feel for years now.

“Something amusing you?” he asks, and I meet his gaze.

“No, why?” I pause my wound cleaning and he grabs my wrist.

“That grin on your face... Seems like you think something is funny.” The way he holds my arm is possessive, like he owns me.

“Nothing is funny.” I try to stand and he puts a hand on my shoulder and pushes me back to my knees. I see the lust in his eyes and I know what he’s thinking. And believe me, if we hadn’t almost been killed moments ago, maybe I’d feel that way too, but my knees hurt and we did just have sex like ninety minutes ago.

He stares into my eyes for a long hard second then scoffs at me and shakes his head, sitting back. “So am I going to die?”

“You should have stitches.” I dab the wet paper towel over a spot of the cut that’s still bleeding. “But I can’t do them.”

“You know what you can do?”

God, his eyes, the penetrating way they drink me in. It’s like he’s an animal and I’m his prey. The rush of adrenaline from the gun fight and subsequent chase is still coursing through my body, and I’m sure he feels it still too. I squirm again, but this time it isn’t because he’s staring. It’s because my pussy is starting to ache. Am I an adrenaline junky too? I need to feel the thrill of fighting him and then get off? I mean I’ve had a lot of fun experimenting with my own body and masturbating but I only just gave him my virginity, and now all I can think about is fucking him over and over.

I flick my tongue over my lower lip and rest my hands on his knees. “What can I do?” I have no idea what I can do. I don’t even know what to do. I have zero experience in this department. I don’t even watch porn; I find it repulsive that other people slap skin for a camera, besides the fact that the sounds they make are

ridiculous. No one sounds like that.

“Suck my cock, then impale yourself on it and let me fuck you so hard you lose control of your bladder and can’t walk for a few hours.” He rests his hands on his crotch and stretches the material over his lap, a clear bulge emerging as he undoes his fly. I panic for a moment. I’ve never given a blow job; he’s going to think I’m a fool.

“I... Leo,” I mutter, shaking my head.

“So you’re a virgin. I knew that, Willow. I know everything about you. Now,” he says, extracting his dick from his pants. He holds it upright and looks me in the eye. “Just wrap your pretty little lips around me and suck.”

My pussy screams for him to fill me, but I bend down and do as he says. I wrap my lips around him and suck. He tastes good. I don’t know why I thought he wouldn’t. I swirl my tongue over the underside of him and he groans. I can’t believe I’m doing this. He’s so fucking big, I can barely get my mouth around him. I use my hand to make up for the extra space and take him a little deeper. I gag and pull back.

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“Don’t stop.” He pushes my head back down and I continue sucking his cock, getting used to the taste and the feeling. My pussy throbs and I feel juices between my legs. I press my thighs together and squeeze. “Oh god, suck it.” His hand rests on my head, pushing me down, and his hips begin rising up. He thrusts into my mouth; I’m not prepared for it either. Each time his dick pushes into my throat I gag.

“Fuck, Willow,” he grunts.

My pussy is so wet. I’m going to come. I’m going to come from sucking his cock. It’s so wrong, but I can’t help it. I want Leo. I want him to fuck me and make me come and come and come. I manage to pull my mouth away for a moment. “Leo,” I whimper, and my body tightens as he forces my head back down, my mouth swallowing him in. I don’t know what’s happening. I shudder and feel like my body is being ripped apart.

“Willow,” Leo cries, and I can feel his cock jerk and his come fill my mouth. I swallow, having no idea what I’m doing, but I keep taking him into my mouth and swallowing a few times until he pulls my head off his dick.

“Fuck,” he says, pushing me away from his red throbbing cock. I lean back, wondering what’s next, because my pussy needs satisfied now. I can feel how soaked these damn gym shorts are. I slip my hand into the elastic waistband and into my panties and touch myself. My clit is hard and soaking in moisture.

“Get up,” he orders and as I stand, he tugs the shorts and panties down. I’m not an expert, but I was pretty sure men could only go once. But Leo is still hard, and when he starts stroking himself, I know he wants to fuck me as bad as I want him to fuck

me. I straddle him, slowly lowering myself onto his lap and letting his thick girth push into me.

"Holy shit," I groan. My pussy is still tender from the other day, but he feels incredible, already easing the ache I've been feeling. "Woah... so good." I grind on him as he starts thrusting upward.

"Fuck, baby," he groans. "You feel fucking perfect."

"You feel fucking incredible," I tell him.

"I love your tight little virgin pussy," he says.

"I love your cock," I tell him. I'm getting close. My pussy is throbbing around him, and I claw his shoulders. He thrusts faster and drives his dick into me hard. "I'm going to come."

"Come for me," he says, his voice strained. "Come on my cock."

I do. My body feels like it's being ripped apart. My pussy clenches around Leo's cock, pulsing with each wave of pleasure that hits me. "Fuck me, Leo," I cry. "Oh, fuck me." He pulls my hips down and then shoves me back up again. I cry out as his cock slams into me, stretching me.

"Yes," he says. "So fucking tight."

I feel his dick twitching inside of me. His body stiffens and he thrusts into me hard and fast a few more times before I feel his cock pulse. He pulls me to him and kisses me as I feel him shooting his load into me. I kiss him back, enjoying this feeling of closeness and... love. It can't be love, but it feels like love.

"Oh, god," I tell him. "That was amazing." I lean back, his dick still buried inside of me. I feel his juices draining from me, probably making a mess inside his boxers, but he doesn't seem to care.

"That was," he says, and lets out a sigh. "I'm going to be sore tomorrow. I don't think I've come that hard since I was in high school."

I laugh and stand up, realizing I'm a little sore too. I can't help but have a stupid grin on my face as I turn my back to him and collect my shorts and panties from the floor. What is coming over me? Why am I falling for this man again, after he hurt me, after all that happened? But I am... I can't help myself. Maybe I am an adrenaline junky and fucking a mobster is how I get off. If so, I never want it to end. His sex is incredible.

9

LEO

Sex with Willow is something I never thought I'd get to enjoy and fuck do I enjoy it. I sit in my chair as she slowly dresses, keeping her back to me, and then proceeds to put the water bottles into the fridge, along with a few other things she bought, and the rest into the cupboards. There isn't much here for food; the rest will come in the morning. She manages to fix up a pretty decent meal though, quesadillas made with mozzarella cheese, dipped in pasta sauce. It isn't gourmet but it's food.

Willow fidgets while she eats. I can't tell if it's a personality quirk or if she's nervous to be around me. We haven't exactly had any heart to hearts since getting stuck together. It's been one thing or another. It was never like this before. Talking to her used to be so easy, but it appears conversing now isn't like riding a bike. I don't know what to talk about, so I just eat. It's silent and awkward, and when I'm done I carry my plate to the sink and wash my hands, then retire across the room to the bed,

kicking my shoes off but leaving my pants on.

Her eyes follow me, and she stays at her spot and finishes her meal. I watch her stand and carry her plate to the sink too. She's graceful, feet barely touching the floor. She glides across the room like a figure skater, elegant and beautiful even in my old shorts and t-shirt.

"Hey, bring me some water." Lying down, I reach my arm above my head and curl it up so I can rest my head. She glances at me and opens the fridge, grabbing a water. When she brings it to me I don't expect her to do anything but hand it to me, but she climbs onto the bed and lays down next to me, draping an arm and a leg over me.

"I missed you." The shift to this docile, tender woman is jarring. This is the Willow I remember, calm, quiet, meek, and loving. This is why my father said she'd make me soft, because compassion isn't something that comes in great quantities within my bloodline. I'm not opposed to this tenderness, but the years and my life experiences have made me something rigid and inflexible.

"I longed for you, but I can honestly say I never missed you." I crack the water and have a sip, then replace the cap and hold it in one hand while I wrap the other around her. Her hair hangs in her face, and I curl a few strands behind her ear as she looks up at me. The color really doesn't suit her, but soon it will wash out and those chestnut strands will return.

"Because you were following me?" Her question is innocent. I told her I tracked her in an effort to watch out for her. She was upset when she learned that, but my intentions were always pure.

"Yes, well, because I was closer than you ever knew, only an arm's reach away at times." I pulled more hair out of her eyes and spoke quietly. "You are mine, Willow. You may have just been a kid, or barely more than a kid, when we met, but I was

every bit of the man I am today. I knew what I wanted and I protected it. I'll always protect it."

Her neck cranes up to look at me and she rises up, propping herself on one elbow. She draws circles around my chest with a single finger, lightly touching the key around my neck. I can see the confusion on her face, or maybe it's frustration. "So you stalked me?" Her brow furrows and she looks down at the invisible line she is tracing across my skin. "Like, meddling in my life?"

I chuckle. "Yeah, I guess so. We're together again. Was it worth it?" I sigh contently. I have what I want, though I will have to fight with every breath in my lungs to keep my position in the family if I want to have her, and I may end up losing it all in the end anyway.

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Willow's lips purse and she offers a concentrated look of curiosity mixed with frustration. "Like, how much meddling?"

I shrug one arm and shake my head. "What does it matter? We are together." She doesn't need to know what I've done.

"It matters, Leonid." Her finger stops moving on my chest; her hand splays out. "Tell me." She only uses my full name when she is upset, but I still only detect frustrated curiosity in her expression. She's gotten better at hiding behind her poker face. I lie there for a moment controlling the angry response that wants to lash out at her.

I lick my teeth and feel tension entering my body. She has no right to question me after how many times I have saved her life and her career. My nose twitches, like a snarling muzzle of a wolf ready to bite.

"Like chasing off every bastard who tried to date you because you belong to me. Like making sure they didn't come back to tap the well that was only mine to tap. Like paying off your debts so you could afford to eat, and opening doors for you with my power and influence you'd never have had opened for you. How do you think you got into that gallery?"

It's a lie. She did that on her own but I'm pissed at her questioning my acts and the motives behind them. She lets out an angry breath and pushes off my chest, climbing out of bed in a huff.

"I can't believe you!" She paces, shaking her head and getting angrier by the second. "You lying sack of shit. You did what?"

“I protect what is mine.” I sit up calmly and place my feet on the floor. My authority is being tested and she will learn that she, in fact, does belong to me and she always will.

“You’re the reason I couldn’t get a second date? Because you didn’t want someone taking my virginity?” She turns on me, eyes angry and wild, and plants her hands on her hips. She’s too loud; she’ll draw attention from other tenants of this building.

I stand up and square off with her, crossing my arms over my chest. “I told you, you belong to me.”

“People don’t ‘belong’ to other people. I am not a possession. I am a person.” I love the way her nostrils flare when she’s pissed off.

“Well, you’re my possession.” Anger tightens my chest and I curl my hands into fists. “You don’t like me taking care of you?”

“That isn’t ‘taking care of me,’ Leo. That’s literally stalking. People go to jail for that.” Willow shakes her head again and runs a hand through her hair. “You’re unbelievable.” She walks toward the bathroom as if she is going to barricade herself in there to hide from me but my words halt her mid stride.

“You’re unbelievable. You know that? Not only are you not thankful for everything I’ve done, I found out that you were working with your father to drum up evidence against my father and put him away.” The minute the words leave my mouth she explodes.

“What the actual fuck are you saying?” Willow charges over to me, hand raised like she’ll smack me. I grab her wrist and look her dead in the eye.

“You heard me. You were supposed to be in love with me, but you teamed up with

your father to bring my family down.”

Her lips draw up and she spits in my face. “I hate you.”

“So it’s true then!” Now my voice is too loud. This whole thing is getting out of control.

“No, it’s not true. Why would I do that to you? I loved you.” She writhes, trying to get out of my grasp and I wipe her spit from my face.

“Hold still,” I order, but she refuses.

“Let me go. I hate you. I’m leaving, and you can’t stop me. I’d rather die at the hands of my enemies than spend another second with a fucking backstabbing traitor.” The rage in her voice curdles my blood. I’ve pushed her too far this time, but she is still mine. She might have to be a caged bird, but I will never let her go.

“Shut the fuck up, Willow.”

My ears perk up to voices in the hallway, men’s voices. They’re close, maybe right outside the door.

“You shut the fuck up. I can’t believe you—”

I clamp a hand over her mouth and spin her around, holding her to my chest. She elbows me hard in the ribs and I grunt, but I don’t let her go. “Shhhh!” I hiss, listening to the voices. I swear I recognize one of them, but I am positive they both have Italian accents.

“They’re here. They had to have tracked us.”

Willow quiets instantly, no longer fighting me, and I lower my hand. “Fuck, what do we do?” The anger in her tone is gone, replaced with fear.

“Get your shoes on now. Go to the window.” The instant I let her go she races to the table where her shoes sit next to mine on the floor. I sit on the edge of the bed and cram my feet into my shoes, then go to my dresser and grab a fresh t-shirt. My wallet remains in my pocket, but my gun is on the table, so I hurry and pick it up and by the time I do, Willow is at the window.

“It’s locked. Holy fuck it’s locked.” She is panicking, probably because the man outside my door bangs on the flimsy wood with something hard.

“Leonid,” he says, drawing my name out, “we have something to discuss with you.” His accent is so thick there is no mistaking it. This man is hunting me.

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I meet Willow at the window and use the key to unlock the padlock so we can fold the bars back. I open the window; it sticks and creaks as I push it up. It's barely large enough for me to slide through, but Willow manages quickly. She stands on the fire escape just outside and points at the counter.

"Fuck, my bag, Leo." It's funny how the minute she is afraid, I'm no longer Leonid and I'm her protector again. "It has my ID, my bank cards, my prescriptions. If they get that, they'll know everything about me."

"Fuck's sake, woman," I snap and dart across the room as the banging on the door gets louder.

"Open the door, Leonid. We only want to talk." I hear laughter accompanying the order and I grab Willow's bag and head back to the window. I have exactly three rounds left in my gun as I shove the bag into her hands and hoist myself out. I will have to use them wisely if we end up in a shootout.

"Go!" I urge her, and she pushes the ladder downward, then slings her bag over her shoulder. She climbs quickly, but I skip the climb, leaping to the ground when I hear a loud crash behind me. I tuck and roll when I touch down; my ankles scream at me, but I'm not hurt. We have to get out of here; they've broken down the door.

"Okay, Spiderman," she says snarkily, and takes my hand.

"Let's go." We take off, running down the narrow alley and the report of a weapon chases us. Bullets strike the buildings around us as we run. I turn and fire a single round, hoping for cover. I have to save the ammunition I have because the rest of it is

all in the safehouse we just fled.

“Here!” she hisses, trying to turn left, but I see an old Chevy pickup truck and I know I can hotwire it.

“No, here. We need wheels.” I yank her the other direction and she loses a shoe, but we keep running.

“God, Leo... My shoe,” she whines, her bare foot slapping the sidewalk.

“You can get new ones.”

I ram the back of my elbow into the passenger side window and it shatters, sprinkling glass all over the ground. Reaching inside, I unlock it and open it. Willow looks down at the glass with disdain, but the gunfire hasn't stopped. We don't have time for this. I pick her up and shove her in the car and slam the door. By the time I'm around to the driver's side, she has it unlocked.

“Look for a knife, screwdriver, anything.” I tear into the center console and Willow gets on her knees, leaning over the seat to look in the crew cab. I'm not afraid, but I do realize the gravity of the situation. I can't shoot our way out of this one. They had to have tracked us from that damn store. I knew it was a bad idea, and I let my fucking emotions get the better of me. I made a horrible choice. This is why my father said she'd make me weak.

“Got it!” she says, sitting up. One hand grips the seat, her back to the windshield, and the other holds a flathead screwdriver. But behind her, I see my worst nightmare. One of the men has his gun on aim. I raise my weapon and reach it right past her, firing the round that's so loud she screams and covers her ears, but my aim is true. It hits him in the gut.

“Get down,” I tell her, grabbing the screwdriver. “I only have one round left.”

Willow obeys, curling into a ball on the seat as I jam the screwdriver into the key slot and turn it hard. It tests my strength, but I feel it break loose. She whimpers, and I hear men shouting. They’re getting closer. I pull hard, exposing the ignition switch and cylinder, and the rest is a cakewalk. I find the right wires, twist them together. I get a bit of a shock and jerk my hand back, shaking it, but the car starts.

I slam it into gear and push the accelerator to the ground, and we’re off, though the old metal beast does cop a few bullets as we race away.

“And I didn’t even have to use my last round.” I shake my head and sigh, relieving the tension. “You can get up now.”

Willow looks up at me and wipes her eyes. She’s been crying. For good reason too. She could have died.

“See why I protect you?”

She glares at me but says nothing. I have no fucking clue where we’ll go, so I just drive. I just have to figure it out before we run out of gas.

10

WILLOW

It’s dark. The gas light chimes and I know this beat-up old pickup truck won’t take us much farther. At least we got away from those men again. Leo hasn’t said a word to me for at least twenty minutes, nor has he called anyone. We’re in a part of town I’ve never been in, where the row houses are all restored and expensive cars are parked bumper to bumper on the streets. This truck stands out like a sore thumb, but that

doesn't seem to bother Leo.

"Where are we?" I try to see his face in the flashes of light as we drive beneath each streetlight.

"My old neighborhood. My father lives here." He whips the truck into an alley and parks it, but the engine continues to run, maybe because it's hotwired and there is no key to turn it off. "Get out."

"But..." I protest. He is out with his door shut before I can even get one word out. I have no choice. He starts down the alley without me and I don't want to be left behind with this truck for the police to find me and think I stole it. I swing the door open and climb out, clutching my bag to my chest. "Wait up!" I hiss, not wanting to shout. It's late now, a lot of the homes we passed had all the lights out already.

Leo pauses for a moment while I try to catch up. I limp slightly thanks to only having one shoe. The bottom of my foot hurts each time I take a step thanks to the pebbles and stones on the pavement. It feels like walking across a wood floor covered in Lego bricks.

"You do realize your father threatened to kill me, right? I can't go to his house." It is impossible to keep pace with this ogre. His legs have to be a foot longer than mine, and he won't ease up.

"Fine, you can stay on the street. You'll last exactly two hours without my protection. Or did you forget already what happened when we left the safehouse? They tracked us."

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He is so irritating, acting like this is my fault. I keep my mouth shut as we continue down the alley and across two more blocks traveling in darkness now. I assume he's just trying to put space between us and the stolen car so it doesn't get traced to his father's place, but my foot hurts.

"Can we please stop for a second?" My tone is whiney; I know that. He doesn't seem to care.

"If you want to die, yes."

When he turns down a lit sidewalk, I sigh with relief. There are fewer stones on the sidewalk. The strap of my bag digs into my shoulder, but I press on.

"So what if your father just shoots me then? AM I better off on the street then for two more hours?"

Leo stops abruptly and turns to face me, and I almost slam into his chest. "My father is on palliative care. He's dying. He's not killing you."

His nostrils flare and his chest is puffed out, so I shrink back. "I had no idea. I'm sorry."

He takes my hand and continues down the street another half of a block before he nods at a house. "No talking now." I gulp and try to keep a straight face. Leo mounts the stairs, still holding my hand, and unlocks the front door. It opens silently to reveal a dark hallway. There isn't a trace of light. I feel completely blind.

“I can’t see,” I whisper.

“Shut up,” he whispers back and squeezes my hand so hard I almost whimper. I keep my mouth shut, following him down a long hallway past the stairs and into a room. Once inside, I hear the door click shut and then his phone illuminates. “Stay here,” he tells me.

“No, you’re not leaving me alone here. What if someone comes in? What if this is someone’s bedroom?” I’m angry, and my whispers come out more like quiet shouts.

“It is someone’s bedroom. This was my dad’s room before he got sick. Now he stays upstairs where the nursing staff is closer to him. Just stay here.”

“Leo, this is insane.” Our whispers keep getting louder and louder, and if he doesn’t put my anxiety to bed, we’re going to end up in a screaming match because I am not staying alone in the same home of the man who threatened my life and my father’s.

“This is the only option we have. Do you think I want to deal with my father being enraged by me? Just shut up and sit down and I’ll be back.” I feel his hands on my arms and I yelp quietly as I am forced backward until my legs bump into something. I collapse backward, and the bed breaks my fall. “And be quiet.”

I hear the door open and shut again and I know I’m alone. I half expect someone to flip on the light and scare the shit out of me, but all I hear are Leo’s footsteps silently retreating down the hallway. I sit up, leaving my bag lying on the bed. I kick off my one shoe and lift my sore foot up to rub it. There are still tiny stones stuck to it, so I brush them off. I hope he intends to get me some fresh clothing and a pair of shoes now, because I feel gross and naked.

This room smells sterile, like it’s been cleaned with bleach or something, and it’s cold. Their thermostat is set way too low. If I thought I’d be staying here, I’d curl up

in bed and warm up, but I want to leave. When Leo returns—if Leo returns—I’m telling him I want out of here. We can just stay at a hotel. I have enough money to pay for it, at least for one night.

Leo is gone a while, and I start to feel restless. I still can’t see anything but my eyes have adjusted to the darkness enough to make out a window. I tiptoe to it and pull the drapes back, which allows just enough light from the alley out back to see around the room. The silver doorknob reflects some of that light, and I walk straight to it and open the door. I have to find out what he’s doing.

As soon as the door is open, I hear loud voices coming from upstairs. One of them is Leo’s voice, but I don’t know who the others are. His father maybe? Or one of his brothers. I tiptoe up the hallway toward the door where we came in. It gets darker with each step, but the voices get louder and louder until I’m standing at the bottom of the stairs and I can hear everything very clearly.

“Get rid of her.” The statement is followed by coughing. It sounds like an older man, so I guess that’s his father. I knew he wouldn’t want me here. Leo was wrong to bring me, and now I feel even more afraid that this might be my last night on Earth. Alexsi Gusev wants me gone, maybe even dead. The way my mind is racing, I wonder if I should just get my bag and leave. If I’m not with Leo I know I can disappear. Just need to stop at an ATM and then by a car rental place and I can be out of the city at first light.

“No. I won’t do it. You know me well enough to know I never did. She’s mine. She’s always been mine, and we don’t turn our people out onto the street to be left for dead.” That’s Leo, angry and standing up for me against his father. “They’ve tracked her down. They know who she is. If you want her dead you’re going to have to get out of that bed yourself and steal my gun.”

“Leo, don’t be stupid.” Another man’s voice chimes in. He sounds younger. It’s got

to be one of his brothers. “No woman is worth risking your life and losing your family.”

“Yeah? What about Nanette? Huh? Would you risk your life for her?” After Leo asks the question there is only silence for several seconds. “Thought so. Now why is it that she is so dangerous? She hasn’t spoken to her father once since you sent her away, or tried to.”

So the older man’s voice really is his father. I knew it. I clench my jaw, half tempted to go up and give that bastard a piece of my mind, but fear keeps me glued in place for now. If Leo is having a difficult time fighting for me, my face appearing in that door will only make things worse for him.

“You take care of this, or Dominic will. Leonid, you make me so ashamed to be your father.”

Oh my god, what sort of man says that to his child? I cover my mouth to keep from talking to myself about how evil this man has to be. They want him to kill me, or they are threatening to do it. I’m not even dangerous. Sure, when I was living with my father, if he’d have found out about Leo and what his family was like, I know he’d have used me to get to them. But it’s been so long, there is no way they can think my father is still a threat. I want Leo to tell them Dad is out of the picture. I’m not a threat.

“Look, she’s not leaving. Not tonight. We’re sleeping downstairs. I’m locking the door and I’m filling my clip, so don’t even think of coming in unless you want a chest full of lead.”

