



Safe Haven

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Category: Romance, Thriller, Suspense

Description: It's been nine months since I left everything behind. Walked away from my friends. My business. My home. Even my dog.

All so I could get away.

The only thing I took was the truth. Proof of the evil I'd escaped.

I thought it would keep me safe. Protect me from the whims of the dangerous man I'd married.

I was wrong.

My only hope is to fight fire with fire, so I call Alaskan Security, begging for help. Pleading for protection.

The man they send is someone I already know.

Maddox is lethal. It's obvious in every breath he takes. Every move he makes.

And I watch them all.

I know I should close one door before I open another, but I learned the hard way how fleeting happiness is. I want to hold onto all of it I can.

Especially since my past refuses to let me go.

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ONE

MADDOX

Please turn back for a list of trigger warnings.

“ARE YOU SURE you want to do this?” Zeke repeats the same question he’s asked five times already. “I can send someone else. I’m sure?—”

“I’m positive.” I don’t want to hear who he’d send in my place. Don’t want to think about who he believes might be better suited for the task I’ve been assigned. “Eli cleared me three weeks ago, remember?”

Alaskan Security’s resident physician actually gave me more than the all-clear. He gave me a fucking glowing review. Said I tested better now than nine months ago—before I was shot at point blank range and left to die in the snow.

“I remember.” Zeke blows out a sigh, raking one hand through his hair. “Fine. If you say you’re good, then you’re good.”

I wish he sounded like he really believed it, but I’ll take it anyway.

“Agreed.” I lift my brows. “Now can I get the fuck out of here?” I don’t like stalling.

And that’s all my life’s been lately. Stalling. Biding time while my body healed and recovered. Waiting for the day I could get back out there doing what I love instead of sitting on the couch eating cookies and watching Netflix. Watching the world pass me

by was the hardest thing I've ever had to do.

Not that my life's been filled with difficulties. I'm one of the few men at Alaskan Security who had an idyllic childhood. One of only a handful with both parents alive, let alone still happily married.

Maybe that's why the injury I sustained protecting Savannah—Zeke's now wife, and my close friend—hit me so hard. I'm not used to suffering.

Turns out I don't fucking like it.

"Yeah. Go." Zeke motions to the door leading out of the newly renovated gear room at Alaskan Security's Nashville location. "Don't let that fucker get anywhere near her."

A slow smile works across my lips. "I don't plan on it."

I grab the bag I packed, haul it over one shoulder, and stride out into the warm fall sun, breathing in a lungful of the sweetly scented air.

I like Nashville. Like the city. Like the weather. Like the new compound where I live and work. Like the people filling it.

But I fucking love what I do. Love being the thing that goes bump in the night. Love knowing I'm the bogeyman for men who need to be wiped from the earth. I love taking them out and sending them where they belong. And I don't lose a second of sleep over it.

Does that make me a little fucked up? Probably. Does it mean I've always been the black sheep of my wealthy, suburban family? Definitely.

It also means these past nine months have been torture. Purposeless and soul sucking.

But they're over. I'm back and—arguably—better than ever. I can get this one easy job under my belt, prove I'm as good as I've ever been, and then everything will be back to normal. Zeke will see I'm not a liability and put me back on the regular roster.

After tossing my bag into the back seat of the dark colored sedan I'll be using, I get behind the wheel and pull around the large building that's technically still under construction. I'm not the only one who's been busy improving over the past few months. A whole crew of builders have been hard at work on the warehouse serving as Shadow's new home base, and the residential housing adjacent to it.

It's interesting to see how much can be accomplished when a shit ton of money is involved. I watched it happen when Pierce, the owner of Alaskan Security, built the townhouses in Fairbanks where most of Rogue lives, and now I'm watching it happen again here in Nashville.

There's a total of ten single-family units being built for our team, and five of them are already finished. One of those five is mine since I've been grounded and needed a place to stay while I waited out my sentence.

Not anymore.

I roll down the heavily tinted window and swipe my badge to open the gate blocking the property off from the general public, then I'm free. Putting the past nine months farther behind me with every mile I drive.

This isn't the kind of job I'd normally be excited about taking. It's not the kind of job I'd normally be assigned. Working as a personal bodyguard is more in line with what Alpha and Beta do, but I'm not complaining. This is a means to an end. A quick way

to prove I'm as good as I—and Eli—say I am.

It's also relatively close to home, making it easier for someone from Shadow to tackle rather than flying in a guy from another team. I can get to where the client lives outside of Memphis in just over two hours by car.

The third, and maybe biggest, reason I'm the one heading to Audrey Hawthorne's address, is because she's a friend of Savannah's. I'm not naive enough to believe Zeke came up with me being the one to take this job on his own. I know his wife had a hand in my name being shortlisted. Savannah and I spend a lot of time together. She knows just how stir crazy I've been.

She also knows I would do anything for her, and she assumes my affection for her will make me more invested in Audrey's safety.

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She's probably right.

Savannah's life has been as hard as mine has been easy, and I would do just about anything to make sure she never has to deal with another bad thing. Audrey is her friend, and Audrey will stay her friend—her living, breathing friend.

Anyone who tries to change that will find out the hard way why I'm usually the triggerman when someone has to be taken out.

Because I don't give a fuck about putting a bullet in the brain where it belongs.

As I close in on the address plugged into my phone's GPS, I do a lap, circling the area to get a lay of the land and look for anything that stands out. I'm a little surprised to find a suspicious-looking car parked a few houses down from the aging mansion that's my final destination.

Tapping the screen on the dash, I dial Isaac's number, waiting for Shadow's tech lead to answer as I coast past the vehicle in question. The windows are tinted even darker than mine, making it difficult to see who's inside, but I'm almost positive it's a surveillance vehicle. It's black and nondescript, with basic rims and dusty paint. Unremarkable by most standards.

Unless you know what you're looking for.

"Calling already?" Isaac answers as I reach a stop sign. "I wasn't expecting to hear from you... at all, honestly."

“I wasn’t expecting to call you, but I think I might have company.” I rattle off the location and description of the car as I turn, scanning the surroundings as I work my way along the side street. “Can you run the plate and see if there are any cameras on it?”

“On it.” Isaac hangs up as I reach the closest main road.

Audrey’s first-floor apartment is in an old house that was converted to apartments at least fifty years ago. And while it’s by no means high-end, it seems to be decently maintained. The city where it’s located might be close enough to qualify as a suburb of Memphis. It’s nothing fancy. Mainly strip malls and multi-family housing. And most of what I’m seeing might even be considered run-down. But, based on the scaffolding and dumpsters lining the street, the old downtown area seems to be in the process of revitalization.

I mark a few places of interest—grocery store, police station, and a couple gas stations—on my phone, then circle back toward Audrey’s as the sun goes down. I’m pulling into the alley that runs behind her building as Isaac calls back.

I connect the call, studying the rear of the mansion as I ease past. “Find anything interesting?”

“I guess that depends on how you look at things.” The sound of typing carries through the line. “I ran the plate and it came back to a black sedan that matches the car’s description, but the address listed is all the way on the other side of the state.”

“Maybe someone’s visiting family.” I reach the end of the alley and turn in the opposite direction of the car, just in case. “I’m guessing there’s more?”

“There’s for sure more.” Isaac sounds bothered, and he’s a pretty even-keeled guy, so if he’s bothered, then I should be bothered. “We were able to find a camera that has

the car within view, but it's in the distance, so everything's a little blurry."

"And?" I check my mirrors, making sure no one's tailing me, because I'm not liking where this is going.

"And from what we can tell, it pulled into place a few hours ago and no one's gotten in or out since it parked." Isaac lays out the reason for his concern.

And it's a pretty decent reason.

"Well that's fucking annoying." I was planning to park my happy ass right in front of Audrey's house. I'm nothing if not ballsy, and sometimes the best defense is a good offense. If her ex knows she's got someone with her, the chances he'll try to cause a problem could go way down.

But now I'm rethinking that plan. At least until I know exactly what I'm dealing with. "Give me a spot to put this thing for now."

I already passed once in a car that looks a whole hell of a lot similar, so if someone is conducting surveillance, they're paying just as much attention as I am. I can't risk them seeing me a second time.

Not yet anyway. Not until I know if my presence will help or hurt.

Isaac directs me to a side street a few blocks away where a number of dark sedans line the curb. I wedge mine into an open spot and wait for the sun to finish its descent while I plan my approach.

Under normal circumstances, I would call Audrey. Ask a few questions, see if she knows who might be outside her apartment. But I've been around long enough to know if someone goes to the length of stationing a set of eyes outside the place you

live, they're probably trying to put eyes—and ears—other places too. So until I know differently, lots of shit is off the table. No phone calls. No emails. No messages on social media. Hell, I wouldn't even send a carrier pigeon to her place right now.

So much for starting out on an easy job.

Once I'm sure it's dark enough I can move around relatively undetected, I slide out from behind the wheel, collect my bag, and melt into the shadows. Pierce named our team appropriately, and I do my best to live up to it. Especially at times like this. Times where my ability to move through the world unseen can be the difference between life and death.

The type of neighborhood Audrey lives in works heavily in my favor. The buildings are old and few of them are well-lit. A number of them seem to be unoccupied, and few have anything significant in the way of security. I'm not surprised when my movements don't trigger any outdoor floodlights as I silently make my way between the houses.

The path I cut is jagged and indirect, but I want to see as much of the surroundings on foot as I can. I'm looking for anything that might be a problem now or in the foreseeable future. Keeping my eyes open for more suspicious vehicles. Anyone who might be peering out their windows. I'm scanning for cameras, whether it be one Alaskan Security can tap into, or systems put up by someone who might be using them to watch Audrey.

It takes me nearly a half hour, but I finally reach the back corner of the property where my new client lives. Hunkering down in a clump of weedy overgrowth and pulling out my binoculars, I spend the next ten minutes going over every inch of what's visible from my vantage point. I scrutinize windows, doors... even the foliage around the perimeter. I'm looking for any sign someone has attempted—or been successful at—entering the building by means other than the front door.

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I highly doubt Audrey would let someone in to install cameras, so anyone wanting that sort of access would have to do it without her knowledge. The last thing I want is to find my own alternative way in only to be discovered by a fucking hidden camera.

When I'm as satisfied as I can be that no one's breached any of the access points, I send Isaac a quick text. After letting him know I'm about to make entry, and to send someone after me if he doesn't hear from me in the next fifteen minutes, I make sure my bag is well hidden and start working my way to the window I believe is my best option. It's out of sight from the car parked in front, and the room behind it is dark. Unfortunately, there's no way to accomplish this without scaring the shit out of Audrey. It's going to happen, but I'm hoping to control her reaction. If I drop right into a room she's occupying, there won't be any time to smother the sound if she screams.

And having her scream loud enough to wake the entire neighborhood would defeat the purpose of everything I've just done.

I reach the window I'm aiming for and pull myself high enough I can peek over the sill. The blinds are closed, but there's a slight gap at one side where I can see what I think is a bed.

I pull the narrow tool we used to bypass window locks free of my belt and slide it between the panes. Again, Audrey's choice of locations works in my favor—the windows are nearly as old as the house, and their advanced age makes them much simpler to open than newer models. I get it unlatched and pause. Listening for any sign the slight sound drew her attention. I'd love to double check through one of the other windows—ascertain exactly where she is—but I'm not completely confident I

wouldn't be seen, so I ease up the sash, doing my best to raise it along the decrepit casing as silently as possible.

Which is not very fucking silent.

It makes a quiet squeaking sound and I freeze, holding my breath as I wait to see if Audrey heard. When there's still no sign of her discovering me, I inch it up, managing to get a big enough gap I can slide through. After another pause to listen for any sounds coming from inside, I heft myself up and over the edge, quietly somersaulting through the opening and into the room. It's a move I've executed dozens of times before. And dozens of times before I've accomplished it without problem.

This time... Not so much.

As I roll up to my feet and start to straighten, the tell-tale whistle of air as something heavy and blunt swings my direction cuts through the silence. I automatically reach for it, managing to catch the end of the bat before it can connect with my skull.

But, while I avoid the immediate impact, the momentum of the hit still jerks my arm and manages to send me falling backward. Making sure I'm not the only one going down—and the only one at a disadvantage—I grab the wrist of my assailant, locking us together and pulling them down with me.

We both grunt at the impact, but mine is immediately followed by a sigh of relief.

Because the body on top of mine is soft and the voice in my ear is sweet. Even if the words it's saying aren't.

“Let me go.” Audrey starts to fight me, not realizing who I am. “If you're here to kill me, you better be prepared to earn it you piece of shi?”

I barely manage to get a hand over her mouth, sealing off the increasing volume of her threat. The window I came through is still open, and it's not outside the realm of possibility someone could hear what's happening.

But quieting Audrey down doesn't help any. It only makes her fight me harder, and I take an elbow to the gut before I finally manage to get both arms pinned at her sides.

"Audrey." Her name comes out ragged since I'm wheezing from the blow she got in. "Relax. I'm not here to hurt you."

I must not be very convincing, because she continues struggling, wiggling around against me in a not entirely unappealing way.

It's been a long fucking time since I've gotten laid, and between the excitement of being back on the job and the excitement of her generously curved ass grinding against my dick, my body decides now is the perfect time to send a hefty sum of blood racing south.

The change doesn't go unnoticed.

Audrey stiffens, her breath coming in sharp pants against my skin where my hand is pressed under her nose.

Fuck. I have to let her go. I don't have a choice.

"Don't scream." Bracing for whatever's coming my way, I release her, immediately guarding my dick and nuts with one hand as she scrambles off of me.

I stay on the ground, hoping it will keep her calmer as she rushes across the dark room.

At least she doesn't go straight for the bat. That's gotta count for something.

"Audrey, stop." I know she needs to put some space between us, but I can't have her running out the front door. "I need you to?—"

The overhead light flips on, the sudden brightness making me squint.

"Holy shit." Audrey stands at the closed door, her blue eyes open wide as they move over me. "Maddox."

The breathy way she says my name doesn't help the issue I've got going on in my pants, but I'm a little relieved she remembers me. "Yeah," I grunt as I push to my feet, turning to close the window and fix the blinds I fucked up on my less than stellar arrival. When I face her again, she's still staring. Like she can't believe I'm here.

"Why in the hell did you come in through the window?" Her eyes drop to my dick before snapping back to my face. "I almost kicked you in the balls."

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AUDREY

OF ALL THE people I thought might come climbing through my bedroom window tonight, Maddox wasn't at the top of the list. Or the middle.

Or the bottom.

That being said, I'm not exactly upset about it. Outside of one little issue.

"Why didn't you call and tell me you were coming?" Even if he couldn't call me, someone from Alaskan security should have. I've been sitting here in my apartment for days, jumping at every little sound, thinking my time in this world was almost up. It woulda been real freaking nice to know help was on the way.

"That's a complicated answer, and I don't have all the information I need to be able to give it to you." Maddox bends down to pick up the baseball bat I've been snuggling at night. "So for now, I'm gonna need you to keep your voice down." His eyes narrow on my weapon of choice. "And you need to put a sock on the end of this thing so whoever you swing it at next can't take it from you."

That has me sealing my lips together and my eyes snapping around the room. Is someone else here? Listening? In need of a baseball bat to their head?

Shit. I don't have a sock handy.

Maddox shakes his head, like he can hear what I'm thinking. "No one's inside, but I'm a little concerned about who might be outside." He's been speaking softly, but his

voice lowers even more. “And I want to be sure there’s no cameras or devices in here before we talk about anything, okay?”

I nod. “Okay,” I whisper, trying to be as quiet as he is.

I knew something was going on. Had a pretty good idea what it was about and who was behind it. But I didn’t think it had gotten quite far enough that I should be worried about cameras in my apartment. Not yet, anyway. I did see it heading in that direction though, which is why I’ve been sleeping with a baseball bat while waiting to hear back from Alaskan Security.

I stay by the door as Maddox lays the bat across my dresser and begins to systematically move through the space, checking around door frames and peering at knobs. He inspects the shelves of my closet and goes through all the items on my bookshelf. He doesn’t seem to come up with anything, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

When he checks my bedside lamp and peeks behind my headboard, I figure he’s probably finished in here, so I step out of the way, expecting him to come to the door.

But then he reaches for the drawer of my nightstand, and my stomach drops to my feet as I rush to stop him. “Don’t—”

Shit. The most gorgeous, memorable man I’ve ever met in my life is staring straight at my vibrator. The way his whole body goes still makes it obvious he knows exactly what it is too. Closing my eyes, face on fire, I wait to discover if a person can die from embarrassment.

Apparently that’s not a thing, because I remain living and breathing as he closes the drawer and continues on, acting like nothing happened.

When Maddox straightens and turns to face me, I can’t meet his gaze.

“I need you to do me a favor.” His voice is still low as he continues laying out his request. “Go through your apartment and turn off all the lights. That’ll make it less likely anyone who might be watching can identify me while I do a sweep.”

“I can do that.” I’m actually totally cool with turning off all the lights right now. I’m also cool if he wants to dig me a hole I can crawl into.

I flip off the bedroom light first, breathing a little easier now that I’m not staring down the man who just gave my little lavender friend a long look. After opening the door, I do the same with the hall light. The bathroom switch is already off, so I pass it and the darkened kitchen to switch off the lamps and television in the living room. My place is small, so in under thirty seconds it’s completely dark.

Normally, the reduced visibility would make me uneasy, but I’m actually breathing better than I have in a long damn time. I might be completely mortified right now, but I also feel completely safe for the first time in months, and that’s worth a little embarrassment any day of the week.

Staying quiet so I don’t distract him from this very important task, I watch Maddox in the darkness, eyes adjusting as I track his shadowy movements while he investigates the apartment I currently call home. It’s nothing like the million-dollar mansion I lived in before, but there’s not enough money in the world to make me go back to the luxurious life I lived. I’d rather die.

I was starting to think that might be a very real possibility.

But now Maddox is here, so maybe everything really will be alright. Maybe it will be possible for me to get through this. For me to move on.

For me to have a life. One I’m in control of. One I enjoy. One that’s not filled with fear and shame and sadness.

It feels like it takes forever, but eventually, Maddox has looked through every inch of my apartment and deems it safe, which I'm going to guess just means no one has hidden any cameras or recording devices in it. Because I am pretty confident I'm about as far from safe as it gets.

And that's not for lack of trying.

I honestly believed I'd crossed all my Ts and dotted all my Is when I left my husband. I genuinely thought I was smart enough to get away.

But yet again, I think I underestimated Trevor.

"Can I turn the lights back on now?" I'm reaching for one of the lamps when Maddox stops me.

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“No. Not tonight.” He pulls out a cell phone, the screen of it offering a tiny bit of illumination in the dark space as he makes a call. His explanation continues as the line rings, the trill easy to hear in the silence. “Anyone watching will think you went to bed. Turning off all your lights and then turning them back on will be suspicious.”

A chill snakes down my spine as he confirms my suspicions. “So I am being watched.” It’s not a question.

Whoever Maddox is calling answers, so I don’t get the confirmation I don’t really need.

“I’m in. The place is clear.” Maddox strides to the front window, one long finger reaching out to lift a single slat of the blinds so he can peek outside. “It looks like the car is still out there. Have you seen any movement?”

I know which car he’s talking about. It’s the same one that had me big spooning a baseball bat every night for the past few days.

I hoped I was overreacting. Tried to convince myself I was being paranoid. That there was no way Trevor would have figured out what I’d done. I did my best to believe the unknown car simply belonged to a new neighbor.

Who happened to also occasionally park outside the clothing store I managed.

If I tried hard enough I could convince myself it was possible. Plausible, even.

Which was a ridiculous thing to do considering my history of choosing to see things

differently than they actually are.

“Stay on it. I want to know the minute something changes.” Maddox lowers the blind into place and turns to me, his expression nearly impossible to read in the dim lighting. “She’s okay.”

It’s good to hear that I appear okay, even though I’m not confident it’s an accurate assessment.

Maddox reiterates to whoever’s on the other end of the line that he wants to be informed of any changes. Then he hangs up, sliding his phone into one of the pockets on his tactical pants as he looks me over.

“Is that why you called us? Because of the men parked outside?”

Among other things.

I nod. “Yes.” Because if he can claim not to have enough information to give me answers, then I feel like I deserve the same luxury.

Maddox continues studying me in the darkness, making me want to shift on my feet. Can he tell I’m holding back? Is he going to be pissed as hell when he finds out how much more there is to this story?

“How long have they been out there?” he asks.

“Today?” The word comes out on a squeak as the familiar twist of dread ties my belly. I know I called Alaskan Security for help, but I was thinking they would just send someone big and scary to shoot at anyone who might try to kidnap or kill me. I didn’t really expect them to ask too many questions. “Or just in general?”

“Both.”

“Well.” I take a deep breath, trying not to fall apart as I face him and the truth. Silently hoping he handles unpleasant news better than the man in my past. “Today, they’ve been out there since just after lunch.” I wipe my hands on the front of my pants, attempting to rid my palms of the clamminess collecting there. “In general, about a week.”

“So you waited almost a week to call us?” He doesn’t sound pissed, but he does sound skeptical. I don’t blame him. Any reasonable person in my situation would have assumed seeing the same car everywhere they went meant they were being followed.

But I’m not so sure I’m a reasonable person.

“I didn’t want to be overreacting.” I didn’t want it to be true. I wanted everything to work out the way I expected. For things to slowly find their way into a new sort of normal. A normal that didn’t involve getting the shit beat out of me when things didn’t go my husband’s way. Or hearing about what a piece of shit I am every night.

Unfortunately, I’m discovering I don’t simply get to leave those things behind. The universe appears to be more of an exchange type situation.

Now, instead of wondering when I’ll get smacked again, I wonder if someone’s going to come for me in the middle of the night. Instead of hearing what a piece of shit wife I am, I get to be threatened with having my life ruined. Manipulated with promises of money and the return of my dog.

My life is still just as fucked up as it was before, only in new and exciting ways.

“If it makes you feel any better, I don’t think you’re overreacting.” Maddox moves

toward me, tipping his head in the direction of my bedroom. “Which is why I need to go get my stuff so I can get set up.”

Stuff? I know I was a little distracted when he first came in, but I didn’t notice any stuff. Not even after I realized it was him standing in my bedroom, not some goon Trevor hired. “I didn’t see you bring anything else in with you.”

“I didn’t.” He pauses partway down the hall, turning to peer at me over one shoulder. “Which is probably good, considering it would’ve made it a hell of a lot harder to block the baseball bat you aimed at my head.”

Did he sound amused or irritated? It was kind of hard to tell. “I wasn’t aiming at your head specifically.” I follow behind him as he begins to walk again. “I was aiming at the head of the random person breaking into my apartment.”

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Maddox suddenly stops and turns to face me. The unexpected change in trajectory, coupled with the darkness, makes me slow to react, and I faceplant right into the center of his chest.

I could almost swear Maddox is smirking as he stares down at me. “I wasn’t complaining.”

Really.

I’m not sure how to take the comment if he wasn’t complaining. And my brain isn’t offering up any alternatives because it’s very distracted by his closeness.

Has he always been this tall? Because I don’t remember him towering quite so far over me. Granted, I’ve only been around him the one time, and I was a little out of sorts considering my husband had knocked the shit out of me and threatened my life, but I managed to remember just about everything else about Maddox. It’s surprising I hadn’t also accurately clocked his distance from the ground.

“It’s good that you’re prepared to protect yourself. That’ll make my job a whole hell of a lot easier.” There seems to be a hint of admiration in his voice as he clarifies.

I might be reading too much into it—hearing what I want to hear—but I’m going to take the compliment anyway. Because after years of hearing nothing but how awful I am, it feels really freaking good for someone to say something positive.

Especially someone like Maddox.

“I was also going to kick you in the balls.” I’m fishing now, but I don’t feel bad about it. After just one hit of barely qualifying praise, I already want more. Like some sort of an approval addict.

The shoe does kinda fit.

“And I will be forever grateful you didn’t.”

This time I’m almost positive he’s grinning as he turns away, going back into my bedroom. For a split second his head angles, almost like he’s looking at my nightstand, then I blink and he’s gone.

Freaking disappears into thin air.

“The fuck?” I whisper under my breath as I move to the window. The blinds are barely askew and the sash is slightly ajar. Other than that, there is no indication Maddox was even here, let alone that he just Houdini’d out my window.

And now I’m not sure what to do. Do I stand here and wait for him to come back? Is he expecting me to open the front door so he can walk in?

Probably not with those guys outside, so I have to assume the window is going to be his chosen means of entry for now.

Since he seems to have no issues getting in and out of it on his own, I make the executive decision to try to stay busy until he gets back.

With my baseball bat, of course.

Collecting the heavy steel weapon, I angle it over my shoulder as I open the top drawer of my dresser and fish out a pair of pajamas and the tallest pair of socks I

own. Maddox said we won't be turning the lights back on, so my only real option is to get ready for bed.

And I'm kind of eager about it. I haven't slept well in weeks. Maybe months.

Hell, possibly years.

But tonight, I'm going to have a dangerous man watching over me, and that might be enough for me to finally be able to relax.

Even now, I feel more secure than I've felt in forever. I'm not stupid, so of course I'm going to be prepared and have my baseball bat—with its newly added sock covering—at the ready, but I don't think Maddox would have left if he was worried I was in imminent danger.

So I head into the bathroom, baseball bat and pajamas in tow, so I can get ready for the sleep I so desperately need. I brush my teeth, wash my face, and change, skipping a shower for now.

I'm not so sure when Maddox will be back, and I'd hate for him to walk in and discover me naked and wet right after meeting my vibrator in person. And right after whatever that was while we were rolling around on the floor wrestling over my baseball bat.

Is there such a thing as a fear boner? Even if there is, I don't imagine Maddox is capable of getting one. Not the boner part—clearly he's got that handled. The fear bit is where I think that theory falls apart.

There's something about Maddox that just seems unflappable. Like nothing fazes him. I came at him in the dark, swinging to kill, and he just grabbed the bat and pinned my arms in place. He did seem a little out of breath after I managed to get a

good jab into his ribs. But other than that? It seemed like just another interaction to him. Just another day in the life of a bodyguard.

That makes me cringe a little, my face scrunching up as I toss my clothes into the laundry basket and head out of the bathroom. Because it could technically still be a fear boner. It just might not have been his fear that fed it.

Did Alaskan Security send me a masochist mercenary? Although technically I guess he wouldn't be the masochist. He'd be a sadist in this scenario. And if it's true, it would be a huge bummer considering a little tiny part of me might have been lusting after him over the past nine months and I'm for sure not into pain.

But me building a man into something better than he actually is isn't really a stretch, so Maddox is probably not anywhere near as great as I've wanted to imagine he is.

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And that's fine. If he keeps me from ending up dead, he can be as much of a sadist as he wants to be. Not like I was planning on sexing him up.

Anymore.

It was easy to imagine when I thought I'd never see him again, but now that he's going to be a part of my everyday life for the foreseeable future?

No more fantasizing about Maddox, regardless of his sexual proclivities.

Carrying along my trusty bat, I go to my room, climb under the covers, and wait, listening intently for any sign of my new bodyguard's return.

And I'm a little pissed that the first hint of his arrival is the sound of his big body sliding through the window. Why in the heck didn't the window make the same noise as before? That was what alerted me the first time he came in.

"Are you asleep?" Maddox's question is incredulous. Shocked even.

I frown at my betraying, squeaky, now un-squeaky, window. "No, but I plan to be very soon."

"Why are you in bed? If somebody broke in, you'd have to fight your way out from under the covers." Maddox is standing there staring at me, his hulking figure gigantic as he towers over me in the dark.

I sit up, tired and irritated, and, if I'm completely honest, disappointed he's ruined my

primary fantasy. “I brought my bat.” I lift it up as evidence. “And I knew you wouldn’t leave if you were worried I was in danger.”

That seems to shut him up. Maddox stands there a second longer then turns to my dresser, hefting his duffle onto the surface.

I really wish he would let me turn on the light so I could see what all he’s pulling out of his Mary Poppins bag, but I guess I’ll have to wait until morning to see what’s now lined across the surface of my furniture.

“What happens now?” I’ve asked myself the same question a thousand times and it feels good to have someone else offering up an answer. I’m tired of being the only one figuring this shit out.

Maddox turns to face me, coming close enough I can almost make out his serious expression. “Now you can go to sleep.” There’s a clicking sound I can’t identify, but then I catch the dull metal glint of the pistol in his hand. “But FYI, I sleep with something a little more dangerous than a baseball bat.”

THREE

MADDOX

Circling to the other side of the queen-size mattress, I sit on the edge and begin unlacing my boots. “So if someone comes through that door or the window, let me handle them.”

Audrey’s eyes stay on me as she pulls the covers tight to her chin. “You’re staying in here?” The question isn’t outraged or upset. It’s breathless and carries just a hint of something my dick wants to identify as excitement, which is strange since my dick isn’t in the habit of noticing shit like that.

“Would you rather me be a whole room away when someone comes through that window like I did?”

“When? Why did you saywhenand notif?” Now she sounds upset. “Ifsomeone comes through the window.”

“Do you really want me to answer that?” I will, but I’m not sure it’s what she’s gonna want to hear.

Audrey stares at me a second longer. Then, she grabs one of the pillows from against the headboard, smashes it against her face, and screams into the fiber fill, the sound muffled but still identifiable.

When she pauses to take a breath, I yank the item away, replacing it with my hand over her mouth. “I thought I made it pretty clear we need to act like this is a normal night.”

Audrey grabs my wrist, dragging my palm away from her lips. “Yeah. I know.”

That has my brows lifting. “Screaming into your pillow is normal?”

Audrey lifts her chin, like she thinks I’m judging her. “I’ve had a really rough nine months.”

It’s starting to seem like rough might be an understatement. I was there the day Savannah, her sister Sadie, and their friend Lydia, rescued Audrey. I’d hoped her escape from an abusive husband would mean the end of her suffering, but I know firsthand bad men don’t generally give up easily. Especially when it’s something they want. And I can’t imagine many men wouldn’t want the pretty blonde I’m about to spend the night with.

Granted, I don't know her well, but so far Audrey seems brave and fearless and strong. In addition to having a tiny violent streak that's cute as hell.

"Everything's going to be okay." I have no qualms about making the claim. I'm confident in not only my ability, but also the company I work for. Whatever issues Audrey is having should be easy enough to clear up. Then she can go on her merry little way and I can go back to doing what I love.

Putting very bad men into very deep holes.