At that, I quickly tiptoe back to the room and silently shut the door behind me. My hands shake at the way he spoke to his family, especially his father. A man like that is not to be double crossed. Why does he think he can say those things and get away

with it? Leo seems fearless, like nothing on this planet matters more to him than me. But why does he feel like that? Especially after I took that payout from his dad and left. He should have been angry with me. Instead he followed me around and protected me.

I begin to think about it a different way now as I climb into bed and curl up beneath the covers. I shiver as I ponder how brave of a thing Leo did for me. Yeah some of the things he did were shitty, but he never gave up. He actually wanted to keep me in his life and he made it happen.

God, my heart feels so confused right now. This needs to be over, soon, because if not, the fear and anxiety are going to give me an early-age heart attack.

LEO

Now that Dad knows I'm here and I'm not leaving—and I'm not getting rid of Willow—I don't bother with being quiet. I storm out of his room and take the steps two at a time, my boots clunking on the wood floor. I hope Willow didn't hear that argument, but even if she did, she'd know how hard I'll fight for her. My feet hit the first floor and I walk straight to the kitchen, to the south side of the house. It's a galley kitchen, stretching the length of the flat from front to rear, with a dining area near the front.

The lights flicker to light when I hit the switch and I head for the fridge. I need to calm down and blow off steam and a beer or two will help that along. Dad can't drink anymore, but I know my brothers keep the fridge stocked for their regular rotations of being here to sit with him. The stainless-steel appliances reflect my movement, blurring my actual image. It's how I feel I've gone through life—blurred out because my mere existence has upset people.

I grab a six-pack of beer and shut the fridge, then head toward the back hall that passes through the mudroom and allows me entrance to the main hall where my father's old room is. Willow was pretty pissed that I left her, so maybe she'll want a beer too. So far, Dominic has not followed me down the stairs, and I don't hear shouting, so maybe he's talking some sense into my father. Or maybe they're devising a plan to get rid of her. The latter is probably more accurate.

When I walk into the room and turn the light on, I hear sniffing and see Willow curled up under the blankets. As promised, I shut the door and lock it, then set the beer on the oak nightstand that matches the dresser and bed frame. She pulls the

blanket down far enough she can see me and watches as I rifle through the dresser in search of ammunition.

"That didn't sound like it went so well."

"It didn't," I grumble, but I find the nine-mil ammo in the top left drawer. I pull my weapon and take the clip out, then load fifteen new rounds into it and pop it back into place. With the one round already chambered, I have a full weapon just in case Dom gets any stupid ideas. I don't think he will. He'll let me sleep on it. If something is going down, I assume it will be tomorrow morning.

"I told you he would want me gone, and by the way it sounds, he wants me dead." Willow sits up. Her eyes are red and puffy from crying. Tears still glisten in them. "They're not touching a hair on your head." Now a bit more comfortable, I lay my gun next to the beer and kick my shoes off, then strip out of my clothing, leaving only my boxers, and climb into bed.

"Is one of those for me?" she asks when I crack open a beer.

"Yeah," mumbled, handing her one. She stares at it for a second then looks at me like I'm stupid.

"How will I open that?"

I am so irritated with her neediness at times. "With your hands."

She takes the beer and repositions herself in bed so that she's sitting next to me propped against the headboard. Her hands fumble with the cold bottle, struggling to work the cap, but she grunts and whines so much I set my beer down and take it from her hand to open it.

“There,” I tell her, giving it back to her without the cap.

“Thanks.” Willow cautiously takes the beer from me. She looks at me like she’s afraid of me or something. Or maybe she’s afraid of what she overheard. She sips the beer and watches me intently as I stew. My mind races so much I forget I even opened a beer. This family loyalty thing is at a whole new level following the ousting of the mole. It’s obvious my father and brothers blame me. It’s the only reason they would refuse to protect Willow; I know it.

They have always thought of me as the weak link. As if, should there be tragedy within the family, it would come through me. It’s infuriating that my own father and brothers don’t have my back when they should, and only because they blame me for Nick, or Mom, or Willow’s father, or whatever other plot came against them.

“Penny for your thoughts.” Willow’s soft tone breaks through to me and I watch her sip her beer.

“I don’t talk about my feelings. I fuck. Okay?” The beer on the nightstand is sweating, leaving a puddle of condensation around its foot.

“Then let’s fuck.” She sets her beer on her nightstand and pushes the covers back.

“What?”

I watch as she pulls her shirt off over her head, then shimmies her shorts and panties off and tosses her clothing to the floor.

“You don’t talk; you fuck, so let’s fuck. I mean...” she mewls, reaching beneath the covers until her hand rests on my dick, the thin layer of my boxers keeping me from enjoying the way she rubs me. “Fucking helps you relax, right? And you’re tense. It’s been a tough night. Let me help you.”

I sit straighter as she slides her hand into the opening of my fly. “Since when are you initiating sex? You told me you felt like a prisoner.”

“I don’t know, Leo, maybe I think it’s really arousing and hot that you stood up to your father and brother for me.” Willow pushes the blanket back and slips my cock out the front of my boxers. “Maybe I just get turned on by a man who fights for me.” She bends, lowering her mouth to my limp dick and flicking her tongue over it. IT sends a shiver of anticipation through me and I begin to swell.

“Maybe I’m tired of feeling like a prisoner. I like you fighting for me.” Willow wraps her mouth around my cock and begins to suck.

“You’re not a prisoner. You’re a fucking sexy woman.” I reach out, wrapping my fingers in her hair and pulling her head up so I can stare into her eyes as she sucks me. “I think you’re sexy as hell.” She looks at me out of the corner of her eye while she sucks me hard, stroking me with one hand.

“I think you’re sexy as fuck.” I croak, my voice straining. “You’re gorgeous.” She moans around my dick, sending vibrations through me. “You’re fucking gorgeous. Dirty. Sexy. You drive me crazy.”

She moans again.

“You make me crazy.” I tell her as she strokes me. “All I can think about is fucking you.” I push her head down so she has to take all of my cock into her mouth. “I think about you like this.” I pump into her mouth, working her head back and forth as I fuck her mouth just like I’d fuck her pussy. “I think about you like this and I lose my fucking mind.”

Her throat constricts around my head, making her gag, and she pulls back, but I push her head down hard and make her take it again and again, giving her time to breathe

in between thrusts. Her ass in the air, the curve of her cheeks silhouetted against the backdrop of the green walls is so fucking hot. I reach for her, grabbing and squeezing her ass cheek, and feel how moist she is.

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“You’re a dirty little minx aren’t you?” I ask her and she moans, her mouth full of my dick. “You like sucking my cock don’t you?” I smack her ass cheek. “You like taking it in your mouth and sucking it down. Do you want to suck the cum out of it?”

Willow’s eyes are watery, tears leaking from them and down her face, but she doesn’t stop sucking me. She’s stroking me as fast as she can with one hand, and I can feel her lips on me as I thrust into her mouth. Her hands are on my hips now, holding onto me as I thrust into her mouth. I can’t hold back. I’m so fucking turned on by her. I’m so turned on by her mouth on me.

My balls draw up; my groin tightens. I'm going to come way too fast, so I grab a handful of hair and force her mouth away from my cock. She pants, bracing herself on my body with both hands. I gave that throat a workout, and now I want her sitting on my face. I let go of her and slide down the bed until my head rests on my pillow.

"Sit on my face, now."

Willow wipes her mouth and offers a hesitant look, but I don't take no for an answer. "Sit on my face now," I repeat, and she moves. She straddles me and slides backward until her dripping pussy is inches from my lips. "Fuck you are wet." I dip a few fingers into her then lick them clean and she whimpers.

"I was just going to suck you off." Her hands squeeze my thighs as I grip her legs and pull her backward harder.

"Yeah, well now I'm going to fuck you good." I force her backward farther still until I can bury my stubbled face into her valley and lap at her juices.

She groans and I feel her nails claw my skin, nearly drawing blood. I lick her slit, and spread her lips apart and hungrily eat her pussy. She cries out when I slide a finger inside of her and push my tongue inside of her tight hole. I feel her hips move, grinding on me as I fuck her with my mouth, and I'm hard again. I'm harder than I've been in a long time. I need to fuck her, and I need to fuck her hard.

I pull her hips down, and she comes all the way down onto my mouth. Her pussy is right on my face as I swirl my tongue around her swollen clit and pump my fingers into her. I feel her muscles contract around my fingers, and I lick her pussy as she comes all over my face.

"Oh god!" she moans and shakes above me. Her hands are on my thighs, her fingers digging into my flesh as she rides the wave of her orgasm. I watch as she comes and it's the hottest thing I've ever seen. She's so fucking beautiful, and she's mine.

When her body calms, I push her forward until she is straddling my hips, my dick slipping around in her juices. I eye her asshole, rubbing a finger across it, smearing her moisture, but I want her pussy.

"Leo," she whimpers, grinding on me. She wants another, and I want to give it to her.

Willow raises up and I hold myself upright for her to slide down around me.

She cries out when I grab her hips and lift her slightly, forcing her to rise up just a little more. Then I push my hips up toward her and she takes me again.

I slide into her easily. She's wet and ready. I want to take it slow, to make her feel how much I love her, but I need her too much. I need her more than I need to breathe.

I thrust up into her, pulling her down on me. She is panting, her head thrown back, her hair a mess, her body sweaty as she slides up and down on me. Her pussy is tight,

and wet. It's like a warm velvet glove, and I'll never get enough of it.

I watch as she comes closer and closer to the edge. I want to prolong it, make it last, but she's too much. She's my addiction, and I want her to consume me.

"Come for me, baby," I say as I thrust up again. I feel her juices coat my dick and I'm about to lose it. And when I force my thumb into her tight, hot ass, she shudders.

"Fuck," I hear her whisper, and in a few seconds I feel her gush over me. I thrust up into her as she comes, my dick pulsing as I come inside her. My hips twitch, my head falls back, and I groan as my cock unloads inside her. She spasms and jerks, convulsing around my shaft and milking me, until she falls forward, bracing herself on the mattress between my knees. I could get used to this.

When Willow slides off me, I feel her sex mixed with mind drain between my legs and I roll out of bed. She collapses there across the foot of the bed to enjoy her afterglow, but I head into the adjoining bathroom to grab a washcloth. I wet it and wash myself up, then rinse it out and walk back to where she lays curled on her side.

"Do you think your father will kill me?" she asks, watching me as I spread her legs and wash her clean. It's a sensual moment, me seeing her exposed like this—her vulnerable enough to allow it.

"Yes." I don't mince my words. He may not pull the trigger himself, but I know what he's capable of and if I don't handle this correctly I'll be standing near a headstone wishing I could reverse time.

"Should we leave?" I hear the fear in her voice, but there isn't a trace of it in my mind.

"No. You're going to do exactly as I say and you're going to be fine." I finish my

clean up and lay her leg down, and she crawls up into bed and waits for me. The blanket is soiled, but there are no extras in here so I wipe it as clean as I can and toss the dirty wash rag into the hamper in the bathroom, then return to bed.

“Leo?” Willow is acting strange. I wonder why the sudden shift from angry and hostile toward me to comforting and calm.

“What?” I climb into bed and lie down on my back, down the beer, then crack another.

“Do you love me?” She props herself up on an elbow and waits for an answer, watching me drink my second beer.

“Love is a strong word. Let’s not define this.” I turn my back on her and finish the beer, then clap my hands twice to shut the light off. The bed is cold. There is distance between us, but I can’t let my emotions get away with me right now. I have two enemies vying for my blood—my true enemy, and one who should be my brother. And Willow is stuck right in the middle. Now it’s my job to keep her safe, because if she’s not safe, no one is. At least not as long as there is breath in my lungs.

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I awaken to the bed shaking. Leo sits on the side of the bed putting his boots on. He's dressed. I never even heard him wake up or put his clothes on. His hair is damp too, which means he showered and I slept right through that as well. He smells nice, like aftershave or cologne. I turn to lie on my side facing him and lightly touch his back. He glances at me over his shoulder as he ties his boot strings.

"I'm getting food, and then I'm getting us out of here." As he stands he picks up his weapon and shoves it into the waistband of his pants in back. "You need to stay here."

Just having woken up, I feel groggy and I'm not sure I heard him correctly. "Me stay here while you leave?" I yawn and for a second I forget where I'm at. Me waiting for breakfast in bed sounds like a treat, until it all comes rushing back to me. The argument, the way his father ordered him to get rid of me. "Leo, I can't stay here alone."

Sitting up, I stretch and slip my legs over the edge of the bed. I'm going to get dressed and go with him because if I stay here, I'm afraid of what his father will do. I pick up the shorts I've been wearing and my panties, but he says, "What are you doing?"

I turn to face him. He's buttoning his shirt and tucking it in. "Going with you. I'm not staying here without you."

"Yes, you are. Just have a shower and I'll bring you food." His stern tone is threatening, but I know he'll never hurt me. That's the mistake he made when he said they'd never touch a hair on my head. I know he won't either.

“I’m going,” I say again in just as firm of a tone as the one he uses. I bend and shake my panties out to put them on and he rounds the end of the bed and opens the door, standing in it open.

“You’re staying, even if I have to tie you up and lock this door. Now have a shower. That’s an order.”

“You think you can just order me around like one of your men? I’m going with you, Leonid.” I yank the panties up and glare at him. My heart is pounding. Even with the room fully illuminated it’s still just as scary as the second I walked in. The man who threatened to kill me years ago slept in this room, and he sleeps upstairs in this same house right now. Not to mention he threatened me last night too.

He walks over to me and puffs his chest out, looking down his nose at me. “You think because you feel all lovey dovey toward me that I’m just going to let you walk all over me? In case you forgot, you are incapable of defending yourself against the people who want to kill you.”

“And some of them are right upstairs.” My nostrils flare and I cross my arms over my chest, hiding my tits from his view.

“So I should make good on my threat to tie you up?” He isn’t backing down and I’m sure an argument will only draw attention to my presence. Maybe if I just hide away everyone will forget I’m here and leave me alone. It’s not likely, but apparently I can’t go with him where it’s actually safe. “The Italians can’t get to you here.”

“Your father can.”

“Stay in this room. I’ll be back.” Leo retreats, shutting the door behind him after he leaves and I am alone to brood over my own anxiety and inability to control the circumstance. My hands shake with fear and anger. I drop the shorts and have to wipe

my sweaty palms on the fronts of my thighs.

“Bastard,” I mumble as my eyes dart around the room. There is no source of safety in this room, no comfort. It’s just a bed, two nightstands, a dresser, a television and a window. Even if there were a gun here, I’m not sure I know how to use one.

Leo was right. I do need a shower; it's been days since I felt clean even though I showered only two days ago. But that brown water at the safe house was so gross I feel like I am dirtier after having the shower than before I got in. And don't get me started on how I don't have any clothing that fits me properly. I will have to put on the same filthy panties, shorts, and t-shirt after my shower, but I want one.

I walk into the bathroom, and I peel the panties off and leave them lying on the floor. The room is still steamy from Leo's shower, the mirror fogged. It feels awkward to shower in someone's house when you are a guest, but showering in my enemy's house is frightening. Just being naked and alone here is frightening.

I turned the water on and I only have to wait a few seconds for it to be warmed up. I step into the flow of water and shut the glass door behind me. In moments I am soaked and starting to feel relaxed. In the shower is where I do my best to thinking. As the tiny droplets hit my skin it's like sensory overload and it allows me to stay grounded in the moment where my conscious thoughts can be directed toward the problems I'm facing and help me find a solution.

I don't want Leo to be a problem. I'm not sure I want Leo to be anything in all honesty. A week ago I would have told you that Leo meant nothing to me, that his absence from my life didn't affect me in any way. And that would have been true. My life was perfect. Or at least I thought it was. I graduated from Juilliard, got my own studio, and I am running a successful art business making money off of my paintings and sculptures. At least I'm supposed to be.

Life isn't supposed to be this way. I'm not supposed to be on the run from men who want to kill me. I left that life behind twelve years ago. And even back then it wasn't like this, not running from one house to another with gun fights and car chases. It was a simple matter of a father who didn't want me around his son, and an agreement that I leave or there would be dire consequences. Leaving that situation was the hardest thing I'd ever had to do because I was so in love with Leo. I would have told Alessi to fuck off and leave me alone and totally passed on his "offer" but then Leo dumped me.

I reach for the shampoo bottle, squirt some in my hand, and lather my hair up. As I massage my scalp I feel the ache in my shoulders and arms from carrying bags full of groceries and water during that narrow escape from death. Maybe we shouldn't have left that safe house, but at least the water in this home is potable. I want to relax. I want to trust that Leo really has my best interest at heart and that he actually really will protect me even from his own family. But the past is coming back to haunt me now, and I not only fear for my own life, but for my father's. He doesn't even know I'm still alive, and my presence in this home is a very threat to his life.

Turning in the water, I let the flow rinse the shampoo suds out of my hair. It feels good to be clean. But I still don't feel safe. I use a bar of soap to wash my body, cleaning all the nooks and crannies. I remember how Leo washed me last night before sleep, and as I gently touch my soft folds to suds them up and wash them I remember how it felt too. No one has ever touched me the way he touched me. I never had a chance for them to touch me that way. He kept them all away from me, all so he could have me to himself.

I'm not really sure what to think of that either. Is it one of the most romantic gestures of all time? Or should I be infuriated that he micromanaged my life and kept me from really living? Because if I'm hours or days away from dying right now, and I could have lived my life to its fullest, but he prevented that from happening, then maybe I should be upset with him, and not falling in love with him all over again.

Finally clean and feeling a bit more refreshed I turn the water off and step out of the shower. I glance around the bathroom in search of a towel, but the only one I see is Leo's used towel draped over the towel bar. I could spend time rifling through cupboards to find one, but the air conditioning chills my body making my nipples hard. It's too cold to fuck around. I grab the used towel and dry my body then my hair, and wrap it around my torso tucking it into itself. I stare down at my dirty panties and feel completely repulsed by the idea of putting them back on. So I leave them lay there in a heap and open the bathroom door, prepared to go commando.

“Fuck, Leo said you were hot. I just didn't know you were that hot.” A man's voice startles me and I freeze. I glance around the room and notice a man who looks similar to Leo, though slightly younger, leaning against the wall in the corner of the room. He uses a pocket knife to clean the dirt from under his fingernails. His dark wavy hair hangs across his stormy eyes, and his leather jacket buckles in the front, slightly too large for him.

“Who are you? What do you want?” Adrenaline shoots through my chest and down into my limbs, I'm ready to fight him for my life or run out of here even if I have to do so butt naked.

“Whoa, slow down, woman. What are you so jumpy for?” The man stares at me through slitted eyes and closes his pocket knife before sliding it into his pocket. He pushes off the wall, crosses his arms over his chest, and stares at me.

“Answer my question. Did Leo send you in here to watch me?” I wouldn't put it past him to have done such a thing, but I'm more afraid that he didn't send this man. That this man was sent by Alexsi to kill me. I hover by the bathroom door shivering and shaking from fear.

“Leo has no idea I'm here.”

His words confirm my greatest fear. Someone has sent this man to kill me while Leo is out of the house. And when he comes back he's going to find a bloodbath and I'm going to be dead. I stepped back into the bathroom and shut the door, but quickly realized the folly of my choice to do so. There is no window in the bathroom, and there is no lock on the bathroom door. So when the man tries to open the door from the outside and I put all of my body weight against it to hold it shut, he easily pushes it inward and we are trapped together in the tiny space.

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“Look, honey, you're going to do what I tell you to do so I don't have to hurt you. Nobody wants to shed any blood, I just follow my orders, and you do what you're told also.”

Trembling, I say, “You mean you're not going to kill me?”

“If you don't go get dressed and shut your fucking mouth I will. Because it'll be a hell of a lot easier to explain blood all over these walls than it would be to deal with you rebelling against me.” The expression he gives me is one I've seen a thousand times in the last forty-eight hours. This man is undoubtedly one of Leo's brothers. I know he has like four or five.

Fear of death is a funny thing. It makes you do things you would under other circumstances never do. I walk past him back into the bedroom and he follows me. Swallowing hard, I turned to him and gesture with my finger in a circle. “Turn around,” I order.

“For what, honey? You think I ain't never seen no bitch naked?” He chuckles at me with a slightly smirk on his face and crosses his arms over his chest indignantly. He has no intention of giving me any privacy to get dressed.

“Does Leo know you watch his women get dressed?”

“Does leos woman know that I fucked every one of his exes except for you?” He walks closer to me; His eyes lusty and hungry like he's stalking me. He holds his hand up all of his fingers curled back except for his pinky. He uses the very tip of his pinky to brush a single strand of damp hair off my forehead and out of my eyes. As

he does he says, “Who says you have to be an ex for me to fuck you?”

I shudder with fear and back away. I'm not afraid that he will hurt me, because I know that Leo will kill him if he does; it doesn't matter if this man is his brother. But the idea of being sexually assaulted by this man on the same bed where I just had sex with a man I think I might be in love with, only days after giving that man my virginity, well that thought makes me feel sick in the stomach.

With all the strength I can muster I walk around to the other side of the bed, pick up my t-shirt and shorts, slowly peel the towel away from my body and lay across the bed, and then quickly get dressed. It's degrading, and humiliating, and I want to go home, but I want to live even more than that. I want Leo to come back now. I want him to walk in here and see what this man is making me do. But he doesn't and soon I'm being swept out of the room and shoved into the back of a black sedan, where I'm being shuttled to God only knows where. I didn't even get to grab my bag. My feet are bare, and my chest aches from the amount of anxiety I've been under for days now.

For the second time in twelve years I want to call my father. Even if it risks his life. Because I want to go home.

13

LEO

From the instant I pull up outside my father's house I know something is wrong. Something is different; I can feel it in my gut. I took one of his men's cars, and went to the local bakery to grab some doughnuts and coffees for Willow and I to have for breakfast before we discuss our next steps. I carry them in my hand as I walk up the steps to the front door and open it. Rome stands at the bottom of the steps, a sentry guarding my father's best interest.

He looks at me calmly, though I get the feeling that he isn't at all calm. Ignore him and walk straight down the hallway to the room where I left Willow to shower and prepare for our day. The door is standing slightly open, and I left it shut. I told no one that I was leaving, but that doesn't mean they didn't hear me drive away. And I did give Dominic a very strict order to stay out of that room, though my absence from the room may have indicated to him that I was finished there. Still, I made it very clear to them what I expected.

So imagine my surprise when I walk into this room and Willow is gone. There's a towel draped across the bed as if she showered like I told her to. But her clothing is gone, the shorts and T-shirt she's been wearing. I set the donuts and coffee on the nightstand and walked to the bathroom. That door is also slightly ajar. The room is hot and steamy, as if she has only finished having her shower. Her panties lay there on the ground, but she is not here either.

My chest tightens with anger; I clench my jaw. If my father has done something to harm a single hair on her head I will murder him myself. I know what that means for my life, that I'll always be on the run from my entire family, but Willow is mine. No one will ever hurt her and get away with it.

I march out of my room and back up the hallway to Rome, who now stands with his hands clasped in front of his groin, chest puffed out, and shoulder squared. "Get out of my way, Rome." At my order he stiffens his neck, as if he were going to stop me from mounting those stairs. He's younger than me, smaller than me, and I have bested him in every physical altercation we've ever been in. "Now."

"Dad is getting his medication right now, Leo. You cannot go up there, because I was given strict orders to keep you away from him." Rome's eyes dart back and forth between mine. He's testing me. He wants to follow Dominic's orders, but I can see that he also doesn't want to anger me. That's a very smart position for him to be in with me at this moment. Because I cannot be held responsible for what I'm about to

do if he doesn't move the fuck out of my way.