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Audrey doesn't seem as confident in me though. She pinches her lower lip between her teeth, eyes dropping mine. "I hope so."

I don't like how beat-down she seems. It's likely the result of being stuck in fight-or-flight response for so long.

"Go to sleep. You don't have anything to worry about. I can handle whatever happens." After kicking away my boots, I settle onto the mattress beside her, laying on top of the covers, both to give her a little personal space, and because I'm still fully dressed. No one wants my dirty outside clothes rubbed all over their sheets.

It's quiet for a few minutes. Long enough I assume Audrey's already asleep, so it's unexpected when her soft voice cuts through the silence.

"Can I ask you a question?"

I stare up at the ceiling, wondering what it is she wants to know. "Sure."

The room is so quiet I can hear her as she swallows and takes a deep breath. "Are you a sadist?"

"I —" Did I hear her correctly? "A sadist?"

"It's okay if you are. I know everybody's into different things. I'm not judging. Really. I'm genuinely not." The words tumble out of her mouth. Like she's used to trying to smooth things over.

And that pisses me off. No one should live their life in fear. Worried someone's going to hurt them for asking a simple question.

Bizarre as it is.

"Relax." I roll to my side so we're face-to-face. Reaching out, I rest a reassuring hand on her shoulder, hoping to soothe a little of the worry and fear still clearly controlling her brain. "You can ask me anything you want. You just caught me off-guard with that one." I huff out a little laugh. "And no, I'm not a sadist."

I should leave it at that, let her get the sleep she desperately needs, but I've got to know. "Out of curiosity, why would you ask that?" The question is barely out of my mouth before I come up with an answer all on my own. "Is it because I kill people for a living?"

Again, she surprises me. "No. It's not because you kill people for a living." And again, Audrey rushes to explain. "Not that I'm judging you for that either. I'm starting to realize some people probably need killing and the world is better off without them."

I wait a few more seconds, thinking she's just catching her breath before answering my initial question. When she doesn't, I ask again. "Why did you think I could be a sadist?"

Is that really the energy I give off? Because if it is, that could explain the serious dry spell I've been facing. I tried to blame it on my injury, but honestly, it goes back further than that. Even before I was shot in the line of duty, I struggled to connect with women.

And while sex can be great. Sex without connection has always been...

Underwhelming.

And it's only gotten worse as I've gotten older. Both the making connections part and the underwhelming sex bit. Up until recently, things were easy enough to handle on my own, but then Zeke and Savannah got together—and I lost the distraction of working for nine months—and I started to see just how much I'm missing out on.

Part of me thought I, and the rest of Shadow, would be single forever. Sure, the guys of Rogue have all paired off, but they're cut from a slightly different cloth. They've always been different. More normal than Zeke and me and the rest of our team. It takes a special kind of person to hunt someone down knowing you're going to kill them. To look them in the eye as you end their life and then go home, eat dinner, and go to bed like a normal person.

Of course I assumed whatever made me capable of doing that was the same thing making it difficult for me to find someone who understood me. But a sadist?

“Well.” Audrey drags the word out, making me wait as long as possible for her insight. “It was just a little strange that you got, um...” Again, she makes me wait. After clearing her throat, she tries again. “That you seemed to get excited while we were struggling on the floor. And I thought maybe it was because you were enjoying how scared I was.”

That's like a punch to my gut. Not just because she thought I was getting off on it, but hearing I scared her to begin with.

“I didn't want to scare you. That's one of the reasons I came through this window. I was hoping I could ease you into my presence a little instead of dropping into the room where you were sitting.”

I didn't have a lot of options, and I tried to come up with the best plan I could.

Because I don't like scaring people who don't deserve it. The same way I would never kill someone who didn't need to be killed.

Is my moral compass a little different from most people's? Yes. But those directions are still strong and unwavering.

"It's okay," Audrey immediately tries to reassure me. "I understand why you had to do it the way you did, but at the time, I didn't know it was you." Her cheek rounds, the shadowy edge of it shifting as she smiles. "And I'm really glad you're here." She reaches out, using one finger to poke the center of my chest. "Especially since you're not a sadist."

That circles me back to the other thing I have to apologize for. "Yeah. I'm also sorry about that... Misunderstanding."

It's the only word I can come up with to explain the oddly reactive response I had. Because I don't really understand it myself. I'm not generally the kind of guy to have issues like that. Can I appreciate an attractive woman? Of course. Can I see and identify sexual appeal? Yes. Does it result in a physical reaction for me? Not usually.

That's why it seemed more likely my response was due to being excited about working again. That the friction of Audrey's ass added enough contact to create the unexpected reaction. Like kindling on a spark.

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“Misunderstanding. Right.” Audrey almost sounds disappointed in my explanation. “And it’s totally fine. I figured it was just some sort of random thing anyway.” She yawns, reminding me that I’m supposed to be letting her sleep.

“Go to sleep, okay?” I give the shoulder I’m still holding a gentle squeeze. “I’ll be right here if you need anything.”

“Good.” She yawns again, and this time it ends abruptly, cutting off into the cutest little snort of a snore I’ve ever heard.

Chuckling, I roll to my back again, giving her as much space as I can and positioning myself so I’m ready for anyone who might come through the window or the door. I doubt it will happen though. Isaac and Intel will have eyes on this place until we figure out who—if anyone—is in that car, so I feel relatively comfortable closing my own eyes.

I’m used to sleeping in strange places under dangerous circumstances, so I’m expecting my slumber to be light and short. Usually when I’m on the job, I can doze enough to get the rest my body requires while also remaining aware enough to do the job I’m there for.

But suddenly light is filling the room.

I jerk upright, eyes flying open because I think someone has flipped on the overhead fixture and caught me off guard. But it’s not artificial brightness making me blink.

It’s the fucking sun.

Somehow, I crashed hard, sleeping heavily through the night.

Looking from side to side, I double check that Audrey is safe beside me and my weapon is where I left it. Both important items are exactly where they should be, and the racing of my heart slows a little.

Raking one hand through my hair, I slide off the bed, being careful not to jostle the mattress as I get to my feet. After holstering my pistol, I move to the window, peeking out through the blinds. The side yard is empty, and I'm relieved to see I didn't cause too much damage to the landscaping as I came in and out the night before.

At least I did something right.

Still feeling rattled over the unexpectedly hard sleep I just experienced, I make my way into Audrey's bathroom. After taking care of my immediate needs, I return to her room to retrieve my toothbrush. She's still sleeping soundly, so I silently collect what I need, giving her one more look before I leave.

After scrubbing the grime off my teeth, I head for her kitchen in search of caffeination.

I've lived most of my adult life at Alaskan Security headquarters, so the past few months of being on my own has been enlightening. I've discovered I don't mind cleaning a house, grocery shopping is fucking torture, and having access to an espresso machine has made me a coffee snob.

But beggars can't be choosers, so I drop a single serve cup into Audrey's little machine, put a mug under the spout, and set it to run. While it's brewing, I dig through her fridge, looking for something I can make for our breakfast.

I've got eggs, cheese, and a gallon of milk out on the counter when I hear a strange sound in the bedroom. Dropping everything, I race out of the kitchen and down the short hall, coming to a quick stop when Audrey's wild eyes meet mine.

A rush of air passes through her parted lips as her shoulders drop. "You're still here."

Did she think I'd left? "Of course I'm still here. I told you I was staying with you until we got all this handled, didn't I?"

A sad smile curls her lips. "I know, but I'm not really used to people—men, mostly—doing what they say they're going to do."

The burn of irritation I'm becoming familiar with flashes across my skin. I just don't see how anyone could lie to Audrey's face that way. What's the point? Why make promises you don't plan to keep?

It's bullshit.

"Come on." I reach one hand out to her. When she takes it, I heft her up off the bed. "Drink some coffee. Eat some breakfast. You'll feel better once you have food in your stomach and caffeine in your veins."

Audrey snorts, her hand remaining tightly clutched around mine as I lead her down the hall. "I think it will take a little more than coffee and eggs to fix the shit I've got going on."

"Fair enough. But you still have to eat." I give her a smile. "Especially if you want to be strong enough to swing that bat at someone's head."

"I'm also very interested in nut kicking." She offers up the reminder of her second plan of attack.

“Then you definitely need to eat, because quads are some of the biggest muscles on the body and they require a lot of energy to stay strong.”

Audrey angles a brow at me, watching as I load another coffee pod into the machine and slide the second cup into place. “I didn’t know bodyguards were so up on their anatomy and physiology.”

“Bodyguards who work hard to be as strong as they can are.”

I don’t tell her why I’ve had to work so hard to be strong. I don’t want Audrey to worry any more than she already is, and hearing that the man responsible for her safety was flat on his back and weak as a baby six months ago, would probably shake her faith in my abilities.

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“I guess that makes sense.” Audrey takes the cup of coffee when I offer it. “It is pretty obvious you work out a lot.”

I run one hand down the center of my chest. Smoothing over the hard muscle I’ve fought to regain. “Climbing through windows is harder than it looks, so I try to stay in peak physical shape.

Audrey grins, realizing I’m joking. “It’s good to know you climb through a lot of windows.” She tips her head. “Creepy, but good.”

“It could be worse.” I take a sip of my coffee. “I could be a sadist.”

One hand flies to Audrey’s face, trying to shield the sudden flush of her cheeks. “I can’t believe I asked you that. I’m going to blame it on being so tired I was delirious.”

“It was probably a fair question.” I turn to the stove, switching on one of the gas burners. “And I’m probably the first guy you’ve met who kills people for a living, so it’s understandable you would have some questions for me.”

I’m proud of what I do for a living. Never felt ashamed or guilty or tried to hide it. But I don’t like that it might be making Audrey leery of me. I want her to trust me.

Actually, I need her to. It’s easier to keep someone safe when they trust you, and it’s my job to keep her safe, so technically making sure she trusts me is part of my job.

“So...” Her eyes drop to the coffee I made as she nibbles her lower lip the way she

did last night. “Do you like your job?”

I want Audrey’s trust, but I won’t lie to get it, so I admit, “Yeah. I love it.”

I expect her judgment. Maybe for a flash of fear to darken her eyes.

Instead, she smiles. “Good. Otherwise it would really suck.”

I don’t know where the laugh comes from. The sound surprises me and seems to startle her, but something about the observation strikes me as funny. “It would really suck, wouldn’t it?”

I keep laughing, because now I’m imagining some poor sap hating his fucking life as he drags a dead criminal into the back of a van.

Pulling in a calming breath, I wipe the corner of one eye with the back of my hand. Refocusing on the breakfast I was supposed to be making, I ask, “What about you? Do you like your job?”

Audrey’s smile dims a little. “It’s okay. I loved what I did before, but...” The remainder of her smile slips away. “But it was one of the things I had to leave behind.”

I turn away, not liking the sadness in her eyes at all. It bothers me that I can’t fix it for her, so I go back to the thing I can fix—her empty stomach.

My phone starts to ring just as I pour the eggs into the pan. Dropping the lid into place, I connect Isaac’s call. “What do you have for me?”

“I have a guy coming to the door. He’ll be there in about thirty seconds.”

I drag the pan off the burner, sliding it away from the heat as I turn to the front of Audrey's apartment. "Who is it?"

"Don't have a name, but he got out of the car we've been watching all night."

"Shit." I was hoping they'd left. Or that maybe somehow we'd missed whoever it belonged to getting out and walking to their house. "What do you want me to do?"

There's a little bit of a commotion on the line. The next voice that speaks doesn't belong to Isaac.

"We want to get a look at the guy's face so we can run it through the system, and we have an idea about how to make that happen." Harlow, one of the hackers on Team Intel butts in on the call. "But you're probably not gonna like it."

FOUR

AUDREY

"I DON'T THINK I can do this."

Maybe can't is technically the wrong word. I don't want to do this. No single part of me wants to come face-to-face with someone who might be connected to Trevor. Someone who could be on his payroll. Someone he may have sent to spy on me in an attempt to find out what I know.

Because if I come face-to-face with him, there's a chance he could discover I know everything.

If that happens, I lose the tiny bit of an upper hand I possess. Then there's nothing stopping him from trying to take me out.

Trying to silence me.

“I’ll be right here the whole time. You aren’t going to be alone for a single second.” Maddox’s gaze is steady on mine. “Intel wouldn’t suggest this if they thought it could get you hurt.”

That seems like a stretch. “They don’t even know me. I don’t think they’re that worried about my well-being.” Sure, they’re being paid to care, but there are limits to what money can buy. Sometimes those limits stretch further than they should, but they still exist.

Maddox frowns at me like I’ve offended him. “People don’t have to know you to want you to be safe, Audrey.”

That hasn’t been my experience at all. “People whodoknow me don’t want me to be safe, so you’ll have to forgive me for not believing you.”

I’ve been working hard at learning to stand up for myself. Doing my best to make sure I don’t end up in another bad situation. Disagreeing with this deadly man—even in such a small way—makes me feel like maybe I’m actually getting somewhere. No, this isn’t a huge argument, but speaking up about my experiences and countering his claims is something I never would have done before.

But when Maddox’s lips flatten and his nostrils flare, the familiar pang of panic twists my gut. Tells me I’ve said too much and gone too far. Self-preservation has me opening my mouth, ready to backtrack, but a knock on my door stops my words before they can even start.

Maddox and I both turn to the front of my apartment at the same time.

I swallow the saliva collecting in my mouth as my skin goes cold. “I think I might throw up.”

“Just breathe.” Maddox rests his hands on my shoulders, leaning down to align our eyes. “I can answer the door,” he says slowly and calmly, “but then you have to do the recording.”

I immediately bob my head in a nod, because recording sounds so much less scary than trying to interact with whoever’s on my doorstep. “I can record.”

Maddox holds my eyes a second longer before reaching into his pocket to retrieve his phone. After unlocking it, he opens the camera app and hands it to me. “I’ll keep his attention on me, but if something goes sideways and things start to seem like they’re headed the wrong direction, go lock yourself in the bedroom, understand?”

Again, I nod, the movement continuing as Maddox peels away his shirt, revealing the broad expanse of his bare chest.

“What are you doing?” If I sound breathless, it’s probably from panic. Definitely not a reaction to the sight of him naked from the waist up.

“If I answer the door in my gear, there’s the chance he’ll suspect who I am, and I’d like to keep that a secret for as long as we can.” Maddox’s answer is just above a whisper. His hands go to the waistband of his tactical pants, long fingers nimbly flipping the button free before dragging down the zipper. “Unless you’re opposed to someone thinking we’re...” His voice trails off instead of finishing the thought.

And I’d really like to hear him finish that thought.

“We’re, what?”

Whoever’s outside knocks again, and Maddox finishes shucking his pants, leaving him standing before me in nothing but a pair of black boxer briefs.

I swallow hard again, but this time it’s not from nausea. I knew he was well-built, but what’s in front of me now? This is just ridiculous. Every muscle on his body is developed and toned, bulging with strength and raw power.

“Audrey.” The way he says my name is sharp. Like maybe he’s said it already and I missed it.

Forcing my eyes to his face, I smile out of reflex. “What?”

“It’s time.” He motions to the phone in my hand. “Be ready.”

“I’m ready.”

I follow him to the door, taking my spot behind it so I stay out of sight as Maddox uses one hand to mess up his hair. Then he’s unlocking the deadbolt and removing the only barrier between us and whoever is outside. I can’t see them, but I can still see Maddox, and he gives the other person a sleepy looking grin.

“Sorry. We were still asleep.” He lifts one arm, leaning against the door frame, effectively blocking the opening with his body. “Can I help you?”

“Umm...” The other man sounds surprised. “I might have the wrong address.”

Maddox’s free hand lifts to the edge of the door. It looks like he’s simply hanging on, but his pointer finger aims my way. It’s the signal that my part in this whole plan—formerly his part—is up.

Edging closer to the gap at the hinges, I align the back camera of his phone with the opening, watching the screen until our visitor comes into view. I can't get a great look since I'm still standing off to the side, but he doesn't seem familiar to me. A lot of people came and went from the house when I was married to Trevor though, so it's possible I've seen him before and just don't remember.

"Are you looking for someone in particular?" Maddox keeps the guy talking as I continue recording. From what he explained, the more video we have of this guy, the more likely it is he can be identified.

"Tom?" Our visitor practically blurts out the name.

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“Are you asking me, or telling me?” There’s an edge to Maddox’s voice I haven’t heard before. It’s sharp and dangerous and a little scary. “Because you should probably know who you’re looking for before you start knocking on strange people’s doors on a Saturday morning.”

I almost gasp. It’s Saturday. I’m supposed to be at work in an hour and I totally freaking forgot.

“I’m sorry I interrupted...”—the guy looks Maddox over—“whatever it is you’ve got going on here.” He starts to step back and I pull my hand away from the gap, tucking the phone close.

I wait for Maddox to close the door, but he continues standing there, tall and imposing, a hard expression on his face. After many long seconds, he finally closes us in. After flipping the deadbolt into place, he turns to me. “Are you okay?”

Not, ‘Did you get the recording?’ Not, ‘I can’t believe you’re too big of a coward to answer the door yourself.’ Not, ‘Way to be a pain in the ass and make me do everything.’

It’s weird not having blame piled on my shoulders when I don’t live up to someone’s expectations. Not bad weird. Just weird.

I hold his phone out. “I think I got what you wanted.”

“Great.” Maddox barely glances at his cell as he steps closer, bringing the mostly naked line of his body toward me. “How are you doing?”

I'm really not used to someone showing concern for me in general, which is why I ignored his question in the first place. It makes me want to feel like he cares, and that seems like a bad idea since he's being paid to be here.

"I'm good." Shoving the phone at him, I start to back away from all the bare skin and tight underwear trying to steal my eyeballs. "But I should get a shower. I've got to be at work soon."

Maddox's brows lift. "Work?" His head tilts. "It's Saturday."

"I manage a clothing store, so I work almost every weekend." Even when I worked for myself I went in on Saturdays, so I'm used to the weekend hours. It's not like I have anything else going on.

Outside of trying to stay alive.

"Okay." Maddox props both hands on his hips, fingers resting right along the V-shaped groove framing his abs. "Then I guess you get a shower and I'll finish our breakfast. We can head out whenever you're ready."

I force my eyes away from that deeply distracting area of his body. "You're coming with me?"

Maddox's lips curl into a hint of a smile and it makes my belly flutter. "I go where you go."

I mean...technically I'm about to go into the shower...

Clearing my throat, I blink hard a few times. This poor man has been nothing but nice to me. Outside of that little misunderstanding we had, he's been completely appropriate.

And here I am wondering what he looks like naked and wet.

Spinning away, I go straight for the bathroom. “I’ll hurry so you can jump in after me.”

Rushing through the process, I quickly scrub down and dry off. After rubbing on some lotion, I wrap on my robe and hustle to my bedroom.

One of the perks of the job I have is that, thanks to the employee discount, I’ve been able to build a new wardrobe relatively quickly. The clothes hanging in my closet are a lot different than the ones I left behind, but they fit the life I live now way better than the designer labels and red-bottomed heels would have.

Picking out my favorite pair of wide-leg jeans and a cropped sweater, I hurry to get dressed. Once that’s done, I duck into the bathroom to fix my hair and apply a little makeup. I’m running at hyper speed, but Maddox still finishes making breakfast before I’m done. When I reach the kitchen, my eggs are plated with a piece of buttered toast and a fresh cup of coffee, and he’s packing a bunch of random stuff into the soft-sided lunch box I use to take leftovers into work.

His eyes lift to mine before dropping back down as he tosses a granola bar in. “I figured you might need some snacks.”

Am I caught in some sort of alternate universe? It sure seems like it, because I’ve never had a man take care of me like this. Not the ones I dated. Not the one I married. And sure as heck not the one who contributed to my DNA.

“You didn’t have to do that.” Once again I’m unsure how to react to his thoughtful gesture. I’ve never been presented with this sort of a scenario before. “But thank you.”

Maddox flashes me a smile. “Don’t be too grateful.” He zips up the bag and sets it on the counter. “I packed some stuff for me too. I tend to get snacky.”

“I bet.” All on my own, my eyes fall back down his frame, getting stuck on that spot at his hips again. “You’ve got a lot of muscle to feed.” Speaking of muscles... I point to the area I’m embarrassingly obsessed with. “What muscle is that?”

Maddox looks down, poking the ridge with a few fingers. “This? Not a muscle. It’s the inguinal ligament. It anchors the muscles of your abdomen to your pelvis.”

I’m not sure it’s anchoring much on mine, but that thing is working overtime on Maddox. “Interesting.”

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“Right?” He runs one hand over his stomach. “It also helps with hip flexing.”

This conversation probably needs to stop, but I can’t seem to make that happen. “Hip flexing?”

“Yeah.” He bends at the waist, thrusting forward in a way that makes me weak in the knees. “Like this. Hip flexing.”

After spending the last few years with men whose hip flexing left a lot to be desired, my brain and libido latch on to the smooth but powerful way Maddox moves. I bet he could rattle a girl’s teeth right out of her head.

She’d probably thank him for it too.

Maddox’s phone starts to ring, stopping his mind numbing movement. He points at my breakfast. “Eat while I get ready.” He stares at me, lifting his brows, phone continuing to ring.

It’s not until I sit down at my tiny two-seater dining table and pick up the fork he’s left out, that Maddox finally connects the call, watching me a second longer as he presses it to his ear. “Yeah?”

I don’t hear anything else of the conversation, because he turns and goes down the hall to the bathroom.

My stomach is still a little touchy from months of fear and unrest—plus that strange visit we just had—but if Maddox went to all the effort to make me food, the least I

can do is choke it down.

The fluffy eggs and melted cheese are seasoned perfectly and sit surprisingly well, so I plow through them pretty quickly, managing to fill my stomach for the first time in what feels like forever. I've always been a little on the thicker side—with boobs and hips and booty—but all the stress has taken its toll, and I miss myself. Miss being able to fill out a bra and finish a dessert.

It's funny how things change. There was a time when I'd been told there was too much of me for so long that I hated the way I looked. Now, I'd give anything to get back there.

After finishing breakfast and polishing off my coffee, I load my dishes into the dishwasher, lining them next to the ones Maddox has already racked up, and set the appliance to run. By the time I have my bag and purse collected, Maddox is striding out of the bathroom, looking like a dark knight in his tactical gear and boots.

A dark knight who is going to stick out like a sore thumb at the store where I work.

We sell everyday basics for the whole family. Jeans, T-shirts, joggers, hoodies. Our offerings definitely lean toward the casual side of fashion.

Mercenary chic isn't our aesthetic.

"What's wrong?" Maddox looks down his front. "Do I have something on me?" Continuing to look himself over, he spins around, like that will help him get a better look at the parts of his body he can't see.

And holy shit is it cute. Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined someone who does what Maddox does for a living could be so... Adorable. Like a big, overgrown golden retriever trapped in a man's body.

A very top-of-the-line man's body.

"You look fine, but if you're trying to blend in, that might be a problem."

Maddox's eyes come to me, skimming my frame from head to toe. I resist the urge to stand taller. To straighten my shoulders and stick out my chest. He's simply gauging the difference in our outfits, not checking me out.

I'm the only one checking anybody out in this situation because I'm a bad, bad person.

"This is all I brought." He gives me a lopsided grin. "And I don't think I'll be able to borrow any of your clothes."

There it was again. Maddox being freaking adorable. It makes me want to squeeze him. Makes me wish we'd been able to meet under different circumstances.

Ones that wouldn't eventually make him see me differently once everything I'm holding back comes to light.

Forcing on a smile, I try to sound light in spite of the dark cloud now looming over me. "I don't think you'd blend in any better wearing my clothes. Especially since my pants would all be about six inches too short and your shoulders would explode out of my shirts." I'm currently staring at the shoulders in question, which is why I notice when Maddox seems to flex a little, the muscles of his upper body bunching and shifting beneath the black fabric of his fitted shirt.

Yeah. Very much hate this being the way our paths crossed.

"I'll call Isaac. See if he can figure something out." Maddox finishes his cell from his pocket, but I stop him.

“I can actually fix this.” A genuine smile curls my lips. He’s already done so much for me, and I’m a little excited to do something for him. “As long as you don’t mind letting me dress you.”

I don’t fully realize what I’ve said until a spark of something flashes across his eyes.

Was that...heat? Why?—

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Oh God. I said I was going to dress him.

“I meant I could pick out your clothes. I didn’t mean specifically take yours off and put the new ones on you.” I start rambling, trying to fix what I messed up, because there’s no way Maddox reacted the way I thought. It was me seeing something I wanted to see. It was more likely offense that tightened his expression. “I manage a clothing store, so I can absolutely find you a new outfit that you can put on yourself that will make it possible for you to blend in.” There. That was better.

Way less creepy than offering to strip him down and dress him up.

Luckily, Maddox doesn’t seem offended. “Yeah?” He gives me a grin. “Perfect.” Grabbing the pile of my bags off the table, he loops everything over one arm, then rests his free hand against my lower back, directing me to the door. “Let’s go to work then.”

I reach the door and pause. “What about that guy? If he sees you now, he might start figuring out who you really are.”

“He’s gone. Left right after I talked to him.”

Maddox takes his palm off my back to flip the deadbolt and open the door. I start to step out, but he stops me, one hand spreading across my belly.

“I go first. Always.” His voice is back to being low and serious, the way it was last night, and the change in him could give me whiplash if I wasn’t working so hard to control my drool.

Maddox steps out onto the stoop, his clear blue eyes scanning the surroundings before he turns to me. “Come on.”

I step out and he pulls the door closed. Then I realize I don’t have my keys. “Can I have my purse?—”

Maddox is already locking up, latching both the deadbolt and the lock embedded in the knob.

“Are those mine?” I ask, even though I can easily identify the collection in his hand.

“For now, they’re my keys.” Maddox continues scanning our surroundings as he hooks one arm around my waist, tucking me close to his side before leading me down the sidewalk. “All you have to do is stay alive. I take care of everything else, okay?”

I’ve been dealing with so much shit on my own for so long, it’s surprisingly easy to say, “Okay.”

FIVE

MADDOX

“HOW DO I look?” My arms are stretched out at my sides, making sure Audrey can get the full view of the outfit I just put on in one of the changing rooms.

I have something pretty similar to the jeans and shirt she picked out for me at home, but since I was working under the belief this would be a simple bodyguard type job, all I packed was my black tactical gear. All I thought I had to do was stand around looking scary so her ex-husband would leave her alone.

That belief flew out the window even before I even climbed in hers. And while I’m

not upset the job is proving to be more interesting than I initially expected, I don't fucking like that Audrey's the one in the middle of it.

"I think it looks good." Audrey nibbles her lower lip, the movement dragging my attention to her mouth. "What do you think?"

I think I might have a little bit of a problem if I can't figure out why in the hell my train of thought gets derailed nearly every time I look at her.

"I think it's perfect." The clothes are comfortable. They fit well. And—most importantly—they'll make it easier for me to blend in. Possible for me to protect Audrey while hiding in plain sight as I wait for Isaac and Intel to identify the guy who came to her door this morning.

"Good. Great. I'm glad." Audrey rubs both hands down the front of her jeans, looking nervous.

And I want to comfort her. Technically, it's part of my job. People act erratically when they're nervous or afraid, and that could lead to a dangerous situation. I need to keep Audrey as calm as possible, and the way to do that is by making sure she feels safe and secure and protected.

So I move closer, hoping my presence reminds her she has someone on her side. "It's going to be okay, I promise. No one will get to you while I'm around."

Her lower lip goes back between her teeth, the plush fullness of it pinched by her straight, white incisors. "I can't imagine anyone would look at you and think it'd be a great idea to start a fight." Her lips curve. "Even in those clothes."

I smile, relieved that she believes what I'm saying. "Hopefully you're right, but they'll start to question their life choices really quick if they do." I smooth a hand

over her hair, because physical contact seems to help her stay calm. Letting my hand rest on her shoulder, I lower my voice as the sound of people arriving carries through the store. “You feel comfortable with our plan?”

Audrey nods. “I think so.” She gives me a little smile. “Welcome to your first day at Birch and Ivy, new assistant manager.”

“Thank you, new boss.” I smooth down the front of my shirt. “I think I’m really gonna like it here.”

I’ve worked at Alaskan Security the better part of a decade. Joined Shadow right after my twenty-fifth birthday when I left the military to work in the private sector. It’s been years since I’ve done anything different, and I’m strangely excited for this little game of pretend we’ll be playing.

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Audrey takes a deep breath, the shoulder under my palm lifting and falling as she inhales and exhales. “Let’s go introduce you to some of the staff then.”

When she turns, I let my hand fall away, fingers clenching to a fist at the loss of contact. She’s still well within reach, but with everything going on, I feel better keeping her as close as possible. Especially while we’re out in the world.

The store she manages is a big place. It’s part of a well-known chain and takes up two floors on the edge of an outdoor shopping mall. One side of the first floor leads straight out onto the sidewalk. Another feeds into an indoor food court and attached atrium on both levels. I’m not thrilled over how many access points there are, but our story—that I’m in training and will be serving as assistant manager—will make it possible for me to essentially follow her around all day as she teaches me the ropes.

Staying no more than a half-step behind Audrey, I force my hands to stay at my sides as I follow her through the store and into the back room. It’s the way we came in, so I’m assuming it’s the entrance all employees use. When we get back there, two new people have joined the lineup of individuals we have to fool. One of them is a young woman who can’t be much more than twenty, and the other is a guy who’s probably only a few years older than that.

Audrey flashes them a warm smile as we enter. “Good morning.” She immediately motions to where I stand right beside her. “This is Maddox. He’s going to be training with me and serving as assistant manager.” Her eyes come my way. “Maddox, this is Ginny and Dane.”

I tip my head their way. “Nice to meet you.”

Ginny's brows climb her forehead. "I thought they were going to hire from within for that position?"

Audrey's smile slips a little at the accusatory edge to her employee's question, and I decide I don't think I like Ginny very much. Hopefully she doesn't know how much Audrey has been through, because if she does and is still being difficult right out of the gate, I definitely don't like her.

"My understanding is corporate wants him to train here because we're such a high producing store. Once he's ready, they'll be moving him to a different location and filling the local position from current staff." Audrey's explanation sounds entirely plausible. I want to tell her how proud I am of her for thinking so quickly on her feet, but I have to pretend like we met just this morning when I showed up for my first day on the job.

Ginny seems annoyed by the answer, but doesn't push it. "I guess they're going to do what they want to do." She lifts her chin, looking down her nose at me before turning to Audrey. "I'm going to go refold everything Danica did last night. She was closing so I'm sure the tables look like shit."