“Do you really want to put a bullet in me this morning, Rome?” I lean in so close I know my hot breath wafts across his face. He doesn't flinch, or blink. He doesn't move a muscle. “Because it's fine if Dominic sent the order to put a bullet in me, but we're blood. We're brothers. This disagreement is not between you and me, it's between me, Dominic, and our father. So if someone's going to do some shooting today, let it be one of them.”

Rome looks thoughtful for a moment. I know him, and he's loyal to a fault. But this is a complex issue and family loyalty means loyalty to me as well. I can see his wheels turning; he's thinking about what he should do or shouldn't do. As if there were a right or wrong thing in this situation. So I help him along in his thought process.

“I'm not going to hurt him. I just want to find out where they took her so I can get her back.” I don't back down. I continue breathing down his face, and he nods one solemn tiny nod. I know that he does not want to defy Dominic. So I make that easy for him by rebelling against his order.

I step around him and take the steps two at a time ascending to the second floor where my father lies in bed. I hear Rome following me, though he follows me calmly. I opened the door to the bedroom and walk in to see my father lying naked on his bed. His young nurse, about the age of twenty-five maybe, is giving him a sponge bath. He looks up at me, not even surprised to see someone walking in on him receiving his bath. Then he speaks to me in a stoic tone.

“I only did what was necessary to protect my family.”

The nurse continues washing him, dipping her sponge in the bowl of warm water then rubbing it over his aging frame. She studiously continues as if the conversation isn't even happening. I wonder how many times this has happened in the past. I also

wonder how much he pays her to do this service for him, because I can't imagine it's pleasant for such a young woman to have to touch such an old wrinkly man in such an intimate way.

“Where is she?” I leave no room for doubt about how I'm feeling following my father's actions. My tone is curt, cold, and I expect an answer.

“You should not have brought her into this home, Leonid.” I don't understand how he can remain so calm when he knows how angry I am. If he were any other man he'd have a bullet in him already. The only reason I have respect for him is because he raised me.

“We had no other choice. They were on our tail. The truck I stole was running out of gas and we had no way to get to another safe house.” I clenched my hands into fists glaring at the nurse. She glances up at me and then looks at my father. Now she looks nervous, because maybe now she's getting the point that she is not wanted here. Still she continues washing him, except now her hands are shaking.

“Roman, please escort your brother out of my bedroom.” My father's order is final, and I know Rome will not defy him. In the interest of not causing a complete commotion where I may lose my ability to maintain self-control I take a step away from Rome.

“If you hurt her, I will kill you.”

“Very strong words for a man in the position you are in. Leonid, you have put this family at risk enough times. It's time for you to listen to my wisdom, because one day I won't be here to protect you. If you can't respect me while I'm here, then what will you do with Dominic when I'm gone?”

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“You are a fool for believing that a woman could threaten this family's existence. And I am a fool for remaining in your employ for so long. This family means nothing to me.” I spit on the ground by his bed and turned my back on him charging back out of the room.

I sense Rome following me out of the room and I turn around to face him. “Tell me where they took her.”

The door clicks shut behind him and he shakes his head. “I can't do that, Leo. You know it.”

I grab him by the shirt collar and shove him against the wall hard. He gasps and grabs both of my wrists as I put pressure on his throat. “Tell me where the fuck they took her, now.”

“I can't,” he gasps. He pushes on my wrists and glares at me. “Let go of me. Don't make me have to hurt you.”

“You hurt me? That's hilarious. I'm going to make your face look like a cheeseburger that's been chewed up and spit out. Now fucking tell me where they took her.” I shake him hard. I know my rage is getting out of control.

“Leo, let me go.” Rome drives his knee upward; I assume hoping to connect with my balls, but I turn my hip and he misses. The act of aggression unleashes my fury, and the beast inside of me leaps out through my fist as I connect with his jaw hard.

Rome has no idea what lengths I will go to in order to protect Willow. I draw back

and punch him again, this one he takes to the temple. He pushes me hard and I ran backward into the banister. When I get my footing I charge back at him driving my shoulder into his gut and slamming him against the wall again.

“Tell me where she is or I'm gonna fuck you up.” I give him a right hook to the gut and he doubles over. Then I drive my knee upward into his chest knocking him back against the wall.

“Leo, stop,” he grunts, but I have no intention of stopping until I get the information I want. I bring my elbow down on his back hard, and he drops to the ground. I'm ready to kick him in the balls when he holds his hand up. “Stop!”

“Where?”

“They took her to Sven's place.” Rome holds his face tenderly, his chest heaving.

“Why did they take her there?”

“They're giving her a new identity. We bought a ticket for a flight to Paris that leaves tonight, and we're getting her away from us. The Italians are on our doorstep. You brought her here and dad is defenseless.”

I back away running a hand through my hair. My knuckles burn, but I'm sure it's nothing compared to what his face feels like. “They did what?” I pace the landing for a few moments before I realize what this means. They're shipping her away from me, and it's not just because of the Italians. They're trying to get her away from me because they think that she is making me weak. Or maybe it's because my loyalty has now been divided.

“I can't believe you.” I leave him with those final thoughts as I jog down the steps and out the front door. The engine is still warm when I climb in the car and drive off.

I'm no more than three blocks away when Dominic tries to call me. His caller ID shows up on my phone screen. I have no intention of answering this call.

He calls me again at least five more times before I'm so angry I can't ignore him anymore. I swipe right on the call and press the speakerphone button. "What the fuck did you do?"

"Back off, Leo. We're only following orders." Dominic's warning does not deter me.

"Strange how the new leader of this family has to follow orders from the old leader of this family."

"He's our father, Leo. It's about respect. He told you to stay away from her a long time ago and you didn't listen. You're lucky he didn't order us to put a bullet in her. This mess with the Italians has to stop. You know Sven's guy Tucker? Well, he just got murdered in a drive-by last night. Courtesy of your friends, the Italians."

I'm not surprised to hear that the Italians have taken it up a notch by attacking other members of my family and those employed by us. I'm also not surprised to hear that it was someone very close to one of my brothers. But while the news is slightly jarring, and it's disappointing to hear that one of the people close to our family is dead, this has nothing to do with Willow.

"Willow didn't do this, Dominic. She has nothing to do with why the Italians are mad at me. I killed that man. This is on me. Don't punish her." And make a hard right toward my brother's house and slam the gas pedal.

"Orders are orders, brother. And you should be following them."

"Or what?" Dominic is going to threaten me now too? This thing keeps getting better and better.

“I'm trying to protect her and help you. Don't go to his house.”

“Watch me,” I tell him; then I hang up.

I pull up to Sven's house more angry than I've been in years. I don't even bother turning off the engine or shutting the car door. These assholes have taken something that belongs to me and I'm not here for a cordial visit. I want her back and then we're leaving. I charge up the stairs to the front door of the sprawling estate, not quite as large as Dominic's place, but in the city it's difficult to find real estate.

The front door is locked so I ball up a fist and bang on it hard. “Sven, let me in now!” I will not stop banging on this door until he opens it. Instead of Sven, though, it's Matty, and he looks pissed that I'm here. I push the door open and rush past him, but he grabs my arm and holds me back.

“Leo, don't do this. We're trying to fix a situation.” Matty doesn't know fucking thing one about this situation. I yank my hand away.

“Where is she?” I glare at him with fists at my side, ready to pounce on him the way I did Rome.

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“Look, she’ll be safe where she’s going.”

“Fuck you, Matt. Just stay out of my way and you won’t end up looking like Rome.” I turn away from him and head into the foyer, walking past Sven’s den on the left hand side when I see he isn’t there. He meets me at the bottom of the stairs, glass of whiskey in hand. He sips it casually and stands in my path, blocking my ascent of the stairs.

“Give her back,” I order.

Sven takes a deep breath and sighs. “She isn’t an object to be traded, Leo. She is a person. One who needs protection from you and the games you play.” Sven towers over me, standing one step up, but having size over mine anyway.

“Get out of my way.” I try to step up but Sven moves to the side.

“You really want to defy our father?”

“He gave me no choice. You know what I’ve gone through to have her. I’m not backing down. Just move so I can take what’s mine and it will be on me not you.” I shove him to the side and he puts his weight into me, knocking me down.

Matty is there immediately, holding me down with his knee on my shoulder. “It’s for your own good, Leo.”

“Get the fuck off me!” I scream, thrashing as they drag me across the foyer.

“Put him in my den,” Sven orders, but I manage to swing a leg around and take Matty’s feet out from under him.

“She has nothing to do with this thing with the Italians. I started that. I can finish it too. And that bullshit with Dad and her father was all lies. She knew nothing about it. She’s not even talked to him in more than a decade. Now stay the fuck out of my way.” I put both of my hands on Sven’s chest and shove him so hard he stumbles and spills his drink, and then I see her, standing at the top of the steps....

14

WILLOW

My nerves are totally shot. At one point during the drive across town I almost jumped out of the car at a stop sign, only to realize this bastard had me locked in. He chuckled at me but said nothing, so when we stopped at a massive home on the Upper East Side, I knew I’d have no chance of escaping when the doors were open and I climbed out. Now, being ushered into someone’s home, I feel like I may throw up. My hands are sweaty; I have a headache, and Leo is nowhere in sight.

The man leads me roughly by gripping my bicep so tightly it will leave a bruise. He forces me up the steps to the door where another man, a striking resemblance to Leo, opens the door. They look too much alike to not be brothers—dark hair, blue eyes, chiseled jaw.

“Thanks, Matty,” the man says, holding the door wide. “I hear you’ve had quite an adventure, Ms. Sanders.” His gravely, rumbling baritone sounds strange saying my alias. It feels weird too, because Leo has done nothing but call me Willow for days now.

“Who are you? What do you want with me?” I wrestle my arm away from my captor,

who shakes his head and walks away. I glance at him, then back at Leo's lookalike as he shuts the door, closing off my pathway to escape. He's much larger than the first one, and I see his weapon on his hip. It scares me, so I play nice.

"I am Sven Gusev. You probably recognize that name..." His words trail off as his eyes float upward to the landing at the top of the stairs where a beautiful woman stands. "This is my wife Allie." Allie looks like a fairly normal woman, not like these animals who think physically abducting women is the way to their heart. "Allie will get you some clean clothes and some food. Please go with her." As he says the words, he tucks his jacket behind the butt of the gun, and I get the idea he isn't taking no for an answer.

"Hey, hun, come on." Allie gestures, smiling at me.

I look over my shoulder at the closed door and wish Leo had just listened to me before he left. If I had gone to get breakfast with him, I'd be safe right now. This is his fault. I am so angry with him. I reluctantly mount the stairs, giving the man a cautious look, and as I climb, my stomach gets heavy. I have a feeling I'm walking into something even worse than the Italians, something that might end with me never seeing Leo again.

Allie hooks her arm around me and walks me away from the staircase down a narrow hall. "Don't mind Sven; he's in a bit of a mood today. I promise, he really wants to help you." Her calming words don't really calm me at all. All of this is terrifying.

The floor is cold against my bare feet, and I find myself hugging my stomach. I haven't eaten. My heartrate is through the roof, and if something else goes wrong, I might have a heart attack. But I follow her willingly into a bedroom.

The room is a complete contrast to the rest of the mansion. It's bright and floral, with a huge window overlooking a stunning garden. The bed is covered in fluffy pink

blankets and pillows, with a matching pink armchair in the corner. The walls are painted a shade of pale yellow, and the curtains are a light, flowy fabric that billows in the breeze. It's like stepping into a garden itself.

Allie pulls me towards the armchair and pushes me onto it. "Just wait here for a moment, okay? I'll be right back." She disappears out the door, leaving me alone in the floral paradise.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself down. The room is so peaceful, and it's hard to believe that just moments ago, I was in the middle of a terrifying situation. I run my fingers over the soft fabric of the armchair and close my eyes, trying to relax.

The door bursts open, and Allie returns with an arm loaded down with clothing. Jeans, dresses, shirts, you name it; she carries it. She plops it on the foot of the bed and smiles at me. But I'm too worked up to care that there are actual women's clothing items in front of me. Suddenly I want to hang on to this old t-shirt and shorts that I took from Leo's things at the safe house. They make me feel close to him, as if he is here and he can help me.

"Let's pick something appropriate for you to wear."

"No thanks," I tell her, curling my legs up to my chest. It's probably not proper to put my feet on the furniture—everything looks so expensive—but I'm afraid. I need some time to process what's happening.

"Nonsense... Oh! You'll need panties and a bra, and by the looks of it shoes." Allie walks to the dresser and opens it, producing a black silky bra and a fresh pair of panties that look about my size. She tosses them onto the pile of clothes on the bed and walks to the closet where she disappears. If I am quick, I can dart out the door, down the steps and out the front, but I'm glued in place. Seeing those clean panties is like seeing water in the desert. As much as I want to hate this, the simple comfort of

clean clothes is starting to soften my edge.

“Here!” she says, and appears from the closet holding a pair of black sneakers. “I hope these fit. They’re size eight, because that’s what I wear.” She holds them out to me and I nod.

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“Seven and a half, but eights will work.... Why are you being so nice to me? Have they told you what’s going on?” I ask, nervously taking the shoes. I unfurl my legs, putting my feet on the floor and she shrugs.

“Sven keeps his business to himself, but I can only imagine. He said the Italians tried to hurt you and they’re after you.” She shakes her head and bends to take my hand. “I was in a pretty messed up situation with my ex and Sven really saved me. I know Leo is trying, but he’s failing. Sven will help.”

I take my hand back from her and sigh. I don’t want help. I want to go back to my normal life, but maybe with Leo in it now. That’s all. And I don’t feel like that’s ever going to happen. I stand and she walks toward the bed. I have to admit some of these things are really nice. They are designer, looking like they cost a lot of money.

“I just kinda want to go home,” I mumble and pick up the bra and panties. After changing in front of that other man, I have no hang-ups anymore. The silky fabric feels good between my fingers. I can’t wait to put these on and feel fresh again.

While I strip off the dirty clothes and put on the undergarments, Allie digs through the pile. She pulls out a few things that catch my attention and I point to the pair of jeans in her left hand.

“Those, what size?” I ask, and she looks at the size tag.

“Four... Think they’ll fit?” She hands them to me so I take them and try them on.

The jeans feel like they were custom made for my body, hugging my hips and

smoothing my tummy. I've wheeled suitcases filled with cash totaling five million dollars and I never thought to buy jeans this expensive. I stand in utter shock as Allie claps her hands and squeals.

“They look great on you!” She picks up a pink blouse and tosses it at me. It’s cashmere—a summer sweater—and my god is it soft. I hold it to my nose and breathe it in. It smells like a floral perfume or soap. “Put it on, put it on!” she urges me.

So, being a little giddy at the makeover and special treatment, I slip the sweater on over my head and smooth it down, then turn and look in the mirror. It’s the first time I’ve looked in the mirror since Leo dyed my hair and I’m shocked by my appearance. I look tired, and sad. Bags beneath my eyes show dark circles, and just as I predicted, the black hair is awful with my skin tone.

“You don’t like it?” Allie asks, and I shake my head.

“No, I love it. I just look like an old hag. Leo dyed my hair and it’s just not my color.” I quickly run my fingers through my hair and rake out some of the tangles before twisting it around on top of my head and tying it in a knot. At least it’s out of my way, and up on my head it doesn’t look as bad.

When I turn to face Allie, she hands me a pair of socks and points at the shoes I left sitting next to the armchair. “Go, put them on.”

I sit down with the socks and shoes feeling like a brand-new woman. I’m not sure what is next in this plan Sven has for me, but so far I’m enjoying it way more than the one Leo has. He’s done nothing but starve me, neglect my needs, and talk down to me. Sure the sex is amazing, but actions speak louder than words. I find myself settling in already with these new people and feeling safer than I’ve felt since that night in the alley.

As I'm tying the laces on the sneakers I hear men's voices shouting. The hair on the back of my neck and my arms stands on end. I look up at Allie who doesn't seem to be scared or on alert at all, but I am. My mind immediately goes to the worst-case scenario, that those men are the Italians coming to hunt me down. They've finally found me and now that I finally have new clothes and feel like life might be able to be normal again one day, I'm going to die.

"What's that?" I ask, straightening.

Allie shakes her head, a fake smile plastered on her face. It's as if she knows what's happening, who the men are. Almost as if she knows Sven's plan is to hand me over to them to keep the drama away from his family. Would they all conspire against me to turn me over to them just to protect what's theirs? Especially when they know how Leo feels like I'm his property? Are they trying to protect him from me again? The way his father did?

"I have to leave. I can't stay here." Darting for the door, I trip and nearly fall. Allie makes it to the door before me and tries to stand in the way but I shove her aside, pulling the door open. The voices grow louder the closer I creep to the top of the stairs, and Allie recovers and tries to drag me back in. She's too polite though, tugging my arm but not really moving me backward.

"Please, Willow, stay in the room. You're safe there," she pleads, but the closer I get the more I recognize one of the voices as Leo's.

"Let me go, Allie." I yank my arm free and round the corner, standing at the top of the stairs. Leo is ready to punch his brother in the face; I can see his fists balled up. He looks up at me and our eyes meet, and I can tell he's afraid, not of his brother or of the Italians. He's afraid of what they plan to do to me. That bit of healthy fear sends a shiver down my spine, making me instantly distrust Sven and his wife.

“Don’t do this, Leo,” Sven says in an angry voice but Leo completely disregards his brother.

“Willow, come down here and get in the car.” Leo pulls his gun and aims it at his brother and Sven holds his hands up and backs away toward the stairs. I want to go down, but I’m afraid he will just grab me and we’ll end up in a hostage situation. Apparently Leo feels the same way, because he uses his gun to gesture for Sven to move. “Away from the stairs, Sven. Don’t make me do this.”

Sven purses his lips and moves away, looking up at me as I come down the stairs cautiously. “Leo, please don’t hurt anyone. I’m listening to you. We’re together again. I’m safe; they didn’t hurt me. They just gave me new clothes.”

“Yeah, and bought you a plane ticket. They were going to ship you to France under a new identity.” He keeps the gun trained on Sven as I walk up to him. The news of what the real plan was for me shocks me, and I feel gratitude and relief wash over me that Leo came for me. “Go to the car.”

Leo stays behind as I walk out the front door and see the first man who took me from Alexsi’s house. He stands next to a running car glaring at me. I tiptoe down the steps, knowing Leo won’t let anyone hurt me, and I approach the car.

“I’m telling you, you’ll be safer with Sven.” He doesn’t stand in my way, probably afraid of Leo and the pistol he’s waving around. Or maybe someone called him off, someone higher up.

“In France? No thank you.” I open the door and stand there waiting for Leo to appear.

“You have no clue, do you?” He shakes his head. “Leo is obsessed with you. He doesn’t love you. He doesn’t know what love is. He’s a mental case and he’s been one his whole life. Wonder why he never let you out of his sight for more than a

decade? Because he's an addict. So blinded by you in his life he nearly cost the family our leader... I'm warning you, you need to get away from him."

This man, whose name I still don't know, stares at me with a ferocity I've never experienced. I feel dread in my gut, churning and roiling. I can't believe that's true. No, Leo never said he cared about me, but the way he came for me? The way he washed me after sex. The way he has been watching out for me, protecting. He fucking killed a man for me. That has to mean something, doesn't it?

"Get away from her," Leo shouts, now waving the gun at this man. "Matty, I mean it. I'll shoot you right now."

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Matty—must be another brother... I sigh and sit down in the car as Matty backs away shaking his head. He looks at me with disappointment and disgust, as if I'm a disease that has plagued his brother and all he wanted was to have me gone so he could have his brother back.

Leo climbs into the car and slams it into gear with the gun still in his hand. The way he peels out scares me. I grip the handle and whimper, then buckle myself in as inertia lets up and I have a moment to breathe. If what Matty said was true, then I may be in danger.

So why do I feel safer with Leo than back there? Or before he returned to my life for that matter....

15

LEO

Every day for one week now I've done this. I pace the floor all night while she sleeps, nap while she's showering. I live off of energy drinks and coffee, and she has never been safer. It was easier to watch her like this when I had the help of my soldiers, but with my father all but cutting me off, I have no support. Dominic doesn't answer or return my calls. Sven continues to try to convince me to bring her back every time we speak, and Matty and Rome have been ordered not to speak to me.

I glance at her, seated in the recliner flipping through the stations on the television. She looks relaxed here. This safehouse is farther out from the city, north of Newark, but still close enough to be in the hot zone if the Italians find us. Dad had it set up to

protect us as teens after Mom died. Only Dom and Sven remained at home with him. Matty, Rome and I were sent here with a nanny and a dozen or more gunmen until Dad was sure things were cleared up at home. I always took offense at that, Sven being younger than me, that he thought Sven was stronger somehow.

Willow looks up at me and tosses the remote onto the glass-top coffee table. “I’m bored.” Her attitude has bothered me for days, and now she’s really frustrating me.

“Yeah, well, go read a book.” I gesture with a thumb over my shoulder into the den. She complains every day about something, but at least this safe house has more than one room and clean water. The fridge is stocked, thanks to the grocery delivery service, and she has no need to be afraid or upset.

“Look, when can I get back to my real life? I want to paint and sculpt. It’s how I relieve stress.” Willow squirms, stretching her legs out before turning in the chair and curling them back to her chest.

I push the curtain aside with my finger and look out. I do this too, every day watching to make sure we’re not made. Then I turn to face her. “You’re not going back Willow. Reba Sanders doesn’t exist; she never did. Your art, your gallery, your career—it’s over. If you want to paint or sculpt, I can have some things delivered here, but until the heat dies down and we can get you a real new identity, you’re staying here.”

She scowls at me and clenches her jaw, her lips pursing into an angry pout. I don’t care if she likes it or not. It’s just what has to happen now to keep her safe. I move away from the window toward the kitchen. It’s time for me to check out back. Normally I make my rounds like this once an hour and she ignores me, but this time she follows me. Her feet slap against the floor angrily.

“I don’t want to feel like a prisoner. Matty told me that you were dangerous, just

obsessed with me. That you don't really care about me, because you can't. Are you a sociopath?" Her accusation stings. Why would Matty tell her that?

I tuck my chin, trying to ignore the inciteful words, but I can't pretend she didn't just accuse me of something so disgusting. I turn to face her and take a few calming breaths. We haven't had an argument all week since I got her away from Sven, and this is only happening because she wants to stretch her legs a little. I'm getting cabin fever now too.

"You don't mean that."

"I do mean it. He said you were a mental case. Do you even feel emotion? Do you even care what happens to me?" She walks around the kitchen table, leaning on the old metal-framed chairs. The floral, white vinyl has seen better days, but it brings back good memories, so my brothers and I have never updated this place. "Maybe you are a sociopath."

"Willow, I'm going to ask you not to talk to me like that."

"Why? Because anger is the only emotion you can actually feel?" She chooses her words carefully, circling around the table as I follow her.

"I feel..."

"What do you feel? Rage? Sadness? Loss of control? Making me your slave and keeping me here makes you feel better?" Her eyes look me up and down. She's reading me. I move around the table slowly, tracing her footsteps and she continues forward.

"Does it make you feel like less of a person because I haven't told you I love you? Is that what this is about? You need those words in order to be able to trust me?" I'm

calm, but at any minute I know my monster will emerge and tear her limb from limb, at least metaphorically. I could never hurt her.

“Does it enrage you that I want to leave here and you?” Her eyes narrow. Now she’s just trying to push my buttons. And it’s working. “That my life is something that you’ll never be? That I’d rather go back to being an artist than be the sex partner of a Bratva member?”

“You don’t mean that,” I tell her, but she chuckles.

“Don’t I? Your father gave me five million dollars to walk away. I almost said no. I only accepted it when you told me it was over. That’s when my heart needed you to choose me. Not now. Not when you get to come out in a blaze of glory shooting up the Italians in an attempt to prove you’re something you’re not.”

I can’t take it anymore. She’s infuriating. She just does this to make me upset, and it works every time. I rush around the table and grab her arms, then push her against the wall and pin her there. “You have no idea what I am or am not. You’ve known me a few weeks, and the man you knew years ago, he’s gone.” I breath down the front of her top, glancing at the soft curve of her breasts. Then I look her in the eye as I lick my lips.

“So you turned me away because...?”

“My father made me.” Her body pressed against mine arouses me. I feel my cock beginning to swell as she continues her verbal assault. I have no idea why it gets me going when she’s angry with me, but I don’t want it to stop.

“You were a grown man—”

“With a gun to my head. Do you think I wanted to be ostracized from my family and

watch them murder you?” My words seem to smack her in the face.

“So where is your loyalty now?” she spits, squirming in my grasp.

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“I’m done taking orders from anyone, including you.” I hold her more tightly, and she begins to really writhe against my grasp.

“It makes you feel powerful to control me?”

“No, it makes me feel angry that you don’t just respect my leadership.”

Willow whimpers and rams her knee into mine. “You call this leadership, but I call it prison. You’re more of a master than a leader. Leadership is proven by setting an example, but the only example you’ve set is a bad one. You boss me around, refuse to let me breathe a single fucking second of the day, and you even pick my food for me.”

“It’s called a fucking grocery delivery service.” Now I’m mad, shouting and almost spitting in her face. She isn’t even thankful for how I’m providing for her.

“Just fucking kiss me already,” she snaps, and I let her go. I back away and she says, “What. That’s what you wanted to do isn’t it? I felt your dick getting hard.”

I bite my tongue. She isn’t wrong. “Get out of here.”

“Now you don’t want it?” she asks, tearing her shirt off over her head. Her black silky bra cradles her tits perfectly as she unbuckles her pants. “You don’t get to have all the control, Leo. This time I’m in charge.”

Willow shoves her pants down, peeling them off and stepping out of them. She stands in her bra and panties in front of me and points at a chair. “Sit down,” she orders, but

I'm not inclined to take orders from her, so I don't move. "I said, sit the fuck down. If you're not going to let me go back to my real life, you can at least fuck me. That's the only other way to relieve the stress I feel." Her finger stretches out toward the chair and I have to decide if I want to maintain my control over her, or if relenting this once is okay. My throbbing cock decides for me.

I park my ass on the chair and rest my hands across my lap, cocking my head to the side. "So what, you're going to have your way with me? You think you can take this?"

She smirks and scoffs at me. "No, you're going to use me like a fuck toy and make my pussy drench your cock until I've milked you dry, and then you're going to make me cum again and again."

Willow walks closer to me, bending to undo my fly. Her hands work deftly until my swelling dick is in her grasp. There is no mistaking my level of arousal. I've seen her angry and fighting it. I've seen her begging for it. I've even seen her initiate it, take control and really suck me good. But this side, this fem-dom lusty vixen—she's new.

She takes my face in her hands and I instinctively grab her hips, ready to plant her on my cock, but she keeps me back. "Get on your knees, Leo," she orders and I obey, falling to my knees.

"That's a good little bitch," she purrs. "You're going to do whatever I say today, aren't you?"

I nod eagerly and she grabs my face. "Speak when you're spoken to, Leo," she reprimands.

Willow steps out of her panties, letting them fall to the floor. She straddles me, my face just inches from the wet heat of her pussy. "I'm going to give you a choice: you

can suck my clit, or you can eat me out. You can't fuck me, though," she tells me, cupping her tits in her hands. "You don't get to fuck me yet, just make me cum. Got it?"

"Mmhmm," I hum in my throat, anxious to taste her.

Willow's hands slide over her body, covering her tits and stroking her neck, then lower as she reaches behind her ass to pull her pussy lips apart. A gleaming bead of her sex glistens with her wetness and I'm desperate to taste it, to have it coating my tongue. She straddles my face and I bury my mouth into her, my tongue swirling deep into her pussy.

Willow's fingers brush over my cock and I groan, my mouth full of her dripping juices as she pumps her hand along my length. I lean back against that chair and she braces herself on the table as I eat her so hard.

She's so wet for me, so eager to get fucked. I lap at her, lick at her pussy and suck her clit greedily. She grinds against my face and I groan, sucking her clit into my mouth. My tongue strokes the underside of her clit with every suck and I feel her shudder.

"Oh, fuck, Leo," she moans, her body shaking.

She strokes my cock harder, her grip tight around my shaft. I suck her clit into my mouth and Willow's body tenses, her breath hitching in her throat. She moans, her pussy tightening up around my tongue, so my lips travel to her little nub and suck as I push two fingers into her slit. It's hot, and she clamps down on my fingers as I find the firm rough patch and rub it. over and over I pump my fingers into her until she's bent over the table and I'm kneeling behind her fingerfucking her.

If this is what boredom does to her, then I'll live in this house the rest of my life, keeping her locked away. She went from virgin to lust-hungry dominatress and my

cock couldn't be more happy, though I'd rather be pumping it into her than feeling her haphazard strokes as her orgasm approaches.

"Oh, fuck, Leo," she moans, grinding her ass back against my hand.

Willow's pussy clenches around my fingers as she cums, her body shaking as I keep sucking her clit. She lets go of my cock and grips the table, which scoots across the floor loudly as she writhes on top of it. She pants and groans, then finally relaxes. I slide my fingers out of her, and she looks over her shoulder at me as I stand and press my dick against her wet pussy.

"No," she says, her voice rough and breathy. "I'm not fucking you yet."

She pulls away from me and I groan, my cock poking out of my pants, standing erect. I take hold of it and stroke it as she stands and removes her bra, softly walking to the counter and climbing onto it. She sits in the corner, spreading her legs down each side of the counter, and curls her finger at me as she touches herself with her other hand.

"Here now. Make me come again."

Her tits are perfect, nipples hardened into tiny peaks. My cock is so hard it hurts. I want to be in her, but to tame this minx would be to ruin the entire atmosphere. She provoked a fight because she thought it would lead to sex, and when she didn't get what she wanted, she decided to take it. Well she can fucking take me any day.

I step forward and grasp her legs, her knees bent so I can spread her wide. She's so pink and wet, and I can smell her sex as I place my head against her and begin to tongue her. Willow grips my head with both hands as I start to lick her, flicking my tongue over her soft little slit and plunging it into her entrance.

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I hold her lips open with my fingers so I can lap up all her juices, and she moans, her body arching forward. I pull back and push my tongue into her entrance again, groaning as I feel her clench around it. I fuck her with my tongue, tasting her as she moans and writhes. It's like a battle, my mouth fighting her strong muscles for dominance, and I'm determined to win. I want her to feel pleasure, but I also want to give her a reason to come back to me.

My cock is so hard it hurts; the head aches and my balls are swollen. I want to come, but I don't want to stop eating her pussy. I slide my tongue back up over her clit and suck it into my mouth, biting down lightly on it while she gasps.

"I'm going to—" she moans, and I don't stop. I don't give a fuck if she cums on my face, that's what I want. I want to make her explode. She rubs her clit with her fingers as I tongue it, and she moans louder and louder as her body trembles and spasms. I feel like she's going to slide right off this kitchen counter, so I eat her harder, pushing her backward, then feel one of her feet on my shoulder for more stability.

When she calms again, I can't take it anymore. I stand up, and press my cock against her pussy. She lets out a soft moan as I rub it against her, over her clit and down her slit. I spread her lips with my head as I rub it over her hole, then slowly push it in. I groan as her pussy wraps around me, sucking me in with a tight grip. I bite my lip and push my thick pulsing dick into her. She gasps and slowly rocks her hips against mine, grinding her pussy against my pelvis.

"Fuck me," she whispers.

I grab her hips and pull her onto my cock, sliding it deep into her, then pulling her

back on it again. I groan and squeeze her tits as I do it. She grips the counter and rocks back and forth, her pussy getting wetter with every thrust as I pump my cock in and out of her.

"Yes, fuck me, Leo," she moans.

I pump my cock deep into her and she moans into my chest, her pussy clenching around my cock. I pull it out and she whimpers, but I don't give her any time to miss it before sliding it back in, groaning as my cock fills her. I pull out and push back in, her pussy getting wetter with every thrust. I feel her body tighten up and I know she's about to cum again.

"Shit... just... oh god," she pants, grunting as her muscles clamp down around my dick. My balls are ready to explode. She milks me so hard I have no self control. I need to pull out before I come because I'm enjoying this, but I can't resist the pressure buildup. I feel it start in my groin, low and warm, but rising quickly, spreading throughout my body, my muscles tightening, my heart beating faster and harder. I know I'm about to cum. I can't pull out. I pull her close to me so that my cock is deep in her, and she bucks against me as she comes, my cock throbbing and twitching as I pump rope after rope of thick hot cum into her body. I feel her get wetter as I cum, milking me for every drop, her pussy sucking it up as I slide into her. I can't believe how good this feels. How good she makes me feel.

Our bodies finally relax. She slides off my cock and gasps as it slides out of her. She sinks to the kitchen floor, leaning back against the cabinets, her pussy gaping and dripping with cum. I sit down next to her and pull her to me. We're covered in sweat, panting and staring at each other as the orgasm fades away. I just can't believe how good that was. I've never cum so hard before. I've never had my cock used like that before. I'm exhausted, and so is she, but we just keep staring at each other, unable to say a word. We just keep breathing, staring, panting. I think I'm in shock.

"Well... say something," she says, touching herself lightly.

"That was..." I search for the word, but no words come. I don't let women dominate me.

"That good?"

"I could get used to it..." It's about as close to the words "I love you" as she'll ever hear from me. "Now, are you still bored?"

"I think I'll have a shower then read." She stands, forcing herself off the floor and walks over to the doorway, leaving her clothes on the ground. "Want to join me?" she asks, then walks off without another word. I'm left reeling from the way she has power over me. I like it, and now I want more.

16

WILLOW

It's been eleven days in this new safehouse. Eleven days of boredom and eating. If I don't get out of here soon, my waistline is going to expand and none of my clothes are going to fit—if I can even get back to my apartment to retrieve my clothing when this is all done. I'm not sure how Leo determines when it's safe or not, but I'm ready to leave now. Sitting at this kitchen table swishing my spoon around the bowl of corn flakes is tedious and frustrating.

"What's up your ass?" Leo asks, pouring a cup of coffee. It's too early to deal with him being this way. I wonder if he's had to hunker down in a safehouse before, and if so how many times. He seems to be so at ease with complete separation from society. The longest I have ever gone without staying connected to other people was a few weeks when I was forced to change my identity. I make friends easily because I'm

kind. Leo, on the other hand, has a rough edge to his personality.

“Sick of corn flakes and reading books. I want to go for a walk or something.” I drop the spoon. The cereal is soggy and the milk is getting warm. I don’t like pouring food out but it’s just not appealing to me right now. Something is going on with my appetite too; I feel like I’m hungrier than ever, but nothing sounds good.

“No walks. We have to stay inside. We’re not too far away from the city that they wouldn’t be looking for us. If they do their homework, they’re likely to see that this house has been used in the past. It’s only a matter of time before they figure it out and we’ll have to move to another safe house.” He adds a spoonful of sugar and a splash of milk and stirs his morning brew.

“Then why not just leave the city?” Standing, I carry my bowl to the sink and pour the soggy cereal into the disposal, turn the water on, then flip the switch. When the machine runs smoothly again, I shut it off.

“It’s not that easy, Willow. My family pays for this house. I have money, yes, but I can’t access it right now because my father still pulls the purse strings. We’d be completely on our own, which means if the Italians came after us, with no place to hide, no cash to buy ammo or food to feed ourselves, we’d be sitting ducks.” He brings the mug to his lips and sips the hot liquid.

I dry my hands and turn my back. I’m sick of his rational excuses. They keep me grounded in the fear that I’m being hunted just deeply enough that they make sense and I am resigned to stay here. I walk to the front room and stand by the picture window, staring out over the lawn. By all accounts this is a nice home. It’s a nice neighborhood. A few times I’ve done this and noticed children playing and let my mind drift to a happier life where Leo and I weren’t hiding out and fighting like cats and dogs. One where we were a family and we loved each other.

Shaking the thoughts from my mind, I shuffle over to the couch and plop down on it, stretching out until my head rests on one arm and my toes touch the other. My shirt rides up, pulling up over my hips and leaving my panties exposed, but Leo has seen me completely naked enough times I feel comfortable lying around in my shirt and panties around him. I reach for the remote and turn the TV on. There are a bunch of morning talk shows and news broadcasts. Nothing good will come on for a few hours at least.

I continue flipping through the channels until a commercial for the art exposé comes on. I let the commercial play out and feel sad about the fact that I'm going to miss it. I have friends that will be there, customers who come to see me every year, and no one even knows I'm missing right now except Stuart. He probably thinks I am just off on a trip to some exotic location which I forgot to inform him about.

When the commercial is over, the news comes on. I raise the remote to change the channel again but the broadcaster's words catch my attention, so I turn it up.

"Police are investigating the disappearance of a local artist, Reba Sanders. Ms. Sanders was last seen two weeks ago at the gallery on Fifth Street where her paintings are on display. Witnesses say they saw Ms. Sanders exit the building with a gentleman just before closing time. She didn't report to the studio the next day and hasn't been heard from since.

"Authorities are investigating this as a kidnapping, though a search of her apartment showed it had been ransacked." The female news anchor turns to her male counterpart who continues speaking.

"Yes, Lyla, and this case took a strange turn three days ago when authorities released an image of Ms. Sanders and a detective from our very own NYPD spoke up. This is what he had to say..."

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The camera pans to another man whose face shocks me to my core. My father stands behind a podium, red-faced and tears in his eyes. “My daughter Willow Akers went missing twelve years ago. I then, as I do now, plead for her safe return. I believe the case of Reba Sanders is directly connected to the disappearance of my daughter Willow. I believe Willow was forced to assume a new identity back then and may have been forced into a horrific situation.” He pinches his nose and shakes his head then says, “If you have any information regarding this case, please call the number on your screen. There is now a two-hundred-fifty-thousand-dollar reward.”

The broadcast shifts back to the newsroom where the news anchors move on to another story but I am left shocked and speechless. I push myself up to a seated position and my shoulders sink. My entire life is unraveling and there is nothing I can do to stop it. The very fact that my father knows I’m alive both thrills me and terrifies me. Alessi will kill us both.

My hands shake and I feel like I’ll be sick. This means my father will be searching for me now. He’ll have my face plastered everywhere, and everyone will recognize me. That’s both encouraging and scary because if the people who recognize me are loyal to Alessi or the Italians, I’ll never see my father again. Alessi’s men may get to my father and kill him before he can find me anyway. But if I find him first, go to the station and beg him to help me flee the city, we can both be safe. I can be with him again.

The thought swirls in my mind and I realize I’m crying. Warm tears sluice down my cheeks. I swipe them away and head for the stairs. I don’t want to cry in front of Leo again. He doesn’t seem to have much sympathy for my heartbreak. He’s a machine, pushing all emotion away to endure what life throws at him. I’m not so strong. I just

want to feel safe and loved.

I tiptoe up the stairs and shut myself into the bathroom and let the tears fall. It isn't like I haven't seen my father's face in years. I've seen him do press releases on varying cases he's had, and I have photos of him. He's remarried now, has a fifteen-year-old stepdaughter. I get jealous when I think of how he probably goes to watch her choir concerts and soccer games. I want my father to be my father again, and not some TV personality who knows nothing of Reba Sanders and her art.

"Willow?" Leo calls, and I know he's going to just barge right in here. I quickly pull my panties down and sit on the toilet. I don't have to pee, but he doesn't know that. I tuck my chin to my chest, letting my hair fall around my face, and hope he just assumes I'm using the shitter and leaves.

"On the toilet!" I call, my voice shaking a little. Hiding emotion is my greatest weakness. I'm a fucking empath and I have no poker face for this moment. The door swings open and Leo leans against the door jamb.

"Did you see that news report?" he asks. I keep my head down, trying to not let him see my face, but his firmly planted feet tell me he is not moving. He's just going to stand here while I pretend to shit and watch me.

"Excuse me? I'm on the toilet." Snot runs down the inside of my nose and it's all I can do to keep myself from sniffing. I want to wipe it away, but that will be a dead giveaway that I've been crying, so I clench my jaw and will the snot to stay in my nose where it belongs.

"Yeah, I guess the gallery guy reported you missing... Your dad was on TV too, three different channels."

"Can I shit in peace?" I snap, feeling emotion welling up again. My body

involuntarily tenses and I sniffle.

“Are you crying?” he asks, stepping into the room farther.

I sigh and look up at him. “Yes, I’m crying. Okay? I’m a woman. I have emotions. I cry sometimes.” I’ve had enough of this charade. I stand and pull my panties up then grab a wad of toilet paper and wipe my face and blow my nose.

Leo stares at me like I’m on exhibit while I clean myself up and toss the dirty tissues in the toilet and flush it. I walk out of the bathroom, heading to the bedroom I’ve been using. No—I haven’t been sleeping in the same bed as him. There are times where I feel like I want to, but I have no future with him anyway. I can’t let my heart get attached. I have to keep the pain of him deserting me fresh in my mind or I will catch deeper feelings for him again.”

"So you did see it?"

There he goes, focusing on the facts instead of the emotions. I swear this man is a robot. He can’t feel a fucking thing. It’s like he was a military trained soldier or something, deprogrammed in his amygdala to shut down any feelings other than rage and revenge. He follows me into the bedroom and I swing the door shut, but it bounces off his foot and doesn’t shut.

“Go away,” I shout, picking a pillow up and throwing it at him. He catches it and throws it back onto the bed.

“What the hell? You had to know this was going to happen.” He glares at me like I’m the problem. I want to kick him in the nuts.

“How would I know that? Huh? And now that my face is out there, my real identity, your father is going to keep his promise to kill me and my father.”

Leo shakes his head. "I'm not letting him harm you."

"What about my dad, Leo? Are you going to let him kill my father? Because you know what will happen. The police will follow the string of clues. They'll connect me to you. They'll place me at your father's house, Sven's house... Then what? Then my father really will go after yours. Then he really will be killed."

I sob harder, throwing myself onto my bed as my verbal acknowledgement of what could actually happen begins to sink in. This entire thing should never have happened.

"Look, I can't protect your father, but maybe he'll lay off."

I sit straight up, infuriated, and launch another pillow at him. It smacks him in the face. He doesn't even attempt to knock it down. He stares at me with an unenthusiastic face. "This is all your fucking fault." I come off that bed swinging, slamming my fists into his arms and chest.

"Woah, I saved your life, Willow. This isn't my fault." He grabs my wrists after a little difficulty, and I use my feet. Kicking his shins until my toes hurt.

"It is. You fucking micromanaged my life so badly, I'd date any man who looked at me once. Yeah, ten years ago maybe my radar would have gone off when that Italian asked me for coffee. I'd have seen he was shady and told him no. But I was so fucking starved for attention and affection, that I jumped on the first man who looked at me. So it's your fault."

"Fuck you!" I scream and then spit in his face. He lets me go, wiping the spit away. "Just fuck you." Turning, I climb back on the bed and curl into a ball, facing away from him. I can just see a few birds flying in the sky out the window. It makes me want to pray to god that I could be a bird and fly away too.

“You’ll see that this was always meant to be, Willow.”

Leo leaves me alone, shutting the door behind him. I hear a lock engage and realize he probably locked me in here too. Good. I don’t want him around me right now. I’ll just stay here until I starve to death or die of dehydration. One or the other.

I cry for a long time, using the corner of the sheet to wipe my eyes. I cry so hard I can’t breathe. I have to take the shirt off to use it like a tissue and blow my nose because there are no tissues in here. When I’ve almost exhausted myself and feel like I could fall asleep from the weight of emotion, I notice the bottle of sleeping pills on my nightstand. Leo ordered them for me last week when I couldn’t sleep, and the grocery delivery service brought them the same day.

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A thought plays at the corner of my mind. I could open those little capsules, pour them into his drink. He'd never know. He'd sleep like a baby and I could just walk right out the front door and go straight to the police station. Sure it's a very long walk to the closest precinct around here probably, and no I don't really know where it's at or how to get there, but I'd be free. I'd be with my father, and this whole bull shit with Leo would be over.

My heart starts to settle into the plan to escape and I calm myself with thinking of my father as I drift off to sleep.

17

LEO

"Looks like the Yankees are going to go all the way this year," I call out to Willow who is in the other room cooking. She doesn't respond. She's not into sports like I am and she's been irritated with me for days now. Despite all my attempts to make peace, she remains quiet and studious.

My phone sits on the end table, a constant reminder that there is life outside this place, a life I deserted in favor of an ungrateful woman who only wants to leave. She doesn't even know that I've left the front door unlocked from the inside now for days. She's free if she wants to leave, but like a true prisoner, she lingers. I turn the volume up and absorb the stadium sounds as the announcer talks about the first baseman's stats. The only thing worse than watching baseball alone is watching in an icy house.

I look at the phone again. Matty usually watches the games with me, even if we do it

in different houses and text each other our smack talk. I think about calling him for a moment, wondering if there has been any more movement against the family. But he's probably still pissed at me for what happened, for how I held a gun to his chest and threatened him. We did this shit as kids all the time, kicked each other's asses and threatened to hurt one another. It's no different as adults, just bigger fists, harder punches, and weapons.

"Dinner is ready," Willow shouts and I scowl.

"Trying to watch the game!" I roll my eyes. "Just bring me a bowl."

I hear some dishes clatter and Willow cusses loudly. She's making a mess in there she'll have to clean up, and all I want is to watch the game in peace. "Keep it down," I call over my shoulder and suddenly I feel something smack me in the back of the head. I turn to see her standing in the doorway. She has one oven mitt on her hand and the other is lying on the back of the couch touching my head.

"Get in here and eat. I didn't just stand here cooking for an hour to sit and eat alone." She plants her hands on her hips and scowls at me and my shoulders sink in defeat. In order to make this night a little more peaceful, I comply with her, but not because she ordered. It's only because I'm sick of screaming matches. I'm not sick of the nasty sex we have afterward, though. That part is hot. "Well are you coming?"

"Fine, god..." I push the power button on the remote and toss it onto the sofa cushion then stand and follow her to the kitchen. The scent of pot roast and vegetables wafts up my nostrils and it makes my mouth water. I have no idea if she is a good cook, but if the smell is anything to go by she is a fantastic gourmet chef.

The small laminate table is loaded down with dishes of food. We have our groceries delivered, but I had no clue she ordered all of this. In fact, I had no clue we had all these serving dishes here. They must be remnants of my former life—white Corelle

plates with green ivy painted in a ring around the rim, and matching cups and bowls.

“This looks fancy. What’s the occasion?” I sit down and stretch my arms quickly, then reach for the ladle in the bowl of mixed vegetables.

“No occasion,” she grumps, taking her seat.

As I heap food on my plate she watches me. She’s already poured a glass of wine for each of us, though I’m more of a beer guy. She takes a deep breath and lets it out, relaxing her shoulders, then proceeds to place small portions on her plate. There’s even an apple pie here, sliced and ready for serving. I wait though, because I don’t have room on my plate for dessert right now.

“Did your mom teach you to cook?” I take a huge bite of the roast and it falls apart on my tongue. I barely have to chew it, it’s so tender.