Yeah. I don't like Ginny.

Dane shakes his head as she leaves. "Don't worry about her, man. She gets wound up quick, but gets over shit just as fast." He holds one hand out. "I'm happy you're here." As I shake his offered hand, his eyes go to Audrey. "They couldn't have sent you somewhere better. Audrey's the best manager we've ever had."

I give Dane a once over, looking a little more closely at his fit figure and bright smile. He's not a bad looking guy, and his friendly demeanor is probably what most women would call charming.

Does Audrey find him charming?

She rolls her eyes, but there's a slightly pink tint to her cheeks. "If you're buttering me up because you think I'll give you next weekend off, you might as well stop now."

Dane drops my hand, resting his against the center of his chest as his mouth falls open. The smile on his face holds as he says, "I'm offended you think I would do such a thing."

Audrey angles a brow at him.

Dane's smile turns devilish. "Again."

Audrey thumbs over one shoulder, pointing in the direction of the dressing rooms where I got changed. "Go empty the discard rack and stop trying to sweet-talk me."

Dane gives her a wink. "Yes, ma'am."

I watch him as he goes, making a decision as I assess his retreating form.

I don't fucking like Dane either.

As soon as both employees are out of earshot, Audrey blows out a long breath, her shoulders sagging. "It seems like they believed it."

"They believed it." Because it's making me itchy not to touch her, I reach out to pinch a stray bit of a plastic tag that's clinging to the fibers of her sweater. "And as long as I can make it seem like I'm at least a little competent, they'll continue believing it."

Audrey snorts out a cute little laugh. “I’m pretty sure you’re going to be great.” She flashes me a grin. “And now you’ll have a backup plan in case being a mercenary doesn’t work out.”

I force myself not to react. To hide any hint that I’ve already faced that exact possibility. For a few weeks after being shot, my medical team wasn’t sure how well I was going to recover. I spent more than a few dark days thinking life as I knew it was over. That the career I loved so much had been ripped out from under me, leaving me with nothing.

That’s when I started spending so much time with Savannah, and when I started seeing how her presence had changed Zeke’s life. How it had changed Zeke.

“Backup plans are always good.” I glance around. “What now, boss?”

“Now we get you hooked up with an earpiece and you pretend to be interested in learning about retail.” She takes me into her small office at the far side of the storage room and hands off the clunky, low-quality device. “I’m sure it’s not nearly as fancy as what you’re used to, but it’s required that you wear one while you’re on the floor working, so there’s no way around it.”

“I don’t mind wearing it.” I tuck the speaker piece into place, wrap the cord around my ear, and clip the mic cord to my shirt.

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Audrey's brows lift. "That's the fastest I've ever seen anyone put one of those on."

"I'm a trained professional." Leaning close, I lower my voice and remind her what else I'm capable of. "You should see how fast I can break a man's arm."

The claim is probably a pretty decent explanation for why I struggle so much when it comes to women. I lead a simple life. I don't have hobbies. I don't have friends. I don't socialize. I work, and that's about it, so the topics I have to converse about are limited and mostly involve violence of some sort.

And right now the difference between Dane the Charmer and me is pretty glaring.

"I'm not opposed to seeing that, but if you're breaking limbs in front of me, I'm going to assume it's because someone's trying to hurt me. Seeing as I'm not extremely excited about that prospect, I'm going to choose to take your word for it." Instead of being horrified by my admittedly terrible attempt at pulling her attention away from Dane, Audrey seems amused, her smile holding as she says, "For the record, I would also really love it if you don't make any sort of bloody messes in here. I'm pretty sure that would go in my file."

I relax a little at her response, feeling like maybe she gets me and my sense of humor. "No bloodshed in the workplace. Got it."

"I'm not completely nixing the option, I just would really like to avoid it if at all possible." Audrey steps a little closer to me, her voice barely above a whisper when she says, "You do what you have to do, and I'll deal with the fallout."

The more time I spend with Audrey, the more I'm seeing how brave she really is. How strong. It's not obvious or blatant like many of the women I work with. Everything about Audrey is quiet. Understated. And damned if that doesn't make me want to protect her even more. Just so she doesn't feel like she has to change.

"I know people who'll deal with the fallout, so you don't need to worry about that either." Without realizing it, I've got my hands on her again, palms resting high on her shoulders. "You just worry about staying alive."

The shirt I'm wearing tightens as her hands grip the fabric across my stomach. "That's what I've been doing for the past year, and it's starting to wear me out."

I study her face for a second, wondering how accurate her math is. "Only a year?"

Audrey's eyes drop mine, but not before I see the trace of shame that flashes over them. "No. Not only a year." She swallows, the delicate line of her throat working through the motion. "It's been much longer than that."

"How long?"

I came from a happy family—my parents still have a great relationship—but have dealt with enough shitty people to know abuse is a slow build. It inches along in forgivable increments until one day you look up and realize they've slowly dug you to the bottom of a pit so deep it's nearly impossible to climb out of.

I want to know how long Audrey was in that pit. Because if I'm ever lucky enough to cross paths with her ex-husband, I'm going to reclaim every inch he sent her sinking.

Unfortunately, I don't get an answer because Dane's voice comes blaring through my earpiece and Audrey's.

“Hey, Aud. I’ve got a guy up here who says he scheduled an interview with you for this morning.”

Audrey’s brows pinch together as she activates her microphone. “I don’t have any interviews scheduled for today. Is he sure it’s this location?”

I move to the line of monitors Audrey turned on when we first arrived. Scanning the displays, I find where Dane is standing just inside the doors he opened only seconds ago. What I see has me grabbing Audrey as she starts in that direction. I drag her deeper into her office and close the door, locking us in.

“It’s the guy who came to your apartment this morning.” I point to where he stands on the surveillance screen. “Are you sure you don’t recognize him?”

It was the first question I’d asked her when we reviewed the footage. At the time, she was confident she’d never seen him before, or if she had, didn’t remember it.

I was hoping Intel would identify him before our paths crossed again, but facial recognition software takes a long fucking time to come back with a list of possible identities, and this guy seems to be on a tight schedule.

Audrey’s skin goes pale as she stares at the screen. “Why is he here?”

“You’re sure he’s never been here before?”

“Positive.” Audrey reaches for me, her hand gripping mine. “Is he here to kill me?”

I tug her against me, wrapping both arms around her shaking body. “If he is, I’m going to apologize in advance, because he’s about to end up a little bit of everywhere.”

And I feel bad about it. Not about killing the guy—that doesn't fucking bother me—but about the possibility killing him could make Audrey's life more difficult. The whole store will have to basically be cleared out. Mountains of merchandise will have to be trashed. The two employees that are here will likely be traumatized enough she'll have to replace them.

“You stay here.” I pull my weapon from the holster hidden in my waistband, checking it before putting it back in place. “I'm going to talk to him.”

Audrey's fingers grip tight, holding on till her knuckles turn white. “What if he'snother to kill me?”

That question makes me pause. “What else would he be here for?”

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The reason Audrey reached out for help was because she was afraid for her life. Worried her ex-husband would try to make her disappear, or at the very least cause her bodily harm. I want to believe she's simply trying to calm herself down and off the edge by hoping this is something it isn't, but the way she asked seems off.

Audrey presses her lips together, breaths coming quickly as her eyes move between mine. "There's something I probably should have told you."

"Audrey? Are you coming up?" Dane interrupts again

Fucking Dane. I definitely hate that guy.

I press my own mic. "One of us will be up in just a minute." Turning back to Audrey, I give her all my attention. "What should you have told me?"

Moisture collects at the corner of her eyes, unshed tears shimmering in the overhead fluorescent lighting. "I took something with me when I left Trevor."

"Okay." I bring a hand to her face, catching a tear with my thumb as it breaks free. "What did you take?"

"I was just trying to protect myself. I thought if I had something to use against him, he would be less likely to come after me. I thought if he was worried I could ruin him, he would just leave me alone." Audrey starts talking faster and faster. "And I can't just let him get away with what he's doing." Her voice wavers. "Someone needs to stop him, and I might be the only one who can, so I made a few phone calls. I thought they were anonymous. I thought I could just plant the seed and it would grow

without me.”

“Audrey.” I say her name softly, bringing my other hand to her face, cradling her cheeks as I angle it toward mine. “What did you take?” I say the words slowly, enunciating each one.

She pulls in a shaky breath, swallowing hard before admitting, “A memory stick.”

“Okay.” I smooth my thumbs over her skin, trying to soothe her. Trying to help her calm down. “What’s on the memory stick?”

Audrey barely whispers, “Proof of all the awful things he’s done.”

This is like pulling teeth, but I get it. It’s probably difficult to admit the man you married is a terrible person. “What has he done?”

A bitter little laugh breaks through her lips as another tear slides down her cheek. “Whathasn’t he done? He’s embezzled money from any business he’s been a part of. He’s used his connections to take down anyone who doesn’t do what he wants. He’s paid to have people hurt.” Her chin wobbles. “And...” Audrey closes her eyes, squeezing them tight.

“And, what?” Whatever it is has her nearly hyperventilating, the hands clenched in my shirt holding so tightly her fingers have to be numb. “What else did he do?”

“It’s why I left. When I knew I’d rather die than stay with someone like him.” Her voice is barely audible when she admits, “He was trafficking underage girls.”

SIX

AUDREY

I CAN'T BREATHE. I'm going to suffocate.

"Slow breaths, Audrey." Maddox's forehead drops to mine, his eyes slipping shut. "Close your eyes and breathe with me."

He makes it sound so simple. Like I can simply feed air into my lungs. I can't. Not after admitting I chose to marry a man who turned out to be capable of such unspeakable acts.

I've never said it out loud before. Never admitted the full extent of what Trevor did to anyone. Not even the police hotline I called months after leaving. I gave them everything else. The theft. The violence. The coercion and laundering.

But I couldn't make myself say the last part. It was too shameful.

I was hoping if I gave them enough they would start looking and find it on their own. That once they started investigating Trevor, they'd come across the same things I did.

But nothing happened. No one seemed to be looking at anything. They were just going to let him get away with it all.

Then someone started following me. That man out there now, the same one who came to my door this morning, drives a car that is suddenly everywhere I go. And there's only one person who could have sent him. I knew I was screwed well before this morning. Because it has become clear that Trevor is untouchable.

And I am not.

"Audrey." Maddox's voice sharpens. "I can take care of this, but I need you to breathe, because I'm not leaving until I know you're okay."

That gets a reaction out of me, and breathing isn't it.

I hold tighter to him, my voice pitching with panic. "You're going to leave me?"

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I shouldn't have told him the truth. I should have held back. He's probably looking at me the same way I look at myself now. Has decided I'm not worth protecting because of how stupid I've been.

"That's not what I meant." Maddox straightens, his eyes fused to my face. "You aren't going anywhere near that guy out there, so that means I have to go handle it. But you're going to stay back here behind a locked door while I do it." He lays it out slowly. "When I'm done, I'm coming back here to get you, then we're going to have a long talk." I think he's done, but then Maddox adds on, "And you're probably going to be taking a leave of absence from your job."

Relief floods my veins. He's not leaving me. Not walking away now that he knows how terrible I am at knowing who to trust. "But you're staying with me?"

I need confirmation. To hear again that he's not walking away.

"I'm staying with you." Maddox strokes down my arms with even passes of his hands. It's been so long since anyone—especially a man—touched me with so much care, and without realizing it, I begin pulling in oxygen again.

"That's it. Good job." His eyes continue holding mine. "Five minutes. I just need five minutes to handle this and then I'll be back, okay?"

I can probably survive without him for five minutes. I managed to make it nine months. But that was before I knew how good it felt having him around. How nice it was to have someone like Maddox in my corner. Protecting me. Reassuring me. Listening without judgment.

Because he's doing so much for me, and I don't want to make his job harder than it already is, I nod. "Okay. I'll be okay."

Maddox gives me a soft smile. One hand smooths over my hair and I lean into his touch. "I know you will be." He gives me one last look then goes to the door, unlocking it and stepping out. Turning back, he says, "Lock it and don't open it for anyone except me."

I nod again, my head working on autopilot. "Okay."

He pulls the door shut and I lock it, forcing in a quick breath before turning to the bank of screens displaying the security cameras positioned throughout the store. I watch as Maddox moves through the space, weaving his way around the racks, following an indirect route. It takes me a minute to realize he's doing it so he can assess the situation, and I feel silly for not figuring it out sooner.

Maddox has a sweet, easy-going side to him, but there's another, darker part fused in his personality. And it is not one I would ever want to be on the wrong side of.

That's the side of him running the show now. Gone is the man who was holding me close and whispering soothing words as he worked to calm me down. He's been replaced by a laser-focused and calculating individual on a mission.

I watch, breathless again, as he closes in on the man he's already faced once today, wondering how in the hell either one of them is going to explain their presence here.

Maddox moves in close, dismissing Dane with a tip of his head. Once my keyholding associate is gone, he faces down the unexpected visitor, looking every bit the predator he is. Even casual jeans and a relaxed shirt can't hide the way every muscle and ligament is primed and ready to attack. Prepared to hand out a level of violence most people couldn't imagine, let alone execute.

And he'd be doing it for me.

After a string of men who couldn't be bothered to buy me flowers, having one ready and willing to kill for me is doing strange things to my insides.

My grip on the desk gets tighter and tighter. Soon, my knuckles start to ache and the muscles in my hands begin to burn. Why is Maddox talking to him for so long? Every second he's out there is another second he's in danger. Trevor doesn't like people who go against him, and by protecting me, Maddox falls strongly in that category.

If Trevor hurts Maddox...

The cool weight of rage settles into my belly. Fury like I've never felt before, certainly not for myself, simmers under my skin.

Because if Trevor hurts Maddox, I'll ruin his life. I'll spill every secret he has. I'll make so many copies of that memory stick they won't be able to count them all. And I'll send one to every news station in the country. In minutes, everyone will know what Trevor Hawthorne III, the man with hopes to be the next governor of Tennessee, really is.

When Maddox's eyes finally shift to the camera with the best view of him, I straighten. He discreetly holds up a finger, letting me know he's almost done, and I breathe a little easier.

But only a little. He nods to the other man once, then turns and walks away, putting his back to the guy who came to my apartment and now my work. The same man who's been following me for the better part of a week. I keep my eyes on the suited stranger, watching for any hint he might be thinking of taking advantage of the offering Maddox has gifted him.

If he does, he'll be the second person I ruin. I don't know how I'll do it, but I'm sure I can figure something out.

I'm watching the other man so intently, I nearly jump out of my skin when Maddox knocks. "Audrey. It's me."

Racing to the door, I flip the lock and fling it open, jumping at him. Locking my arms around his big body, I squeeze tight. I'm relieved he's okay, but also a little mad that he took such a big risk when walking away. "That asshole could have shot you in the back."

Maddox glances around the storage room, then wraps an arm at my waist and hauls me back into my office, closing the door behind us. "He's not interested in shooting me."

My stomach bottoms out. "Because he wants to shoot me."

It's a crazy thing to know someone wants you dead. It's even crazier to know there are people willing to make it happen.

"No. Actually, he doesn't." Maddox continues holding me, and I'm not going to complain, because I want to continue holding him too.

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“He’s a private investigator for a company in Chicago. It sounds like your ex-husband called and hired them to follow you, but he started to get a bad feeling about it and decided to warn you.” Maddox smooths a circle over my back. “That’s why he came to the apartment this morning.”

I lean back, my eyes jumping to his. “Trevor must know I took proof of what he’s done.”

“Maybe not.” Maddox moves to the large chair behind my desk and sits, situating me on his lap. “From what the PI said, Trevor claimed you were trying to take advantage of him and nullify the prenup you signed. He wanted them to collect dirt on you that might help him in court.”

I shake my head. “I’ve never contested the prenup. Not once.” I snort, bitterness rising like bile. “I’ve always been willing to walk away with practically nothing. I only asked for one single thing, and he refuses to give it to me.” My throat tightens. I try not to think about this part of what I lost, because it’s too painful. Reminds me how helpless I was and am. It drives home how Trevor has the power to take everything from me.

And that might include my life.

Maddox studies me. “What did you ask for?”

I sniff, overcome by emotion for the second time today. “My dog.”

I lower my head, because I hate letting anyone see me cry. I don’t think Maddox

would exploit it, but it's so hard to be that vulnerable. Not after having it used against me for so long.

"She was all I wanted, but since he's the one who paid for her, Trevor claimed she belonged to him. Just like my clothes, my car, my cell phone and my business."

When I lift my eyes, it's not cute, easy-going Maddox staring back at me.

It's murder Maddox.

His jaw is tight, nostrils flared, when he asks, "Where is your dog now?"

I wipe at a dry cheek, managing to corral the last of my tears, a little proud I didn't allow a single one to fall. "I don't know. Probably at Trevor's house, locked up in her crate because he doesn't even like animals."

That was the hardest part about all of this. If I genuinely believed Coco was being taken care of, I could make peace with it. But I know she's not. I know she's being left to waste away in a crate, only being fed or given water when a member of his staff remembers.

Maddox pulls in a deep breath as he rocks his head from side to side, bones cracking with the motion. "I'll find her. I promise."

I shake my head, sadness and regret poking at me from all angles. "He'll hide her from you the same way he hid her from me. That's why I didn't take her with me when I left. I think he believed I wouldn't go without her." I swallow hard. "But I didn't have a choice. If I stayed, I knew eventually he would kill me." I would have simply disappeared and no one would have ever known what happened.

"You did the right thing." Maddox's expression softens just a little. "And I've had

enough dogs to know she would have done anything to protect you, so she might have ended up getting hurt if you'd stayed."

He's trying to make me feel better about one of the many impossible choices I've had to make, but I can't feel better about losing Coco. Not ever.

Smoothing down my hair, I carefully stand. "What now?"

Maddox shrugs. "Now we go back to work."

That's not what I was expecting him to say. "What? But that guy?—"

"I told him Intel was going to run his information through the system to confirm everything he told me and he didn't protest, so I think there's a good chance he's telling the truth." Maddox gets up and goes to open the door. "And if he is, we have one more person looking out for you, so I'm gonna take it."

That sounds a little too good to be true. "And if he's not?"

Maddox flashes me a smile as we walk through the storage room. "Then I'll find him and kill him."

MADDOX TURNS TO me as we come to a stop at a light. His hand is draped leisurely over the steering wheel of my usedcrossover SUV, his expression serious. "You should come work with me. Start killing people for a living."

"What?" A laugh sneaks out because imagining me as a mercenary or bodyguard or whatever he is, is hilarious. "Why would I come do that?"

He turns back to the road as the light switches to green. "Because it's a hell of a lot easier than what we just did."

I laugh some more, because I think he's kidding, but when he doesn't shoot me that puppy dog grin he slides into when he's teasing, my laughter fades. "You're serious."

"Yeah, I'm serious." He frowns. "My feet are killing me. I folded and refolded the same shirt two hundred times today because people are assholes and can't be fucked to put things back the way they find them." He continues listing off things I deal with on a regular basis. "Ginny gave me a headache because she never stops fucking complaining through the earpiece, and Dane thinks if he smiles at you and winks enough, you'll give him a free week of vacation." Maddox keeps going. "And why the fuck do you have to ask every single goddamn person who checks out if they want to open a credit card?"

Now I'm laughing again, because his assessment of my job is pretty spot on. "If it makes you feel any better, whoever has the most credit card sign-ups gets a bonus."

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“It does not.” He shakes his head. “It doesn’t make me feel better at all. No amount of money is worth asking five hundred people in a row about a credit card none of them fucking wants.” His brows lift as he glances my way again. “Honestly, it came really close to our worlds colliding, because if I had to fold that fucking beige T-shirt right in front of the door one more time, I was going to have to hide a body.”

Again, he has me laughing in spite of the dire situation I’m caught in like a snare. “Tomorrow I’ll do all the shirt folding. I don’t want to risk it.”

When I called my friend Lydia to see if her husband Christian could help me find someone to come keep me safe, of course I had an idea of what a person who did that would be like. And in many ways, Maddox does fit the mold.

But there’s also a side of him that is so vastly different, I’m struggling to figure out how those two parts fit together.

Maddox is strong and smart and capable, and as dangerous as I would have expected, but he’s also sweet and kind and occasionally a little goofy. There’s even a tiny hint of awkwardness in some of the things he says.

I was expecting someone dark and mysterious, and maybe a little grumpy, but Maddox isn’t grumpy at all. He’s actually proving to be quite the opposite. A black-clad ray of sunshine in my cloudy life, and I kinda love it.

“That’s probably a good idea, because that shit is ridiculous.” Maddox turns my way, expression incredulous. “You really fold the same shirt a million times a day?”

“I mean, not during the week so much, but on the weekends? It might not be a million, but it can feel like it.” I’ve never thought about my job being difficult because I genuinely enjoy it. “Does it bother you when you have to kill a bunch of people in a row?”

I can’t believe those words just came out of my mouth. But, after the last nine months of being separated from Trevor and fighting him in the divorce, plus five years of being with him before that, I can honestly say I wouldn’t mind killing a few people in a row myself.

Again, Maddox looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. “No.”

Good to know, just in case the opportunity arises. “Well, there you go.”

Maddox continues driving to my apartment, his brows pinched together. Like he’s confused both by the conversation and my career choice. It’s kind of funny, because I would think I’d be the one confused. But I guess if you don’t work in retail, it could be tricky to understand the appeal.

“I’ve always worked at places like Birch and Ivy, so I guess I’m just used to what it involves.” I think back to my first job at a small children’s store in a shopping mall. “In the beginning, maybe it’s a little more stressful, but once you acclimate and move up the ladder?” A smile twists my lips. “The pay is surprisingly good.”

Good enough that I’m able to afford a bodyguard. Granted, part of that’s because I’ve been pinching pennies. After leaving Trevor, I found the cheapest apartment I could that was still in a decently nice neighborhood. I purchased an inexpensive car. I don’t really go out, and I don’t spend frivolously. I didn’t know what kind of hell might be coming my way, or when I might have to run away in the middle of the night, so I’ve put every cent I could into a savings account.

And thank goodness I did, because having Maddox here with me has made it possible to breathe again. And laugh, which is fantastic.

“I wasn’t thinking about you being a weirdo for enjoying retail.” Maddox gives me one of those almost lopsided grins I’m starting to get addicted to. “I was thinking you were weird for not being bothered by my profession.”

An ache forms in the pit of my stomach. I’ve worked hard not to face a lot of things. There was already so much trying to break me, acknowledging certain aspects of how Trevor changed me might have pushed me over the edge. The way I look at fairness and comeuppance is one of them.

I used to feel bad for people. Hated seeing anyone suffer. I was too empathetic. Too forgiving. I gave bad men too many chances to prove they could be better.

It’s not surprising. I was fed that kind of bullshit from the time I was born. But at some point, I decided to stop eating. I’d rather starve.

Taking a deep breath, I spill one of the more painful discoveries I’ve made. “I guess I just learned the hard way that the world is better off without certain people in it.”

I can name a few.

SEVEN

MADDOX

“HOW’S SHE DOING?” Savannah’s voice is sweet and soft as it comes through the speaker of my phone.

“I think she’s as good as can be expected considering the situation she’s in.” At the

very least, hopefully Audrey's better than before I showed up. I'm working hard to help her feel as happy and safe and protected as possible. "I'm pretty sure she wasn't eating well, so I'm trying to feed her as often as I can."

At first, I thought maybe I was misremembering, but the more time I spend around her, the more confident I am that when my path first crossed Audrey's, her figure was fuller. Her cheeks were rounder and her frame carried an appealing amount of softness. Enough a man could sink his fingers in when he—" I look up from the cutting board I've been staring at while chopping vegetables.

What the fuck?My brain never goes off the rails like that. And certainly not about a client.

"You should make her a batch of those cookies you love." Savannah offers up a suggestion I've already considered. "I can send you the recipe."

"That was part of the reason I called. Could you also send me your recipe for those little cheese pancakes you make?"

Savannah's a great cook, and she played no small part in making sure I had enough caloric content to rebuild my body. I'd like to do the same for Audrey. She's going to need her strength. I've experienced just how healing good food can be, so I plan to fill her mouth every chance I get—

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“Fuck,” I swear under my breath as I drop the knife to the board and take a step back. Using one forearm to rub at my eyes, I try to scrub away the vision of Audrey on her knees, greedily taking my?—

“I’m glad you’re learning to make this shit yourself.” Zeke’s voice is glaringly loud compared to his wife’s—thank God—and it pulls me out of the inappropriate spiral I’m caught in. “Maybe then you’ll stop coming over to steal mine.”

I smirk, feeling a little better as I go back to the green pepper I’m halfway through dicing. “You know that’s not going to happen.”

In its own way, living next door to Zeke and Savannah these past few months has been one of the best times of my life. Was I a little depressed I couldn’t work? Sure. But after growing up with a family who doesn’t understand me at all, it was nice to be so close to people who got it. People who got me.

And it was enlightening to see the way Savannah accepts Zeke. Understands what makes him tick and considers the scarier parts of him an asset instead of a flaw.

“I’ll give him all of your cookies if he promises to take good care of Audrey.” Savannah’s been worried about her friend. They bonded when we helped Audrey escape her ex, and have kept in touch since. When she found out Audrey had been struggling this whole time and hadn’t said anything, it broke her heart.

Made her feel like Audrey didn’t think she could be trusted.

Now, I know that’s not true—Audrey’s simply not the kind of person who would

burden her friends, even to her own detriment—but at the time, Savannah was heartbroken.

“I’ll keep her safe, but this situation is more complicated than we initially believed.” I’ve already briefed Isaac, so I’m guessing Zeke knows what I’m about to share, but I want to tell Savannah directly what I found out. “It turns out Savannah’s ex-husband hired a private investigator out of Chicago to follow her. He and I had a conversation this afternoon, and he’s got some concerns about Trevor’s motives. Is worried he’ll start looking for a way to get rid of her.”

Savannah’s gasp tells me Zeke has not yet filled her in, and I’m grateful. I wanted her to hear directly from me. I don’t want anyone else to apply their filter to the situation thinking they need to shelter her from the truth.

And that’s what Zeke would do. Not maliciously or with bad intentions, but because his primary objective in this world is to protect her. To keep his wife from anything that might cause her pain.

And what I’m about to tell her is going to cause her pain.

“Just because she got away?” To my surprise, Savannah doesn’t sound broken, she sounds angry. “What is it with these men whotreat women like possessions to be acquired? I swear, if I ever see him?—”

“I don’t think that’s what this is about, Savannah.” I lower the knife in my hand to the counter, because if I hang onto it, I might decide it makes sense to march my happy ass to Trevor’s mansion and end this all right now. “At least not entirely.”

I lay out the list of accusations Audrey gave me. Then I explain how she tried to anonymously report most of them, but nothing seemed to happen.

“Sounds like it’s possible he has connections in the department there.” Zeke’s comes to the same conclusion I did. I haven’t shared my suspicion with Audrey—it would only scare her—but it’s part of the reason I wanted to speak with Zeke directly. “If that’s the case, maybe getting her the hell out of here is the best plan of attack.”

Normally, I’m a stick-around-and-fight kind of guy, but I don’t want to risk Audrey. I don’t want her to suffer any more than she already has—physically or mentally. And sticking around here, waiting for someone to find her, is definitely wearing on her.

Savannah scoffs. “And then what? You’re going to make sure this prick gets in trouble for what he’s doing, right?”

And there’s the third reason I wanted to talk to Zeke and his wife—my best friend—directly. I knew Savannah would go to bat for me. Zeke can get tunnel vision when it comes to the jobs we’re brought in to do. I understand that. Once you start looking too hard at the gray, it can be easy to question what you’re doing.

But I’m not ignoring this gray. This son of a bitch hurt Audrey and countless other people. I want to make sure he goes down. For all of them.

But mostly for the woman showering while I make dinner.

“Let me make a few calls. See what I can find out.” Zeke’s offer is exactly what I was hoping for. His connections reach far beyond mine. I’m just a worker bee, doing what I’m told and loving every minute of it. I have no one to call and no strings to pull.

Zeke continues, “But if she runs, it’s going to look suspicious. If we want to take this guy down, him getting suspicious is our worst enemy, because he’ll start doing everything he can to cover his trail.”

I know it’s the truth, but I don’t like hearing it. “Then send me backup. They don’t

have to be right on top of us, but I want to have someone to call who can be here quickly if shit goes sideways.”

“He’ll make sure someone comes down there ASAP,” Savannah answers for Zeke, and it makes me smile.

Savannah and Audrey have a lot in common. They both have sweet temperaments, but beneath the soft smiles and gentle demeanor, there’s a tiny hint of an edge. And it can be cutting when you don’t expect it to be there.

It’s what makes both of them survivors. And maybe it’s what makes both of them so understanding of the life Zeke and I lead.

“Something smells really good.”

I turn to find Audrey standing in the doorway of her small kitchen, wrapped in a pale pink robe, her blonde hair tousled and damp.

“Is that Audrey?” Savannah’s voice is now just as loud as her husband’s. “I want to talk to her.”

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I turn off the speaker and hand over my cell. “Dinner will be done in a few minutes, but take your time. I’ll keep it warm until you’re finished.”

“Thank you.” Audrey gives me a little smile as she takes my phone and disappears down the hall.

I spend the time while she and Savannah talk finishing up our simple meal. Since I couldn’t do much for a few months, I had plenty of time to learn how to cook. And I’m glad I did. There’s not a doubt in my mind all the meals and treats Savannah fed me made a difference in my recovery. I’m hoping they’ll do the same for Audrey.

When she returns with my phone, I’m plating our food, dishing out a generous portion of one of my childhood favorites for each of us. It’s not fancy or fine dining by anyone’s stretch of the imagination, but goulash—the American version—is hardy and simple to make. Comforting and rich.

Audrey’s eyes widen when I hand over the shallow bowl filled with macaroni noodles, ground beef, diced onions and peppers, and chunks of tomato. “What is this? It looks delicious.”

I angle a brow at her. “You’ve never had goulash?” I thought it was a staple for our generation.

She shakes her head. “Never heard of it, but it looks really yummy.”

Audrey carries her portion out into the living room, and I follow. We ate breakfast separately this morning, so I wolfed mine down at the small dining table, but if she

wants to be comfortable while she eats, I'm not going to argue. Savannah and I shared more than a few meals piled on her sofa or mine, watching television while Zeke was out working.

I grab a couple drinks from the fridge and carry them out, sliding both on the coffee table as I settle onto the sofa beside her. Her furniture's nothing fancy, but it's pretty freaking comfortable. And when she puts her heels up on the coffee table, I do the same, settling in for a relaxing evening.