“No,” she says coldly so I leave it at that.

She takes small bites and eyes my wine glass nervously, chewing meticulously before swallowing. She doesn’t even take a sip of her wine either. I’m too busy shoveling food into my mouth to think about a drink. Everything is so flavorful I could gorge myself like it’s Thanksgiving dinner. Juice from the roast dribbles down my chin and I wipe it away with the back of my hand and keep eating.

“Slow down, Leo. You’re going to bust your stomach,” she chuckles and takes another small bite.

“This is really good, woman.” I think that’s the first genuine compliment I’ve paid her, and it’s due. “If I knew you could cook like this, I’d have wifed you a long time ago.”

Snickering, she shakes her head. “Just enjoy, and enjoy that wine too. It wasn’t cheap.” She points her fork at the stemware and I nod, but the way she looks down the fork is suspicious. I catch her staring at me for a split second and she looks down and her cheeks flushed. She thinks I’m stupid. She’s put something in my drink and she expects me to drink it.

“Look, I’m almost ready for pie, but I don’t see the server here.” I gesture at the table and look up at her. “Want to be a doll?” I wink at her while I chew with my mouth open and she scoffs, disgusted by my poor manners. I know her. It’s exactly what it takes to frustrate her. She clears her throat and sets her fork down, then stands to go to the utensil drawer.

Keeping my eye on her the entire time, I reach over and swap our glasses, and hold mine in hand as she reaches into the drawer and takes out the pie server. She turns around triumphantly and I hold my cup up as if I’m making a toast.

“To pie!” I say and wink at her, and she returns with a grin on her face. It’s priceless, because I’m about to see exactly what she planned to do to me up close and personal.

“I can drink to that.” Willow sits back down and places the server next to the pie, then picks up her drink and clinks her cup against mine. We both drink deeply, but I can’t help but smile at her. Foolish girl thinks she has got the upper hand on me, sneaking something into my drink, but she’s about to be taught a lesson.

“This is really good wine.” I don’t mean it. I hate wine, but I’ll say whatever I can to get her drinking. “You had this delivered?”

“Yeah.” She shrugs and takes another sip, but she sets it down in favor of another bird-sized bite of her roast. The only thing better than seeing her plan turned on its head, is the fact that she’s not even eating. Whatever she’s put in the drink is going to hit her very hard.

“Don’t you like it?” I take another gulp, emptying the glass, then pour another glassful from the bottle.

She grins but tries to hide it as she chews her food carefully. “Oh, no I love it.” She speaks with her mouth full but covers it so food doesn’t spray out.

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“Then bottoms up!” I go to fill her drink but she holds her hand over it, not allowing herself to have more.

“This is enough.” She eyes me, and I shrug it off as if it’s no big deal. So she’s trying to get me drunk while she herself remains completely sober. Then she should be eating a lot more food.

“Suit yourself.” I set the bottle down and finish my meal, then my second glass of wine. Then I serve myself a slice of pie.

Willow continues to eat miniscule bites, but she does finish her glass of wine. When her speech starts to slur I know whatever she’s put in the drink is taking effect. I assume it’s some sort of pain med or her sleeping pills. I bought her some when we first got here because she complained she couldn’t sleep. The longer I sit here watching her the more obvious it is that she intended to drug me.

“You okay?” I ask, snickering.

“I’m just fine,” she slurs, smirking at me. “You okay?” Dropping her fork onto her plate, she plants her hands on the table and pushes herself up. She sways a little, more proof she’s intoxicated off of one glass of wine.

I lean back in my chair and rub my stomach. The food was actually really delicious and my belly is full and happy like a fat baby ready for a nap. So I breathe in a deep breath and sigh contently, and she walks around the table and starts rubbing my shoulders. I hide a smirk, just waiting until she figures out she’s drunk the wrong glass, but she continues to rub my shoulders, then leans over me pressing her tits on

my back as she whispers in my ear.

“I’m feeling frisky.”

“Yeah?” I ask her as her hands roam down my chest. It’s no wonder she’s frisky. She’s high on something.

“Yeah, and I want to sit on your face while you shove your fist in my pussy.”

I’m instantly hard and ready to go. “Sounds like you need some dessert,” I say, turning over my shoulder. She’s standing behind me, her hands resting on my shoulders.

“I want you to taste me,” she says firmly, licking her lips.

I unbutton my pants and slide my zipper down. Pulling my cock out, I wrap my hand around it and stroke slowly. “I want to taste you too.”

She smiles and climbs onto the table, pushing all the dishes aside. A few plates clatter to the ground and she jumps and giggles but opens her legs and pulls her skirt up. “Then get to work.” I can see from this angle that her panties are soaked, something I really like to see. I stroke myself just thinking of how delicious that will feel when I slide into her little pussy and feel her grip me with her strong muscles. She's going to be so pissed when she wakes up, but she's throwing herself at me and I'm not letting this moment pass by without taking advantage of it.

"Here on the table?" I ask her as she pushes her panties aside and dips her fingers into her own juices. She brings them to my lips and I suck them clean.

"Yeah, why not... Unless you want me bent over the counter. " Willow's words are more slurred than ever. If I don't fuck her now, she'll pass out. And there's no fun in

that. I reach up under her skirt and shimmy her panties down and pull them off, then spread her legs, planting one on each chair on either side of me. "Eat me, Leo."

I waste no time leaning forward. My tongue licks her lips and she moans, leaning back on her hands. She watches me, for a moment then her face turns up to the ceiling as I lick her sex. My tongue runs over her lips and folds, my mouth covering her clit as I gently suck. Her hands lace through my hair and pull it hard until it hurts, but I don't back off. I stroke my dick hard and push a few fingers into her.

"God, more," she begs, grinding against me as I fuck her. I obey her command, sliding another finger in. "More..." she pants, pulling on my hair. I slide a third finger in, then a fourth, my tongue flicking her clit as I fuck her with my hand. She moans louder, her hips bucking against my face. She's really going to have me do it. She really wants my fucking fist, doesn't she?

I growl against her nub and she shudders. "More, Leo... do it."

"You want it. Don't you?" I ask her, my hand teasing her lips. She moans and nods. "Say it."

"I want it." she moans.

"Louder, Willow."

"I want it! I want your fist in my pussy, Leo!" She's looking at me with those gorgeous, pleading eyes of hers, her body tense and ready. I push my hand into her, filling her with one thrust. I feel her lips stretch, her walls gripping me tightly. Her head falls back and she moans loudly as I thrust into her.

My other hand goes to her hips to steady her as she bucks against me. Her moans go straight to my dick and I can feel myself getting really close. Watching her take my

fist is so hot I can't control myself. She's so fucking sexy. I press my mouth against her nub, sucking hard. Her walls tighten around me and I groan. I growl as I thrust into her, over and over, nipping on her.

I feel my balls tighten and draw up. I'm going to dump my fucking load all over this kitchen. I feel her come hard, her sex gripping my hand like a vice. Her pussy is like a vice. Little innocent virgin Willow isn't as innocent as I thought she was. I can't stop my own orgasm. I feel my dick pulse and my cum spurts out, covering her thighs and my hand, dripping to the floor. She's still shuddering as I pump my fist into her, slowing my strokes on my cock. The sticky, thick ejaculate gets chunky. That'll be a bitch to clean up.

I push her legs up, spreading them wide. I lean down and lick her pussy clean, licking my cum from her flesh. She tastes like heaven, her cum dripping down to her ass and I lick it too. I stand up between her legs and put my dick in front of her mouth. She opens for me, like a good little girl. She sucks me off hard, bobbing her head over my dick.

he's still moaning and sucking me when I pull my dick out of her mouth. I fall back into the chair, breathing hard. I'm covered in sweat and cum, my hand sticky with it.

She's still on the table when I look over at her. She's licking her lips, trying to get the last of my cum out of her mouth. She's so fucking sexy. I grab her and pull her into my lap, kissing her hard. She can barely sit upright now, the drug taking hold of her.

"I think it's time to sleep, Willow."

She whines, and sways, and she almost falls off my lap, so I stand and sling her over my shoulder, carrying her up to her bed. She's too high to leave her alone, so after washing my hand, and cleaning her thighs with a wash rag, I climb in bed with her and hold her. My mind wanders to Willow's sense of adventure and I grin against her

back as I pull her hard against my body.

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“Where do you learn that, you little vixen?” I mutter the words under my breath but she hears me.

“Porn, duh... When you can’t get dick you have to do that shit.”

I chuckle at her response, but I respect that. I haven’t used porn in years. There is no lack of attention in my world. I could have any woman I want—and I have. Until now. Willow is the only thing on my mind, and I’m learning new things about her every day. As she falls asleep and starts snoring, I start to ponder why she would try to escape. It had to be the news report about her disappearance. She’s going to try to sneak away again and get to her father. I need to shore up security now, maybe plant one of my soldiers outside to follow her in the event she does leave.

And I’m going to have to teach her that lesson. She can’t do what she did tonight. I can’t have her roaming the streets. It isn’t safe.

18

WILLOW

They’re chasing me and it’s dark. My feet slap against the sidewalk as guns go off behind me. Why can’t I see them? Where did they come from? Who are they?

I run as fast as I can down the street. There is a light at the end of the street where I’m headed. I think it’s home, but I can’t tell. I scream for my father, and I can hear his voice calling for me, but when I get to the light, it’s not my father I see.

Leo stands with his gun pointed over my shoulder and fires it. The noise is so loud it nearly bursts my eardrums. I screech and cover my ears, crying, and he fires again and again. I want to scream for him to make it stop, but when I open my mouth no sounds come out. Then, when I try to run again, I can't. Why can't I run? Why are my feet sinking into the ground? There's another loud boom and suddenly I'm frozen.

I jolt awake to the sound of a clap of thunder. The dream lingers in my mind, making my pulse race and my body shake. I'm covered in sweat, and my pussy feels like it's been pounded hard. I rub my head. It's dark in the room, but I can feel Leo in bed with me. When lightning flashes in the sky, the room lights up and I see he's wearing only his boxers.

Frantically, I touch myself everywhere. I'm still fully clothed, wearing the same blouse and skirt that I was last night when I planned to get him drinking and knock him out with the sleeping pills. The lightning fades and the thunder rolls, and I lie back down in bed next to his snoring form. What a horrible nightmare that was. I have been having them so often now, the sleeping pills are the only thing that helps.

I lie here thinking about the meal and what happened. I remember cooking everything, roast, veggies, rolls and pie. It took me all day to bake that damn bread, and more than an hour for the roast. Leo liked it. I remember that much. And I remember taking those capsules and opening them up and pouring them into his drink. Just a few stirs and they dissolved fully.

My head throbs, hammering against my eyeballs. I didn't drink that much. I only had one glass, so why am I feeling this way? Yeah, I only ate a little, but one glass of wine is hardly enough to make me get wasted—unless. I look over at Leo who's sleeping like a fucking baby. He had to have switched the drinks. But why? He didn't know I had drugged his, did he? And why would he even be suspicious? Because I made a good meal?

I rub my head and sigh. My bladder is full and with this headache I'm not getting any sleep until I take some meds, so I sit up and carefully slip out of bed, tiptoeing to the door. It creaks as I open it, but I look back and Leo and he doesn't move. My bladder screams at me, so I hurry down the hall and into the bathroom, and when I hike my skirt, ready to down my panties, I find them missing.

"Fuck's sake," I hiss under my breath. My pussy took a pounding alright. I wonder if he got a kick out of fucking me when I was blind drunk. I shake my head and sit down, relieving my bladder.

The entire plan I had to drug him and escape is ruined. I'm groggy and emotional with a splitting headache. If he figured out that I drugged him, he'll never trust my cooking again, at least not any time soon. And if my father is looking for me now, then I have a chance to get to him and get him to run away with me so we can both be safe—before Leo's father gets to him.

I plant my elbows on my knees and cover my face. I blew it by not watching the glass. Or maybe I blew it by not having a poker face. Why else would he give me the drugged glass? Or maybe I was just stupid enough to set the wrong glass in front of myself? But I could have sworn I was so careful. Confusion sets in and I yawn, feeling a smidge of the drug in my system still.

Thunder claps outside, sounding like a door slamming shut, and I realize that thanks to the storm, I could still pull this off. He wouldn't hear me shut the front door if I timed it just after a lightning strike when the thunder resounds. Though, I don't have an umbrella, so whatever I wear will get soaked and by the time I get to a police station I'll look like a drowned rat.

It's late though, and creepy people come out when it's dark out. That part of this plan has always scared me—that it doesn't have to be someone who is purposely searching for me that could hurt me. Some weirdo random stranger could assault me

this time of night when everyone is sleeping and there are no witnesses.

I sigh and wipe myself, then stand up and flush. While I'm washing my hands, I stare into the mirror. The dark circles under my eyes seem permanent now, but at least the black dye is mostly washed out. My chestnut waves have returned for the most part. I remember once, Leo telling me that he loved my hair and how well it suited my hazel eyes. I didn't agree with him then, but I do now. Maybe he was right about that, but he was wrong to encourage me to leave him then. And he's wrong if he thinks keeping me locked up is how to keep me safe.

The woman in the mirror stares back at me, resolving that tonight is the night we get out of here. "You can do this, Willow," I say to myself. I just have to get on more sensible clothing. I only have a few outfits, ordered on Amazon and shipped to me over the past few weeks. I need my jeans, a t-shirt, and a sweater. And I need the sneakers that Allie gave me. They're by the front door. I don't have my bag, or anything of value to carry with me. Not even my cell, so there is no point in taking anything along, except maybe a bottle of water.

With my plan made, to sneak the chain off of Leo's neck and leave, I tiptoe back to the room. He is still snoring lightly when I open the door. I leave it cracked so the light from the hallway will illuminate the dresser. As quietly as I can, I pull the drawer open and rifle through it. I don't find a t-shirt, but I do find my jeans, and I pull out a pair of socks. There is a sweater in the coat closet next to the front door, so I can take that one. If only I can get out of here without waking him up.

Leo stirs as I pull the door open wider and place my clothing on the ground outside the door. I'll just have to wear my blouse, I guess. He rolls over, now lying flat on his back, and drapes an arm over his eyes. His thick bicep, silhouetted against the light streaming in from the hallway seems larger than normal, maybe because it's squished over his face. I grit my teeth and creep up to him.

I fully expect him to snatch my wrist and scare the fuck out of me, but his light snoring resumes. Leo is terrifying at times, even though I don't think he'll ever hurt me. I just know his family will if I don't get away from him. So even though my heart is really bonding to his at times, and his sex is incredible, I gingerly pluck the chain off his chest and feel around on it until I find the clasp.

The tiny claw is almost impossible to open in the dark, but I manage. I start to pull the chain off his neck and he stirs again and I freeze in place. My heart races, my breathing becoming choppy, and I stand there staring at him for a few seconds. He mumbles something in his sleep and I realize the key can slide right off that damn chain. I don't have to pull the necklace off. I feel like I hit the lottery.

Grinning to myself, I pull the key off and let the chain drape across his chest, then retreat for the room with my bounty and a huge smile. The key clutched in the palm of my hand, I grab my clothing and head downstairs. The stairs creak but with the storm outside, I don't think he will even hear it. I don't bother turning on any lights. I put the key in my mouth for safe keeping while I strip off the skirt and toss it to the floor, then put the pants on. I forgot panties, but at this point I don't care. I'm three seconds from freedom as I jam my socks on and shove my feet into Allie's sneakers.

The sweater I wanted isn't in this closet, but Leo has a leather jacket—even better because at least I won't be soaked and cold from the waist up. I zip it to the chin and stand by the door, willing myself to use the key and leave. It's scary out there, really scary. I pull the key from my mouth and slide it into the lock. It turns easily and the door is ready to open, so why do I stand here frozen?

Doorknob in hand, I turn it and pull, and a clap of thunder strikes just as I open it. I hear it creak, but I know Leo can't. The ground is soaked. Rain pounds the earth, and my heart hammers in my chest. Now is my chance to go home. I can be with my father again, really make something of myself with my art, and be free from all this violence of shooting and car chases.

I glance up the steps where Leo is sleeping. He'll wake up and I'll be gone, vanished in the night without a trace. What will he think? His first day of living life without knowing where I am? Will I be able to hide from him? What will he do without someone to follow around all day and all night?

Steeling myself, I look back out over the puddles in the grass and rub my eyes. I have to. If only for the fact that Alessi Gusev is going to kill me if I don't. Leo has no idea what hell he brought on me when he came back into my life. I take a step onto the porch and feel the breeze, moist and cold.

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“You can do this,” I tell myself, scared of what’s out here. Who’s watching...

A car passes in the night and I feel the hair on my arms rise. What if he has someone following me still? What if the Italians see me? What if some street thug grabs me and rapes me?

I push past the fear, taking a few steps. Thunder tears across the sky, booming so loud it startles me and I whimper and cover my ears. I let a cry of fear fall from my lips and I faintly hear, “You don’t want to do that.”

Is it Leo? But he was sleeping. I take a few more steps, descending the porch and standing in the rain now, wind pelting me with tiny needles. I glance back and see his feet on the stairs.

“Come back in here.”

I turn to the lawn again, but I swear I see some glowing green eyes in the bushes across the street. I am a fucking pussy. I am a yellow-bellied, low-down, no-good chicken. I can’t move. The rain is soaking me, and I’m petrified to my core. What is more scary than being murdered by Leo’s father? Why can’t I run? My dream must have gotten in my head.

“Willow, you don’t want to do that.” I turn and see Leo standing in the doorway wearing nothing but his boxers. He runs a hand through his hair and yawns. “Come back inside.” His hand reaches for me, fingers gesturing for me to come to him.

I have no gun, no way to stay dry or warm. No way to defend myself at all. My hair is

already soaked and I'm shivering, but I know I can't stay here. "Leo, please let me leave. Your dad will kill me."

"I told you they're not going to harm a hair on your head, but you'll get yourself killed out there. Or you'll catch pneumonia." He wiggles his fingers again. "Now get in here."

"Please let me go," I whimper, but as I do lightning strikes a tree down the street with an electrifying explosion that sends sparks flying, and I'm a stupid baby who runs up the stairs and into his arms.

Leo is there, taking me into his embrace, though it's not a romantic gesture. He snatches me off the porch, dripping wet, and plants me inside as he shuts the door and uses the key to lock it again. I realize my folly of leaving the key in the lock as I stand shivering and leaving a puddle on the floor.

"You're really stupid," he says, stripping me of the coat first, then my jeans.

I am really stupid. I thought the leather would keep my top dry, but as he upends me and I fall backward onto the couch so he can peel off my shoes and pants, I feel the soggy collar still chilling my skin. The water ran right down my hair into the coat and soaked me to the bone.

"Please, Leo..." I whine, but he ignores me. With my bottom half naked, clothes piled on the floor near the door, he tears the shirt down the front and yanks it off me, then removes my bra. Both items of clothing go in the pile before he points at the stairs.

"You were saying 'Please, Leo' a little differently last night," he says, and his smirk makes me want to smack him. "So unless you want my fist in your pussy again, I suggest we sleep."

He puts the key back on the chain and clasps it around his neck for safekeeping and I know I'm defeated once again. He follows me up the stairs as I do my walk of shame. The air conditioning makes me so cold my nipples shrivel to hard peaks and I am shivering as I climb in bed. Leo lays behind me, forcing me to bend so he can curl around me, and I feel his cock harden and slide between my thighs. No fucking way I'm doing that tonight. I buck against him and grunt, and he gets the point, pulling away slightly.

"You're still mine, Willow. You always will be. And I will provide everything you need, especially protection. But you better start obeying me because bad girls get punished." I guess to prove a point, he grinds his dick against my body again until it pushes between my ass cheeks and I whimper.

I don't say another word. I'm too tired to fight him. The drugs I used last night have overtaken my brain again and lying down in the dark, I find myself getting sleepy. I'll try again. I'm not giving up. Leo can stop me as many times as he wants, but I'll keep trying. I need to get to my father to warn him. I need to stay away from Alessi, and I need Leo to understand I can't be his, even if he thinks it's true. Even if my own heart wants it to be true.

Because I can't die. I don't want to die.

19

LEO

I pull the covers up over Willow's shoulder, tucking her in. She doesn't have a fever, but she's been tossing in her sleep. After I made breakfast this morning she said she felt ill. She's been saying that for a few days. There's no way I can bring a doctor in here though. The family doctor takes orders from my father and if I reach out he'll want to clear it through Dad or Dom first. So all I can do is nurse her until she's

better and hope it's just something she ate.

She mumbles and I watch her eyes dart around behind her eyelids. More nightmares. She's plagued by them now. We have separate beds in this place, but she asks me to hold her before she sleeps. I never tell her, but I stay here the whole night and make sure I'm awake and out of bed before she wakes up. It's torture watching her be so restless in her sleep like this.

I linger by her bedside for a few minutes and finally decide I have to get on with my day. It's now been weeks since we locked ourselves into this house for our own safety, weeks without contact with my family. The news has been mostly quiet, though there are still requests broadcast for information regarding Willow's disappearance as Reba Sanders. The world will never see Reba again, but hopefully one day Willow will be reborn in a way that keeps her safe and my father off our backs.

I trudge downstairs and make myself a snack. We don't have much in the way of food right now because we have to get a grocery delivery again. I've just been too lazy to open the app and order things. Willow doesn't have the means to do it without my phone, so I can't even blame her. With her phone left behind at my father's house, she relies on me for everything now.

I grab a bag of chips and a beer, and head to the living room. I'm experienced in the art of living in a safehouse for long periods of time without exposure to the outside world, but even I'm growing tired of this. My family responsibilities have gone unmet for all this time, but life has gone on as if I don't exist. I know they have to keep things running smoothly. It's just business. I know when I return my spot will be there. I'm not a traitor. I haven't turned my father in to the authorities. I just want what I want and they'll have to get used to that.

The TV blares to life at the click of a button and I flip through channels. This time of

day it's mostly soap operas and game shows. None of this appeals to me. I'd read a book but that's not my thing either. When I feel like this, I normally shoot the breeze with Matty or Rome. Sometimes we shoot things—literally. We go to the gun range for target practice to keep our aim sharp and our guns calibrated. But this is torture.

Things have to be clearing up by now, at least enough that my family understands Willow is a part of my life and we both need the same respect and protection. She isn't guilty of what my father thought; she never was. I understand why he drew the line in the sand, but he was wrong. He just won't admit it. The rest of the family is blinded by loyalty to my father.

Angry, I change the channel again and it lands on a news broadcast. It's better than dramas, so I watch it and turn it up. They talk about the weather for a while, then the Farmer's Almanac and the long-range forecast. The sportscaster runs through some statistics on the games that happened over the weekend but that's old news to me. Since I have nothing better to do than sit here and twiddle my thumbs, I watched all the games he reports on.

When it flashes back to the anchors, they start discussing something that has me sitting up in my seat. Images of the bookstore cycle through as the woman tells the story of a drive-by shooting.

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“This happened yesterday afternoon, just before rush hour. Witnesses say they believe the car was owned by a son of the Italian Don, though once declared only a myth in this city. Authorities will not confirm nor deny the presence of organized crime, nor will they comment on the speculation of this being inter-gang hostility.”

I lean forward on the couch as more images scroll across the screen accompanied by more talking. “Janet, the lead investigator on this case said that luckily no one was injured in this event, though many priceless books have been damaged. It’s believed to be a retaliatory move, though no one is clear what this retaliation is for.”