After switching on the TV, she peeks my way. "Anything specific you want to watch?"

I had plenty of time to watch anything I wanted while I was down, so I shake my head. "Dealer's choice."

I'm rewarded with another sweet smile as she picks a show I've never heard of called *The Night Agent*. She starts the series and we dig into our food. I do my best to stay focused on the show—it's actually right up my alley, with tons of violence and action—but the little sounds of pleasure Audrey makes as she eats are distracting. My attention keeps dragging her way, gaze catching on the way her lips wrap around the spoon as she adds a bite into her mouth. Zeroing in on the way her eyes almost roll back as she chews.

When she licks her lips, I'm forced to adjust my position, hoping to hide my body's reaction to all her little moans and soft sighs.

Maybe this is a side effect of my injury. Another way my body is coming back online after being out of commission. When I first was able to do cardio again, I couldn't seem to get enough. I'd run for miles or spend hours on the stepper. It was like I craved that physical release. Maybe this is the same sort of thing.

Because I fucking hated cardio before. Not that I hate sex. I love sex. I just don't generally crave it unless I'm in a very specific sort of situation. One where I'm borderline obsessed with a woman and she's borderline obsessed with me. There's got to be feelings—strong and mutual—for me to fuck. I know it's not that way for everyone, but that's how it's always been for me.

So this little... development? It's kinda throwing me off.

I let out a sigh of relief when Audrey finishes her meal and slides the empty bowl onto the table.

"That was delicious." She turns to me, angling her body on the cushions as she tucks both feet up under her butt. "Where did you learn to cook like that?"

"Savannah, actually." I finish off my own food and stack my bowl under hers. "She and her husband Zeke live right next door to me, and she's pretty much my best friend, so I'm over there annoying them a lot."

A sad smile curves Audrey's lips. "That sounds really nice." Her head tips, resting against the cushion. "I don't know any of my neighbors." She lifts one shoulder and drops it in a shrug. "Outside of that, they're all about fifty years older than I am."

"That's not a bad thing. Probably why it's so quiet." It worked against me when I came through her window, but it will definitely help if someone else tries to get in. I'll hear them coming a mile away.

"It is quiet, but it's also kind of lonely." She straightens, eyes staying on my face. "It's been nice having somebody else around. I'm sure my television was getting real tired of listening to me lecture everyone making stupid decisions on the shows I watch."

“I’m happy to be of service.” I waggle my brows at her. “How do you feel about cookies?”

Audrey’s eyes widen. “You know how to make cookies too?”

I flash her a grin as I reach for our dirty dishes. “Killing people isn’t my only skill.” I grab the edge of the bottom bowl. “Let me take these into the kitchen and I’ll show you what else I can do.”

I don’t realize the suggestion in my words until Audrey starts to laugh, head tipping back as the light sound spills from her lips. “I’m so glad I’m not the only one who’s said awkward things.” She pulls in a choppy breath as she leans my way, resting her hand in the center of my chest. “When I said I would get you dressed earlier, I wanted to die.”

“Don’t die. That’ll go on my record.” She also shouldn’t die over something like that, because while it might not have been what she meant, it did manage to occupy my mind for a little while.

A lot of while. The whole time I was folding that fucking shirt everyone who walked in the door inspected, I thought about her words. Accidentally might have even imagined Audrey’s soft hands moving over my skin as she peeled away the layers I was wearing.

But in my imagination, she didn’t exactly replace them.

Audrey laughs harder at my teasing about the reason she shouldn’t die. “I definitely don’t want my death to sully your record.” She wipes a tear from the corner of her eye. “You’re so funny.” Then, before I realize what’s happening, she leans in and plants her lips right on mine.

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The second our bodies connect, we both freeze. I go completely still, shocked and confused. And—if I’m being completely honest—that confusion isn’t over what she’s doing, but my body’s reaction to it.

Before I can really analyze what’s happening, Audrey pulls back, a hand flying to cover the lips that were just pressed so sweetly to mine. Eyes wide, her skin pales as she says, “Oh my gosh. I don’t know why I did that. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. Don’t apologize.” I release the dishes I was still holding, deciding now is not the time to walk away. “You’re in a high stress situation and you’ve been dealing with the unthinkable for years. You’re going to do things you wouldn’t normally do, and that’s okay. I’m not upset.” Not in the slightest, though that might be an issue worth investigating.

But Audrey still looks mortified, upset by her actions to the point I’m worried she might cry. And seeing her cry earlier today was fucking awful. I don’t want to deal with it again.

So, in a moment of possibly flawed thinking, I pull her hand from her face, and lean in to kiss her back. I mean, if me saying something suggestive made her feel better about what she’d accidentally said, this should work the same way, right? She kissed me and felt bad about it, so me kissing her will negate those feelings.

Except my kiss isn’t quick like hers. I linger, not wanting to give up the plush texture of her lips against mine.

I’ve overcome a lot recently, but forcing my mouth off Audrey’s takes an amount of

willpower I haven't had to exert in a long fucking time.

“There.” My voice sounds wrong. Too deep. Too raspy. “Now we both made things weird.”

Audrey's eyes drop to fix on my mouth. “You did a better job of making it weird that I did though, so things still seem a little unbalanced.” Her hands come to my face and she leans close, this time kissing me with intent. With purpose. Forethought and resolve.

I can't stifle my groan as her tongue flicks against the seam of my mouth, taunting me. Tempting me.

And I am not nearly as strong as I believe, because I give in.

Not only do I give in, I fucking jump with both feet.

In the blink of an eye, Audrey's no longer beside me, but straddling my lap as I pull her close, the heady taste of her overwhelming my senses. Her hands move from my face to my hair, fingers digging in to hold tight as her tongue teases against mine. She tastes so sweet they should fucking bottle it up and sell it on the shelf. She smells just as good—fresh and floral—and I pull as much of it into my lungs as I can manage, trying to memorize the scent.

Sliding both hands up her back, I grip the plush fabric of her robe and pull her closer, wanting to feel as much of her as I can. Her thighs spread wider, and the hot line of her pussy presses right against the ridge of my dick. For the second time since meeting Audrey, it's fully hard and rubbing against her soft body.

Or maybe she's rubbing against it. At this point I can't tell who's doing what and I don't really care. The mistakes probably belong to both of us in equal part.

I bring my hands to her hips, fingers gripping the slight curve as they move against me. I urge her on, chasing the same thing she is as her breathing speeds up, coming in sharp pants against my cheek as her lips stay sealed against mine. When they drag free, my name whispers between them as she comes against me, dark lashes splayed across her cheeks as her head falls back and a shudder wracks her frame.

Her body barely finishes twitching before Audrey's eyes fly open, that look of horror back. "Oh my God." She tries to scramble away, but I hold tight.

"Audrey, relax."

"Relax?" Her voice pitches. "I just rubbed against you until I came." Her hands press against her cheeks, the distress she's feeling evident. "Who does something like that? You're my bodyguard. I'm paying you to be here, and I just humped you like a dog."

That reminds me about her dog, but I'm gonna have to circle back to that later.

"Calm down. You didn't do anything wrong." I lower my voice as I remind her, "I kissed you back, remember?"

Was it a wise decision? In hindsight...

Yes. Yes, it was.

I try to meet Audrey's wild gaze, continuing to hold her tight so I know she won't try to run away again. "Look at me."

Her eyes finally come to mine, and the humiliation and regret simmering in their depths stabs through me like a knife. I want to fix it. I want her to understand it's fine. Nothing has changed. "Do you remember what I said to you?"

She shakes her head, chin wobbling.

“I said all you have to do is stay alive.” And I meant it. Just as much as I meant the rest. “I’ll take care of everything else.” I risk letting go with one hand so I can smooth back her still-damp hair. “So don’t feel bad for letting me take care of something for you.”

EIGHT

AUDREY

MADDOX IS TRYING to make me feel better, but it’s not working.

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“I’m pretty sure providing orgasms was not part of the contract.” Technically, I didn’t sign a contract, but still. I called my friend Lydia who put me in touch with Alaskan Security and I told them I needed help. I didn’t also request someone to grind on to completion, so I’m confident that was not part of the deal.

“I’m not upset. And if I’m not upset, you shouldn’t be upset.” Maddox seems to think this is a simple sort of problem to resolve.

And that has me wondering.

“Does this happen a lot?” I try to climb off of him again, my embarrassment joined by humiliation. “Do you mess around with most of your clients?”

I shouldn’t be horrified at the possibility considering what I’ve just done, but I am. I don’t like the thought of another woman doing what I just did to Maddox and him reassuring her it’s absolutely fine. That he’s there to see to all her needs.

It pisses me off. Makes me feel like I want to swing my baseball bat at some unknown woman’s face.

And that’s probably an overreaction.

“No.” The denial jumps through Maddox’s lips as he pulls me back into place. Then he sternly repeats, “No.” He shakes his head, adding another layer of rejection. “This doesn’t happen with all my clients.” When I try to get up, he holds tight. “It hasn’t happened with any of my clients. Only you.”

I don't know if that makes me feel better or worse at this point. Do I like the thought of him getting rubbed on by another woman? Hell no.

Do I like hearing I'm the only weirdo who's done it? Also no.

I force myself to look at him, so he can see how much I mean what I'm about to say. "I'm still sorry. I shouldn't have done that. It was inappropriate."

Maddox studies me for a second, his blue eyes moving over my face. "Maybe, but I didn't stop you." His gaze falls to where his hands grip my hips. "Actually, I remember being pretty encouraging." His attention comes back to my face. "So if what just happened was inappropriate, we're both equally guilty." He shakes his head again. "But I don't feel like what you did was wrong."

I press my lips together, desperately wanting to not feel bad about something that felt so good. "I don't think you did anything wrong."

"Good." Maddox lifts one hand to smooth my hair back. "Considering we're both adults who get to make choices and decisions, I think our opinions are all that really matter."

Technically, he's right, but there's still one sticking point here. "But I'm paying for you to be here. That makes you basically my employee, and?—"

"Have you sent any money to Alaskan Security?"

Now he's splitting hairs. "Well, no. Not yet. But I'm sure they're going to send me a bill at some point."

Maddox shrugs. "Until money exchanges hands, I don't see a problem." He flashes that unassuming smile that's probably confused more than a few people, coming from

a mercenary. “And I’m really good at seeing problems, so there must not be one there.”

I narrow my eyes. “Stop trying to make me feel better.”

His grin widens. “Nope.”

Suddenly, I’m being lifted into the air. The change in altitude startles me, so I latch on to his strong body, linking my legs at his hips and both arms around his neck. “What are you doing?”

“I’m putting you to bed. You need a good night’s sleep. Tomorrow you’ll feel totally different about all this.” He easily carries me out of the room and down the short hall.

I reach out as he passes the bathroom. “I need to brush my teeth.”

Maddox stops, lifting a brow at me as he turns. “You’re getting a little demanding.” He carries me into the small room and drops my butt to the counter beside the sink. “Always gotta brush your teeth before bed.” He grabs my toothbrush and squeezes on a line of paste before handing it to me. “It’s like I came in and screwed your whole routine up or something.”

I take the prepped brush and start scrubbing, trying to wrap my head around how easily and quickly he defused the meltdown I was well on my way to having.

Maddox pauses brushing his own teeth to look me over. “You’re starting to think about it again. I can see it on your face.” He spits the paste from his mouth into the sink, rinsing it down. “If you don’t quit worrying about it, I’ll have to figure out a way to even the playing field so you’ll stop feeling bad.”

I nearly choke on my toothbrush, because me rubbing against Maddox and

accidentally getting off is very different from him purposefully bringing me to completion.

And I am not as opposed to it as I know I should be.

Maddox's blue eyes fuse to my face as he drops his toothbrush to the counter. After taking mine from my hand and slotting it into the holder, he stands in front of me, hips easing my knees apart. "Would that make you feel better? If I'm the one who makes things happen this time?"

I can't answer him. All I can do is swallow hard, accidentally sending a mouthful of toothpaste foam to my stomach. I don't even notice how gross it is, because the next second, Maddox is pulling me closer to the edge, bringing my body practically flush to his.

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“I’m gonna need an answer for this, Audrey. It’s one thing for you to rub up against me, but I won’t be putting my hands on you like that without permission.”

Oh my God. He wants to use his hands?

Now, not only am I unable to talk, but I think I stopped breathing. And that’s a shame, because I’ll probably pass out before I know what it feels like to be touched by a man like Maddox.

A man whose actual goal is to get me off.

“So tell me.” Maddox’s voice is low and deep. “Do you want me to make you feel better?”

I bob my head in a nod.

He leans closer, his lips brushing against mine as he says, “Words, Audrey. I need words.”

I don’t think he’s going to be able to touch me after all, because I’m pretty sure I’m about to melt all the way to the floor. Turn into a puddle of Audrey at his feet.

I’m not sure where I find the strength, but somehow, my lips work and my voice says, “Yes, please.”

“Perfect.” His lips tease mine again in a soft hint of a kiss. “I knew you could do it.”

His hand brushes against my thigh, the slightly rough skin of his calloused palm skimming under my robe. And because I'm greedy and possess obviously loose morals, I spread my legs wider, trying to provide him as much room as I can.

When his fingers slide against me, we both suck in a breath. I hold mine, but Maddox exhales on a groan. "No panties, Audrey?"

I grip his shoulders as he teases along my slit. "I took a shower, and when I came out you were talking to Savannah and then I was talking to Savannah, and then—" I gasp as he delves deeper, gliding over slick skin.

But Maddox seems to want to keep talking. "And then?"

"And then," I parrot. It's difficult to find my train of thought when he's touching me like this, but as I pull in a deep breath, the savory scent lingering in the air reminds me. "And then we had dinner, and then..."

I stop again, but this time it's not because I forget. This time it's because I'm still a little embarrassed.

"Then you climbed on my lap and took what you needed," Maddox finishes for me.

I nod, because now he's circling my clit, and I'm already climbing toward another release.

I'm not sure if I'm simply desperate for touch. Or maybe my body realizes how rare it is to find someone interested in giving and not just receiving. Or if Maddox is just really good at what he's doing. But in what feels like seconds, I'm coming again, my arms tight at his neck and my head dropped back. My hips flex, working in time with his steady strokes against my clit as I chase every bit of it I can to claim for myself.

When I'm finally able to open my eyes, Maddox is studying me. "You're beautiful when you come, Audrey."

He was watching me? Mortification races its way back in again, heating my cheeks and dropping my eyes.

But this time, Maddox doesn't seem to notice.

He carefully steps away, keeping one hand on my thigh. "Stay right there." Reaching for the stack of washcloths on the shelf in the corner, he tugs one free and runs it under the warm tap. He gently wipes away the slippery evidence of my misdeeds before tossing the washcloth into the hamper and lifting me off the counter. "Now it's really time for sleep."

He carries me into my bedroom and sets me on the edge of the bed before going to collect a set of pajamas from my drawer. He hands them off then starts peeling away his clothes. "I'm going to take a quick shower, and then I'll be in."

I swallow hard as he drags his shirt over his head, presenting me with his bare chest once again. Every inch of him seems to be sculpted from stone. Every muscle is perfectly developed. Every bit of skin is smooth and tan and?—

I point to a spot I haven't noticed before. It's an odd pucker of a scar that almost looks like— "What's that?"

Maddox's demeanor changes in the blink of an eye. He goes from the eager to please goofy grinning guy to Maddox the Murderer in a heartbeat.

His expression shutters as he turns away, but his voice is still gentle when he says, "Nothing. Go to sleep."

Then he walks out of the room, leaving before I can offer to return either of the favors I owe him. Which is really disappointing. I was sort of looking forward to making things as weird as possible between us. Seeing if he would continue making it weird right back.

Except things really haven't been weird between us. Not when I tried to hit him with a baseball bat. Not when he got a little excited while we were wrestling. Not even when I rubbed up against him or when he touched me.

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But things did get weird when I pointed out that scar, and it makes me wonder what in the heck it is.

The shower switches on, and I take off my robe, putting on the pajamas he picked for me before sliding under the covers. I flick on my bedside lamp and wait, wondering if things will be strange when he comes back from his shower. I don't know what exactly I said to upset him, but I've never had such an easy time being around someone, and losing that opens a hole in my gut.

When Maddox comes back, he's wearing a T-shirt and boxer briefs. He's also wearing an easy smile instead of the closed-off expression he left with.

A little of the tension knotting my insides slips away, allowing me to breathe easier. "I hope I didn't use up all the hot water."

Maddox shakes his head as he rounds the bed to his side. "Nah. There was plenty." Just like last night, he lays on top of the covers instead of getting under them.

I frown. "Do you not like blankets?"

He tucks one arm behind his head, head rolling my way. "I just figured you didn't want me all up in your business like that."

I laugh, because considering what just happened between us, I'm clearly okay with him being all up in my business. "Stop being a weirdo and get under the blankets." I roll toward him, reaching out to try to yank the covers from under his body. He's heavy and doesn't budge, so I push his arm, gasping a little at how cold his skin is. "I

thought you said there was plenty of hot water?”

Maddox almost looks sheepish. “I’m sure there was, but I didn’t really need a hot shower,.”

My eyes skip and jump their way down to the front of his boxer briefs. “Oh.” He doesn’t look hard, so the cold water must have done what he intended. But I hate that he chose that option. Especially since there were other—in my opinion, better—options available.

“I would have taken care of that for you.” I pinch my lower lip between my teeth, curling my fingers close to my palm as I imagine what it would feel like to touch him. Not specifically down there, just in general. To let my hands roam over his bare body, exploring the weapon he’s honed it into.

Maddox sighs. “I’m starting to feel like you might not be a very good listener. I told you I was the one who would take care of everything, and that all you have to do is stay alive.”

“I know what you said, but just staying alive can get boring sometimes.” I haven’t experienced any of those times recently, but I’m sure they happen. “I’m going to need something else to do at some point.”

“Then you can play with my hair.” Maddox offers up an alternative that’s way less interesting than the one I proposed.

But it’s enough to redirect my focus, lifting it to the freshly washed waves on his head. “Do you really like to have your head scratched?”

He nods, giving me a slow smile that would probably light certain parts of me on fire if they hadn’t already been effectively subdued. “I do.”

I lick my lips, wanting to ask a question, but knowing I shouldn't. At least this time I stop myself before being inappropriate.

"What?" Maddox asks, his voice soft. "You're thinking something, and I want to know what it is."

It's so strange how well he reads me. I thought I was good at hiding my emotions, but maybe no one else ever really looked at me. Maybe no one cared to see them.

"No. I'm done being inappropriate tonight." I go back to wrestling the blanket. "Now get under the covers with me."

So maybe I'm not completely done being inappropriate, but at least I didn't ask him if he would rather have his top head scratched or his other head stroked.

Maddox frowns at me. Not so much he looks like Murder Maddox again, but a little of his easy-going nature moves to the back burner. "I've taken over your apartment. I raided your kitchen and infiltrated your workplace. I don't want you to feel like I'm everywhere and you have nothing left of your own."

"I don't mind." I scoot a little closer, reaching out to rest my hand at the center of his chest. Having him close reminds me he's here. That I'm not alone anymore. I know it won't last, so I plan to savor every second of it. "I like having someone here." I almost leave it at that, but then I specify, "I like having you here."

I don't think I would feel the same way if Alaskan Security had sent someone else. Would I still feel safe? Possibly. But I wouldn't feel comfortable like I do with Maddox. I wouldn't feel secure or relaxed like he makes me feel.

And I would bet money I wouldn't be laughing nearly as often.

“I told you earlier that I was lonely being here by myself on my own, but it’s been way longer than just the past nine months.” I swallow hard, feeling emotional, but not vulnerable like I would expect. It seems natural to be open and honest with Maddox. To tell him my secrets and share my pain. “In some ways, I’ve always been alone.”

Maddox inhales deeply, then releases the air on a long sigh. His tall frame shifts around and he adjusts the covers, working them from beneath his body. The mattress jostles a little as he pulls the blankets over us both and reaches for me. “Come here.”

This is why it wouldn’t be the same if it was someone else here. They wouldn’t know what I need the way Maddox does. I’m not sure how he does it, but he’s able to read my emotions unlike anyone ever has.

And I’m not going to pretend like he’s wrong, so I wiggle around, scooting closer until I’m pressed against him, my head tucked against his pillow and shoulder as he envelops me in the warmth of his embrace.

His voice is low and rumble, lips moving against where they’re resting against my head as he asks, “Why have you always been alone?”

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“My parents were terrible. My mother was an alcoholic and my dad was a cheater and a narcissist who wasn’t interested in being a dad.” My upbringing was something I wouldn’t wish on just about anyone.

I grew up without physical affection or emotional connection. And it left me hungry. Starved and desperate. As a result, I ate whatever crumbs came my way and was grateful for the tiniest of scraps.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been with a man who genuinely liked me. Looking back, I was so desperate to have someone, I didn’t recognize that they were all just using me for one reason or another.” Or maybe I didn’t care. “When I met Trevor, I thought everything was going to get better in my life.”

That’s what he promised me, and I believed him. He was older. Successful. Well-groomed and respected within the community. I let myself believe he was my knight in shining armor. My happy ending.

But he was just another mistake. Just another man using me for his own gain.

“It can be difficult to find someone in this world who you’re compatible with.” Maddox slides his fingers into my hair, gently stroking through the strands as he continues. “Especially if you’ve never seen what a healthy relationship looks like.”

I lift my eyes to his face. “Do your parents have a healthy relationship?”

He gives me a small smile. “My parents are very happy together.” He continues petting me, each touch making my lids heavier and heavier. “But I’m not like them,

so looking for what they have wasn't really an option for me."

I snuggle closer, the muscles in my body turning to liquid as his warmth soaks into me. "You mean they don't kill people for a living too?"

Maddox chuckles, and I hear the sound rumble through his chest beneath my ear. "No. My parents are in marketing."

A laugh sneaks out of me, because I cannot imagine what Christmas must be like at his house. "Do they know what you do?"

"Yes, but they pretend like they don't, because they don't get it." His voice is softer when he says, "To be truthful, they don't get me."

"Oh." My amusement is gone, replaced by sadness. "Do you have siblings?" I'm hoping he says yes. And that they are like him and they understand who he is and why he does what he does.

"A brother and a sister." His fingers snag on a tangle, and he gently works it loose. "They're in finance."

Looping an arm around his middle, I squeeze him tight. "I'm going to guess that means they don't understand you either."

"No. They don't." Maddox seems to relax a little now that I'm holding him back. "I'm pretty much the black sheep of my family."

"What you do is important." It's easy for me to defend him. Way easier than it probably should be to argue that the world needs mercenaries.

But knowing what I know?

“Actually, the world could probably use a few more people like you going around taking out the evil around us.”

NINE

MADDOX

AUDREY AND I are halfway through our second day working together, and I’m folding that fucking tan shirt for the five hundredth time, when my cell phone starts to ring in my pocket. I’ve got it on vibrate, but Audrey’s so close, she can hear it and her eyes jump to mine, full of uncertainty. I tip my head toward the back room, motioning for her to follow me, and weave through the clothing racks.

Dane is working again today—because of course he is—and gives me a strange look as I pass. I’m pretty sure he thinks I’m fucking Audrey—using her to get what I want—but that’s at the bottom of the list of my concerns right now. As long as he does what she tells him to do, I don’t care if he thinks I’m the biggest piece of shit walking the earth.

I quickly reach the back room and duck into Audrey’s office, waiting to close the door until she joins me, then I answer the call from Shadow’s tech coordinator. “What’s going on?”

Isaac knows what I’m doing today. I made it clear he can only call me if it’s an emergency, because for now, I need it to seemlike I’m genuinely an employee here. One who follows the rules, and the rules are no phones on the floor.

“We got a call from your private investigator friend. Apparently, his company has a connection with us.”

I motion for Audrey to sit down. She’s been on her feet all day, and now that I know

how much that sucks, I want her to sit as often as possible. “He didn’t mention anything when I talked to him yesterday.”

“He didn’t know yesterday. I guess he called his boss and found out the guy used to work here.”

I scrub one hand over my face, because it’s starting to seem like Isaac doesn’t understand what the term emergency means. “You called me to tell me the boss of the private investigator Audrey’s ex hired used to work for Alaskan Security?”

“No. I called to tell you Pierce asked his friend to have his investigator continue keeping an eye on Audrey’s ex, and said ex seems to be up to something.”

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“I made it pretty clear he’s always up to something, so that doesn’t surprise me.” I close my eyes, taking a deep breath. “Anything else?”

“Of course there’s something else, dick. You told me not to call you unless there was an emergency. I’m calling to tell you that apparently Audrey’s ex has a whole lot of unmarked vans leaving his house, and the number of people walking through his door doesn’t seem to match up with the number of people walking out of it.”

Okay. So maybe there is a small emergency. “Have we identified anyone who’s gone in but didn’t come out?”

“We’re working on it.” Isaac types in the background. “Your private investigator friend was taking pictures for us, but it started to seem like Audrey’s ex was getting suspicious someone was watching him. He backed off to make sure he didn’t end up leaving in an unmarked van.”

“Probably a smart decision.” I don’t like what I’m finding out. It’s got me worried for Audrey. “Do you think he’s trying to cover his tracks? Maybe got worried someone’s going to look into what he’s been doing?”

“I’d say it’s pretty fucking likely he’s figured out somebody’s trying to get him in trouble.” Isaac sighs. “We’ve been trying to find someone with the Memphis police we can get information from, but it’s been a little tricky to figure out who would be a reliable informant.”

“Fuck.” I rub my eyes, frustrated with the way things are playing out.

I'm glad Shadow left Alaska. It was cold as fuck up there. Isolated and dark all the damn time. But in Fairbanks, we knew everyone. We'd been there long enough to establish relationships with all the local PDs. If we had issues, they were ready to help and easy to handle.

Here? Those foundations haven't yet been built, so when we do need help from law enforcement, we have to sift through the dirt to find the diamond.

"What's the plan for me and Audrey then? Is it time for us to go yet?" I'm getting itchy. I don't like sitting here waiting for someone to make a move.

"Not yet. The PI was able to feed Trevor some bullshit and thinks he convinced him Audrey's not doing anything that would cause issues. Her suddenly disappearing would go against that and cause all sorts of fucking problems for everybody."

Not for her. I could keep her safe. Hide her away where no one would find her. I don't give a shit what happens to anybody else. They can take care of themselves.

"I do have backup headed your way now. Luca and Owen will be coming in and staying two minutes from where Audrey lives, so you'll have someone close by. They're also going to conduct surveillance of her apartment, making sure there's no unexpected issues."

"I don't like this plan." I never argue with orders. Never go against what I'm told to do. Isaac and Intel know better than I do in just about every situation.

But leaving Audrey here like a sitting duck makes me want to peel my skin off.

"You're not alone, but it's the best option we have available until we have more information." Isaac is right, and I fucking hate it.

I hate that I can't do what I want—what I know is best for Audrey's mental and possibly physical well-being—because we don't have the rules for the game we're playing yet.

“Fine, but the minute I think she's in danger, I'm gone. I won't risk her. She's come too far and been through too much.”

“Understood.” Surprisingly, Isaac doesn't argue with me. “Just keep me in the loop.”

“I'll see what I can do.” I'm not making any promises. Not right now. Not when I've just heard people are going into her ex-husband's house and not walking back out.

“Call me the second you know more.” Fuck emergencies only. I'm starting to feel like everything in this shit show qualifies as an emergency.

“Will do.” Isaac hangs up, and I turn to where Audrey sits.

“That doesn't sound good.” Her skin is pale but her voice doesn't waver. “That sounds like Trevor is trying to make his problems disappear.” She pulls in a deep breath. “And I definitely qualify as a problem.”

“Not necessarily. Hopefully he thinks you're scared enough to keep your mouth shut.” I crouch down in front of her, resting my hands on her thighs. “Isaac is right. If we run, it will be obvious you're expecting him to come after you and he'll assume that's because you've been talking to people.” I hesitate, knowing it's going to be difficult for her to come to terms with what I'm about to say. “And there will come a point where you have to talk to people and tell them what's going on.”

I hold my breath, worried she's going to crumble in front of me, because I know how scared she's been of reporting her ex's crimes.

But, proving how strong she really is, Audrey sits straighter, determination hardening her pretty face. “Find someone trustworthy in the police department, and I’ll tell them everything.”

That was going to be the tricky part—finding someone we can trust in the Memphis police. Because the longer I sit on it, the more it seems like Trevor has them in his pocket. Generally, reports like the one Audrey made, even anonymous ones, are taken seriously. Investigated to some degree.

My brain trips over that theory though, because it still doesn’t make sense. “Did you call the Memphis police directly to report Trevor?”

Audrey nods. “A few times, but nothing ever seemed to come of it.”

“If Trevor does have someone in the department watching out for him and keeping him from getting into trouble, wouldn’t they have relayed those reports to him?” If they had, Audrey would’ve been the first person he went after and retaliation.

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Unless Audrey isn't the only woman who could have ratted him out.

"Is it possible someone else could be trying to get him in trouble?" I ask the question carefully, but there's no good way to broach the topic of being cheated on.

"I mean, it's possible." Audrey offers a humorless smile. "I'm sure I'm not the only woman he fucked over."

I don't want to be relieved another woman could be caught up in this mess, but a little part of me is, because it will take the heat off Audrey.

"We should get back out there before Dane starts getting any more ideas." I straighten, reaching out a hand to help her up.

Audrey angles a brow at me. "Any more ideas?"

"I'm pretty sure he suspects there's something going on between us, but I don't think he's positive yet. Every minute we spend back here will only make him more confident in his assumption." I don't really care. Actually, I prefer Dane thinks Audrey and I have something going on. Maybe then he'll stop looking at her the way he does and flirting every time she's within a twenty-foot radius.

But him thinking Audrey is messing around with me will make her job harder. It'll make him question what kind of a manager she is, and I don't want that. Her life is hard enough right now as it is.

"Why would he think that?" Audrey takes my hand and lets me help her up, her soft

palm lingering in mine.

“I think he’s just feeling territorial because we’re working so closely together. Plus, I’m sure the only explanation he can come up with for why I got the assistant manager spot and he didn’t is because there’s something going on between us.”

Audrey wrinkles her nose at me. “Dane would never get the assistant manager spot. If anyone here would be offered that position, it would be Ginny. She works her ass off and is responsible. She’s also got a don’t-fuck-with-me sort of temperament that can come in handy when you deal with customers and employees.”

I smile. “What I’m hearing you say is I’m actually overqualified for this position.”

Audrey laughs. “Your version of don’t fuck with me is a little bit more than what company policy allows, so yeah. We’ll call it overqualified.”

I grin, pulling her in for a quick hug, because I feel better knowing she’s close and safe, and Audrey relaxes when she knows I’m right here with her. That means, whenever no one’s looking, I sneak in little touches. Winks and smiles meant only for her. Reminders that I have her back.

As expected, she melts into my embrace, letting out a sigh as her face presses into my chest. “Part of me was kind of hoping they’d tell you to whisk me away to a cabin somewhere so I could hide out till this is all over.”

“Me too.” That actually sounds perfect. Except for one thing. “But the more we get into this, the more I want your ex-husband to suffer. And to do that, we have to play his game.”

Audrey nods. “I know.” Her eyes lift to my face. “You think if there’s another woman she’s playing his game too?”

“I sure fucking hope so.” I release her, knowing we’ve got to get back to business as usual. “But just to be safe, I’m gonna call Isaac when we’re done today and tell him our suspicions so Intel can start trying to figure out who it might be. Because if someone else really is trying to take him down, she’s in just as much danger as you are.”

Possibly more. I think Audrey’s temperament is probably part of what’s keeping her safe. Her ex abused her sweet, passive nature

If this other woman’s personality isn’t sweet and passive, and falls more in line with the women of Intel, he’s going to believe she’s the one trying to ruin his life, because he’ll know she gives zero fucks.

Following Audrey back out onto the floor, I ignore Dane. I don’t want him to think I’m worried he’s suspicious, so I don’t give him a second of my attention. I keep my focus on doing what Audrey tells me to do, and unfortunately that’s folding fucking shirts.

I don’t get anymore calls from Isaac, and that’s both a good and bad thing. Good because Audrey and I won’t suspiciously walk straight to her office again, but bad because it means Isaac and Intel haven’t found any more information.

Hopefully, my suspicions will change that.

At the end of our shift, I load everything—Audrey included—into her car. Upon pulling out of the mall lot, I immediately call Isaac, filling him in on what I think could be happening. He agrees there could be another woman involved in this and adds her to his list of items to investigate.

As we near Audrey’s apartment, I begin circling, following an indirect path different from the ones I’ve made previously. If I have to keep her where she’s at, I’m going to

do my damndest to make sure the place is as secure as possible. Today that means fifteen minutes of canvassing the neighborhood. Making sure nothing is out of place.

When I'm satisfied, I pull into one of the available spots along the curb and climb out, giving the area another scan as I round the front to retrieve her. Opening her door, I continue keeping watch as she steps out, carrying our lunch pail and her purse, and lead her to the front door, keeping my hands free just in case.

We've only done this once before, but she's already figured out how to make my job as easy as possible. When we're in a spot that could be dangerous—like we are now—she stays quiet. Keeps herself between me and anything that could serve as cover just in case things get hairy, so my body will block hers from any attack.

We reach the stoop, and after unlocking the door to her apartment, she hangs back, following me in, but staying barely inside the door so I can make sure the place is clear.

Yesterday, this process was smooth. Today I only make it two steps in before coming to a stop, automatically sweeping one arm out to tuck Audrey behind me. It's a reflexive move, but has the two men parked on her sofa lifting their brows at me.

I shoot each of them a glare. "You assholes didn't think it was important to give me a heads-up that you were going to be here when we got back?"

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I close the door and flip the deadbolt, continuing to keep Audrey behind me. Not because I think she's in danger, but because I don't like the casual interest currently directed her way.

Luca shrugs. "Didn't think we needed to. Thought it was pretty obvious we'd be here since Isaac sent us over as backup."

"Backup means you're nearby in case I need you, not that you're going to be sitting on the couch eating leftovers and watching TV when I walk in."

I should be relieved they're here. I wanted this. I requested their fucking presence. But ever since Zeke and Savannah got together, something's changed with the men of Shadow. Priorities have shifted. The thoughts and expectations for the futures we would all have are morphing into something way more domestic than any of us ever imagined.

So maybe Audrey is in danger after all. Just not the bodily harm kind.

"We always do this shit." Owen shovels in a mouthful of reheated goulash. "Did you make this, man? Because this shit is fire."

Audrey peeks around me, her blonde hair swinging with the motion. It might as well be a red fucking flag waved in front of a couple of bulls.

Luca flashes her a smile. He's not an ugly guy, and his dimpled smile and olive skin have caught the interest of more than a few women over the years. "You must be Audrey." Standing up, he straightens to his full six feet five inches. "I'm Luca." He

holds out a hand, and my first instinct is to punch him in the fucking face.

My second instinct is to punch him in the throat.

Unfortunately, that would likely make him less capable of helping me protect Audrey, and it would go against my primary motive, which is to keep her safe at any cost.

So I step aside, turning my attention to her. “Luca and Owen work with me at Alaskan Security. They’re part of the same team I’m on, and they’re here in case shit hits the fan.”

Audrey eyes Luca, her gaze dropping to his offered hand. She steps closer to me, practically tucking into my side before she finally reaches out to greet him.

“Thank you for being here.” She quickly pulls her hand from his. “Hopefully coming here will be a waste of your time.”

Luca’s smile holds, his voice smooth as silk when he says, “Coming here would never be a waste of my time.”

Audrey inches even closer to me, and this time her hand comes to rest at the center of my chest.

Luca’s eyes narrow, moving from me to Audrey then back to me again. Since his focus is directed my way, I can see when Audrey’s preference for my presence registers. I also see the disappointment he tries to mask.

Continuing to smile, he tips his head toward the man who stopped a few feet away, figuring the whole situation out faster than Luca did. “This is Owen. He’s a pain in the ass.”

Owen rolls his eyes, unbothered by Luca's jab. "He only says that because I kicked his ass last time we sparred." Owen reaches out to shake Audrey's hand. "It's nice to meet you." When he turns to me, the same hint of disappointment is in his gaze. "You got lucky when Maddox was assigned your case. He's good at what he does." He reaches out to slap me on the shoulder. "One of the best we've got."

I've always felt closer to my teammates than I was with my family. Never felt excluded or like they thought there was something wrong with me—which definitely happened with my parents and siblings. But I didn't realize how much they genuinely cared about me until I got shot. Now I get to hear how much they like me and are glad I'm around on a regular basis.

Was it worth taking a bullet for? Probably not. But I'll take all the silver linings I can get.

And hopefully one of the silver linings is they leave Audrey alone. She and I have built a level of trust that will make my task easier and will keep her safer. She doesn't have that with them, so they just need to be waiting in the wings on the off-chance things get bad.

"We've got a room at a hotel a couple blocks away, but thought it would be a good idea to come touch base and meet in person, just in case something happens and one of us gets to her first." Luca runs down a perfectly reasonable plan, but the last bit chaps my ass.

"That's not something she has to worry about, because I'm not leaving her fucking side." I'm sticking to Audrey like glue until I'm convinced she's safe.

Luca's brows lift, but I swear I can see a hint of a smile working onto Owen's lips.

I'm being aggressive with them, which is not normal for me, so I try to smooth things

over. “I’m just saying, for the time being, I go where Audrey goes. No exceptions.”

And that’s how it will stay.

Luca shrugs, grinning at my suddenly territorial behavior. “Understood.” He shifts his attention to Audrey. “It was nice to meet you. I’m sure we’ll be seeing you around.” He turns to Owen. “Let’s let them enjoy their evening.”

Owen glances back to the dirty dishes on the coffee table. “But what about?—”

“I’ve got it.” I collect the bowls and spoons. “I’ll call you if I need anything.”

Owen gives Audrey a little wave as he follows Luca down the hall to her bedroom and the window they also identified as the best access point.

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Audrey stares after them, her brows pinched together. “Is that how everyone is gonna start coming into my apartment now?” She frowns. “Because I don’t know how I feel about that.”

Honestly, I don’t know how I feel about it either.

TEN

AUDREY

MY EYES KEEP going to the window as I crawl into bed.

Like he often does, Maddox seems to know what I’m thinking. “Unfortunately, that’s the only hidden access point to your place, so until we know it’s safe to come and go through the front door, my team will probably be using it if they need to come inside.”

“You’re coming and going through the front door.” I regret pointing it out the minute it’s through my lips, because I want Maddox to keep coming through my front door with me. Having him at my side as I take that first step inside keeps me from freaking out as I wait to see if someone’s broken in while we were gone.

“I’m coming and going through the front door because at this point there’s no way for me to keep you safe and not use the front door.” Maddox slides under the covers, taking the spot closest to the window. “It’s the same reason I sleep in here and not out on the couch.”

That takes a little of the wind out of my sails. “Oh.” I manage a wobbly smile because my pride shouldn’t be injured by his admission. “I thought you just liked to cuddle.”

Maddox gives me a sheepish smile. “I mean, I’m not against cuddling.”

That makes me feel a little better, and when he opens his arms, I don’t even pretend to resist. I immediately scoot into his embrace, curling up against the warmth of his chest as he flips off the bedside lamp, bathing us in darkness.

“Do you think your friends will come back tonight?”

I want to be prepared—as much as I can be—for what might happen. There are so many variables as far as Trevor is concerned. I don’t think anyone can begin to guess what he might do, but I’m sure there’s at least a little consistency to how Maddox’s side of things normally work. And if there’s some sort of rotation where Luca and Owen—operatives I think he called them—are going to be coming in and out, I’d like to know.

So I won’t be startled when the comfortable little bubble surrounding me when just Maddox is here bursts.

“They won’t come back tonight unless I call them. And if I call them, we definitely want them here.” Maddox pulls me a little closer. “But I don’t foresee that happening right now.”

“Right now?” I hang onto his T-shirt, needing reassurance he’s going to be right beside me all night. “Do you expect it to happen in the future?”

“If I told you I didn’t, I’d be lying.” Maddox begins finger combing my hair. Petting me like he did last night. “Your ex has a lot on the line if he goes down, so I’m

guessing he'll do anything he can to save his ass. It would be stupid of me to think there's any scenario where he won't eventually come for you." His voice softens. "And it would be wrong of me to let you believe otherwise."

I nod, cheek rubbing against his chest. "Deep down I think I've always known he's going to come after me eventually." I swallow hard. "I just feel bad because if there is another woman involved, he's probably going after her first."

I've been so focused on my own position that it never occurred to me that someone else might be in a similar place. Of course I knew Trevor was having affairs and relationships outside of our marriage. Honestly, I preferred it that way, because he was more likely to leave me alone. It was almost a relief when he stopped touching me a year before I left him. Well, he never stopped smacking me around or pushing me into walls and furniture, but I actually preferred that over him wanting to put his hands on me in other ways.

There came a point where any contact at all turned my stomach, and the last few times we had sex, I threw up after it was over. That was even before I found out how evil he really was. I'm not sure what I would have done if he'd tried to fuck me once I discovered all his dirty secrets.

I can't imagine it would have ended well.

"Whatever happens, I promise you will be okay. There's no way I'll let him get to you." Maddox clearly believes what he's saying, and I want to believe it too.

But I also know Trevor has connections everywhere. Powerful connections. And Maddox is only one man. Even with Luca and Owen, it's still just the three of them against a group of men willing to do whatever it takes to save their skins.

"I don't want Trevor to get to you either, though." I feel sick just considering it. "If

the PI is right, and he's herding people into his house to kill them, you might not be any safer than I am."

"I'm not sure anyone said herding." Maddox continues stroking my hair, his hand moving a little faster, like he's trying to soothe me. "And you don't need to worry about me. I deal with men like him all the time."

"But it's not just him." That's what makes all this so awful. "I don't know who all Trevor has in his pocket. It could be every official in Memphis." My next breath is more of a hiccup. "It could be every official in Tennessee, for all I know."

Trevor's aspirations are high. That's why he married me. He needed a pretty, soft-spoken wife to give the world the illusion of civility so he would be electable.

"He knows so many people, and they all like him. Even if they're not in his pocket, it's possible I'm just going to look like a scorned wife."

I ruined his plans when I left. Forced him to rethink his entire election strategy. And boy did he put a positive spin on it. Sure, he no longer has me at his side looking pretty and sounding sweet, but he's found a way to use my absence to his advantage. From what I've seen during the few times I couldn't avoid his appearance on my television, he's managed to twist the breakup into a story meant to garner people's sympathy. He's been careful to tread lightly—he didn't want to do or say anything that might make me more likely to speak the truth—but he has lamented the loss of his hopes and dreams thanks to the 'mutual unraveling' of our marriage.

"I really fucking hate that guy." Maddox pulls me a little closer. "And I'm so fucking sorry you married him."

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“Don’t apologize. I’m the one who did it.” It’s my own stupid fault. “That’s part of what makes it so difficult to speak out about him. I know what people are going to think about me, because it’s what I think about myself.” Everyone with half a brain cell will judge me for my part in all this. They should.

I do.

“No.” Maddox’s arms are so tight around me now it’s hard to breathe. “You don’t get to take any of the responsibility in this situation. You were manipulated. Used by someone because they knew you wouldn’t see it coming. He took advantage of what a good person you are, Audrey. The blame here is all on him. Not you.”

“But I should’ve left so much sooner than I did. The first time he hit me, I should have?—”

“Stop.” His tone is so sharp it almost makes me jump. When he speaks again, Maddox’s voice is gentle. “You can’t think like that. People like Trevor dig the hole so slowly you don’t even realize you’re sinking until there’s no way to climb out. They do it on purpose, to trap you. They get you so deep you can’t get free on your own.”

I press my lips together because my immediate reaction is to continue arguing. To keep grabbing at the blanket of guilt that’s been covering me. It’s an automatic reaction, because somehow it provides an amount of security. Claiming responsibility for some of what happened gives me a certain sense of control. Without that...

“I don’t like feeling as if Trevor was the only one who had any power in my life.”

But maybe he did. Maybe he still does. “It makes it feel like I can never beat him. Like I will always be weak and he will always be strong and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“You aren’t weak, Audrey.” Maddox leans back so our eyes meet in the darkness. “No one who goes through what you went through and manages to come out the other side is weak.”

He seems so sure. So sincere. Like he’ll defend me even from myself. No one has ever cared about my welfare or happiness, and Maddox’s genuine concern makes me reckless.

Bold.

This time when I kiss him, I do it on purpose. With intent.

But it feels just as natural as it did before. An obvious and expected progression of the connection we have.

Part of me wants to pass off what I feel between us as simply a reaction to feeling safe for the first time in forever. I’d like to believe my interest in Maddox is nothing more than my mind attempting to latch onto the first person I’ve been able to trust. It would be safer. Easier to accept and simpler to navigate.

But I don’t think that’s what’s happening, and that scares the shit out of me. Because at some point, all of this will be over, and Maddox will leave. He’ll go back to his Murder Maddox life and I’ll be left on my own again. Only, this time, I’ll know what I’m missing out on.

Up until now, being alone was a gift. I’m not sure I’ll look at it that way after meeting the man holding me close and kissing me back.

I hold onto him as he rolls me to my back, the weight of his strong body pressing me into the mattress as I part my thighs so his hips will settle between them.

The room is spinning and I'm fighting for air when his mouth suddenly pulls from mine. He's breathing just as fast as our foreheads meet. I stare up at his closed eyes as Maddox finds my hands, lacing our fingers together before pressing them into the pillow beside my head.

For all intents and purposes, he has me pinned down. I couldn't get away even if I wanted to.

But I've never felt safer in my life. Protected. Cherished. Understood.

Connected.

And I want more.

"Maddox?"

His eyes open to meet mine, and I swallow hard.

"I want you."

I want to know what it feels like to be with someone who genuinely cares about me. I'm not silly enough to think it's anything more than Maddox simply being a caring person in general, but maybe that's enough. I don't know how all of this is going to end up. Hearing there's a chance Trevor might be trying to get rid of anyone who could incriminate him, means there's a chance I could die. And that asshole would be the last person inside me.

I've given him so much, he can't have that.

But to my disappointment, Maddox shakes his head, looking genuinely regretful. “That’s not a good idea right now.”

Maybe I am silly after all, because the right now part gives me hope. “Maybe later?”

Maddox’s eyes move over my face, his nostrils flaring as one thumb strokes against the skin of my hand. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to be making decisions about something that important after everything that’s happened the past couple of days.”

His answer surprises me. “Important? It’s just sex.” Even as I say it, I hear the lie.

And Maddox calls me out on it.

“You don’t really believe that.” His nose teases alongside mine. “Do you?”

After experiencing what ‘just sex’ is, I can say with relative certainty anything that happens between me and Maddox will never be just anything. So I shake my head, admitting the truth, but still hoping for more. “Can I touch you then? Make you feel good like you did for me?”

Maddox’s lips curve into a slow, sinful smile. “I think you already know the answer to that.” One hand releases mine, the tips of his fingers coming to trace the line of my jaw. “But, if you’re having a tough time relaxing enough to sleep, I’d be happy to take care of that for you.”

I should say no. Tell Maddox that if I don’t get to touch him, he doesn’t get to touch me.

And I might do that. Tomorrow. When his fingers aren’t teasing along the skin of my neck, reminding me of how good they can make me feel.

“You’re exploiting my weakness right now.” I’m going to cave. I know it. He probably knows it. But I want to hear him acknowledge it. If for no other reason than to make me feel better. To know he isn’t making the offer simply to be nice, but because he genuinely wants to touch me the way I genuinely want to touch him.

“I absolutely am.” Maddox’s wandering hand slides over my shoulder. “The more rested you are, the faster you’ll be, so technically this is part of my job.”

I wrinkle my nose at his reasoning. “Gross.” I use my free hand to grab his wrist, halting his slow exploration. “If you’re only touching me because it’s your job, then you can stop right now.”

His eyes fix on mine. “You know that’s not why I’m touching you, Audrey.” He doesn’t fight my hold, but he does lean in to coast his lips over my cheek until they rest against my ear. “The same way you know it would never be just sex between us.” He nips the sensitive spot just beneath my earlobe. “I touch you because I can’t not touch you, and I don’t know why. Honestly, it’s driving me a little fucking crazy.”

His head lifts, eyes going to where my hand still encircles his wrist. “So if you don’t want me to touch you, that’s fine. But you should know, I’ll do just about anything to earn that privilege back.”

Holy.

Shit.

I was with a guy for five years—even married the asshole—and never once would he have considered touching me a privilege. Maddox and I have spent less than three days together, and already he seems to care more about me than someone who claimed only death would part us.

I release my hold on him immediately. “You can touch me.” Before he moves, I grab him again. “But only if at some point I’m going to get to touch you too.”

I’ve been in a one-sided situation, and it fucking sucks. No way would I ever want that again. Even if I’m on the receiving end this time. Plus, I want to know what he feels like. The sounds he makes. I want to see his expressions and memorize his reactions.

After a few seconds, Maddox finally tucks his chin in what barely qualifies as a nod. “Okay. But not tonight.”

I can live with that. “Deal.” I release him, but a tiny bit of my brain wonders why Maddox is dodging my request. Most men would jump at the chance to be touched. Gotten off.

I guess it’s one more thing that makes him different from the men I’ve known before. One more reason I feel safe and comfortable with him. And one more explanation for why the connection we have is growing at such a rapid pace.

Maddox’s hand comes to span my rib cage, fisting in the fabric of my pajama top before pushing it up to expose my belly. When the warmth of his palm skims over my stomach, I suck in a sharp breath.

Maddox watches the path his hand follows as it glides higher. “You’re so soft.” The curve of his palm wraps around the swell of my breast and his eyes come back to my face, watching as his thumb rotates, the pad of it dragging across my already tightened nipple.

I grab onto him, fingers digging into the hard muscle of his biceps as the scope of his touch narrows. The teasing stroke becomes the pressure of a pinch when he rolls the aching peak, sending a spear of pleasure slicing its way directly to my clit.

“Audrey.”

I arch into his touch, wanting more. Needing it. “What?”

“I want to taste you.”

In the blink of an eye, his touch goes from too much to not enough. “Yes, please.”

Maddox doesn't hesitate. In the next second, his lips replace his fingers and the sensitive bud he's been teasing is drawn into the wet heat of his mouth.

The feel of him drawing on my flesh—flicking it with his tongue and raking it with his teeth—has my hips flexing against him in search of relief. He's the only man who's ever gotten me off, and now that I know what he's capable of, I'm greedy and impatient.

“Maddox, I need?—”

“I know what you need.”

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His hands curl around the waistband of my pajama pants and then they're gone, whisked away in a quick movement. In my next breath, he's there, broad shoulders wedged between my thighs. I can tell how wet I am by the ease with which his thumb glides over my skin as he parts me. Opens my most intimate area to expose the spot desperate for his attention.

"I told you I'll take care of everything, Audrey." His eyes lift to my face. "When are you going to start believing I really mean it?"

ELEVEN

MADDOX

PLENTY OF MEN at Alaskan Security have crossed the lines of propriety before me. I'm not going to claim I didn't judge them. I did.

I might have to apologize for that.

Now I understand how it happens. How quickly things spiral out of control until right and wrong are so muddled there's no clear path through. Even if there was, I'm not sure I'd take it. Not when I know there's a trail that leads me to Audrey.

I came here thinking this job would be a means to an end. I might have been more correct than I realized.

Because, with Audrey's thighs pressed against my cheeks and her fingers laced in my hair, the glistening skin of her flushed pussy laid out in front of me, my endgame is

starting to change. Shifting into something new. A variation of what was and what could be.

When I finally allow myself that first taste—hear the way my name passes through her lips—I know there’s no way I can come back from this. I’ve survived being shot. Fought through rehab and pushed past pain. But I don’t know that I want to go on if Audrey doesn’t come with me.

Which is fucking hilarious considering the limited amount of time she’s been beside me.

“Maddox.” She says my name again, fingers tightening their grip as the nub of her clit hardens beneath my tongue. I’m caught between dragging this out, prolonging my own enjoyment, or proving how competent I am. In the end, competence wins. It always does. Because I want my proficiency to encourage her to let me do this again.

When I find someone I click with—rare occasion that it is—I want to give them everything. Please them in every way possible. I’ve always been an overachiever, and that didn’t stop at the bedroom door.

So, as Audrey comes undone beneath me, I’m already hungry for more. Greedy for another taste.

When she sucks in a breath and jerks away, I know I can’t continue on as I’m going. Instead, I move up her body, lips against her skin as I work my fingers into the slick tightness of her channel. My mouth locks onto a nipple, the hard line of my dick rubbing against her thigh through the fabric of my underwear as I search for that elusive spot I plan to exploit.

When I find the textured bit of flesh, Audrey gasps, her fingers digging into the skin of my shoulders.

I pull my mouth from her body. “There. That’s it, isn’t it?” Lifting my head, I fix my eyes on her face. “I want to watch this one.”

I’m already becoming addicted to so much about her. The way she smiles. The way she speaks. Her quiet laughs and bravewords. But what I like way more than I should, is the look on her face when she comes. The flash of surprise that happens right before she crumbles. As if she can’t believe it’s happening.

Makes me wonder how often she’s been left wanting.

And I hate it, but a selfish part of me is glad. Grateful I can be the one to please her. Give her something she’s never had before.

Watching her reactions, I gauge what’s working and what’s not. It’s easy to figure out what Audrey likes, and soon she’s writhing against me, chanting my name as she races toward another crest. As her walls clench against my fingers, I fuse my lips to hers, swallowing down the sweet sounds she makes.

Claiming them for myself.

I want as much of her as I can get, and that’s a dangerous thing. For me. For her. In my line of work, distraction is our worst enemy—and I can’t imagine one bigger than fearing for Audrey’s safety.

When her limbs fall to the mattress, body boneless and sated, I lift my mouth from hers and ease my fingers free. As I shift, preparing to go collect a warm washcloth from the bathroom, the air suddenly feels very chilly.

In one very specific region.

Audrey’s eyes drop to the front of my briefs, zeroing in on the dampness blooming

across the fabric. “Oh my God,” she breathes.

I tense, embarrassed over my own lack of control. “I didn’t mean t?—”

“That is so hot.”

Did I hear her correctly? “Hot?”

Audrey’s head bobs in a nod, her hooded gaze still locked onto the outline of my softening dick. “I’ve never had someone—” her eyes finally come to my face “—enjoy touching me like that.”

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“I fucking love touching you.” The admission slips free before I can stop it.

Audrey pinches her lower lip between her teeth, looking hesitant. “I bet I would love touching you too.”

It’s not the first time she’s brought that up, and each time she presents me with it, I get closer to giving in. But I’m on a slippery slope, and already gaining speed.

So I slide off the mattress without making any more promises. After cleaning her up, and changing my underwear, I crawl under the blankets beside her, pulling her close. We’re just a few nights in, and I’m already used to the feel of her body next to mine as I sleep. I already open my eyes in the morning and anticipate seeing her face.

After struggling to find someone for so long, I never would have expected it to happen like this.

And that fucking terrifies me.

“Maddox?” Audrey’s voice is soft and sleepy.

“Yeah?”

She snuggles closer to me, wiggles in until she’s pressed against me from head to toe. Like she can’t get close enough. “I’m really glad you’re here.”

I slide my fingers through her hair the way I did last night as she fell asleep. “I’ll keep you safe. I promise.”

“I know.” She yawns, words slow and a little sloppy as she says, “But that’s not why I’m happy you’re here.”

I SLOWLY OPEN my eyes, the room coming into focus around me as I wake up. It’s pitch black—still very much the middle of the night—and I’m not sure what pulled me from the deep sleep I’d managed to fall into.

Holding my breath so I can listen better, I strain to identify any strange noises. Something to explain why the hairs on the back of my neck are standing up. But Audrey’s apartment is silent.

I carefully extricate myself from her grip and slide off the mattress, silently moving through the small unit looking for any explanation. A dripping faucet. A jammed ice maker. Maybe an appliance humming louder than before.

There’s nothing. But something is wrong. I can feel it. I’ve been doing this enough years to know when I need to listen to my gut.

And right now my gut is not happy.

So I go to work collecting important items. Audrey’s purse and her cell phone. My bag and weapons. I’m just pulling on my boots when my cell phone lights up and begins to vibrate, an unfamiliar number populating the screen. Connecting the call, I press it to my ear as I double down on my efforts to be ready to get the fuck out of here. “This is Maddox.”

“You need to get her the fuck out of there.” Darion, the private investigator Audrey’s ex hired to follow her, echoes my thoughts, then fills me in on the bad news I’ve been sensing. “Trevor and two guys loaded up into a car about thirty minutes ago. I’ve been tailing them, and I’m pretty sure they’re headed your way.”

“What’s his ETA?” I glance at where Audrey’s still soundly sleeping.

“His? You’ve got about fifteen minutes. But I can’t guarantee there’s not someone ahead of him.”

“Understood. I’ll call you when we’re out of the area.”

I disconnect because I don’t have the time or the inclination to continue conversing with him. My priority right now is to get Audrey the fuck out of here. Safely.

I go to where she’s sleeping and crouch down, brushing a little of the hair out of her face. “Audrey, sweetheart. I need you to wake up. We’ve got to go.”

Her eyes fly open, dark pools in the shadowy room. “What?” She sounds disoriented, but I don’t have time to offer her more.

“We need to go.” I straighten, offering her my hand.

She doesn’t hesitate. Her grip is strong as her palm slides into mine.

Then we’re moving fast. Her pajamas aren’t perfect, but they’ll do. I grab her a set of socks and a pair of sneakers, going to the window to check outside while she slides them on. A quick scan of the street out front accompanies my call Luca, letting him know what’s happening. Then I’m back in her bedroom, sliding open the window, making sure I put more pressure on the left side than the right so it doesn’t squeak.

Checking again for any sign someone’s outside, I toss her bag and mine out, then slide through, landing silently on my feet before reaching both arms up. “Come on.”

Again, she doesn’t hesitate. It’s not a long distance, but the elevation makes it an intimidating drop. So when Audrey doesn’t bat an eye or question me, I’m relieved as

hell. And proud as fuck.

She slides into my arms, and I lower her feet to the ground. After closing the window, I pick up our bags, lace my fingers with hers, and we start to run, weaving our way through her neighborhood.

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When I stop, she tucks in right behind me, keeping her hand on my back the way I showed her when we went through the basics of what I'd need from her at times like this. When we start to move, she stays a half step behind me and to the side, eyes moving, feet flying. Our progression is careful but quick, and soon we're closing in on the location of my parked car. Just as I'm about to make my move across the sidewalk, a set of headlights cut through the night.

Then they shut off.

Hooking one arm around Audrey's waist, I spin her into the closest line of hedges, blanketing her body with mine since the dark color of my pants and shirt will hide us better than the pale green cotton of her pajamas.

She's silent and still against me, arms tucked in tight, hands holding the waist of my pants, as the sound of an engine slowly gets louder. The vehicle I saw creeps down the road, getting closer each second, and I grit my teeth, running through all the possible scenarios in my head.

We aren't in plain sight, but we also aren't well-hidden. If they stay in their car, we should be fine. If they park and decide to start looking on foot?

We might be fucked.

As the car reaches our position, I hold my breath, wishing for just a second I could handle this the way I would if I was alone. On my own, I could move within the shadows. Get closer. Get a look at who's behind the wheel. Check the license plate along with the make and model.

Hell, I could just kill whoever's in there and call it a day.

But Audrey's safety overrides everything. And with each passing second, it only matters more. Because whether I'll admit it or not, I'm no longer here because it's an assignment.

When the car continues its established pace, I breathe a little easier. I strain to see as much as I can between the branches and around the leaves camouflaging us, but it's nearly impossible to identify anything about the vehicle other than its dark paint.

I wait until it's fully out of sight to pick up my phone. Keeping my voice low, I quickly place a call to Luca. "I need you to pick us up on the corner of Tulip and South Street."

"We'll be there in five minutes."

Audrey's blonde brows pinch as I replace my cell and collect our bags. "I thought you had a car?"

"I do, but with as slow as they were going, it's possible they clocked every vehicle on the street. If they make another pass and notice it's gone, they might connect it to you." It won't be an easy process for them—Pierce registers all our vehicles using shell companies—but I don't know who Audrey's ex is connected with. If it includes people within the police department like we suspect, that search could get a whole lot easier.

Audrey nods, looking scared for the first time. "You think they'll be able to tell we just left?"

"Unfortunately, your spot in the bed is probably still warm, so yeah. If they go into your apartment—which I'm sure they will—they'll know that we're close." I take her

hand again, triple checking our surroundings before leading her out of the bushes. “Which is why we need to get the fuck out of here.”