I’ve seen enough. I mute the TV and reach for my phone which lays on the end table. I know what the retaliation is for and I am upset that it’s come to this. They didn’t have to come after my family’s business. This beef was between me and the man who tried to rape Willow. Now it’s become a whole-family thing and I’m sure my brother’s have had something to say about it.

When my phone boots up for the first time in weeks, I have to wait two whole minutes as notifications roll in. It uses all the processing power of my phone just to not crash itself while the messages, voice mails, and social media alerts go off. When it’s said and done there are hundreds, though the voicemails are what I’m most interested in. I hold my phone to my ear and listen to Rome, whose voicemail was the first one to be left.

“Leo, look, Dad is sick. He just wants peace. Come back and we’ll talk.” The line clicks dead and I delete the voicemail.

Matty’s call is next. “Leo, hey, come to Al’s, we’ll have a beer and chat. I’m not

pissed you pulled the gun on me, but some shit is going down with this reporter. You need to hear about it.”

The voicemail starts to play over again, so I delete that one too. A reporter is the least of my worries right now. I skim the list, scrolling to a few days after we were locked in here and play a voicemail left by Dominic.

“It’s wise that you have your phone off. You should know they hired L’ombra to sniff you out. I got it on good authority from our man Jimmy that they’ve hired the assassin to take you out. Hunker down there until you hear from me.”

“Hmm,” I say out loud to myself. It appears Dominic has a heart after all, or maybe Dad is just protecting his assets. Maybe he thinks if they get me they’ll squeeze me and I’ll talk. I don’t know what to believe anymore.

For a second I sit and stew over that last voicemail. That was left weeks ago. There are at least thirty more voicemails I haven’t heard yet, three of them from Dominic. Sven hasn’t called once, though there is a text from him I haven’t looked at yet. It appears my entire family has tried to reach out multiple times. They know the drill, though. Stay low—stay silent. Flying under the radar when you’re being hunted is the only way to stay safe in this game. If L’ombra is hunting me, then right here is the only place that’s safe. And that assassin has had weeks to do their job.

I play the next voicemail from Dominic and I’m actually surprised. “Leo, Dad wants to see you. You know he’s getting sicker by the day. They’re thinking of putting him on palliative care. If they do that then you may not get a chance to see him again. Call me.”

That one was left seven days ago, so I press play on the next one left by Dominic. “I told you to call me. It’s time to stop this game now. We need you with your head in it. Leave the girl at the safehouse and get back here. We know where you are. Don’t

make us come get you. You know the enemy will follow us right to your door.”

The way he words that makes me feel like he’s planning to protect Willow, maybe even against Dad’s wishes, but I still don’t trust him. In this world people double cross each other all the time, especially when there is blood at stake. I watched Sven turn on our allies at the port in a rage because he wanted to oust the mole. We never told anyone he killed two men who were loyal, but he did. What would Dominic actually do to protect the family? I don’t even know now.

“Hey...” The steps creak and I hear Willow’s footsteps. I lock my phone and make sure it’s on silent before I lay it face down on the end table.

“Thought you were napping.”

“Couldn’t sleep. I just kept having bad dreams.” She shuffles over to the couch and sits on the far end. Her hair is messed up and her eyes have dark circles. She looks miserable. I feel partially to blame for that.

“I’m sorry you did.”

“Yeah...” Her eyes turn to the television where the report of the drive-by is playing again. They found bullet casings now, or that’s what the ticker tape at the bottom of the broadcast is saying. It appears this is pretty big news right now, or maybe there is some other thing that is bigger news that they don’t want people to know. So they’re covering it up by blasting us with the repeated broadcast of the same thing over and over.

“Is that?” she asks, turning to me with a furrowed brow.

“The family bookstore, yes. And that’s Dom speaking to the cops.” My brother’s form is unmistakable, though he stands with his back to the camera in the playback.

He's talking to a cop about the drive-by. When something this public happens, there is no keeping cops away. He's probably furious with me now, and I'm surprised that he hasn't called me to demand I come back given that this all took place yesterday sometime. Maybe he's too busy dealing with fallout from it still.

"God, is this because of me?" She chews on her nail and I feel anger rise up. It's not directed at her, but it sure comes out like it is.

"Don't you ever fucking say that!" I lean forward and ram my hands through my hair. "Don't say that," I repeat, more calmly. It's not her fault and going off on her won't make it better. This is all my fault. She was right. Had I not meddled in her life, she'd have moved on, found a man she was in love with, and been safe right now. I did this to her. And now I have to get her out of it, even if she walks away when it's over.

"I'm sorry," she mutters, and I can tell she's afraid.

"Just look, Willow. Look at what's happening. Okay? This is why you're here. This safehouse is keeping you from being the one outlined in chalk."

Her eyes fix on the screen as the images scroll past again, and when the broadcast changes to some political nonsense, I reach for the remote and shut it off. I don't think she understands what I'm trying to keep her from.

"I get it, okay? I see that this is a dangerous world. I appreciate that you saved me that night. I'm sorry that I haven't said thank you properly. I am grateful." She unfurls her legs and picks at her fingernails. "Your world seems like it's always this dangerous though, and what you're asking me to do is to live in this constant state of fear and running."

"What?" I toss the remote onto the table and stand. "No, Dominic and his wife have a nice home. They're happy. Sven, and Allie, you see how they live... They're happy.

Willow, that's all I want for us."

"You don't get it, do you? You think I can be happy being a prisoner inside a fortress surrounded by men with guns and thick walls that stop bullets. What if I want to be me? I want to paint and have a studio and call my dad on father's day...? Your family thinks I am toxic. They want me dead." She gestures at her chest and her words sting.

"I'll work on them."

"Leo, listen to yourself. Did Dom have to work on your family to accept his wife? Hmm? Did Sven have to fight for Allie?"

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“A little yeah, but we have history. They didn’t.” My phone vibrates but I ignore it and hope she doesn’t hear it. I know it’s got to be one of my brothers calling, which only reminds me of why we’re here bickering again. “I have to go see Dominic. Okay? I need you to promise me you won’t try to leave. That you’ll stay here. Those men are searching for you. They will kill you, after they torture you for information. I don’t want that. We’ll talk about the rest later on. Okay?”

Willow sighs and nods. She curls her legs back up and hugs them, lying against the back of the couch. She looks so small there, like a child needing comfort. I don’t know how to give that right now. I don’t know how to do anything except follow orders like a pre-programed robot.

“I’ll be back.” I turn and head for the door, jamming my feet into my boots. The only thing on my mind is finding out what Dominic wants and how he intends to help resolve the problem in a way that protects Willow. She doesn’t even see how hard I’m fighting my own family just for her, and to hear she doesn’t want this life is devastating.

When I lock the door behind me, I know there are multiple ways she could leave. She could break any window. Sneak out an upstairs window and jump. Use the basement to go out the cellar door which locks from the inside but not with a key. I’m not sure if she’ll think of any of those things, but it worries me she will. Only, I can’t leave someone here to watch her. There is no one. It’s only me. I have to trust that watching that newscast has put the fear of God in her.

I open the garage door and pull the sedan out then shut the door. With one last glance at the front of the house I climb in. She’s standing in the big picture window chewing

her fingernail, hair still just as messy as when she woke from her nap.

“Stay put, Willow,” I whisper. Then I back down the drive and pull away. Dominic better not be wasting my time.

20

WILLOW

Leo

I watch Leo back down the driveway and drive away. The news report was definitely scary to me, seeing how his sort of people handle retribution and paybacks. It isn't the type of life I want to live. His father was right to send me away the way he did. His motive was to protect himself, but in doing so, he also protected me. Leo would have married me. I would have willingly walked into this mess unknowingly and now that I know what it is, I know I can't stay here.

It tears my heart out because in the past several weeks I've found the love I had for Leo never left. His strength, wit, and charm are the same, though maybe buried under thick layers of defense mechanisms and military-like training. But my awareness of his family culture and the environment within which he lives scares me. Walking away from someone you love isn't impossible, but it hurts like hell.

I walk back over to the couch and think about how I'll finally make my escape. As I sit down my stomach churns. It's been doing that for days now, and my tits hurt. I've had unprotected sex with Leo so many times it would be a miracle if these symptoms weren't what I think they are. I curl up on the couch and lay my head down on the armrest and I hear his phone vibrate on the end table.

He left his phone?

I sit up instantly, picking the phone up. It's locked, which means I probably can't use it unless I can guess his passcode. I stare at the notification banner that lights up the screen. It's a message from his brother Dominic, though I can't see the context. I wonder if he knows Leo is on the way? I wonder if Leo will come back and see me trying to break into his phone. The thought makes me panic and I drop it back on the table and race to the window and look out, but he's not here.

Taking a deep breath to calm myself, I chew my fingernail and pace in front of the couch, alternating glances at the phone and the driveway outside the front window. If I get into his phone I could call the police, get someone to help me, but I don't know where I am. Maybe they could get a trace on the call and help me, but what if someone has his phone bugged?

I'm too fucking paranoid. I have sunk into his world so far that I'm starting to think like him. This is ridiculous. I have to get to my father and he will get me away from the people who want to harm me. Leo can fend for himself. This is not my world and I don't belong.

I march right over to that phone and start typing in number combinations. I try Leo's birthday but second guess myself. Was he born in August or April? I can't remember. I try both combinations, and I even try typing the day first then the year. The phone times out and I have to wait five minutes to try again, so I chew my lip as I focus and think of dates and times that might be important to him. He used to talk about the day his mother died, but I can't remember the year that happened even if I tried.

When the phone is ready to try again, I just start randomly guessing numbers. I know if I do this too much it will lock me out for an hour or more. Some phones lock you out for a day, and others will force you to take it into a store to have it reset. I can't afford to have that happen, so this willy-nilly number typing has to stop. I growl in frustration and almost throw the phone when I realize the most important date I haven't tried yet.

My birthday.

I type it in and the phone unlocks and I go immediately to the calling app, but my thumb hovers over the screen ready to type when another notification comes in. This time from Matty.

Curious, I swipe to look at the messages. He has dozens of them unread, and by the time he gets back here and sees his phone I'll be long gone, so I open the one with Dominic and scroll up to see he is very upset with Leo. By the looks of it, he's been upset for a while. But before that I see that Leo has sent very heated messages to Dominic too. Messages about me.

My body feels heavy, my heart still and numb as I read message after message where Leo was defending me. His angry words directed at his father and brother are meant to defend my honor. He has never told me he loves me, but he openly told his brother those exact words. In fact, he said, "She's mine and you know I've always loved her." Reading that puts tears in my eyes.

Twelve years I spent hurting and feeling angry toward him. I thought he never wanted me, that he had never loved me. My heart and mind were destroyed when he sent me away. I loved him with everything I had. I was ready to give him everything I was. And he and his father made me leave. I saved myself for him, because I wanted to give my body to him as a gift on the day we were married, untarnished, untouched by any other man. And he just sent me away.

But he loved me.

And he never stopped loving me all these years.

My stomach lurches again, churning and bubbling. I race for the toilet. It has to be the emotion this time stirring me up. I hover over the toilet vomiting until my eyeballs

hurt, the phone gripped in my hand tightly so I don't drop it in the bowl. This is awful. My head hurts, and I feel weak. I need to know if it's pregnancy or illness, because if it's a virus or food poisoning I need a doctor now.

I flush the toilet, blow my nose, and sit down on the lid with the phone in hand. I unlock it again, this time in one try, and find the grocery delivery app. Leo will be gone a while, and I can have things delivered instantly if needed. I saw him do it the other day when he wanted batteries for the remote. I've never worked the app, but I find it fairly simple to navigate. I select a store, type in pregnancy test, and hit add to cart. The little shopping cart icon shows one item, so I click on it.

The pay button intimidates me a little. If his information is saved, I can complete the transaction, but all of my things were left at his father's house. I can't pay. Also, if transactions prompt notifications to him in any way, he'll know I got this, and do I really want him knowing I'm pregnant when I have no intention of staying with him?

I hesitate just long enough for a nasty burp to remind me of the flavor of vomit in my mouth. I hit pay and the screen changes. The screen indicates the order has been placed successfully. I sit and stare at it for a few minutes, wondering what to do. I really pray he stays away long enough for me to get out of here.

I can't just sit here though. I get up and pace the bathroom for a few minutes, letting my stomach settle. I hate throwing up; it's so gross. So when the nausea subsides, I walk into the bedroom and look around. I have nothing here that's mine, but I did see a few things that might be handy. There is a can of pepper spray on the dresser, so I put that in my pocket. And it's cool out today; I can tell just from looking out the window. I grab a sweater out of the bedroom closet. It's a little snug, but it will work.

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I don't know how far of a walk it will be, so I go down to the kitchen and look through the fridge and cupboards. I could have ordered something from the delivery app, but I didn't think of that when placing the order. I'll just have to make do. There are a few granola bars, so I put one in my pocket. Then I take a bottle of water and sit on the couch to wait for the delivery.

It could be a few minutes, and I'm bored, so I turn on the television. The news channel is still running stories. I'd rather watch something else, but I also feel curious if the Italians have done anything else. I watch for several minutes. They repeat the information about the drive-by shooting yesterday a few times, and then a fresh story comes on. It's my father again. I reach for the remote and turn it up.

"I am begging anyone with information about this case to come forward. If you have my daughter, please let her go. Bring her home. Her family misses her." His eyes plead with the camera, and thus the viewers, to heed his words. He has crow's feet now, and his hair is thinning. I creep over to the TV and touch it softly as he speaks.

"I'm here, Daddy," I tell the screen, though I know he can't hear me. I want to call the number on the screen right now, but I also don't want to leave a record of where I went or what I am doing if Leo checks his phone. I can't use his phone to call. I just have to get out there and walk to the station.

The last time I saw his face in real life was when I picked up my purse and wallet from home—the day Alessi forced me to take that money and leave. He was upset about a work issue, snapped at me for being in the way or something. I wanted to tell him goodbye, give him a hug or something, but he was impatient. I was only twenty years old back then, had never lived a day on my own at all. The farthest I'd ever

been from home was my grandmother's house in Upstate New York, and I'd never spent a night in an empty house.

Alexsi met me at the park, an arrangement he forced me into under threat of violence, and trembling I blew my father a kiss goodbye that I'm not sure he even saw. I met Leo's father and he had suitcases with money in them. Huge, heavy suitcases. I had a choice to take the money and the new identity he created and leave, or I would die. And my father would die with me.

I was naïve and young. Terrified of dying and losing my father. I didn't want to take the money. He had already offered it to me twice, but I was in love with Leo. But that day, after Leo had dumped me the night before, it was different. I had no more fight in me. To protect my father, I took the money and left.

The television screen changes to a commercial and I touch my damp cheeks. It's time for me to go home. I refuse to be intimidated by this dying man ever again. He can keep me from Leo, but I won't let him keep me from my father a second longer. I stand and wipe my face with my sleeve just as the knock comes at the door. The delivery people are here. I wait a few seconds, then look out the window. They are already back in their car pulling away, so I carefully reach through the doggy door and feel around the step for the delivery.

I feel a paper bag and I grab it. There is a small box inside of it. I sit there and tear it open and find exactly what I ordered. It makes my heart race a little and my palms sweat. In my gut I already know the answer but I have to prove it to my mind or I won't believe it. I haven't given away my suspicions to Leo yet. He just thinks I ate something bad, but food poisoning doesn't make your tits hurt.

I drop the phone on the end table and go upstairs to the bathroom. I don't even have to pee, so I turn the water on and bend down and drink from it. I drink a lot—slurping and gulping until my stomach sloshes around and hurts. It threatens to make me

throw up again, but it's the only way to induce urination. I don't know how long it takes for the human body to process liquids, so I just yank my pants down to my knees and sit there waiting for the urge while I tear the box open and read the instructions.

The tiny plastic stick stares at me from the counter. I fucked a mobster and now I'm most likely pregnant with his baby. A Bratva baby—how nice is that? I'm legally connected to the largest crime syndicate in this city now, by blood. And what's scary is, if Leo followed me around for twelve years waiting for me, there is no way I'm escaping his eagle eye while pregnant unless Dad helps me get out of New York for good.

I wait at least twenty more minutes before I get the urge to piss. My hands shake as I pick up the little stick and hold it between my legs in the flow of urine like the box indicated. When the cotton tip is soaked, I lay it on the counter and finish peeing, then wipe myself dry and pull my pants up. The box says it should take three minutes, but within seconds two pink lines appear. A positive test indicator.

"Fuck's sake," I sigh, confirming my suspicion.

I toss the test and the box in the trash and flush the toilet. I have to get out of here. I can't let Leo know I'm pregnant.

I head downstairs and go straight for the kitchen. I don't have a key for the door but I don't need one. I'm going to get the cast iron skillet and throw it through the front window. That'll be just what I need to get out.

Except, as I walk out of the kitchen with the skillet in hand, Leo walks through the door damp from rain. "What are you doing?" he asks, looking at the skillet.

My chest tightens and I feel anger rise up. "Getting ready to cook," I say, lying.

“Want something to eat?”

I pray he can't see the anger in my expression or I might have to use this skillet to knock him out instead of breaking a window.

21

LEO

“This isn't your fucking life, Dominic!”

I'm ready to punch him. My gun may be lying on the nightstand at the safehouse, but this man could be dead in seconds given the amount of rage I have.

“Calm down, Leonid,” my father croaks. He has pushed me to my limits for the last time. They called me here to tell me I have responsibilities and if I don't come back and take care of them, I will be cut off permanently. It's a scare tactic. They need me. I know they can't run the business without me.

“You just don't seem to understand. I don't give a single fuck if the Italians take everything you own. Willow's life is more important to me than any of this.” I swing my arm in a wide sweeping gesture, indicating all five faces that stare back at me and all that they represent. All of my brothers and my father seem to think this is an intervention or something, but I'm not quitting her now.

“Do you understand how her father will react when she finds out she's been hidden away by us this whole time? Do you know who he is?” Dominic looks at me like I'm stupid. I shake my head.

“I don't care. He is nothing. We've handled cops like him before.”

“And when Willow confesses to everything she’s seen? We’ll have to kill them both to protect the family, Leo.” Sven acts high and mighty, like he’s trying to save me from something, but he isn’t. He’s on their side too.

“You dumped five million dollars into her lap to pay her off. You threatened to kill her if she didn’t take it and stay away from him, but back then she knew nothing.” I rake my hand through my hair angrily as I glare at my father. “You want to fix this the right way? You need to pay her father off. Flip him. Get him on our payroll and make sure you have dirt to keep him there.”

“It’s not that easy,” Dominic grumbles. Dad falls into a coughing fit which takes the attention of everyone in the room but me.

Yeah, he’s sick. Yes, I care.

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But right now, we have something more pressing. “Listen, I’m not putting her out. I’m not turning her over to the Italians, and I’m not letting her get back to her father. Got that?”

While they are fawning over Dad, I walk out. I’m irate. I should have known their messages weren’t aimed at fixing what’s going on. They only want me back here to be used as their pawn. Their great idea?—Use me as bait to draw L’ombra out and kill them.

I’m in a rage as I drive back to the safehouse. I’m careful though. I take a very long path, doubling back on my route a few times to make sure I’m not followed. I can’t be too careful at all. We’ve burned one safehouse already. We can’t afford to burn another, and this one has family memories, so I don’t want to blow it.

When I’m back and the car is safely stowed away in the garage, I unlock the house and walk in. Willow is standing in the kitchen doorway with a skillet in her hand looking guilty as fuck. My gut tells me that was about to go through the front window, but I don’t question that.

“What are you doing?”

“Cooking... Are you hungry?”

I grumble as I toss my key on the table and shed my jacket. “Just get me a beer.” She nods and I see the way she looks at me, like she’s nervous or hiding something. She disappears into the kitchen and I crash on the couch, kicking my boots off and propping my feet up. It’s been a long day already and it’s only just after lunch. I

should be with my brothers having a rational discussion about how to finish the mess with the Italians and save Willow but that will never happen now.

Willow returns with a beer in hand and gives it to me. “Not drinking?” I ask her as she rounds the coffee table and sits cautiously at the other end of the couch.

“No. Feeling sick,” she mumbles, but again, there is something in her gaze. I sip the beer and watch her chew her fingernail.

“Suit yourself.”

The room falls silent for a few minutes while I drink the beer. She just stares at me nervously. I wonder if the news report of the drive-by really shook her up that bad. She didn’t leave while I was gone, which is good. I partly expected to come back to a note or something worse—like a broken window and her gone. But she’s here. Maybe she’s starting to trust me now.

“Beer me,” I tell her, thrusting the empty bottle into her hand. I notice she’s fully dressed, wearing shoes and a sweater. She wasn’t like that when I left, which reawakens my suspicion that she was going to smash the window.

She takes the bottle and vanishes into the kitchen, then returns with a six pack of beer in hand, one bottle missing. She sets it next to me and again climbs onto the couch, but this time she kicks her shoes off.

“They still want you gone,” I tell her as I crack the second beer and tip it up. I’m exhausted from being awake so long and getting so little sleep. I haven’t eaten yet today, and my head is already feeling the effects of the beer. It’s a good feeling, helping me relax.

“I didn’t think they would welcome me with open arms anyway.” She shrugs and her

finger goes right into her mouth again. She tears at a fingernail and I slurp the beer.

“So you’re still here. I’m surprised actually. I thought I’d have to hunt you down.”

Her eyes flick nervously to the door and then she drops her chin in a guilty act. “I, uh... You are the only one who protects me.”

Beer two empty, I put the bottle back in the six pack and grab another. My chest feels heavy, my head spinning. For a guy my size who drinks almost daily, two beers shouldn’t make me feel this way. Not even on an empty stomach. I see what she’s done before her guilty face confesses it for her. The sleeping pills were never taken out of the kitchen. Fucking hell...

“So you’re staying?” I ask the pointed question, knowing she will lie. She fully intended to throw that skillet through the window and run. I just came home too early. Now she’s drugged me with the intention of getting out of here while I sleep. I reach into my shirt and find the key dangling there. Gripping it in my hand, I yank hard, breaking the chain.

Her eyes look up at me in shock. “This is what you want?” I ask her, dangling it from my hand.

“Leo... I...”

She looks afraid, or remorseful. I can’t read her with my vision going blurry. I lay the key on the table and down the third beer, deciding that’s enough for me. She’s given me something strong enough to work this fast, I don’t want to fuck myself up so bad I end up in a hospital.

“After all I’ve done for you.” I shake my head and stare at her.

“Leo, you have to understand. Your family wants me dead.” Her eyes plead with me to understand but I can’t. I’ve protected her with everything I have and she still wants to walk away. I curl my hands into fists and tighten my jaw. Then I take a deep breath and pat the sofa beside me.

“At least if you’re going to leave, give me something to remember you by.”

Willow looks at the sofa cushion my hand rests on and shakes her head. I can see she is afraid. She probably thinks I’m going to hurt her, but I have no intention of hurting her. “Come on,” I coax, trying to not sound angry or aggressive. The drug is kicking my ass already. I feel like I’m going to pass out, but I just want to feel her in my arms one more time. I know I am not going to be able to stop her because she’s tricked me.

“Leo, please.”

“I’m horny. Come fuck me. You know, one last time.” I lean toward her and grab her ankle and pull her across the couch and she yelps at me.

“Leo, stop.” She swats at me but as I pull her onto my lap she settles. My cock is hard just thinking about her pussy. She looks down at me with pity, and shoves the hair out of her eyes. “I loved you. You know that?”

I can’t respond to her. I can’t fathom how she can leave me if she loves me. I reach for her pants button and undo it, then unzip the fly of her jeans. She sits with her hands splayed on her thighs, straddling my lap as I squeeze my hand into her pants and rub her pussy through her panties. She hisses and sucks in a breath.