I push her hard for the next few minutes, practically dragging Audrey behind me as her shorter legs attempt to keep up with my strides. At one point, I consider stopping to pick her up and carry her, but we’re so close and she’s trying so hard, I leave things as they are. Knowing she did her part to get away is going to help her confidence. And the more confident she is, the easier it will be if we have to do it again.

And I’m starting to get concerned we might have to do it again unless we can figure out who’s included in our list of enemies.

We reach the pickup point just as Luca and Owen pull up. Opening the back door, I urge Audrey in and immediately follow behind her, using my body to push hers across the seat. Luca takes off the second my ass is in place, leaving me to drag my feet into the floorboards and pull the door closed as we drive off.

“You two okay?” Owen asks from the passenger seat, craning his neck to look us over. “What the fuck happened?”

“Darion called me. I was already up because something felt off, so we were able to get out quick.” And thank God for that. If I’d been dead asleep when I got that call, things could have been a whole hell of a lot different. “We didn’t make it to my car before they got there, and there’s a chance it could have been compromised, so we had to leave it behind.”

Luca scrubs one hand down his face, eyes darting between the mirrors as he moves us farther from Audrey’s neighborhood. “This is turning out to be a fucking mess, isn’t it?”

Audrey's eyes lock onto my face. They're filled with regret and sadness. "I'm sorry you were dragged into this."

I turn my attention from Luca, focusing only on her. Bringing one hand to her cheek, I cradle her face, leaning close. "Do not apologize for that. Okay?" I can't stand her thinking she's done something wrong here. "None of this is your fault."

"It is though." Her eyes shimmer in the glow of headlights as they flash through the interior. "I should have never married Trevor. I was so stupid. So naïve. I should have seen how awful he was, and?—"

"He didn't want you to see what he was, Audrey. Men like Trevor are good at pretending to be something else. Someoneelse. You don't get to see who they really are until it's too late, and that's by design."

During my time at Alaskan Security I've come across plenty of Trevors. I know how they work. I know what makes them tick and what feeds them.

And I know how to bring them down.

"You did the right thing when you called us." I catch a stray tear as it leaks free, swiping it away with my thumb. "This is what I do. Don't think for a second I'd rather be anywhere else."

For a second, I forget it's not just me and Audrey. Everything around us disappears. I lean in and press my lips to hers, wanting to reassure her. Needing to reassure myself. Because now that the immediate threat is over, all the could haves and what ifs are starting to crawl along my skin.

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I knew Audrey was in danger. Of course I did. That's why I'm here.

Having to whisk her away in the middle of the night because the man I'm protecting her from decided to make his move has really driven the reality of it home. It has me pulling her in. Holding her tight. Desperate to get her close enough no one else will know she exists.

It's not until Luca clears his throat that the full scope of our current situation comes back into focus.

"Where to now, boss?" He puts the ball in my court since this is my assignment. Or maybe because he recognizes how all-in I already am.

I pull my mouth from Audrey's, but keep her tight to me. "Find us a decent hotel where we can figure out what the fuck is going on."

TWELVE

AUDREY

"AUDREY, SWEETHEART. IT'S time to wake up." Maddox's voice is low and soft. Way different than the last time he said those same words.

I still jolt awake, sucking in a breath as reality comes crashing back down on me. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Not long. Maybe an hour or two." He reaches out to smooth back my hair. "You can

go back to sleep as soon as you call work and let them know you won't be in."

I freaking hate this. Hate that once again my life is being upended. That I'm losing everything because of an awful man and my own stupid choices.

At least I get to do it in a really nice hotel room this time.

I push up to a sitting position in the luxurious king-size bed Maddox tucked me into once we arrived. I was expecting to be in a motel or maybe a lower-priced hotel, so when Maddox directed Luca to this place, I was shocked.

And grateful. Not knowing what's coming at you next is slightly easier to deal with on comfortable pillows and high thread count sheets.

"Okay." I look around, fairly confident I left my purse on the table beside me. "Do you know where my phone is?"

Maddox's expression fills with regret. "Your phone has been disassembled for now." He hands over his cell. "For the time being, you'll have to use mine."

I get it—genuinely, I do. There's just one small problem with this plan. "I don't know anybody's phone numbers."

Everything is in my contacts on my cell. Outside of my own, I don't know a single number or email address off the top of my head.

Maddox gives me a wide grin. "Then I guess it's good I downloaded everything onto my laptop." He stands from where he's been seated at the edge of the bed. "I also didn't want to risk losing your photos or anything else important, so we transferred the full contents onto a hard drive." Holding out a hand, he tugs me up and off the bed before leading me to the built-in table where a computer is set up and waiting.

Again, I'm struck by how caring and considerate and thoughtful Maddox is. Yet another surprise from a man I initially expected to be cold, hard, and calculating. And I would have been okay with that as long as he kept me safe.

But sweet, gentle Murder Maddox is much better.

Once I'm seated and gathering the numbers I need to call, Maddox goes to the door. As I place the first of my phone calls, I hear him speaking quietly to whoever's outside. I can't hear what they're saying because I'm too busy lying through my teeth to Ginny, telling her I've had a medical emergency and need to take an immediate and undetermined leave of absence. She's the associate I've decided to leave in charge of the store, and I'm relatively confident she can handle it, but I also let her know I can be reached at Maddox's number. Apparently Alaskan Security is in possession of some supersecret magic that makes a cell phone impossible to track, so it's safe for me to use as a point of contact.

I'm just hanging up when Maddox returns, carrying a cardboard tray with two gigantic iced coffees in one hand and a white paper bag in the other. He lifts them up. "Breakfast is here."

I shake my head, stomach turning at the thought of putting anything into it. "I'd love a coffee, but I'm not sure I can manage to eat anything right now."

"I understand." Maddox pulls the first of the drinks free and hands it over. Then he digs into the bag. "But can you try? For me?" He lays down a napkin then sets a savory looking pastry on top of it. "It took me a while to find something I thought you might like, and Luca bitched about how far he had to drive to get it. If you could just take one bite so I can tell him it was worth all the effort, that would be fantastic."

My eyes drop to the cheesy smelling item in front of me. Layers of pastry goodness seem to be flecked with bits of what I think is ham and browned cheese. It looks

delicious and smells even better.

I guess I could manage a bite considering Maddox went to all the trouble to find something he thought I would like and then forced his teammate to go get it. It's still slightly warm when I pick it up, and as I bite down, the complementary flavors of sweetly smoked ham and sharp aged cheese nearly make my eyes roll back in my head as I accidentally let out a little moan.

"Holy crap, this is good."

When I look Maddox's way, I expect him to have that adorable grin he sports so often. Instead, I'm met with a very different version of the man who seems to have as many layers as the breakfast he bought me.

Maddox's blue eyes are locked on my mouth, his focus laser sharp as his nostrils flare. His whole body is still, muscles strung tight and hands clenched into fists at his side.

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Swallowing down the bite I took, I run the tip of my tongue across my lip to catch any stray crumbs. “Maddox? Is everything okay?”

The muscle at the edge of his jaw twitches as he lowers to his knees in front of me, bringing us eye-to-eye. “I don’t like you having to stay in Memphis. I want to get you the fuck out of here.” His hands grip the edge of my seat, pulling me closer, the movement forcing my knees to part so they bracket his hips. “I’ve never been scared on an assignment, but last night...”

He doesn’t finish, and I want to hear what he has to say. “Last night?”

Maddox’s eyes move over my face. “Last night I was fucking terrified.”

That makes me feel bad. And good. Awful but great. Conflicted yet certain.

And all of those feelings are centered around the man kneeling in front of me. He looks freaking miserable and I hate it. But I think hearing how I felt last night will make him feel better.

“I wasn’t scared at all.” Stressed-out? Sure. Worried? Yes. But scared? Not for a second. I knew Maddox would take care of me.

Maddox goes still and silent for a few seconds. Then he’s moving, hands coming to my face as he pulls my mouth to his. One hand curves to the back of my head, cradling my skull as the other arm bands around my back, dragging me off the chair and into his lap.

I love the way he touches me. The way he kisses me. Like he won't survive another second without the contact. I understand, because that's how I feel about him. I always thought it took time to build a relationship. That anything that came fast and easy was a lie built on bullshit and manipulation. I swore to myself I would be smarter next time. That I wouldn't get caught up in another whirlwind.

But here I am. Spinning.

And the only reason it stops is the loud knock on our door.

It's aggressive and urgent and... Aggravating.

I'm annoyed, but Maddox immediately goes on high alert. Bringing us both to our feet and shoving my body behind his.

"Maddox, it's me. You've got a visitor."

He seems to relax a little at the sound of Luca's voice on the other side of the door, but now his expression matches mine. Annoyance and irritation draw his brows low, bringing him to the edge of dangerous.

He goes to the door and cracks it open. "What the fuck are you doing here? How did you find us?"

"I'm a little offended at how incompetent you think I am." The voice that responds is familiar. "But in all fairness, my boss is also friends with your boss, so I didn't have to work very hard."

Maddox turns to glance at me, eyes taking me in from head to toe before he steps back, bringing the door with him until our visitor comes into view.

And it's someone I know. Sort of.

He's tall and handsome, with dark skin, dark eyes, and an amount of swagger that terrified me the last two times our paths crossed.

But this time I'm not afraid to face him. "You're the private investigator Trevor hired to follow me."

The man nods. "I am." He angles a brow and turns to Maddox.

Maddox jerks his chin toward our room, gesturing for him to come inside. "I'm assuming you're here to talk to her."

"Technically, I'm here to talk to both of you." His tone is light and easy as he walks in, scanning the space with a critical and appraising eye. His cool gaze finally levels on me. "We haven't officially met." He holds a hand out. "I'm Darion. Alaskan Security decided to hire me on for this case since it seems like you guys are a few steps behind."

I don't like that he's insinuating Maddox hasn't done a good job, so I cross both arms over my chest instead of shaking his hand. "Behind who? You?"

Darion's brows lift, like he's surprised at my question. "I have to admit, I wasn't expecting you to be so..." His lips purse in thought then twist into a hint of a smirk. "Forceful."

Honestly, neither did I, but there's something about having Maddox a few feet away that makes me feel like I can conquer almost anything. "You didn't answer my question."

Darion flashes me a smile, the divot of a dimple digging into one smoothly shaved

cheek. “I like you.”

“Don’t like her too much.” The threat in Maddox’s words is not lost on me.

But Darion seems unbothered. “Don’t get your panties in a twist. I’m not going to seduce your girl.”

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The way he says it makes me think it might have happened before. That Darion—in his perfectly tailored suit and sharp-edged haircut—has lured more than a few women from happy homes.

Then again, if the home was that happy, I'd think most women would be inclined to stay, so maybe it's unhappy homes they're ready to leave behind. I know I would have probably swooned over the possibility of being whisked away by a man like him not so long ago.

Not anymore though. There's only one man I'm interested in whisking me away, and he's proven himself more than capable of the task.

“You still haven't answered my question. Who do you think we're a few steps behind?”

“All business, aren't you?” Darion takes the chair I recently vacated, unbuttoning his jacket as he lowers to the seat. After crossing his legs, resting an ankle against his knee, he leans back. “It's recently come to our attention that my company should probably be doing a little more investigating of the people who hire us.” His dark eyes go from me to Maddox. “The owner ran into an issue with a client becoming problematic, so now we dig a little deeper than we once did.” His focus comes back to me. “During our investigation of your ex-husband, I unearthed a few suspicious connections that made me inclined to believe turning over the information I collected on you would put you in danger.”

He's making it sound like he knows a lot about me and Trevor, and that has me wondering. “How long have you been investigating me?”

Darion hesitates before admitting, “A little over a year.”

That sends me stepping back. “A year?” I move back again, sinking down when my thighs hit the edge of the bed. “That was before I left.”

Darion nods. “Correct.”

My skin feels cold and the room is moving around me. “Did he know I was going to leave him?”

Darion tips his head in a nod. “He suspected it.”

“That’s enough.” Maddox tries to cut off the conversation. “She’s had a long night and needs to rest.”

I shake my head, because I need to know the truth of what I’m facing. “I’m okay, just surprised. He seemed so shocked when he found out I was gone.” I’d been so careful. Covered my tracks and hidden my preparations. Honestly, even I hadn’t known exactly when I’d be walking out, so hearing Trevor was prepared is making me question everything I’ve done.

“He was surprised, because I didn’t tell him the truth.” Darion studies me. “I didn’t tell him when you opened a new bank account. When you met with a divorce attorney. When you connected with the people who ultimately helped you leave.”

Darion explains that if Trevor asked, he flat out lied about where he’d seen me. Concocted explanations for my whereabouts. And most of them are shockingly similar to what I claimed when Trevor interrogated me.

That can’t be a coincidence. “Did you have my house bugged?”

Darion shakes his head. “Not your house.” He points at me. “You. Remember that new phone Trevor gave you for your birthday? It had a voice-activated recording device in it, and you took your phone everywhere.”

“So you heard the lies I told him and then backed me up?” All this time, someone was looking out for me. And I had no idea.

I know it should make things better, but it almost makes them worse. I was so proud of leaving. Feeling like I could get away on my own helped me have the confidence to make those first phone calls to the Memphis police. I thought even if I did have to go on the record, I could do it. That I was brave enough to share what I knew because I’d been brave enough to walk away.

“If I hadn’t, he would have killed you before you had the chance to walk out, Audrey.” Darion uncrosses his legs and leans forward, his eyes fixed on me. “But make no mistake, you did the hard work. I just fed him the meal you cooked.”

I want to feel like I deserve at least a little credit, but I’m not sure I do. I know Lydia and Savannah helped me with the actual escape, but I felt like I’d done all the work leading up to it. That I was the one who put all the ducks in a row so I was the one who should be proud.

But now I know the only reason my ducks didn’t end up dinner was because of Darion. Without him backing me up—keeping Trevor from getting suspicious—I wouldn’t have gotten out.

I’ve tried to build myself up, but the whole thing was constructed with straw. And all it took was one gust of truth to blow it all away.

“I’m going to hang around Memphis for a while. Keep an eye on Trevor and his associates. Not just for your benefit, but also to cover my company’s ass. Once

Trevor goes down—and he will go down—I want my nose to be clean.” Darion stands up, one hand deftly buttoning his jacket in a fluid movement. “If you need anything, you know how to reach me.” He pauses to shake Maddox’s hand and then leaves, taking the tiny bit of wind remaining in my sails with him.

“Audrey.” Maddox crosses the room, coming straight to stand in front of me. “I don’t know what you’re thinking, but I don’t fucking like it.” He crouches down, trying to make me look at him. “Talk to me, sweetheart. Tell me what’s happening in that pretty head of yours.”

I swallow at the ache in my throat. “I thought I’d changed, but I haven’t. I wanted to believe I was stronger—braver—but it was all fake. I thought I was carrying the load, but everyone was behind the curtain supporting the weight.”

“That’s not true,” Maddox tries to argue with me.

“Yes, it is. You just heard Darion. The only reason I was able to get out of there alive was because he lied to Trevor. Without that, I never would’ve made it out the door. Trevor would have killed me and I would have been the one leaving his house in an unmarked van.” The unsettling thought adds another layer to my burden. To my shame. “If I can’t even manage to convince Trevor I’m telling the truth, then how am I going to convince the world?” Granted, I wasn’t telling Trevor the truth, but still. My believability is obviously lacking. There’s no way anyone will listen when I try to show them who he really is.

Maddox is quiet for a minute, his blue eyes moving over my face. “I wish I could tell you it will be easy to convince the authorities that what you’re saying is true, but there’s a long history proving otherwise.” His hands come to my thighs, warm and solid as they slide up to grip my hips. “Many women weren’t believed. No matter how much proof they had. No matter how many people corroborated their story. It’s fucking infuriating.” He takes a deep breath. “And I can’t guarantee that won’t

happen here.” Maddox’s expression hardens. “But I swear to you, Trevor won’t get away with what he’s done.”

My chin wobbles. “He might, though.” And if he does, I’ll never be safe. I’ll spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder. Wondering when he’s going to come for me. How long I have left before all my bad decisions do me in.

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The curl of Maddox's lips is slow and carries an odd combination of amusement and smugness. "No. He won't."

I open my mouth to argue with him, but then what he's saying hits me. "Oh."

I wait for a pang of some sort of unwanted emotion to hit. Maybe guilt. Or sadness. God, possibly sympathy.

None comes.

The only thing I feel is relief. Maybe gratitude.

A small smile that probably looks a lot like Maddox's works onto my mouth. "I don't remember murder being part of the agreement I made with Alaskan Security."

Maddox pulls me closer to the edge of the bed and closer to him. "Then you didn't read the fine print, because murder is always part of the agreement when you hire Alaskan Security." He leans close, brushing his lips across mine. "Now get your ass over in that chair, eat your breakfast, and finish your phone calls so you can lay down and take a damn nap."

THIRTEEN

MADDOX

"WHAT TIME IS it?" Audrey's voice is sleepy behind me, and I turn to find her curled on one side, watching me as I work.

“Just after noon.” She hasn’t really been asleep that long, so I’m surprised she’s up. “Was I being too loud?”

“No.” Pushing back the covers, she works up to a sitting position and throws both feet over the edge of the king-size bed. “I’ve never been a great napper, no matter how tired I am.” Her lips purse, twisting to one side, then the other. “Even when I was little, I didn’t nap. My mom said it was awful because all her friends got to relax while their kids slept and she didn’t.” Her tone is flat. Emotionless.

Leaving behind my computer, I join her on the bed, pulling her close. “Do you need to let her know where you are?” I know Audrey didn’t have a great relationship with either of her parents, but I don’t want to assume that means she’s not still in regular contact with them. “If you need to reach out to her, or anyone else, you can use my phone.”

Audrey shakes her head, giving me a sad smile. “My mom died a couple years ago.” Her eyes drop to her lap. “I always assumed she would die from something related to her drinking, so when I found out she was crossing the street and got hit by a car blowing through a red light, it kind of rocked my world.”

“I can imagine.” Especially since it happened when she was still with her ex-husband and dealing with his bullshit on a daily basis. “Do you have any other family?”

Deep down I suspect I know the answer, I just want to be sure. I don’t know why, it’s only going to piss me off. Confirm my suspicions about why Trevor would single her out. Not that Audrey isn’t beautiful and smart and funny and kind. But those aren’t generally the characteristics shitheads like Trevor look for in women.

They want someone they can isolate. Someone who’ll rely only on them. Someone they can control and manipulate without outside influence or opinions raising questions and concerns.

Audrey shakes her head. “My mom was an only child and her parents are long gone. My dad walked out when I was little and I never saw or heard from him again.”

I pull in a deep breath, forcing myself to remain calm. “No friends who’ll get worried when they don’t hear from you?”

Again, I know what her answer’s going to be. And again, it’s going to bring me one step closer to hunting Trevor down and eliminating him completely. The world would be better for it. But he’s likely the key to finding other men doing bad things, and without him, making sure they pay for their crimes will be exponentially more difficult.

Audrey lifts one shoulder and lets it drop. “I didn’t want to risk dragging someone else into the mess I was in.” She takes a deep breath. “And any friends I had before, I met through Trevor, so I couldn’t have anything to do with them once I left.”

I scowl at the information. At the confirmation that she’s been completely and utterly alone, facing down a man capable of unspeakable acts. Never knowing when he might come for her. Never knowing who to trust.

“I mean, I have online friends.” She gives me a smile and reaches out to take one of my hands in hers. “It hasn’t been that bad. Really. I’m in a few Instagram chats with people I know through work.” She lifts her brows, leaning close to drop her voice. “And I’m in a local Facebook group that’s all women in business, but mostly everyone just complains about how hard it is to date in Memphis.”

She’s trying to make me feel better. It’s only making everything worse. Because now I know when I took her phone I cut off the only connection she had to her support system.

Lacking as it was.

“Here.” I hand over my cell. “Download any apps you want.”

Audrey eyes the device. “But won’t someone be able to tell where I am from that?”

I shake my head. “Not if you do it on this phone.” I point to the desk. “Or that computer. Both are untraceable.”

“But what about you?” Audrey’s lips press together as she continues staring at the offering. “I can’t just take over your phone.”

“Sure you can.” I swipe the screen and tap in the code to unlock it, making sure she can see what it is. “I don’t have anything on it. And we’re together for the foreseeable future, so it’s not like I won’t be able to get to it if I need it.”

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Audrey takes the phone, still looking uncertain. “What do I do if it starts to ring?”

I shrug, because it doesn’t really matter what she does. “Answer it if you want, or give it to me so I can answer it.”

Her brows pinch together. “Won’t that confuse whoever’s on the other end?”

“Maybe for a second, but they’ll figure it out.” I kinda look forward to the first time Isaac checks to make sure he dialed the right number. “Just don’t post anything that could help someone figure out where you are.”

Audrey’s eyes lift to my face. “I was going to do a slideshow of the hotel that included our room number. Are you saying that would be a bad idea?”

“It’s a good thing I know you’re giving me shit or I’d be revoking your privileges so fast it would make your head spin.” I stretch out on the bed next to her as Audrey fiddles with the cell. “What did Ginny say when you called her?”

“She seemed pretty confident she could handle the store while I’m gone.” Audrey doesn’t sound convinced.

I shift closer, wanting to be right next to her. “You don’t think she can?”

“Ginny can absolutely run the store, I’m just worried the rest of the team might give her shit.” She sighs, dropping the phone to her lap. “She’s just so young and I’m worried they’ll try to steamroll her.”

“It’s too bad that guy they brought in to train for the assistant manager position couldn’t take over.” I’d have had a fucking great time giving Dane all the shit work. “Because I think he would have been great at it.”

Audrey angles a brow at me. “I think he would have eliminated folding and tables would be piled with wadded up clothes.”

I groan. “I never want to fold another shirt in my life.”

Audrey laughs. “That’s going to make it difficult to pack for your next assignment.” Her smile slips. “Do you know where you’ll have to go next?”

For the first time in my career I’m not excited about what might be coming. “Don’t know yet. I guess it’ll depend on what’s available when I’m done here.”

And if Zeke decides I’m recovered enough to be back on the roster.

Her lips curve. “Hopefully it’s something more exciting than sitting in a hotel room watching me scroll Instagram.”

I almost tell her this is way more exciting than the last nine months have been for me, but I hold back. Audrey’s finally feeling safe—even after having to flee her apartment in the middle of the night—and finding out I was flat on my back for a good chunk of the past year might make her doubt my ability to protect her.

Might make her doubt me.

“Don’t sell yourself short.” I scoot in even closer, lining my body against hers so I can see what she’s doing. “I’m going to watch you go through Facebook too.”

“DO YOU THINK she could get us a list of names we can start looking into?” Pierce

asks, his face dominating the screen of my laptop.

“I’m sure she’ll do her best. I don’t know how much she knows outside of what she found on Trevor’s laptop, but I’m fairly confident Audrey will tell us everything she knows.” At least, I’m confident she’ll tell me. “But you better be fucking positive we can keep her safe when the shit hits the fan.”

Pierce studies me. His eyes barely narrowing. “I’d say that’s in your hands more than it is mine.” His lips twist into a smirk. “And from what I’ve heard, I doubt you’ll let anyone near her.”

Fucking Luca. “If you have something to say, just say it.” If Pierce wants to have a problem with how I’m handling this case, then I’d rather get it all out there. Right now. While Audrey’s in the shower and can’t hear what either of us say.

Instead of looking bothered by my outburst, Pierce laughs. “Based on that reaction, I’m going to assume the information I received was correct, and you and Ms. Hawthorne have already developed an attachment.”

Is that what’s between me and Audrey? An attachment? Up until now, I thought of it as a connection. An understanding each of us possesses regarding the other. It wasn’t learned or developed, but innate. Natural. Questioning if that connection could become something more significant—an attachment—hadn’t yet crossed my mind.

To be fair, I’ve been a little busy smuggling Audrey out of her apartment, making sure she eats and hydrates, and folding fucking beige T-shirts.

“Does it matter?” Pierce has no room to judge me or give me shit. Considering he basically married one of his employees, the man shouldn’t be throwing fucking stones.

“It only matters if it negatively affects your ability to do your job.” Pierce leans forward, expression serious. “Do your feelings for Ms. Hawthorne negatively affect your ability to keep her safe?”

Negatively? I shake my head. “Abso-fucking-lutely not.” I will do whatever it takes to keep Audrey safe. Honestly, that’s what I would have done to start with. So with complete honesty, I say, “My feelings—whatever they are or aren’t—won’t change my focus on her safety.”

They will, however, make me more inclined to worry about her happiness. Whether or not she’s eaten properly. Whether or not she’s comfortable.

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And where in the hell that dog whose picture is all over her Instagram has gone.

“Good.” Pierce leans back in his chair, steeping his fingers. “Get us that list. I’ll put Intel on it immediately to see what they can find out. We’re still in the process of vetting possible contact points within the Memphis Police Department, but that task isn’t turning out to be as simple as we were hoping it would be.”

That has my brows lifting. “Is there something I should know?”

Audrey’s already called their hotline, so if there is a problem within that department, it could theoretically affect her. Especially since we’re hoping to handle at least part of this situation in a legitimate fashion to ensure Trevor goes down publicly for what he’s done.

“At this point, we’re having trouble even getting our foot in the door.” Pierce purses his lips, looking irritated. “We were aware there was some general disruption in the Memphis and Nashville area, but I don’t believe we understood how far it reaches.”

“If we can’t find a viable contact within the Memphis PD, I don’t know that I can ever feel comfortable leaving.” My eyes drift in the direction of the bathroom where Audrey is. “Unless Trevor’s taken care of, she’s always going to be in danger.”

“Then take her to Nashville. If she’s impossible to find, it’s likely he’ll eventually turn his attention elsewhere.” Pierce lays it out like I haven’t already considered doing exactly that.

“She won’t go.” I can say it with complete certainty.

Pierce's head bobs back in surprise. "You've already suggested this to her?"

"I don't have to." My jaw begins to tense, and I force it to relax. "She won't risk bringing danger anywhere near Savannah." If she was hesitant about making real life friends, then Audrey is surely not going to risk Savannah. "But if it comes down to it, I'm willing to do whatever it takes to keep her safe."

Even if Audrey hates me for a little bit.

It'll be worth it to make sure she keeps on living. So if I have to drag her to Nashville, kicking and screaming, that's what I'll do.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that." Pierce straightens, dropping his hands. "We will do everything we can here. See what information you can get from her and if there's a way to get our hands on that flash drive. It's possible there's more information on it than she realizes."

I nod. "I can do that." I grip the edge of the computer screen as Audrey steps out of the bathroom. "I'll keep you posted."

Closing my computer, I turn to face her. "Feel better?"

She perked up a bit after spending a little time chatting with her online friends, but as the day wore on, I could tell she was beginning to struggle.

"Better is relative, I guess." Wrinkling her nose, Audrey gives me a shrug. "This just really isn't how I saw my life going."

She walks toward the bed, but I reach out, snagging her by the arm and pulling her into my lap. Tucking her close, I lean back, feeling better about everything now that I'm touching her.

“We’re doing everything we can to figure this out so you can get back to normal.”

Audrey gives me a sad smile. “That’s the thing. I wastalkingabout my normal.” Her eyes drop as she picks at a loose thread on her pajamas. “It’s not like I wanted anything big or amazing. I just wanted to be happy and loved and appreciated.”

The pain in her voice makes my chest ache. “It’s going to happen. I promise.”

Audrey’s blue eyes lift to my face. “It makes me sad that I almost don’t even care about those things anymore.” She pulls in a shaky breath. “Now I just want to survive.” Her gaze holds mine. “And I want to make sure Trevor doesn’t hurt anybody else. Tellyour boss I’ll write down all the names I can remember and who they are.” Her full lips press together, flattening for a minute before she continues. “And if you say I can trust him with the flash drive, then we can go get it tomorrow.”

So much for having a quiet conversation while she was in the shower.

“I trust Pierce with my life.” I continue, because I want Audrey to know the full scope of my belief in the people I work with. “I would trust anyone at Alaskan Security with my life.” A small smile tugs at my lips. “And that includes all the kids.”

Audrey’s chin tucks, her brows coming together. “Kids?”

I chuckle, because I probably should have explained that a little bit better. “Don’t worry, we don’t employ kids.” I smooth one hand over her thigh, the soft fabric of her pajamas rubbing against my palm. “There are multiple teams within the company. Shadow is the team Zeke and I are both on. Rogue is the main team in Alaska. Stealth is there too, but it’s a smaller group. Then there’s Alpha and Beta, but those guys are all over the place all the time.”

Alaskan Security is large. Employs over fifty people, and now we’re spreading across

the country. It's been amazing to see the company grow, and I've loved every minute of my time there.

But one specific bit has been my favorite.

"All the men on Rogue are paired off and a bunch of them have kids." I think of all the little hooligans running around and smile. "Pierce, the owner, also has a daughter, and she's cute as hell."

And I love every damn one of them. I don't get to see them as much as I'd prefer—especially now that I'm in Nashville—but when I do, it's fucking magical. Their little voices and wild laughs. The pure way they accept everyone. The love they dish out without fear or concern it won't be offered back.

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Audrey stares at me, still looking confused. “I guess it never occurred to me that mercenaries could be daddies.” She snorts. “Which is stupid since Savannah’s pregnant.”

I grin, not even a little bothered by her slightly lacking assessment of my profession. “Mercenaries can be anything they want to be.”

Shifting my arms, I scoop her up and push to my feet, carrying her over to the bed to settle her into the spot she seems to prefer. “It’s actually kind of a cool situation. There’s a whole community in Fairbanks where almost everybody lives, so the kids all get to grow up together.”

I watch them and wonder what it might have been like to grow up around people who understood me. If it would have changed anything. Or if I eventually would have become the same—occasionally awkward—man I am now.

Audrey’s smile is warm as she slides under the blankets. “That does sound really nice.” She situates her head on the pillow as I climb in next to her. “It would be really nice to have so many other people around. Especially if everybody gets along.”

“For the most part everybody gets along.” I scoot in close. “Zeke does get a little pissed when I sneak into his house and eat all the cookies Savannah makes for him.”

“Maybe your parents and siblings don’t get you, but it sounds like you were able to find an extended family who does.” Audrey reaches up to smooth back a little of my hair. “That makes me really happy for you.”

My eyes almost slip shut as her nails gently scrape across my scalp. I love having my head scratched. All my muscles instantly turn to liquid, along with my brain, which is why I say, “They would all love you.”

“Actually,” she uses her free hand to grab my phone from the nightstand. “I got a friend request from someone I think you might know.” She swipes across the screen, pulling up the Instagram app. Sure enough, Heidi has requested to follow her. She chews her lower lip. “I didn’t accept it, because I didn’t know if it would mess anything up.”

“Is your account private?”

She nods. “People can find me and see my profile picture, but they can’t see who I follow or who follows me.”

“Heidi’s also a super skilled hacker, so if it was an issue, I don’t think she would have sent the request.”

My eyelids are getting heavy as Audrey continues sliding her fingers along my scalp.

But then they suddenly go still.

My lids are heavy when I look her way, but the look on her face has me wide awake. “What’s wrong?”

She’s still looking through Instagram, but now she has her messages open. “I got a message from a woman who said she knows someone connected with Trevor.” Audrey starts breathing faster, her expression pinched with shock. “She says she tried reporting him to the police, and no one did anything.” Again, she flips the screen my way. “She’s worried he might try to shut her up.”

I scan the lengthy message that confirms our suspicions. Sitting up, I gently take the phone from her hand. “It sounds like we’re going to need to get in touch with Becca.”

FOURTEEN

AUDREY

“I FEEL RIDICULOUS.” I’ve done the best I can with my hair under the circumstances, but even if it looked perfect—which it doesn’t—it still wouldn’t negate the fact that I’m about to go meet someone very important wearing day-old pajamas, a random pair of sneakers, and no bra.

“Luca will pick up your order as soon as the store opens, so you’ll be able to change as soon as we get back.” Maddox gives me a grin, his blue eyes looking me over where I sit in the passenger seat of the car Luca and Owen were finally able to retrieve from my neighborhood late last night. “And I think you look cute.”

I roll my eyes because he’s as ridiculous as my outfit. “You only think I look cute because you like me.”

The smile slips from Maddox’s lips. “You’re right. I do like you.” He shakes his head. “But that’s not the only reason I think you look cute.”

There’s an intensity in the way he’s staring at me now, and I’m not quite sure how to take it.

We’ve been thrown together in highly unusual and stressful circumstances. Of course we’re not going to act like our normal selves. I’m sure when this is all over Maddox will realize I’m just a boring little clothing store manager with so much baggage I should have my own luggage cart. And then he’ll move on.

And that's okay. I want him to be happy. I want him to be surrounded by his chosen family so he feels accepted and understood.

Maybe I can figure out a way to do the same thing once I don't have the dark and stormy cloud that is Trevor hanging over me. Making sure I'm too scared to get close to anyone.

"Have you figured out whether or not you know this woman Becca?" Maddox asks, redirecting both the conversation and my thoughts.

"She doesn't have any pictures of herself on her Instagram, so without seeing her, I don't know for sure." All I have is a first name and her claim that she knows what Trevor and his associates are doing. "I can't think of any Beccas, but I'm not the best with names."

Maddox takes a deep breath, his hands tightening on the wheel as we make our way into Memphis. "I don't know whether to hope she really has information, or hope she doesn't."

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“Same.” I would love to have someone else standing beside me, but that will put them in the same line of fire. And I don’t want that for anyone.

Well... Maybe I’d want that for a few people.

The GPS directs us to get off the highway, and soon we’re pulling through a pretty upscale neighborhood. The houses at the front of the subdivision are huge and high-end. Almost as nice as the one I lived in with Trevor, making it nearly impossible to find a single one appealing. Money and nice things impressed me once.

Not anymore.

Thankfully, the new McMansions are quickly replaced by smaller, older, more interesting homes. After a couple more turns, we’re pulling into the driveway of a cute tri-level with a perfectly manicured lawn and minimal landscaping. The outside is tidy, but simple, and painted in a neutral palette of browns and beiges.

Maddox parks, rounds the front of the sedan, and opens my door, reaching out one hand for me. “Make sure you stay behind me and keep my body between you and everybody else.”

I know the drill, but part of his statement concerns me. “Everybody else? Are you expecting other people?”

Maddox’s blue eyes scan our surroundings. “No, but I’ve been surprised before.” There’s something ominous in the way he says it, and it sends my stomach to my feet.

“Should we have brought Luca and Owen with us?” I know he didn’t want to overwhelm Becca with three giant mercenaries on her doorstep, but now I’m questioning that decision.

“They’re in the area in case we need them.” Maddox says it like that solves all our problems.

But even if they’re close, it will still take them at least a minute or two to get to us, and a lot can happen in two minutes.

“You’re wearing a vest, right?” I tuck close to him, looking around the same way he is as we walk up the driveway and along the sidewalk leading to a small, covered porch.

“Yes, but there are plenty of bullets that can go through it, especially at point-blank range.” When we reach the front door, Maddox positions my body behind his and up against the jut of the split-level portion of the house, protecting me from all but one side. “And even if they don’t make it through the vest, it still hurts like fuck to get shot.”

I don’t want to know how he knows any of this, but his explanation has me thinking about that scar I saw on him. It looked an awful lot like?—

The front door opens before we even ring the bell, and I’m a little surprised at the woman staring out at us.

“Becca?” Maddox seems as shocked as me as he takes in the tiny woman staring out at us.

“That’s right.” Her eyes narrow on Maddox before settling on me. “You must be Audrey.”

“That’s me.” I scan her makeup-free face for anything familiar. “Have we met before?”

Becca shakes her head. “No.” She steps back, motioning us inside. “You should probably get in here just in case somebody’s got eyes on my house.”

Maddox gives the street outside one more glance before stepping into the house and pulling me in behind him. As soon as we’ve crossed the threshold, he closes the door. Then he turns to Becca.

“I’m gonna have to go through this place and make sure no one else is here.”

“I get it.” Becca motions toward her home with one hand. “Have at it.”

Maddox turns to me, eyes moving over where I stand. “If you need me?”

“If I need you, you’ll know it.” I give him a smile because I want him to know it’s okay to go do what he has to do. “But I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

Could this all be a set-up? Sure, but it doesn’t seem like it. After we got Becca’s message last night, Maddox called Pierce and forwarded everything we had on her, which wasn’t much. To my surprise, the team Maddox calls Intel was quickly able to figure out who she was and where she lived. When I responded to Becca’s message, she offered the information up willingly, and it matched everything they’d dug up.

Intel also looked for the connection between Becca and Trevor, but came up empty. So either she is the best, most unassuming criminal mastermind ever...

Or she genuinely wants to take Trevor down. After meeting her in person, I’m betting on the latter.

“Your house is pretty.” It’s actually more simple than pretty, but everything coordinates, it’s tidy, and it smells good, so I go with pretty.

Becca offers a tight smile that doesn’t reach her eyes. “Thanks.” She looks me over, gaze shrewd behind her large glasses. “Can I ask why you’re wearing pajamas?”

“It’s a really long story.” I sigh, the weight of everything bearing down on me. “But I basically had to climb out the bedroom window of my apartment two nights ago before running through the neighborhood in the dark to escape men who were likely coming to make sure I didn’t say anything to anyone.”

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Becca's face falls and her slender shoulders slump beneath the baggy sweatshirt she's wearing. "That's probably my fault."

"I called the police too." I hesitate before admitting the full truth. "Anonymously."

"They probably just assumed that was me." Becca snorted, the sound humorless. "You know, instead of investigating those fuckers who were trafficking young girls, they had the audacity to threaten to prosecute me for making false police reports." There's venom in her voice.

An amount of rage I'm shocked can be contained by her small body.

Becca's shorter than me, and based on the way her baggy clothes hang, she's just as tiny in shape as she is in height. But I'm starting to think I wouldn't cross her. Right now she looks ready to go to war, and capable of causing bodily harm to anyone in her path.

I swallow hard. "How do you know about the human trafficking?"

Becca's already hard expression turns to steel and I could swear she's breathing fire as she says, "Because those fuckers have my sister."

I don't realize I gasp until I hear the sound. Of all the ways I thought Becca might be connected to Trevor, him and the assholes around him taking her sister wasn't even on my radar. I thought maybe she was a girlfriend of his. Possibly someone he'd been seeing on the side while we were married. I thought maybe she was a journalist, or connected to one who didn't want to make the call to report what they'd discovered.

Both of those things I could have handled. But this?

This has me ready to crumble. And I don't deserve to break down. Not in front of Becca.

Not when I could have tried to do something about this nine months ago.

Maddox appears from the staircase leading to the upper floor. "All clear."

Becca motions to the front room. "You guys want to sit down?"

I nod, feeling numb. "Sure."

Becca leads us into her simple, but comfortable, living room, her bare feet making soft slapping noises against the tiled floor as she walks. After gesturing for Maddox and me to take the sofa, she settles into an oversized armchair, looking even tinier swallowed up by the excessive upholstery.

I don't know what to say. What questions to ask. Not now that I know why I'm here.

But Becca has no problem directing the conversation. Her spine is straight as she turns to Maddox. "I don't know if you heard what I told Audrey, but Trevor and the men around him are responsible for my sister's disappearance."

Maddox doesn't seem shocked. "Are you sure?"

Becca tips her head in a single nod. "She managed to call me once after her disappearance. That was over three weeks ago, and I haven't heard from her since."

Maddox reaches into one of the pockets on his pants and pulls out a small device. "Is it okay if I record this conversation and pass it on to my team?"

Becca eyes the recorder then lifts her gaze to Maddox. “I guess that depends on who your team is.”

“I work for Alaskan Security.” There’s no missing the pride in Maddox’s voice as he explains the company he works for. What they do. What he does for them. Who exactly will be listening to the recording and what they’ll use it for.

Becca presses her lips together, a tiny glimmer of hope sparking in her dark eyes. “You guys will help me find my sister?”

“Absolutely, we will.” There’s no hesitation. No telling Becca he has to call and find out. Maddox believes without a shadow of a doubt Alaskan Security will wade right into this mess and throw out life preservers.

Becca studies him for a minute longer, then she leans forward and clicks the record button on the device. “Trevor Hawthorne the fucking third owns a clothing store.” Her eyes come my way. “I believe it’s the store you ran before you guys separated.” She refocuses on Maddox. “My sister went to work there about four months ago. At first he was never there, but then he started coming in more and more regularly.”

My stomach turns, but I do my best to hide my reaction to the story. The last thing Becca needs is my tears. They won’t do her any good, and they sure as hell won’t bring her sister back.

“My sister wants to be an attorney when she gets older, so of course she was thrilled about getting to know that piece of shit.” Becca’s disgust is palpable as she continues. “It all started out innocent enough that my parents didn’t see the red flags, but soon she was job-shadowing him and helping out at his office instead of the store.”

Maddox’s hand slides into mine, warm and strong. He holds tight as Becca spills the rest of her story.

“I tried to tell her that he was just a dirty old pervert trying to get attention from a young girl, but of course she didn’t believe me.” Becca’s lips purse, chin lifting and nostrils flaring. “I went to my parents. Explained what was happening and told them to get her the fuck away from him.” Her eyes come to mine. “They told me I was jealous. Said I’m just lonely and bored and have no life and accused me of trying to ruin my sister’s future so I would feel better about my own.”

My jaw literally drops open. “What the fuck?”

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Becca's brows lift. "Right?" She frowns. "Not everyone wants to go party and not everyone needs a giant group of friends to feel satisfied and fulfilled with their life."

I notice she doesn't mention anything about the being single part, but I know not everyone is interested in finding someone. I didn't think I was.

"When your sister called, did she give you any information about where she was or who she was with?" Maddox redirects the conversation, so I fuse my lips and let him guide Becca's explanation.

"Where?" Becca shakes her head. "No, but I don't think they took her far." She leans to one side, pulling her phone from the pocket of her jeans. "I still have the number, but I'm not sure it will be useful. I tried to look it up, but it seems like it was probably a burner." She rattles off the number, then also recites her sister's cell number. Maddox asks for her sister's address, full name and date of birth, where she goes to school, and if Becca knows any of her friends' names and numbers.

I'm surprised at the amount of information Becca has compiled. She really did plan to take Trevor and everyone else involved down all on her own.

"How many times did you call the Memphis police about Trevor?" Maddox asks a question I'm not sure I want to hear the answer to.

Because I'm sure it was more times than I did.

"Dozens. Not that it did me any fucking good." Becca slumps back in her chair, looking tired and beaten down. "That department is a fucking joke." Her lips flatten

into a thin line. “It’s almost as useless as their missing persons unit.” She shakes her head, eyes lifting to the ceiling. “They pretended to look for Amanda for maybe a week, but then pretty much acted like she was just a runaway. I blew their fucking phones up trying to get them to take this seriously, but they just stopped answering my calls.”

Maddox’s eyes come to me.

I pull in a deep breath. “I called a few times, but I was too scared to do more.” I glance Maddox’s way, uncertain how much information I should share with this woman. When he gives me a barely perceptible nod, I continue. “Trevor was abusive, so when I left, I walked away with virtually nothing.”

I hesitate. I’ve held onto the secrets for so long knowing if I shared them, it could be the end of life as I knew it. Or just life in general. Maddox is the only person I’ve told, but technically Alaskan Security knows now, and I feel like Becca has a right to know too. So, I take a deep breath and tell her my story.

About how Trevor targeted me a lot like he did her sister. How he was so charming and kind and generous in the beginning and I ate up his attention, oblivious to what was happening. I tell her about how he set up the clothing store, claiming it would be my business. How he bought me a dog, and a big beautiful house, and paid for an extravagant wedding.

Then I tell her about how the abuse started slowly—little digs at the weight I gained or how I wasn’t dressing well enough or that my hair looked bad. I explain how that grew into having things taken from me—my car, my phone, my dog. How he held those things over my head. Used them against me to get what he wanted.

And then the physical violence started.

I almost go into a trance recounting some of my most painful memories. Admitting how much I allowed. How much I looked past. How long I lingered, knowing things could get worse if I left.

I was right. I just didn't know they wouldn't only get worse for me.

When I'm done, Becca is absolutely fuming, her small frame practically vibrating with anger. "We have to figure out a way to take these fuckers down."

Rubbing my lips together, I prepare to offer her the last secret I have. Admitting it will make me vulnerable. If we're wrong, and Becca and all she's claiming is a bullshit story concocted to get me to let down my guard, then Trevor will be one step closer to finding me.

But we are where we are because I wasn't willing to take a risk. Wasn't willing to stick my neck out. And now Becca's sister is suffering for it.

"I think I have what we need to make that happen."

Becca goes still. "What do you have?"

"I knew leaving Trevor would be a risk. I felt the only way I could ensure my safety was to have leverage. A bargaining chip I could use to save my skin if it ever came down to that."

It wasn't a well-thought-out plan. I'd done it in the heat of the moment as I was scrambling to figure out how to get away. My face throbbing from his latest punch, I'd thrown a few important items into a bag and called the number on the card one of the customers from the clothing store had given me when she'd seen right through my layers of foundation and primer.

And then I saw his laptop.

I don't know why he left it that day, and I don't know what possessed me to try to unlock it. But I do know Trevor Hawthorne III is a narcissist and an idiot, because his computer's password was 1GovernorHawthorne—a version of the vanity plate he already owned in preparation for his future.

Once I was in, I knew what I had to do.

“Before I left, I copied everything on his computer to a flash drive and took it with me. It has proof of what he's been doing.” I know she's going to be excited, but there's a problem and Becca needs to know it. “If we can ever find someone from the Memphis PD who's not in his pocket, I'll be more than happy to hand it over.”

FIFTEEN

MADDOX

“I THINK BECCA wanted to punch me in the face.”

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It's the first thing Audrey's said since we left Becca's house twenty minutes ago, and while I hate what she's thinking, I'm not surprised. I knew something was wrong—that her mind was spiraling—but I wanted to give Audrey a little time to come to terms with everything we just learned before I started trying to do damage control. Fixing her fractured thinking will be a hell of a lot easier to accomplish if I know where the cracks are.

“Why do you think Becca would want to punch you in the face?” I have my own guesses, but I want to know Audrey's reasons. I want to hear how she perceived the conversation.

“Because I didn't try harder to take Trevor down. Because I knew what he was doing and sat on it for months. And if I hadn't, her sister might not be where she is now.” Audrey's voice wobbles. “For being such a fucking coward while she's being so damn brave.”

None of what she says shocks me. I know Audrey's struggling. She's hard on herself and tries to carry the weight of responsibilities that aren't hers. I don't want to upset her, but there are some things she needs to consider and some things she needs to understand.

“Becca hadn't been abused by Trevor for years. She also doesn't have him holding her financial and physical well-being over her head.” I grip the steering wheel, trying hard not to show how angry I am at the situation. It won't help, and might make things worse. “You can't compare what Becca has done to what you've done because you are in two totally different places.”

“I don’t think she sees it that way.” Audrey slumps down in her seat. “She acted like she hates me, and I don’t blame her.”

I could tell Becca’s personality made Audrey a little nervous. I get it. She’s very straightforward and to the point. She doesn’t sugarcoat things or pull punches. My siblings are a lot like her. They keep their feelings close. Every word that comes out of their mouths is thought through before they set it free. It makes them tricky to read and their serious natures can come off as cold and uncaring.

I don’t think that means Becca doesn’t like Audrey. But if that is true, it means I have to reevaluate my own thoughts about how my siblings feel about me, and I’m not sure where to even start with that.

“My family is a lot like Becca.” I start to explain, hoping it will help Audrey understand things might not be what she thinks, because they also might not be what I thought. “They’re serious and quiet. Reserved. Most of what they say comes out dry and almost abrasive.”

Audrey’s head swivels my way, her brows pinched together. “No wonder they don’t get you.”

I shrug. “It probably doesn’t help that I kill people for a living, but yeah, our personalities are pretty different.” I pull off the highway, heading for the hotel. “That’s just how they are. Honestly, there’s not a mean bone in their body. They’re all good people. But it’s easy to mistake their way of moving in the world as judgment and dislike.” I would know. I did it up until this very moment.

Because my family might not understand me, but maybe I don’t fucking understand them either.

Audrey gives me a small, hopeful smile. “So you don’t think Becca wants to punch

me in the face?”

I pull in a deep breath, the air moving easily into my lungs thanks to the weight that just came off my shoulders. “No. I don’t think she wants to punch you in the face.” My next breath releases on a sigh. “But I do think maybe I owe my family a couple apologies.”

And probably a few confessions since they don’t have a clue I was shot nine months ago.

Audrey reaches across the console to take my hand in hers, giving it a squeeze the way I do when she’s the one feeling overwhelmed or afraid.

My first instinct is to pull away. It’s one thing for me to comfort her. It’s very different for her to be the one initiating contact and trying to reassure me.

I’ve always been different. My personality probably confuses the fuck out of a lot of people, not just my family. Hell, it confuses the fuck out of me sometimes. I’m laid-back. Easy-going. Sometimes goofy and occasionally hilarious. I like making people laugh. Brightening their day.

I also enjoy killing people who don’t deserve to have their day brightened. I can move a body and end a life without blinking or feeling bad about it.

When I get close to someone—which doesn’t happen often—my contradictory personality means there’s literally no limit to the things I will do for them. I’ll bend over backwards to make them happy. Put their needs before my own. Beg, borrow, and steal to get them what they want.

And I’ll kill to keep them safe.

As a result, I'm not close to very many people. It's not easy to allow it when very few people would have my back the way I have theirs.

It's terrifying, actually.

Maybe that's why it was easy for me to feel close to my teammates. They would kill for me the same way I would kill for them. Can they be assholes? Sure, but so can I.

When it comes to women, things get even more complicated. There aren't many who are capable of offering what I can. If I was good at casual situationships or temporary flings, it wouldn't really be an issue. But on top of being willing to kill for the people I care about, my dick also doesn't get hard until I know someone. Develop a level of trust and an emotional connection.

Like I have with Audrey.

I should be thrilled about it. Over the moon I've finally managed to click with someone. These past nine months—seeing Savannah and Zeke and what they have—I thought I couldn't wait to find someone who would fit into my life.

Turns out it fucking terrifies me.

“Are you okay?” Audrey's question is gentle, just like she is.

And because I can't bear to see her unhappy, I force on a smile. “I'm good. Just trying to go over everything in my mind before we talk to Pierce and Intel.”

Her eyes widen. “We?”

“We.” I glance her way, feeling better now that I’m the one squeezing her hand reassuringly. “They need to hear your story in your words. Intel might pick up on something I didn’t realize was important. Plus, getting to hear it firsthand will remove any possibility something could be lost in translation.” But there’s another reason I want Audrey to speak with Pierce and Intel. “And it’s time to give them the contents of the flash drive.”

Audrey stiffens. She’s clung to this flash drive like it’s her life preserver. Convinced herself it’s the thing keeping her alive.

But it’s not. It might actually be the thing that gets her killed. And someone else having access to all the secrets stashed on it might lower that risk since taking Audrey out will no longer get rid of the problem.

“I know you’re nervous about handing it over, but I think you’ll feel better after you get to meet everyone in person.” I tip my head from side to side as I clarify. “As in-person as we can get right now since we’re in Tennessee and they’re in Alaska.”

Audrey’s sitting a little lower in her seat, almost like she’s trying to make herself smaller. It’s a trauma response—one I’ve seen in a number of women around me, most recently Savannah—and the pain of seeing her shrinking is palpable.

It makes me feel a little bad for eating all of Zeke’s cookies since he faces a similar situation with his wife when she’s triggered and afraid.

“I know it’s scary, but I’m going to be there beside you the whole time.” Again, I squeeze her hand. “And this will get us one step closer to us finding Becca’s little sister.”

As I hoped, reminding her she isn’t the only one on the line has Audrey straightening in her seat. Her chin lifts, and an expression of determination hardens her pretty features. “You’re right.” She glances at the clock on the dash. “What time is our meeting? If there’s enough wiggle room, we can go get the flash drive now.”

“Where is it?” I haven’t pressed her about it. Didn’t want her to think I was trying to get my hands on it. It was her security blanket, and I wanted her to keep it as long as possible.

Unfortunately, her time hiding behind that digital wall of data is over.

“It’s in a safety deposit box at a bank Trevor doesn’t know I use.” Audrey opens my phone, and enters the bank into the GPS, rattling off the address as it calculates how long it will take us to get there.

The bank isn’t terribly far away, but going runs us right down to the wire. We hurry through the task of retrieving the drive, and it’s not too long before we’re back on the road, headed to the hotel. Rushing inside, we make it into our room with a few minutes to spare.

Audrey sits quietly while I set up my computer, logging into the special server Harlow and Heidi set up for us, before settling next to Audrey so both of us will be within camera range.

She jumps when the video call window pops up, her hands twisting tight in her lap as more and more faces fill our screen. All of Intel isn’t at this meeting, but enough of them are here it probably is a little intimidating. Even with the bulk of them smiling

and looking thrilled to meet the woman who currently looks ready to throw up on her shoes.

Audrey has been so fucking brave today. First going to meet Becca and now facing down an entire group so she can tell them a story she hates. Admit to what she sees as her failings.

I know it's going to be hard, but it has to happen. If for no other reason than so I won't be the only one telling her none of this is her fault.

Heidi's the first one to greet us. Her light blonde hair is tied into a messy bun at the top of her head and a giant insulated tumbler is clutched in one hand. She waves aggressively with the other as she leans closer. "Hi. Can you guys hear us?"

Audrey doesn't move, so I nod. "Loud and clear."

"Fantastic." Harlow adjusts her thick-rimmed glasses as she flips open the file in front of her. "How did your meeting with Becca go?"

I maybe should have prepared Audrey for Harlow. She's pretty similar to Becca in ways that might have Audrey worried about Harlow's opinions of her. Unfortunately, it's too late now, so I just have to hope Harlow is on her best behavior and recognizes Audrey is a little fragile right now.

And that's not easy to accomplish through a computer screen.

"Enlightening." I slide out the USB adapter on the handheld recorder I used during our conversation, plugging it into the port of the extension connected to my laptop. "I'm uploading it to the server now." With a few clicks of my mouse, I'm able to send the full recording to everyone in the meeting so they can listen to it later. "She confirmed she was the other woman calling and reporting Trevor to the Memphis

PD.”

“Did she say why she was reporting him?” This question comes from Mona, Pierce’s wife.

Before moving to Alaska, Mona was part owner of a digital investigative company. She’s been a huge asset not only because of what she’s capable of professionally, but also because she’s a cool head when Pierce needs someone tempering his more aggressive nature.

“Trevor has her little sister.” Audrey’s voice is surprisingly strong as she answers. “She worked for him in the clothing store I ran when we were married, and it sounds like he groomed her.”

The three women on the screen all look equally interested in physical violence.

“What a fucker.” Heidi shakes her head, sympathy softening her features. “I am so sorry for what he did to you.” A humorless smirk twists her lips. “But I promise he won’t get away with it.”

Audrey shrugs. “It’s fine. I just don’t want him hurting anyone else.” Her eyes fall to her lap. “I should have done all this sooner.”

“The fuck did you say?” Harlow snorts, and my stomach drops. She’s about to go on a rant that could be interpreted a lot of different ways if you don’t know her and all she’s been through.

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Without thinking, I reach out and drape one arm across Audrey's shoulders, reflexively pulling her close. Like I can protect her from any misunderstandings she might have over Harlow's words.

I realize my mistake almost immediately. It's the same amount of time it takes the women watching us to figure out there's more going on between me and Audrey than a simple bodyguard scenario. I can pinpoint the second my arm around her registers. Harlow lifts a brow. Mona smothers a smile. And Heidi full on grins like the cat that ate the fucking canary.

"Anyway." Harlow recovers first and circles right back. "I hope you're not trying to feel bad for being afraid of a man who proved he was capable of being violent toward you." Harlow's tone is sharp and her expression stern. "Because we don't fucking do that. We recognize that abuse leaves scars. Ones you can see and ones you can't. Sometimes they heal and sometimes they don't." Harlow leans forward, eyes fused to the screen like she's staring right at Audrey. "And we let those abusive men own every bit of their bullshit." She straightens, eyes dropping once again to the file in front of her. "And Trevor Hawthorne the third absolutely deserves to own his shit."

Heidi lifts one hand high in the air. "Preach, sister."

Mona nods. "A-fucking-men to letting assholes get what they have coming."

She had her own issues with a man who thought he deserved way more than he did. Of course, that guy's dead. Just like the one who made Harlow recognize and understand Audrey's pain.

I wish I could simply end Trevor. It would make all of this so much easier. Audrey would be safe and able to move on with her life.

Whatever she decides that looks like.

But I can't, and we're about to discuss the reasons why.

"Tell me more about this Trevor motherfucker I'm about to torment without mercy." Harlow flips through her papers. "It says here he's an attorney and politician?"

Audrey nods. "Right now he is a state senator, but his plans include becoming the governor of Tennessee within the next two years."

Audrey continues explaining her experience with Trevor and everything she knows about him, including why she started to become suspicious of him. She explains about the number of sketchy looking men she started seeing coming and going at their house. Why the amount of campaign money he was collecting from strangely named sources made her decide to start digging into his dealings. And how much of his dealings she was able to download to the flash drive gripped in her hand.

From the sounds of it, more than enough.

"Do you know who he's affiliated with at the Memphis Police Department?" Pierce asked.

Audrey shakes her head. "Honestly, I didn't know he had connections within the police department. I only started to suspect that when nothing happened after I made those anonymous reports."

Pierce sighs, the sound carrying frustration. "It was a correct assumption. From what we've been able to find, your ex-husband's reach is wide and far. He's got people

from the city level all the way up to the federal government.” Pierce rubs his face, looking tired. “And until we find someone willing to take this to the county prosecutor, we’re stuck.”

Audrey blinks fast. “Are you saying we might not be able to do anything?”

“That’s not what he’s saying at all.” Heidi sucks down another gulp from her cup. “What he’s trying to say without actually saying, is we really need the information from that flash drive.” Heidi’s eyes focus as she types on the keyboard in front of her. “I’ve made as many connections as I can, but without insider information, I can’t narrow it down any more.”

Audrey nods. “Okay.” She lifts the flash drive. “You can have everything as long as you promise you will do whatever it takes to get Becca’s sister back.”

Heidi stops typing and refocuses on her screen. “Babe, I don’t only plan to get Becca’s sister back. I plan to ruin this man’s life. I’m going to take down everyone who’s ever sneezed in his fucking direction.” Her normally easy-going expression turns serious and scary. “I’m going to make him suffer. I’m going to make him wish he was dead.” A maniacal smirk twists her lips. “And then I’m going to let Maddox give him his wish.”

Audrey blinks, then turns to me. “You would kill him?”

I would lie to most people at this point. Try to soften the truth. Sugarcoat reality to make it more palatable.

But I don’t have to do that with Audrey. Because she’s turning out to be as big of a contradiction as I am.

“Honestly? I would have killed him days ago if we didn’t have so much riding on

keeping him alive.”

I know the exact moment I decided I wanted to watch Trevor Hawthorne III bleed as the life left his eyes. It was when Audrey told me that fucker kept her dog. No one else in this goddamnworld loved her, and he knew how much she would suffer without it.

I want him to suffer equally.

No. More.

Audrey stares at me a second, rubbing her lips together. Everyone in the video call is silent, so I’m pretty sure they all hear when she asks, “Could I help?”

SIXTEEN

AUDREY

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:54 am

“WAS IT AS bad as you expected?” Maddox barely waits until we’ve disconnected before checking in.

I’m not surprised he’s concerned. Early in the meeting he put his arm around me and pulled me close, making it obvious he could sense my distress and wanted to comfort me like he always does.

But my worries were honestly short-lived. Harlow freaked me out a little at first, but once I got past her tough exterior, it was easy to see how much she genuinely cares. How passionate she is about what she does.

And how much she really wants Trevor to suffer. The common interest helped me feel a little more relaxed in her digital presence.

“No. Actually, it wasn’t bad at all.” I smile, thinking about how funny Heidi was and how cool and collected Mona acted. “Everyone was super different, but they were all really nice.”

I thought it would be difficult to hand over the information on the flash drive. Believed once it left my control I would feel completely vulnerable. But I don’t feel vulnerable at all. I feel empowered.

Would it be the same if it was just me on my own doing this—handing that information over to the police? Unlikely. I’m self-aware enough to know that a large part of my current confidence is because I feel like I have people supporting me. Helping me. Looking out for me. People who care and want to do the right thing.

It's almost funny that it would take a company of mercenaries to finally be the good in my world.

"They are all really nice people." Maddox lifts his shoulders. "And I'm not just saying that to make you feel better. They genuinely are the best humans in the world."

I believe him. Easily. Even though I just met them.