“Leo...”

“Just let me make you feel good one more time.” I rub hard, massaging in a circle the silky fabric of her underwear until there is a thick layer of moisture soaking through. “Stand up, take them off,” I order her, and she sighs hard and glares at me, but she obeys. Her jeans slide off her hips, and she pushes them down and steps out of them. “The panties too,” I say, flicking my finger. I’m seeing double now, but I smell her sweet arousal and want to taste her. I pull my dick out of my jeans and stroke myself. I’m rock hard. I just need to be in her one more time. I blink slowly and look up at her.

Willow shakes her head resolutely. “No, Leo. I don’t feel well.”

“Fucking listen to me, woman,” I bark, and grab her hips, forcing her forward. I lean in, and lick her panties, tasting her juices. She shudders and rests her hands on my head as I push the panties to the side and lick her slit.

“God... Leo,” she moans, but I want so much more. She is going to pay for this, because I’m going to sober up, and then I’m going to find her.

“If I remind you how good I make you feel, maybe you’ll stay.” I reach for a beer bottle and hear her sighing softly. She says she doesn’t feel well but she wants me. No pussy makes this much moisture if it’s not aroused. I slide the bottle between her legs and grind it on her lips. “Spread your legs.”

“Leo, please...” she whimpers, and it’s not a whimper of desire either. She wants out of here so bad, and I’m not letting her leave until she knows she’s mine.

The bottle slides into her pussy easily, and she hisses and claws at my head. “Oh fuck, Leo.” Her moaning is hot, so hot my dick throbs like I’m going to blow my load all over my pants, but my head is swimming so badly now I know I’m going to lose the fight for consciousness. I try to thrust the bottle into her, but my eyes are heavy and I drop it. It slides out of her and hits the floor and rolls away.

“Fuck,” I mumble, leaning back against the couch. Willow takes a step back and I look up at her face. “You were mine.”

“Leo, I...” She looks remorseful now, like she feels bad about drugging me. Her head shakes and she walks back over to me. “Okay. I’ll do it. One last time,” she says, straddling me. I feel her slick cunt slide over my shaft. The heat is incredible, the moisture better yet. “I’m so sorry, Leo. I just need to get to my father,” she whimpers, sliding across me. Her pussy grinds on me beautifully. I rest my hand on her hips and close my eyes to enjoy it. I want to be in her, but now my body is so heavy I can’t even speak. Each muscle in my arms and chest feels like tiny lead weights are attached and sinking me into the cushions.

“I love you, Leo, but I can’t be with you. It’s not safe.” Willow kisses me and grinds her pussy along my length. I want to react, to touch her, feel her soft tits in my hand one more time. I want to penetrate her, feel my dick pulsing as it dumps into her, but sleep is imminent.

I can’t move now. Can’t talk. Can hardly breathe. I feel each heartbeat as it comes slower and slower. It swirls in my head, and thrums through my dick, and then she stands, taking her pussy away from me. I can’t even open my eyes now. I’m a prisoner inside my own body. I smell her sex, as if it were the first time I parted those lips and sank into her—tasted her. I want to taste her, but all I taste is the remnant of a cold beer on my tongue.

“I do love you, Leo.”

I hear rustling, probably her putting her pants on. Then I hear footsteps, her walking around. Then her footsteps change; she's put her shoes on. I'm fighting to stay conscious, but I hear the door unlock. Then she whispers, "Goodbye." And the door opens.

I want to scream, to run after her. To force her to stay here where it's safe. I can't protect her out there. She can't leave this place. I need her. She doesn't know how dangerous it is. "I love you, Willow!" I scream over and over in my head. I scream with every bit of strength I have left, but they are silent screams, because I can't move my tongue to utter her name. "Come back..."

22

WILLOW

"I love you, Leo, but I can't be with you. It's not safe..." I lean down and kiss him one more time, savoring the taste of his lips. They're soft, pliable—not like when he kisses me. The sleeping pills I put into his first beer have incapacitated him completely. My pussy slides over his shaft, making my body want him. I shouldn't have climbed on him because now I'm worked up and I actually don't want to leave him. This just reminded me that I'm so weak in his presence. He owns my heart.

I stand and sigh, staring down at his limp form draped across the couch. He left his key on the end table. I snatch that before putting my shoes on and then I stop and look down at him one more time. His dick is soft now, flopped out over his pants. I feel guilty, like I'm the one doing something wrong in this situation. But this is what he deserves, isn't it? He trapped me here with him for weeks. The thought makes my stomach flutter, which only reminds me that I'm carrying his fucking baby.

"I do love you, Leo."

I can't raise a baby in this family. I need my father.

This time, when the key clicks in the lock and the door is open, I don't look back. I leave the key there and shut the door behind me, heading out across the lawn. It's chilly and raining, and I wish I'd have looked for an umbrella or raincoat, but I'm not going back into that home again. If I do, I may never leave. I may look at his dimpled, stubbly face and forget myself, and I know that love is blind, but I can't afford to be.

I tug the sweater around my body more tightly and turn my face down. My sneakers slap on the pavement with each hasty step. He'll be out for a while, but that doesn't mean there aren't other dangers. The Italians are hunting me—I know that much—and the boarded-up windows and doors on the homes I pass tell me there are a lot of abandoned homes. That means vagrants and squatters, who are known for their drug use. It's just not a good neighborhood.

At each intersection, I read the street signs, hoping to get somewhat of an idea as to where I am, but nothing clicks. No one else is stupid enough to be walking in the rain, but plenty of people drive past and have no problem splashing water on me. It's only about ten minutes before I'm soaked to the bone and shivering. I pass a few women huddled beneath the awning of a store. They look like prostitutes, which tells me the neighborhood isn't any less sketchy several blocks away from the safe house than it was at ground zero. One of them flicks her cigarette and jerks her chin upward at me.

I almost ignore her entirely, but I realize that even though I don't normally talk to people like her, she could actually help me. I smile and shiver through my teeth, then clear my throat.

"Do one of you know where the closest police precinct is?" I'm so cold my teeth chatter as I speak, and the leggy bottle-blond smacks her gum as she grins at me.

“We don’t really visit there too often.” Her wink sends shivers down my spine and I hug my arms over my stomach tighter.

“I just need to find it, please.” I’m on the verge of breaking down crying. I just want to get somewhere safe, somewhere I can tell them who I really am and see my father again.

“Look, honey, you don’t want to go down there. They’re nothing but scum. What you need a cop for anyway?” The brunette in jeans puts a firm hand on her hip and shakes her head. “They ain’t do nothing but manipulate and push people around.”

“I’m sorry, ladies.” I tuck my chin and turn to walk away. They must have had some bad run-in with a cop in the past to be so biased against them.

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“On the corner of Murphy and Platner, but I’m tellin’ ya, you should steer clear of there.”

I glance over my shoulder to see them talking quietly to each other. The comment hovers over me like a cloud as I turn down Platner, hoping I’m headed the right direction. There is so much distaste in the world for police and other law enforcement officers; it’s a wonder the city doesn’t erupt into all-out anarchy any second.

With my face turned away from the wind, I head north. The rain lets up a little, but the breeze doesn’t. I feel like my hands are freezing, and I know my feet are. Water squishes up through my socks with each step, even when I don’t step in a puddle. This bone-chilling journey is worth it though, because I know at the end, I will be reunited with my father, who will dote on me and demand answers about where I’ve been. I don’t know what I’ll tell him exactly—maybe the truth—but he won’t care.

Approaching an intersection, I see the sign for the Murphy Street precinct and breathe a sigh of relief. I am steps away from salvation. Nothing horrible happened on my walk except for being rained on, and Leo is in my past again—this time for good.

I hustle across the street and jog up the steps to the entrance. The door is heavy, and it squeaks when I open it. A burst of hot air blows down on me from overhead as I enter and look around. There aren’t many people in here, a few uniforms at desks with their heads down, focused on work, and one man in a brown sport jacket standing next to a high counter, behind which a woman with curly black hair sits smiling up at him. They look my way and the woman smiles at me too.

“Can I help you?” she asks, tilting her head. “Looks like it’s still raining?”

I nod and shiver as I walk toward her. The water squishing between my toes doesn't even bother me anymore. "I'm here to turn myself in—" Their faces contort into expressions of curiosity and surprise. "I mean, to let you know I'm okay."

"What is your name?" the gentleman asks, leaning on the counter. His brow furrows and he grows serious.

"My name is Willow Akers. My father has been looking for me." The violent shivers don't stop just because I'm in a warm place. It will take a while for my body to return to its normal temperature, and I have a bit of anxiety too, which always makes me feel cold.

As I say my name, both of them take a deep breath and nod, as if they have busted the case wide open. The woman turns and her fingers click over the keyboard in front of her frantically. She watches the screen with a determined focus, narrowing her eyes. The man pulls his phone from his pocket and does something. I can't see the screen, but it's obvious to me that my announcement has sparked some interest.

"Uh, so when can I see my father?" I shift my feet and the sneakers' soles squeak on the floor.

"Right this way, Willow," the man says and jerks his head. As we pass through the open office area a few heads turn, but none of them pay much attention. The gentleman calls over his shoulder, "Sally, I'm taking her to Sergeant Baker. Tell the captain to make the call to the fifth precinct that we have her. They'll want a report."

"Sure thing, Howie."

"Howie" leads me down a narrow hallway to a metal door with a name painted on it in black letters. It's the office of Sergeant Carl Baker, though I'm not sure of the significance of why this particular man needs to see me. Still, I'm in a better, safer

place than I have been in weeks, so I don't care who I have to talk to.

Howie—Howard or Howland maybe—opens the door without knocking and another man, stout and mustached, looks up from his computer. “Carl,” Howie says, stepping aside so I can walk through the door, “this is Willow Akers. Her dad is the one making the fuss up at the fifth. We need to contact missing persons and get her booked in. You take her statement and then take charge of transport.”

“Yes, sir,” Carl says, but there is something sinister in his eyes when he looks at me. Howie backs out of the room, leaving the door open, and I feel tense. Carl stands and eyes me for a second, looking me up and down, and I squirm beneath his gaze. This doesn't feel safe to me at all. He doesn't speak; he just buttons his sport coat—gray tweed—and stares at me while he cleans his canine tooth with his tongue.

“Uh, I just want to see my father, please.” I must look disgusting, soggy hair, dripping sweater, muddy shoes. Maybe that is why he's staring at me like I'm the last person he wants to see, or maybe I'm interrupting his porn habit or something.

“Yeah, well...” He reaches into his desk drawer and pulls out a weapon. It startles me and I back away, but he snickers. “Relax, babe. Every cop puts their weapon in their drawer while in the office.” Carl holsters his gun on his hip next to where his badge is clipped on his belt in plain view. I take a deep breath and try to relax, but now the hookers' words are haunting me. They warned me not to come here, but I insisted. But this is a safe place, right?

The man grabs a pair of keys and a cell phone from the drawer too before smirking at me. “Let's just head down to the fifth precinct and see if we can't hunt Daddy up.” He nods at the door and moves toward me. I instinctively back away. This man is making me feel uncomfortable.

“What about my statement?” I ask, trying to stall him. I'd feel safer if the other man

came back, but when I peek into the hallway, that man is gone. I don't even see the woman seated at the front desk either.

"I'll take it on the way. Let's go." Carl doesn't take no for an answer. He hooks his arm around my waist as he passes and forcibly leads me into the hallway then farther into the building. Or I think it's farther until he opens another gray metal door, this one with an exit sign above it. He thrusts me out into the cold and rain again, and I spin around, ready to pummel him with my fists but I take a hard backhand to the face. "Keep your mouth shut."

"Ow!" I whimper, covering my eye where he struck me. Thunder claps overhead and I wish I'd have listened to the prostitutes. "Who are you? Why are you doing this?"

"You shoulda stayed wherever he had you hidden. Don't you know that?" The man grabs my arm and shoves me into the parking lot, herding me like I'm a lost sheep or something toward a row of parked cars. "Gusev is as good as dead. You know that, right? Why'd he keep you so locked up anyway? And have you really been shacking up with him for twelve years without telling your father where you were?"

A chill runs down my spine as he speaks. My eyes dart around searching for a way of escape but there is none. The buildings are connected, surrounding the small parking area. Only one alley leads out to the street, and he's blocking me from running that way. He is going to kill me, or kidnap me. "Help!" I scream at the top of my lungs. "Someone help me—"

His hand comes down on my face again, and I try to deflect it with my arms, which only makes him angry. "Stupid bitch," he grumbles, grabbing a handful of my hair. He drags me toward a black sedan and uses his fob to pop the trunk, in which he shoves me with no remorse.

"He's going to come for me, you sick bastard." I'm crying. I don't even know why.

“Daddy dearest?” He chuckles. “He ain’t coming for you, honey.”

I roll over and try to get to my knees in the trunk. My side hurts from being slammed against the latch hook. I’ll have a bruise from that, maybe rug burn from the carpet in here too.

“I’m talking about Leo. He’ll come and when he does you’ll die too, just like that sick fuck who tried to lay hands on me in the alley.” He kicks my side and I fall down, sucking air into my lungs.

“Yeah, well he’ll get a beating and then he’ll see the boss, just like you. Keep your mouth shut.” Carl slams the trunk shut and I scream again, tears pouring from my eyes. This wasn’t supposed to happen. I am supposed to be going to my father.

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I pound on the trunk until my hands bleed, and he climbs in and starts the engine. He drives like he doesn't care that he has a human being in his trunk. I'm thrown around in the tiny space, slamming into things he has in here with me, and then the car stops, and he drags me out by my hair.

"Fuck... ouch. Stop!" I swat at him, but he doesn't ease up. He also doesn't speak until he has me inside a large brick building. The windows out front are dark or boarded up, and a tiny bell hanging above the door dings as we walk in.

"Tell him we have her," Carl snaps at a man seated next to the door. We pass him and Carl pushes me through an open door where a few other men are seated around a table playing cards. They look up at us and he shoves me toward them. I crash into the table, sending their cards flying to the floor and they jump up.

"What the hell, Baker!" One of the men, dark hair and angry eyes, stares at me as I stumble away from the table and push my hair out of my eyes.

"Willow Akers.... You're welcome," Carl snaps, and then he's gone.

"Dumbass!" the man calls after Carl, but then he turns to me. "So you're the bitch who started all of this?"

"What? No, I didn't start anything." I back away but I bump into a man's chest. I whip around to see him glaring at me. Three other men close in on me too, while the sixth man in the room walks out with his phone in hand. "Please, I just want to go see my father. Detective Akers, please. "

“That’s not going to be possible,” another man says with a very thick Italian accent, and suddenly I see what is happening. The prostitutes tried to warn me that the Italians had people working in that precinct, and I walked right into a trap. Maybe they’d seen my face on the news or something. Why didn’t they just say that?

“Please, this has been a misunderstanding. This whole thing is just a mistake.” I’m trembling, hugging my stomach again, still dripping wet.

“The way I see it, you got in bed with our enemy. That makes you our enemy.” The first man runs his finger over my cheek. “Are you our enemy?” he asks, looking me up and down.

“No, uh, no, sir. I’m not an enemy. I just got sucked into this thing and—”

His hands reach up and tear the sweater open in front, revealing my t-shirt. “Well, we’re going to need you to tell us about Leonid Gusev then. Because he is definitely our enemy.”

“What are you doing?” I back away again, and again I run into the firm chest of a man. They’re all so close I can smell their sweat and the tobacco on at least two of their breaths. “Please, I just want my father.”

“Daddy can’t help you, sweetheart.” The man reaches up and grabs the collar of my t-shirt and tears it down the center in a few jerky movements. His muscles flex in his arms making the tattoo woman on his left bicep dance.

“Hey,” I shriek, but the man behind me holds me by the elbows, then slides his hands down my arms until he has both hands pinned behind my back. “Stop it!”

“Hmmm,” the man says, running a single finger over the curve of my boob, “this looks nice. Think maybe I might have to sample this, see what all the fuss is about.”

He pushes the halves of my shirt and sweater aside, fully exposing my bra. “See, my boss was just about to have his sample when some piece of shit gunned him down. He was protecting you, wasn’t he?”

“No, please...” I squirm, trying to get away, but all I manage to do is put on a show for these sick fucks.

“Oh, yes. I think he was. He has it bad for you, which means you’re valuable to me. How would he feel if he knew I soiled his playground?” The man reaches for his belt and begins to unbuckle it, but another man walks in and everyone backs away from me. This man seems to command their attention.

“What are you doing, Ralphie?” The new man shakes his head and scowls.

“Sorry, boss.”

“Boss” glares at Ralphie then turns his attention on me. “I apologize for Ralphie’s rude behavior. That is not how we treat guests.”

“Sir, I just want to see my father.” With my wrists free I swipe at my eyes and pull my shirt closed.

“In time, perhaps. Right now, you need to tell me everything you know about the man who killed my soldier. Because if you don’t, you’re going to die right along with him, and your father will die too.” The boss takes a gun out of his waistband and something out of his pocket. He screws the metal rod into the end of his gun and watches me. It’s a silencer. He’s going to kill me.

My god, I need Leo. Why did I leave that safehouse?

LEO

My head pounds as I blink myself awake. My memory is foggy as to what happened to make me feel so groggy this morning. My neck aches from sleeping in an upright position on the couch; a six pack of beer with a few of the bottles empty sits on the end table next to me. I rub my eyes and roll my neck, stretching to ease the ache.

“Willow?” I stand and sway for a moment. I’ve never had a hangover like this in my life. Even my chest and arms feel heavy, like I’ve been drugged or something.

The sun is up, already warming the city for the day and I can’t believe I slept so late. I reach for my phone to see a few missed texts from my brothers. It’s already after eight a.m. I never sleep this late. And why is the sunlight hurting my head more?

Shoving my phone into my pocket, I head toward the kitchen. I hear the sound of running water. Willow must be in a shower or something. This is about the time of day she wakes up. I’ll just make coffee for both of us. I know the past month or so has been rough on her. There are times when I wish we could go back to normal life, but until this blows over, we’ll be stuck here. And given how my family refuses to help, it may take longer than normal.

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The coffee maker takes a second to warm up, but I collect the K-cups and mugs while I wait. Then I lean on the counter and fold my arms over my chest. My neck is really sore, so I rub it with one hand, closing my eyes. An image of Willow in the shower flashes in my mind, the water running over her creamy curves. It sparks the memory of a dream I had, her on me, riding me while I slept. Her pussy was so wet, so slick and ready for me. I want that dream to be a reality, but sex with Willow lately has been scarce. I have to provoke her to argue with me, which I don't have any interest in with this massive of a headache.

The click of the single-serving coffee machine tells me it's ready to brew our morning Joe, so I turn and pop a K-cup into the slot and close the lid, then put the mug beneath the spout and hit the twelve-ounce button. The light flashes, warning me I need to add water. Willow was the last to use the damn thing and she never refills the reservoir. I scowl and pull the plastic tank off the machine and carry it across the room to the sink to fill it.

As the water line slowly creeps higher on fill lines painted on the side of the reservoir, I look out over the backyard. The sprinklers are on despite the rain we had last night. It's going to make the entire yard a mud bog. Frustrated, I reach for the key around my neck to unlock the back door so I can turn the water off, but I quickly realize it's not there. I fumble around my neckline, groping myself, but the key is gone.

"What the hell?" I head for the living room, retracing my steps. I came home and locked the door. Willow looked like she was ready to throw the cast iron through the front window because I'd been gone. I dropped the key on the end table, but picking up the half-empty six-pack revealed no key there. "Fuck's sake," I hiss and turn to

look at the front door. The key remains in the lock, chain dangling.

I freeze for a second, staring at that key. My mind is blank. I remember coming home, but not much after that. “Willow?” I call again. I remove the key and move straight toward the stairs. I still hear water running, but she’s been in there a while. “Willow? Do you want coffee?”

I don’t even knock on the door. I push it open to find the shower isn’t running at all. The water I hear running has to be the sprinkler. “Willow, this isn’t funny!” I turn and walk across the hall to her room. The door stands open, light streaming in from her window too. The room is empty, bed fussed from her nap yesterday but unslept in last night.

“Fuck!” I tear through the rest of the upstairs, searching my room and both closets. Then I return to the bathroom, just to double check that she isn’t hiding behind the shower curtain. When I realize she is gone—like actually took my key and let herself out—it all comes back to me. I stand in the open bathroom doorway remembering how she fed me that beer one after another. How she apologized as she slid across my cock, teasing me as the drug kicked in.

I kick the trash can hard and it slams into the wall and spills out its contents. I’m so furious I can’t think. I put a hand over my forehead, as if shielding my eyes from the sun, and clench my jaw. That woman has no clue what she’s doing. She has gone off into this city alone with no protection. I grope my waist frantically and find my Glock still shoved in my waistband where I left it. At least she’s not stupid enough to take that. She has no clue how to even use a weapon if she tried.

Angry, I stare into the mirror for a moment, trying to decide how to handle this. I need to go after her and find her, but I won’t be able to do it alone. I’ll need the help of a few of my soldiers at least. I brace my hands on the counter and drop my head, sighing loudly, and my eyes catch something on the floor. A small white plastic stick.

Next to it is a pink box with cursive writing on it.

I bend to pick up the box so I can see it more clearly, and instantly I know what it is. Which only makes me pick up the white stick even faster. Two lines indicate a positive test, though it's probably been hours since she took it. "She's pregnant?" I shake my head, reeling over the news. Willow is pregnant with my child and now she's out on those streets alone. I sit on the closed toilet lid and run a hand through my hair while I try to wrap my head around this.

It's bad enough that the Italians will hunt her down, but if they know she's carrying my child, they will do far worse. And they will do it all in the name of drawing me out so they can exact revenge. I can't do this myself. I need help, and my brothers aren't getting a choice now.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and hit Sven's number on speed dial. He doesn't even wait two whole rings to pick up. "Leo, where the fuck are you? We've been trying to call. After you left, Dad—"

"I don't have time for this, Sven. I need help now."

"What? Dad went to the hospital in the squad, man. They say he had a heart attack."

"Sven, listen to me." I take a deep breath. The news about my father is shocking, but I can't do anything about that right now, and he is in the best place possible with doctors who will do everything they can. "Willow is in danger. She left the house. She fucking drugged me and took my key. She's out there, and they're going to kill her."

"Slow down, buddy." Sven doesn't sound entirely opposed to the idea, but I don't have time to fuck with his questioning.

“Are you helping me or not?” I head downstairs where I still hear water running, and remember along the way that I left the sink to fill the reservoir. I suddenly do not need that coffee at all, so I shut the water off and leave the thing sit in the sink. The sprinkler is still on, but the backyard can be a mud bog. I no longer care.

“You know what Dad said, and now he’s in the hospital.”

“Sven, she’s pregnant.”

There is a cold tension on the line as he absorbs my words. I hear some talking in the background before I hear him breathe heavily into the receiver. “Come to the hospital and we’ll talk it out. Dad has asked for you personally. Everyone else is here. If you want your family to back you up, you need to act like you have a family.”

The line beeps a few times indicating he hung up and I am ready to smash my phone to pieces. Except, he’s right. I do need my family to back me up, and I know the only way I’m getting anyone’s support is to show up at that hospital. Besides the fact that I have to have their permission to use my guys. By now they will have told all of my men that I’m off limits until I get with the program. I have no choice.

I climb into my car and drive across town to the hospital, all the while scanning every sidewalk, outdoor café, and street corner for Willow’s hazel eyes. I have no idea where she could even be or if she managed to get somewhere safe. All I know is she isn’t with me and that means she’s at risk no matter where she is.

At the hospital, I stop by the information desk to find my father is on the fourth floor with his normal cardiologist, Dr. Haymer. He’s had a few scares in the past, but never an actual heart attack. Haymer is the best in the business and we spare no expense to make sure Dad is taken care of so I know exactly where to go. The VIP suite in the only wing of the hospital dedicated to the wealthy.

My appearance in the doorway seems to shock my entire family except Sven, who probably was waiting for me. Dad's eyes are open, though he looks to be slightly drugged. They all turn with different expressions on their faces. "Hey," I mumble and step into the room. Matty glares at me; Rome nods in solidarity. Dominic's lips are pursed but he remains calm and stoic. Sven shakes his head and gestures at Dad.

"He's been waiting." Sven steps back so I can walk right up to Dad's bedside, which I do with my hands shoved in my pockets.

"Tried to run out of here early?" I asked, trying to make a joke, but my father is too serious to laugh at it.

"This is where you belong, Leonid. I need you to come home, do your job. Forget that girl." Dad reaches for my hand and I pull my right hand from my pocket to let him draw strength from my grip.

"I am willing to come home, but there are things I won't change about my life." I want to unleash, but that won't help anyone. My head isn't in this right now. My mind races; all I can think about is getting back out there and finding Willow.

"Dad, there's something you should know." Sven interrupts our conversation. I look up at him, wondering what the hell he's doing. I need to make my father understand that I need the full force of this family behind me when I go hunting. Dad's eyes turn upward toward my brother's face. "I spoke with Monroe." Monroe—the dirty cop we have in bed with us to keep us safe from certain legal consequences for our business. What would Sven speak to him about?

"About?" Dad's question hangs in the air and Sven steps up to the side of the bed. Dominic and Matty look curious, but Rome stands confidently watching over, as if he knows what will be said before it's out in the air.

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“Detective Akers is willing and ready to do anything we want.” Sven squares his shoulders as he speaks.

“What?” I ask, confused.

Sven looks at me then back at Dad, whose eyes fix on him with angry intrigue. “It looks like Ms. Akers has been taken. She turned herself in at Murphy Street precinct and a dirty cop took off with her. We think he’s in bed with the Italians.”

Dad rolls his eyes and coughs. When he regains his composure, he shakes his head. “I want nothing to do with this. You boys try my patience sorely.”

“Dad, listen to him,” I plead, and his chest heaves in anger. But before he can rebuke me, Sven continues.

“Willow Akers has been missing for twelve years. She just resurfaced and the entire NYPD is on alert because one of their own has really shown his hand. The cop has been arrested and questioned. He gave up the location but Monroe is holding the dogs off until Leo can get in there. Now, if we want more fingers in the pie, I know we can turn Akers to our side. He is willing to do anything to get his daughter back.”

Sven’s pitch is so convincing even if I wasn’t determined to get Willow back safely, I’d go along with him. I glance at Dominic, whose opinion is the real one that matters. When Dad dies, he takes over this business entirely. No more running thoughts by the old man; Dominic will be the leader. He will have to deal with the fallout when things go sideways.

“It makes sense, Dad.” Dominic’s eyes fix on me with fury and distaste, but he knows as well as I do that it actually does make sense. Having more cops on our side for whatever reason is the only thing that gets us out of trouble sometimes. “Detective Akers is next level. We have only sergeants on our payroll. A man at that level is a good asset.”

I turn back to see Dad mulling it over. He has no clue why I need him to agree so badly, and no one in this room understands how much my heart is burning to get back onto the street and search, and if Sven has the address, he’s going to cough that up the instant Dad agrees.

Dad closes his eyes for a moment, and given his drugged state, I almost believe him to be sleeping when he opens them. He’s a proud man, always sticks to his word, but I can see him wavering—if for no other reason than he is dying and doesn’t want division between his sons when he departs this place to cross over. His tongue searches his teeth beneath his lips and his nostrils flare.

“Do it then.” His tone is cold, slicing through any hope I have of him actually having compassion for me in this life, but at least he’s agreeing to help. “Dominic, go to the detective. Make him understand what he will owe me if we do this. Roman, go to the precinct; find out how deep the ties are with the Italians. If that man is really dirty we need to know what he knows, and we need Monroe to silence him.” Dad’s eyes turn to my face and I swallow my pride.

“Leonid, take Sven. Go and use Monroe’s address for this girl you insist you must have.” I hate that he still refers to her as a girl. I want him to understand she’s a powerful woman in her own right. And now she will be a mother. And he will have a grandchild before he dies—hopefully. “You understand I am doing this only because the benefits of having her father working for us outweighs the danger?”

“I understand.” I say nothing more. This is business to him, but to me it’s more

personal than I've ever been.

"Sven, if it goes sideways—kill her." Dad's orders will be obeyed, and he looks me directly in the eye as he gives them.

"Yes, sir," Sven replies, and I know he will keep those orders. Now I need to go rescue my woman and unborn child. And when we come back, he will see that she has always been exactly what I need.

"Let's go, Sven." I turn and head out the door, barely waiting for Sven to keep up. I'm going hunting, and I never ever come home empty handed.

24

WILLOW

My shoulders hurt and my chest aches too. I'm nauseous, but that has nothing to do with being tied up on the cold hard ground of whatever this building is. I cried myself to sleep after a harrowing two-hour conversation with whoever that man was. He demanded that I give him information about Leo, but I honestly couldn't tell him anything. I don't even remember what street the safe house is on. I told them what I know and it wasn't good enough. They lashed my wrists together and I sat down, then lay down, and now I'm waking up alone.

My hands are still tied together in front of me, feet too, and I heard the rhythmic tick, tick, tick of a clock in the room but I don't see anything. The table and chairs block my view from seeing much. I'm surprised I was even able to sleep on this hard ground. I blink my eyes a few times and push myself up off the floor. The door stands open, but I'm not stupid enough to believe they've left me unguarded. There has to be a man with a gun out there charged with watching me so I don't run.

I take a better inventory of where I'm at. The clock on the wall ticking its way into my brain is in view now. It's past eight a.m. I'm normally awake at this time, though I don't normally stay up as late as they kept me up. And after being soaked by the rain for so long—despite my clothing being mostly dry now—my skin hurts. A nagging fear in the pit of my stomach tells me I'm only good to them if I continue to offer information to them about Leo's family. I just can't do that to Leo.

He may have been really shitty to me, but I love him. No matter what they do, I have to protect him for as long as I can. I know he will come for me. I know it in the very core of my being. He will never let them hurt me. He won't even let his family hurt me. Of course he will come find me.

I wrestle with the rope tied around my wrists and see the way my skin has reddened around it. I'll never get this loose, but I can untie the rope around my ankles, which must have seemed pointless last night before I fell asleep. I work the knot and slowly make progress at freeing myself, and one of the goons from last night struts in with a gun in hand.

"Oh, look who's awake. You know the boss ain't here today. I could tap that pretty little ass of yours and no one would know it." He lays his gun on the table and stands over me with a smirk.

"Fuck you," I mutter as I finally untie the rope around my ankles. He just watches, as if he doesn't care that I'm letting myself out of his restraints. "You idiots are horrible at this shit." I rub the tender skin around my leg where the rope was and he chuckles. I remember his beady little eyes watching the entire conversation with his boss. He was just aching to get his hands on me.

"You should really watch how you talk to me, you know?"

"Why's that?" I ask, glaring up at him. "You don't scare me. The worst you can do is

rape me or kill me. Then my pain is over, and I never have to see your face again. But you? You'll be hunted by Leo the rest of your life and he will make sure you stay alive to suffer."

The man crouches next to me, and I can smell his thick cologne. I would expect a mobster to be one of two things—a thug with beer on his breath and tattoos everywhere, or a classy man with a suit and power. This man is different. He has a single large tattoo on his neck, an eagle with its wings stretching up toward his ears. He wears a black t-shirt and black jeans, dark eyebrows shading his threatening eyes. He reaches out and tucks a few strands of my hair around my ear while he clicks his tongue. He's too close, and I want him to back up.

"It's a shame Leo soiled such a pretty woman. I'd have taken you right into my collection, made you a queen, treated you to the world." His hand lingers on my face, brushing his thumb over my cheek bones as he seductively smiles at me. "You're ruined now, unusable."

"Fuck you." I turn my face away from him and close my eyes.

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“I’m going to need you to tell me where he is now. Where his family hides out.” The hand returns to my face and he grips my chin, forcing me to look back at him. My eyes focus on the corner of the ceiling and I see the camera pointed down at me. That’s how he knew I was awake. Fuck’s sake.

“I won’t tell you a thing.”

“You really want me to hurt you. Don’t you? Strip those tight-ass jeans of your body and make you beg me to stop fucking you...” His grip tightens and I shudder in fear.

“Sticks and stones...” I look directly into his eyes while I comfort myself in my own head. It’s okay, Willow, he’s coming. Leo will be here. He’s not leaving you.

“I see what you’re doing. You’re trying to convince yourself you can take it.” His hand shoots out and grabs my crotch, fingers pressing into my flesh as if he’d penetrate me had there been no jeans in the way. He grinds and grips me until I whimper in pain. “Think you can let a man ravage that tight pussy and still stay mentally intact? Not be traumatized?” He licks his teeth and chuckles again. “I ain’t seen a woman yet that makes it to the other side. They all end up tormented.... Just tell me what I need to know, Willow, and that doesn’t have to happen to you.”

I steel myself, whimpering again as his fingers dig into my body through my pants. Leo is coming, just hold on. “I said, fuck you,” I growl, and clench my jaw.

“Have it your way,” he says, letting go of my face. He stands and reaches for his belt buckle. I can see by the bulge in his pants that he is more than ready to back up his threats and it makes me curl into a ball. He’s really going to do it—rape me until I

give up information about Leo. The best I can do is tell them where his father lives, but that place is like a fortress. They'll never get in there.

His dick is in his hand and he's stroking himself, and I almost cave in and give up what I know, but I heard noises. Shouting and things slamming around, then gunshots. The man glares at me as he tucks his hard cock back into his pants and back up to the table, picking up his gun.

"Stay here," he snaps, but I have no intention of staying here. This can only be one thing—Leo coming to get me.

The man disappears out the door and I force myself to my feet. I don't even care what the hell is going on outside this room; this is my chance to escape. I peek out the door and see nothing but a long hallway. To the left there is a lot of shouting and gunfire, and to the right is a dark corridor and a glowing exit sign. I choose to go right, running as quickly as I can toward the door. I nearly trip and fall, and with my hands tied like this, there is no way I'd be able to catch myself, but I don't stop running until I'm out the door.

The sun is bright. I shield my eyes and blink a few times, looking around. This alley goes on for a while in both directions, but I don't see anyone out here, so for a second I breathe a sigh of relief. I'm out of shape, and I'm not cut out for running like this. Not to mention I haven't eaten or had anything to drink, and I feel weak. But I move forward, heading to my left. I can't run; my ankles hurt from being tied up, but I don't stop moving. The echo of gunfire behind me is enough to prod me like a sheep with a dog nipping at my heels.

Someone bursts out of a door in front of me and I notice it's one of the men who was playing cards last night. He glares at me and races after me, and I try to run, but it's too late. He grabs me and pins me against the wall with both hands on my neck. I pound on his chest with my hands, pushing on him as I gasp for breath.

“You stupid bitch.” He grunts and growls as he chokes me, shaking my whole body. My knees give out and I slowly slide down the wall as I feel my consciousness fading. This is it; I’m going to die right here in this alley, no chance to be a mother, no seeing my father again. My face throbs, and I feel tears in my eyes. I move my lips but no sound comes out. I want to scream for Leo, let him know where I am, but the only thing I can do is claw at this man’s chest in hopes that his blood will be under my fingernails and they will get his DNA to lock him up for my murder.

Then a single loud shot shakes me to my core. I feel moisture on my face and the man’s grip releases at the same time. I suck in a breath and scream out as soon as my lungs are filled, and the man drops to the ground next to me. His cold eyes stare up at me, the back of his skull missing. Blood gushes from his head. He’s dead, and I’m covered in his body fluid. I sob, covering my mouth. The scream was enough to alert them to where I’m at, but I don’t have to call them right to me. The only problem is I am trembling too badly to move.

Who would do this? Why would anyone save me?

I use my foot to push the man off of me and see his weapon tucked into his belt. I sob and whimper and force myself to stand on shaking legs. My head still spins from almost passing out, and I look around. There is no one here, not a single person who could have just shot this man and saved me. It doesn’t make sense. How did this happen?

Looking up and down the alley, I see more men down at the end of the narrow passage where I was headed. I can’t go that way. I have to go back the way I came. But I’m not going empty handed. I tug and tug until the gun comes loose from the man’s belt. It’s covered in blood too, everything is. My hands, my face, my shirt—I look like I’ve been shot. I can’t stay here.

Not knowing where the rest of the men are, I double back, staying along the wall so

the men at the end of the alley don't see me. The gun is heavy in my hand. I don't even know how to use it except to pull a trigger, so I just hope that is enough to intimidate someone who may come at me. Or maybe the guy had the thing ready and all I have to do is point and shoot. Either way, I've escaped death once today and I don't see that happening again.

My arm quivers as I hold the gun out in front of me. The alley empties into the street which is void of traffic right now. Before I turn the corner I hear shouts and then I hear grunting and gasping. It's Leo's voice. He's in trouble. I whip around the corner to see the man with the eagle tattoo over Leo. His hands are around his neck; he's strangling him. Leo's gun lays out of reach, and the man doesn't seem to have one on him anymore.

"Let him go!" I shout, using both hands to point the gun at him.

The man keeps his hands on Leo's neck and I move closer. He looks up at me and scoffs. "You don't even know how to use that."

Leo's eyes grow wide. His hands are locked around the man's wrists; his face is red. Gurgling sounds emitted from his throat tell me he is about to pass out, just like me a few minutes ago. Except that man could have just pulled his gun and shot me, and this man is defenseless. I'm the one with the gun.

"I said, let him go!"

The man looks back down at Leo and squeezes tighter. I watch his knuckles turn white and his glare intensify. Leo's leg kicks and his head lolls back, eyes closed.

"You're killing him!" I move faster, my chest heaving. "Stop, you're killing him."

The man still doesn't let go, and I can't let him do it. I pull the trigger and he jerks,

his shoulder flying backward and spinning his entire body around. He shouts in pain, but his hands are off Leo's neck. I fire again, hitting him square in the chest and he falls backward and lands on the ground writhing. All the anger and pain my heart comes up out of my chest and down my arms. I walk closer still, not even look at Leo to see if he's moving, and I fire again. Hitting his stomach, then again, his chest again. He jolts with each shot. I don't know how many bullets are in this gun, but I don't care.

I sob as I take a few more steps, still squeezing the trigger over and over. It clicks each time, but there is no boom. I can't stop. I'm crying and squeezing the trigger and shaking my head. My cries are ghastly, unholy sounds. "You're killing him!" I wail, pointing the gun down at the man, then I feel a hand on my arm and I jerk.

A strong man behind me grips me around the waist, sliding his hand down my bloody arm to the weapon. "Shhh, it's okay," I hear, and I don't recognize the voice. But I can't look away. I murdered him. He's dead. His blood is pooling around his body. Four holes in his torso, put there by me, and I am hysterical as the soothing voice whispers in my ear again, "Shhh, come on. Give it to me."

I relinquish the gun, but my arms stay stretched out as in shock I stare at what I've done.

"Get up, dumb fuck," the man says, but I'm not sure what he's saying. He steps away from me and I absently look at him. I recognize him but my mind is moving slowly as shock paralyzes me.

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Then, Leo's face is in front of me. He pushes my arms down and stoops to look in my eyes. "Willow, we have to go. We can't stay here." The report of more gunfire behind his words should scare me to consciousness, but all I can do is look into his eyes.

"I killed him," I whisper, and he nods.

"We have to go."

"I killed him though."

Leo picks me up in one swift movement and I cling to him, weeping into his chest. I killed him, and now they will really come for me.

25

LEO

Willow is cradled in my arms like a small child during a thunderstorm. Her body is rigid, her eyes fixed and staring. The entire ride across town, I hold her. Sven drives us away from the scene of the shootout and all I can do is breathe. She could have died, and based on the bruises I see forming on her neck, she almost did, just like me. Except, she saved me.

"I'm here, okay. I'm not letting them hurt you ever again." She should have listened to me, stayed put. I knew this would happen. But I can't lecture her now, at least not while she's still covered in another man's blood. "Can't you go any faster?" I snap, and Sven eyes me in the rearview mirror. This shock can't be good for the baby. I

have no way of telling if she's actually okay, or if she'll come out of this alright.

"She's going to be fine, Leo," Sven drawls, but I am, for the first time in my life, terrified. I can't lose her. I won't. I know she's not physically hurt, but she could have a heart attack or stroke, or worse, suffer a catatonic break from reality.

"Just fucking drive!"

Sven ducks his head and I feel the car speed up. We jet away from that scene, but the adrenaline doesn't slow down. Not even when we pull up in front of my father's house, which is the closest to where we were. Sven called the doctor as soon as we pulled away from the building they held her in. His car is parked out front too. The instant the car is stopped I open the door and climb out, struggling to squeeze us both through the tiny car door.

The door to the house is ajar, and I kick it open and carry her straight to the bedroom on the first floor. Doctor Andrews is there, mumbling something, but I only care about her. He follows, carrying his small black bag and I lay her on the bed. Just to be sure, I rip open her shirt and check her skin carefully. Her shirt and bra are both soaked in blood, but thankfully it's not her own.

"Willow, please." I snap my fingers in front of her face but she doesn't even blink. She lays there like a mannequin, eyes wide and fixed.

"Go get something to wash her up while I have a listen." The doctor perches on the edge of the bed with his stethoscope and blood pressure cuff in hand. I march out of the room past Sven who hovers in the hallway and head to the kitchen where I find some towels. I wet one and return with it to the room. When I walk back in, the doctor is taking his cuff off her arm. "BP is high, understandably. He reaches into his bag and pulls out something in a small vial and removes the lid. He wafts it back and forth under her nose and she blinks a few times.

“Willow,” I mutter and walk around to the other side of the bed. I climb up next to her and kneel there, wiping the blood from her face. “Baby, say something.”

Tears stream from her eyes as she blinks back to reality. “I killed him.”

The doctor stands but says nothing. He’s used to this line of work we do, and he’s here as an asset. I cup both of her cheeks and her lip quivers. “Baby, you saved me. Okay? That’s what you think about. You saved me.”

“But I killed him,” she cries again and I kiss her hard. I kiss her like it’s the only thing that will save her life and she cries into my mouth. Her hands cling to my arms and she kisses me back.

“I’m going to step out, but I’ll need to really look her over in a second.” I don’t even care that he watches me lie down next to her and pull her against my body. I slide my hand down over her chest, wiping the blood away with the rag, and when her skin is a bit cleaner, I drop the rag and rest my hand on her stomach and look her in the eye.

“Are you okay? Did they hurt you?” I can barely breathe as I wait for her response.

Willow looks down at my hand on her belly and blinks out more tears, still not saying much. Her expression changes from fear to sadness and she moans, looking back up at me.

“Hey, it’s okay. You’re safe... both of you.”

“I...” she protests and I understand how terrified she must be.

“I know you’re pregnant, okay? I saw the test. I know how you must feel. Please, Willow, just relax. You need to be calm for the baby.” I kiss her sticky forehead. I don’t even care that there is blood and probably brain matter there. She is alive and in

my arms.

“Leo, I can’t... Your family... My father,” she cries, not making much sense to anyone else, but given our past few months together, I know exactly what she’s feeling.

“My family is okay. They are never going to harm you. My father sent me to get you, sent Sven too. They will protect you now. You saved my life. You’re having my baby.”

“Daddy,” she whimpers and clings to me, crying harder. This entire ordeal must be so overwhelming to her and for the first time I feel like I understand her.

“I’m here, baby. I’m not letting you go. Okay?” I cup her cheek again and kiss her hard. “I love you.”

As the words leave my mouth, I realize how much I really do love her. How much I’ve always loved her. I have been so angry and prideful, following the training of my father instead of following my heart fully. Stuck between a world of murderous evil and protecting the only woman in this entire world who has ever meant anything to me.

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“I love you,” I repeat, again and again. I know these words will heal her.

* * *

It’s been forty-eight hours.

Willow came out of her shock slowly, after a long hot shower with me scrubbing the blood and bits of bone from her skin. We made love; she knows how I feel. Then we had tea and she slept for eighteen hours straight. Now we walk hand in hand into my father’s hospital room. He is sitting up this time, alert and calm. Willow clings to my hand, but she has no reason to be scared now. I have never felt more confident about that in my life.

“Leonid,” Dad says, looking me in the eye. Then he looks at her. “Willow, welcome.” He holds his hand out toward her and she glances at me nervously. I nod at him and she goes to him, taking his hand. “I hear that you saved my son’s life.”

Willow shakes her head and licks her lips. “They would have killed him.” It’s the same response she gave Dominic and Matty when they visited. Rome hasn’t been around, too busy hunting L’ombra now to bother with this sort of thing. The war has only started between us and the Italians.

“And I hear you’re going to give me a grandson?” His lips curl into a genuine smile. It’s nice to see him happy, though I’m not sure he understands how his actions have affected Willow over the years. I know she’s not happy to be here; though she is happy to have my baby. We just both agree that we must keep our little one away from the violence, at least as long as possible.

“Yes.” Willow’s answer is curt and short. Dad drops her hand and nods at me.

“You have my blessing.” Dad’s stoic expression returns. He won’t tell her that her father traded his morality for her life. That having another cop on our payroll is the only reason he will be accepting of her. The only reason he allowed me to come save her.

“Thank you, sir.” She steps back and finds my hand waiting for her.

“Is it done?” I ask, knowing the next thing we are about to do. I’m not ready for this, because I have to answer for a lot of wrongs in my life, but this one is the worst one.

“It’s done.” He eyes me and Willow looks up at me with confusion.

“What’s done?” she whispers. I squeeze her hand reassuringly.

“Right now?” I ask him and he nods. Then he picks up his crossword book and opens it. He has nothing more to say to us, and I have great respect for him now. It takes a very big man to do the things he’s done for me. I never knew my father loved me until all of this happened; I just wish I hadn’t had to beg for it.

I turn and lead Willow out of the room. She follows me, but remains one step behind, her hand clasped in mine. “What’s going on, Leo?” she asks, feet slapping on the tile floor.

“You’ll see,” I tell her, navigating toward the family waiting room. Sven stands outside the door, watching us approach. His expression tells me he’s had a day and doesn’t have two fucks to give about this, but this could very well be the best day of Willow’s life.

“Leo, what’s going on?” she asks again, and as we walk up to Sven, he pulls the door handle down, and pushes the door open.

“Someone is waiting for you in there,” I tell her, nodding at the door.

“Who? What’s this about?” Willow’s eyes flick between my face and Sven’s.

“You’ll see,” I tell her again. I gently nudge her toward the open door and look into Sven’s eyes. “Thank you” I mouth, knowing it was him who brought Willow’s father here. She moves to the door and steps into it.

“Daddy?” I hear her whine, and Sven shuts the door.

Our story has a happily ever after because I refused to quit. Except now, my family is plunged into the biggest rivalry with our enemies we’ve ever had. Matty’s off trying to keep the reporters off our case, and Rome is searching for the person who could be the deadliest assassin we’ve ever faced. But I have Willow, and I will never let her fall into the hands of my enemy again.

I look into Sven’s eyes and nod at him. He’s free to go. But my job has just started.