I've met my fair share of bad people, and they weren't it. Plus, I trust Maddox. Implicitly. If he says they're all good people, then they're all good people.

It should be scary—believing a man I just met so unfailingly—but it's not. Not at all.

Well... Maybe it's a little scary, because at some point I know Maddox won't be at my side anymore. And it's becoming more and more obvious how much that's going to suck. Not only because I'll be vulnerable without his protection, but also because I'll miss him. His sense of humor. His goofy ways.

The intensity that radiates off him when he switches to Murder Maddox.

Maddox reaches out to smooth back my hair. "Maybe when all this is over, I could take you to Alaska and you could meet everyone in person."

"Really?" I almost laugh because it's so bizarre that he would offer right when I was worrying I'd never see him once his job here was finished. I don't even know what I would call that. Is he psychic? Is it simply a coincidence that he can always seem to tell when I need him?

Or is there more to it? Because the look of uncertainty on Maddox's face—even though he tries to hide it behind an easy smile—has me stepping forward and

wrapping my arms around his middle.

“That would be amazing. I’ve never been to Alaska.” I rest my cheek against his chest, closing my eyes. “But I’m not sure I’d want to go there in the winter, so maybe we should wait until spring.”

“That’s probably a smart decision.” Maddox’s arms encircle me as he holds me tight. “So maybe if this is over during the winter, we could go somewhere warm.”

I smile. “Are you sure you want me to be your new traveling companion?” I don’t know why I’m fishing for reassurance like I am. Maddox pretty much just said he plans to still have at least a little contact with me once we’re done with Trevor.

But I can’t help but want more.

“Well, I can’t take Savannah now that she’s pregnant.” Maddox chuckles. “Not that Zeke would’ve let me anyway. He’s wedged so far up her ass I’m shocked she can walk in a straight line.”

Talking about Savannah puts a little bit of a damper on my newly lifted spirits. “Is she upset I didn’t tell her what was going on?”

Savannah has already done so much to help me. She was part of the team responsible for making it possible for me to leave Trevor. I just couldn’t put more on her. Especially not when I found out she was expecting.

“Do you want to know the truth?” Maddox’s voice is soft.

I swallow around the ache in my throat. “I always want the truth.”

Maddox’s palms smooth up and down my back. “She’s not mad, but I think it hurt

her feelings a little bit.”

It figures I would upset the one person I might have been able to build a genuine friendship with. “I just wanted to protect her. I know how dangerous Trevor is, and I?—”

“I know why you didn’t tell her, and so does she. I promise, Savannah gets it. But after what she went through, she wants to help save everybody. And there’s a little bit of guilt that she wasn’t able to fully save you.”

“I don’t want her to feel responsible for anything that happens to me.” I lift my eyes, meeting Maddox’s gaze. “Promise me, no matter what happens, you’ll make sure Savannah doesn’t carry the burden.”

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“I promise.” Maddox’s expression darkens, giving me just a peek at Murder Maddox. “But I won’t have to worry about it, because nothing’s going to happen to you.”

I know he wants to think that, and I don’t doubt his ability to keep me safe. But I know Trevor, and I know how desperately he wants to win. At everything. Always.

“I don’t want you to carry guilt either. I have complete faith in you, but I also understand how bad Trevor can be, so if something happens to me?—”

Maddox leans down until we’re eye-to-eye and practically nose-to-nose. All trace of the happy, laid-back man I normally see is gone, replaced by pure and total mercenary. “Audrey.” He says my name slowly. Dragging it out like he wants to be sure he has my attention. “Obviously things haven’t been made completely clear to you.” His hands come up to cradle my face, gentle but firm against my skin. “They might prosecute Trevor, but he will never make it to jail.”

Earlier, he claimed he would have killed my ex-husband days ago if he could have, so I understand what he’s saying. He’s going to kill him.

What I don’t get is why.

“Trevor’s a politician. Relatively well-known. If he goes missing, someone’s going to notice. And I won’t let you risk your own well-being for someone like him.”

I know killing people is what Maddox does. I believe he’s probably really good at it. But killing normal people and killing someone like Trevor are two completely different things.

Maddox's lips lift in a slow smile. "Sweetheart, I've killed way more important men than Trevor Hawthorne the fucking Third."

Really? I know better than to ask who, but just like always, I believe him.

And now I'm feeling very different about all of this. For so long I assumed I would be the one whose life might end during this whole mess. Not once did I think anyone would take Trevor out. I thought maybe I'd manage to get him arrested and possibly even prosecuted and sent to prison. But even that sort of felt like a pipe dream. Something I clung to so I wouldn't lose my mind as I waited for him to hunt me down and make good on all the threats he dished out over our years together.

"If you really don't want me to kill him, I won't." Maddox's thumbs stroke against my skin, his voice deadly serious when he says, "But unless you tell me no, he's ending up with a bullet in his brain."

All the air rushes from my lungs. "Oh."

Why did that turn me on? Is there really so much wrong with me that discovering Maddox fully intends to murder Trevor has me feeling overheated and flushed?

Yeah. There probably is.

I can add it to the growing list of things wrong with me when it comes to Maddox. I just met him five days ago, but I already struggle to imagine my life without him. That shouldn't be possible, especially considering all I've been through. But the closeness—the connection—between us is growing so fast, I'm struggling to wrap my head around it. I know I should hold back. Keep my feelings close and protected, but it's like I can't. The dominoes were lined up, and someone's already tipped the first one over. Now there's no slowing it down, and definitely no going back.

Honestly, I'm not sure I'd want to go back.

“Did you really mean it when you said we could go to Alaska?” I can already imagine it, just like I can imagine so much else with Maddox. “And someplace warm?”

Maddox takes a shaky breath before nodding silently.

I swallow hard, nerves—or maybe excitement—gnawing at my insides. “Maybe when all this is over, and I know it's safe, I can come stay with Savannah for a weekend and we can hang out.”

Hang out? Those two words don't encompass what it's like when Maddox and I are together at all. But what else can I call it? I have no freaking clue.

Because I've never felt anything like this before.

“Savannah's pregnant, so she takes a lot of naps and her schedule is a little mixed up.” Maddox's eyes move over my face. “It would probably make more sense for you to stay with me.” His gaze dips to my mouth. “In my house.”

I lick my lips, needing the moisture now that he's looking at them so intensely. “That probably would make more sense.” I manage a small smile. “But before I can schedule any weekend trips, I'll have to figure out if I'm going to be staying in my apartment or looking for a new place to live. I can't imagine my landlord will be thrilled if an unknown group of men came storming in the other night.”

Maddox's expression shutters, his gaze losing the warmth it just had. “I'll have Luca and Owen go inside and check it out as soon as we know no one's watching it.” Maddox slowly straightens. “Do you want them to bring anything specific if they're able to go in?”

I'm a little confused at the sudden change in his demeanor. For a second there, I thought we were making plans for the future. But in the blink of an eye, he's closed off, and I'm not sure what happened.

"I should probably go check in with them now." Maddox starts to turn away, and I chase after him.

Reaching out, I grab his arm, holding tight to stop him. "What's wrong? What just happened?"

Maddox shrugs. "Nothing."

It suddenly becomes very obvious Maddox has never lied to me. Because he's really fucking bad at it. "Tell me the truth."

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Maddox's blue eyes go everywhere but on me. "That is the truth."

I laugh, because his terrible lying ability is only getting worse. "Bullshit."

Maddox's gaze snaps to my face.

I lift my chin, standing taller as I repeat myself. "That's bullshit, and you know it." I move to stand in front of him, hooking one hand into the waist of his pants and gripping tight. He's not getting away from me. Not now.

Not ever.

A tiny voice in the back of my brain offers up that little nugget of wishful thinking, but I can't let it distract me.

"We were talking about going to Alaska and somewhere warm. Then I mentioned coming to Nashville to visit you and Savannah, and everything was going great until I brought up my apartment." I give his waistband a tug. "Why is that?"

"I just don't like to think about you going back there." Maddox shakes his head. "It's not safe."

"It will be once Trevor's handled, won't it?"

"If Trevor is handled, it's possible you wouldn't be in extreme danger." Maddox speaks slowly. As if he's choosing his words carefully. "But that's only if we can find someone at the Memphis Police Department to help us accomplish that."

I get what he's saying, but where will it leave me if that doesn't happen? "And if we can't?"

Maddox works his jaw from side to side. "If we can't, then maybe you should come to Nashville where I can keep you safe no matter what."

I'm shaking my head before he even finishes. "I can't bring this to Savannah." A weird laugh jumps out of my mouth. "I can't bring this to any of you. And I can't afford round-the-clock protection indefinitely." I've saved money, but not that much. Even if I miraculously manage to get some sort of divorce settlement, there's no way it's going to be enough to pay that kind of a bill.

"We can worry about that when the time comes." Maddox tries to step away again.

But we're not finished here, so I tighten my grip on his pants. "No. I want to worry about it now. I've been in freaking limbo for so long I don't even know which way is up. Now it's looking like there may not be an end in sight if we can't figure out who the fuck will help us take Trevor down." My voice pitches higher, taking this from a conversation to more of a rant. "And if we can't take Trevor down, then we can't take down everyone else who's involved, and we can't save Becca's sister." The last part makes my throat tight. "And we promised Becca we would find her."

Maddox sighs, his eyes closing as he pulls in a deep breath. When his lids lift, I notice how tired he is. "I love my job, but sometimes it's not always simple." He shifts toward me, abandoning his plan of escape. Bringing his hands to my shoulders, his voice softens. "There are certain promises I can make you, Audrey. I can promise I will always save you. No matter what." His hands move up to cup my face. "I can promise I will save Becca's sister. But I can't guarantee the means involved in accomplishing that won't ruin our chances of finding everyone involved."

"They can't get away with what they're doing." Knowing what's happening and

seeing the realities of it are two different things. Now that I've met Becca—heard about her sister—my determination to see this through has only intensified. “If there's only certain things you can do, then I want you to focus on saving Becca's sister and bringing down the men involved with Trevor.”

“No.” Maddox's rejection of my request is clipped and immediate. “You are my priority.”

“Pretend I didn't hire you, then. I can talk to Pierce. Tell him Alaskan Security's contract with me doesn't take precedence over Becca and her sister's safety or taking down those assholes.”

Maddox's expression hardens. “This isn't about your contract with Alaskan Security, Audrey.” He leans down, once again bringing me nose-to-nose with Murder Maddox. “This is about you staying safe.”

I hold my ground. I'm not any more scared of Murder Maddox than I am the man who plays with my hair and cooks me dinner. “But at what cost?”

“Any fucking cost.” His answer is short and sharp.

And wrong, but I'll dwell on that later.

Right now I'm gonna focus on how much I like his willingness to put me above everything else. No one's ever done that for me. Not my parents. Not the man who became my husband.

Not me.

It's probably a great explanation of why I'm falling for him faster than a skydiver without a parachute.

It's also a great explanation for why I keep accidentally kissing him.

Before he seems to know what's coming, I've got both arms around his neck, pulling his body against mine, and my lips on his.

I love so much about this man. The way he smells. The way he can be happy and laid back or intense and dangerous. The way he keeps me safe and the way he makes me feel seen.

But I think I love the way he kisses me most of all.

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Like I'm air and he's suffocating. Like I'm water and he's in the desert.

Like I'm home and he finally found me.

I try to kiss him the same way. Show him how much I appreciate all he's doing.

All he is.

I want him to know I'm not sure how I'll go on when he leaves. That I don't know why or how I feel like I do, but I'm done fighting it. Done feeling bad it's happening. Done?—

Maddox's lips pull from mine and I gasp.

“No. Wait.” I cling to him, desperate to hang onto this moment. “Where are you going?”

That's when I hear it. The vibration of his phone and whoever in the heck I'm going to kill for interrupting us.

Maddox pulls one arm from around me but the other keeps holding me close as he digs his cell free from one of the pockets in his pants. After swiping the screen, he presses it to his ear. “Becca? Is everything okay?”

I can barely make out her voice, but she seems to be talking really fast, which can't be good.

Maddox's eyes move to my face as he listens. His other arm relaxes, his free hand coming to my cheek for a second before he steps away.

"Okay. Listen to me carefully. I want you to quietly go into the closest bathroom. With the door open, lock the knob. Then go out of the bathroom and pull it shut. Got it?" He strides to the door. "I want you to do that to as many of the bathrooms in the house as you can, then get into the farthest closet and leave the door open." Maddox walks out into the hall and I follow behind him. "Hide as well as you can. I'll be there in ten minutes." He bangs on Luca and Owen's door. "If someone finds you, go for their eyes. Use your thumbs to dig them out of their skull."

A chill runs through my body at the directions he's giving Becca. At knowing she might have to follow all of them.

And one day, I might too.

SEVENTEEN

MADDOX

THIS IS A fucking nightmare. The list of reasons for that is long and far-reaching, but at the very top is Audrey's safety.

I can't leave her here at the hotel by herself, but I have to take both Owen and Luca with me because I'm not sure what we're walking into. It's a fucking worst-case scenario and has me on edge in a way I've never been before.

Luca opens the door to the room he and Owen share, and Owen's already gearing up in the background. There's a certain kind of knock that happens when shit's going down, and we all recognize it instantly.

“We have to go. Now. Becca just called me. Said there’s strange cars on the street outside her house and she’s got a bad feeling.” I wish I could’ve stayed on the phone with her, but it’s too risky. All it would take is one wrong move and her screen would illuminate, giving her location away.

Luca’s eyes move to where Audrey stands right behind me. “Are we all going?”

Scrubbing one hand over my face, I curse under my breath. “I don’t think we have any other option.”

Becca was a variable I didn’t plan for, and now we’ve got to make decisions on the fly, working with what we’ve got.

“Agreed.” Luca checks his watch. “We’ll meet you at the car in two minutes.”

That gives me time to see what I can do to make Audrey a little less conspicuous. She looks adorable in the new sweatshirt and jeans from the haul Luca picked up while we were meeting with Becca, but the light color of her top won’t hide well. Even behind tinted glass.

Hurrying back into our room, I grab one of my black shirts since I don’t have time to dig through her new clothes, and pull it over her head, blotting out the conspicuous pale pink. Then I frown at her head.

“I need you to pull your hair up.” Audrey’s long, wavy blonde locks are gorgeous, but easily identifiable. If I’m taking her somewhere Trevor might be, I need to make her as invisible as I can.

While Audrey twists her locks into a bun, I retrieve the knit hat I wear when I need to be fully camouflaged. It rolls down to serve as a full mask that will hide any remaining parts of her that could be visible. That way I can stash her in the car and

she'll blend in completely with the dark interior, reducing the chances anyone will realize she's inside.

After quickly strapping on my personal arsenal, I grab her hand and we race down the hall, pushing our way out the door into the parking lot at exactly one minute, fifty-nine seconds.

"I should have fucking called for more backup as soon as we left Becca's." I'm pissed at myself. Pissed at Trevor. Pissed at the Memphis fucking PD for being so goddamn corrupt.

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Audrey squeezes my hand. “There’s no way you could have known this was going to happen.”

Unlocking the doors using the fob, I fling open the back and motion for Audrey to get inside. I follow her in just as Owen and Luca come running out into the night. Luca gets behind the wheel, and the second Owen’s foot leaves the asphalt, we’re moving. I punch Becca’s address into the GPS on my phone and pass it between the seats so Owen can help Luca navigate.

Thank God Luca is here. He’s the best driver on Shadow, and will get us there as fast as humanly possible. Using moderately safe and highly illegal maneuvers if needed. We still might not make it in the ten minutes I promised—a legal drive to Becca’s house takes twenty—but it will be close.

While we drive, I turn Audrey. She sits quietly beside me, looking more upset than nervous. “It’s going to be okay.”

She huffs out a humorless laugh, hands twisting in her lap. “You know, I was relieved when I found out there was another woman involved because I knew Trevor would be looking for her and not me.” She closes her eyes, shaking her head. “I’m an awful person.”

“You’re not, but we’ve gotta deal with that later. Right now we need to go over what I want you to do while I go save Becca.” I reach out, tipping her face up until her eyes meet mine. “I won’t be able to focus if I’m worried about your safety, so I need you to listen and follow my directions, okay?”

Audrey nods.

I explain how I want her to scoot down as low as she can, making sure my dark T-shirt covers as much of her as possible. Then I tell her to pull the mask down and be very still. The windows of the car are tinted, but they're not opaque. Still, as long as she doesn't move, it will be difficult for anyone outside of the car to see her, especially if she's low and positioned behind one of the front seats, reducing the chance she'll be seen through the windshield.

It feels like it takes both forever and no time at all to reach Becca's house, but when the GPS signals our last turn, I go on alert, scanning the area around us for any sign of the men coming for Becca and, possibly one day, Audrey.

Instead of going directly to her house, Luca circles to the next street over, parking under a tree still holding its bright red and orange leaves in spite of the cooling weather.

As he parks, I turn to Audrey. "I'm gonna leave you my phone, and this—" I pull my sidearm from where it's strapped at my ankle. The pistol is smaller and lighter than my primary weapon, so it should be relatively easy for her to handle. "All you have to do is point and shoot. I don't care how many people you take out, as long as you're here when I get back." I flip off the safety and position it in her palm. "Promise me you'll be here when I get back."

Audrey nods, reaching up to grip the extra knit fabric at her forehead before tugging it over her face. "I promise."

"Time to go." Luca opens his door and silently slithers out. Owen does the same.

I linger a second longer, pulling Audrey in with a hand at the back of her neck, pressing my mouth against what I can reach of hers with the mask between us. "I'll

be right back.”

I open my door and slip out, pausing yet again to turn back to Audrey. “Do not get out of this car for any reason.”

She silently nods, slouching down in the seat just like I showed her, tucking herself against the door so she’s as out of sight as possible.

“We’ve gotta go.” Luca’s warning is low and urgent.

I’m torn between doing what I love and keeping my eyes on the woman who means more to me every day, and it fucking sucks.

Audrey motions for me to go, and I gently close the door. Luca silently engages the locks, and we’re off, moving quietly through the middle-class neighborhood. This one is trickier to navigate than the one where Audrey lives, so we proceed cautiously, avoiding any motion activated lights or cameras. Luckily, the ones most people install nowadays are easy to spot, so we manage to reach the edge of Becca’s property without triggering a floodlight that would mark our location.

Again, we luck out, because the privacy fence edging Becca’s property is high enough most people won’t be able to jump it, and solid enough it will be easy to hide our movements. Working quickly, I hoist Luca up, keeping him stable as he clears the top. Then Owen does the same for me. When I reach the top, I pause, legs locked on each side, holding one hand down so I can pull him up. Once Owen’s angling over the edge, I drop to my feet, landing silently on the grass. When Owen’s feet make a soft thud behind me, the three of us begin to move again, weapons out, covering the span of Becca’s small backyard in a few seconds.

So far I haven’t seen any sign someone’s here, but that doesn’t mean they’re not, so we move along the backside of her home, angling our line of vision into the first-floor

windows and through the sliding doors.

That's when we see them.

I tap Luca to get his attention and motion at the shifting light on the other side of the front door where someone is attempting entry.

"They're not in yet, but we don't have much—" Luca goes silent, glancing up as a soft sliding sound reaches our ears.

I follow the path of his gaze, but all that's above us is the vinyl fascia of the roofline.

This time it's Luca who taps me. He points toward the other side of the house where an upper window has been opened. Becca's house is a tri level, so there's a central floor that's ground-level, a lower floor that's half as deep as a basement, with an upper floor stacked above it. Even the highest part of the house is only slightly higher than a single story, so the open window isn't that far off the ground.

Definitely a short enough distance someone who really wanted the fuck out of there would think was manageable. For me, Luca, or Owen it would be. For a tiny woman with no experience jumping out of windows?

Not so much.

There's movement at the window, and the sight of Becca's feet coming out the opening confirm my suspicions.

"Is she gonna jump out of that window?" Owen's question is soft, but carries an amount of awe.

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I've only met Becca the one time, but she came across as pretty straightforward, so if her feet are coming out, I'm gonna guess she's probably committed. "Yeah. She's going to jump."

"Fucking hell." Luca starts moving first, staying low as he clears the distance between the back sliding door and the window Becca's upper half is now exiting in the blink of an eye.

I rush behind him, tucking the weapon I had ready back into its holster just in case I have to catch her as she comes down. "Becca." I whisper-yell her name, hoping to stop her before she hurts herself. I don't want to be loud enough anyone else can hear me, but I need to get her attention so I can help her do this safely.

Relatively safely.

Her head swivels fast, eyes wide as they lock onto where we stand. I have less than a split second to react when something large and heavy comes sailing directly at my head. I manage to catch it, but just barely.

"Becca. It's me, Maddox. We're here to get you." I set the jug of laundry detergent down so my hands will be free in case she's already dropped her next assault weapon.

"Maddox?" Becca's eyes finally land directly on me. "Oh, thank God." She goes back to her task of getting as much of her body out of the window as possible. "Get out of the way. I'm coming down."

I start to move in, but Luca body checks me, knocking me back a step as he positions

himself directly under where Becca is sliding down the brick, her hands gripping the windowsill.

“Come on. I’ve got you.” Luca’s taller than me, so it makes sense that he should be the one catching her, but I wanted to be able to tell Audrey I did everything I could to help her friend.

Since Luca has taken over, I pull my weapon out. All our whispering—no matter how quiet we tried to be—was likely overheard. “We need to get moving.”

Luca grunts a little as Becca lets go and her small body connects with his. She’s tiny, but gravity is a bitch, and even a small person hitting you from a decent height feels like dead weight.

Thankfully he’s done this plenty of times and recovers quickly. Instead of putting Becca down, he hefts her over one shoulder—ignoring her soft gasp of surprise—knowing we’ll move faster if she’s not trying to keep up with us.

We reach the back fence and I hoist Owen over first. Luca then carefully passes Becca over before sending me right up behind her so I can help her down.

This time it’s Owen who catches her, and Owen putting her over his shoulder.

Reaching down, I grab Luca’s arm, offering the leverage he needs to fully scale the fence. Once both of us hit the ground, we start moving again, this time with Luca and I providing coverage as Owen stays positioned between us. We’ve probably already been discovered, so we have to move faster than before, and that results in accidentally setting off a motion activated light.

“Shit.” I turn as I hear voices yelling behind us. “Keep going. I’ll make sure they don’t get to you.”

I hang back as they continue on, tucking myself into the shadows as I watch, waiting for anyone who might be in pursuit.

It shouldn't take Luca and Owen long to reach the car, so I count, waiting a full minute before I begin to move, quickly making my way toward where Audrey better still be safe and sound.

I'm not sure how the men at Becca's didn't find us, but thank God they didn't. I'm not sure how I would've handled?—

Something whistles beside me. The sound is familiar. Means we didn't get away as well as I thought.

And that I'm directing those pricks right at Audrey.

I turn as I pick up the pace, arm steady as I fire off a couple of silenced rounds in the direction the bullet aimed for me originated.

Pressing the mic on the earpiece we always wear during ops, I say, "I'm coming in and I have company. Shots fired."

"Copy that. We're almost at the car and we'll be ready to move the second you're in."

I want to tell them to leave me, but I'm so fucking close and I don't want to do that to Audrey. I promised I would be back, so I'm fucking coming back.

Three more shots sail past me, but this time they're closer. They come in succession, so there's likely only one shooter. If I can manage to take him out?—

The next shot doesn't miss. It catches me directly in the center back of my vest, sending me stumbling forward. Getting hit hurts, whether there's a vest to save you or

not, and pain radiates down my spine.

I turn, knowing I've got to take him out and I've got to do it now.

But the fucker is too close, and another bullet hits me square in the center of my chest, sending me stumbling back, fighting to stay upright because if I go down, I'm as good as dead.

Getting hit in both the back and front so close together has me struggling to breathe, and my vision starts to blur as I straighten my arm, taking aim. I've got a split second to hit him before he realizes it'll take a headshot to kill me.

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Before I can get the first shot off, his head snaps back, a circular defect appearing just above his left eye. I blink, sure I'm seeing things, because I know I did not pull the trigger.

In my next breath, soft hands are pressing against my face, angling it down.

Audrey's eyes are wide and watering as they search my face. "Are you okay? I saw him shoot you, and I know you said to stay in the car, but?—"

"We don't have fucking time for this." Owen grabs me and hooks one arm around Audrey, shoving my body and practically carrying hers in the direction of the car. Luca's right behind him, collecting my sidearm from where Audrey dropped it on the ground.

Becca's already loaded in the back seat, looking pale and in shock, when Owen shoves Audrey and me in beside her. I barely notice as the two men get in the front and we pull away, racing through the darkened streets of the neighborhood as Luca gets us the fuck out of here as fast as he can.

Audrey's hands are back on me, moving over my body as she checks for the wounds she's sure I have. Her voice is panicked and tears are streaming down her face as she pleads with me to tell her where I'm hit.

But the shots that hit me aren't even registering at this point. Only the one that hit the man chasing me matters. "Are you the one who shot him?"

Audrey's eyes come to my face, and her wandering hands still. "I know you told me

not to get out of the car, but when I heard Owen and Luca talking about what was happening, I panicked. You were all alone, and no one was there to back you up, so I...”

“So you, what?” I need to hear her say it, because I have to be certain what just happened.

Audrey licks her lips, her eyes leaving my face to move back to my body. “I saw him shoot you. Where did he shoot you?”

I grab her hands as they continue moving over me, stalling their progress. “They hit me in the vest. I’m fine, I’ll just be bruised up tomorrow.” I squeeze her wrists, bringing her attention back to my face. “Did you shoot him?”

Audrey presses her lips together, mouth flattening as she gives me a small nod.

A small nod that turns my whole fucking world upside down.

And Audrey doesn’t seem to know it, because she keeps explaining, the words tumbling out of her mouth. “You told me I could shoot as many people as I needed to, so I didn’t think it would be a big deal. Honestly, I didn’t even really think I would hit him. I don’t know how it happened. Maybe it’s like when mothers can lift up cars to save their kids, because I just aimed and pulled the trigger.” Her brows pinch together. “He’s dead, right?”

I can’t tell how she feels about that possibility, so I hedge. “The shot went in right above his eye.”

Audrey nods, taking a deep breath and blowing it back out. “Good.”

My brows lift. “That’s good?”

Audrey's gaze is steady on mine, her words slow and serious. "It was either him or you, and I'll pick you every time."

I don't know what to say to that. What to think about it.

I love hard. I know that. I always figured I would have to settle for someone who wouldn't feel the same fierceness for me—the same all-encompassing-ness—that I do for them.

But the sweet, soft, gentle woman beside me just put a bullet into a man's brain for me. And all she has to say about it is, good.

Audrey sits taller, looking almost proud, which fucks my head up almost as much as her killing for me. Her lips lift in a hint of a smile as she leans close, her voice low. "Since I call you Murder Maddox, does this mean I can be Assassin Audrey?"

EIGHTEEN

AUDREY

NOW I THINK I know why Maddox likes killing people. Why he loves his job the way he does.

Because it's kind of exhilarating to take out someone trying to hurt a person you care about.

I get that's not normally his reason for killing, but I don't plan to start shooting people professionally, so this is as close as I'm going to get to experiencing his profession.

I don't hate it.

Luca keeps eyeballing me from where he sits behind the wheel, his gaze drifting to where I sit in the middle of the back seat. Like he's expecting me to have a complete meltdown any second. I understand, and I'm a little surprised it's not happening myself.

But I didn't really have a choice. If I didn't stop him, that man was going to hurt Maddox.

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Technically he already had.

I run my hands over the vest that's the only reason Maddox is still breathing. I can feel the spot where he was hit, and it turns my stomach, making me even more comfortable with the actions I'd been forced to take.

"I'm okay." His voice is soft, reassuring. He catches my hands, long fingers encircling my wrists, and lifts them to his mouth, running his lips across my knuckles. "I promise. Both shots hit my vest."

My eyes widen. "Both?" That bastard shot him twice?

The one I watched hit him stopped my whole heart. If I'd known that fucker shot him another time, there's a good chance I would've worked out a way to even the playing field and add a second one to my own tally.

Owen twists in the front seat, leaning our way, his upper body practically wedged against the console. "You doing okay, Becca?"

Holy shit. I fucking forgot Becca was even here. As much as I hate to do it, since I haven't verified he's as okay as he claims, I turn away from Maddox, looking over the small woman beside me.

But she doesn't look any worse for wear. If anything, Becca looks even more pissed off than she was the last time I saw her. She's slouched beside me, arms crossed tight over the hoodie she's got on. Her lips are pressed into a deep frown as she glares around the car.

“I swear to God, if those assholes mess up my house, I’m going to kill all of them with my bare hands.”

Owen’s mouth presses into a considering line, his brows lifting. “I can probably make that happen.”

Luca’s hand suddenly smashes against Owen’s face, shoving him back into his seat. “Leave her alone, dick. She just had to climb out of the fucking window and deal with your shoulder crammed against her gut.”

Owen scoffs. “You carried her first, prick.”

“Can both of you shut up?” Becca lifts one hand to squeeze at her temples. “I’ve got a headache.”

The car goes silent. I don’t think anyone wants to make Becca’s night any more awful than it already is, so we finish the drive to the hotel in silence. It takes longer than the trip to Becca’s house, partly because Luca pretty much obeys speed limits, but also because we have to take a roundabout way to make sure no one’s tailing us.

By the time we finally make it to the hotel, I am itching to get a good look at Maddox and make sure he’s genuinely not injured. I wouldn’t put it past him to lie to me about this. He wouldn’t want me to worry. But I will worry until I see for myself he’s okay, so he’s just going to have to deal with it.

After getting Becca a room of her own—also under the name of one of Alaskan Security’s shell companies—we drop her off, making sure she knows not to use her phone and to come get us if anything happens. Once she’s set, Luca and Owen begrudgingly leave her alone to go to their room, and I practically shove Maddox into ours.

The door's barely close behind us before I say, "Strip."

I expect him to argue with me. He's been a pain in the ass every other time I've tried to do much more than snuggle him, but Maddox slowly turns to face me and begins unfastening the destroyed vest covering his chest. Pulling it up and off, he tosses it aside and it hits the floor with a surprisingly loud thud. There are no holes in the shirt he's wearing underneath, and that makes me breathe a little easier. There's also no sign of blood on his skin, so hopefully he's as okay as he claims.

His hands go to his shirt, gripping across his stomach to pull it free of his pants. Once it's loose, he drags it up and over his head. The sight of his body still shorts out my brain a little bit, but not as severely as it did initially. Now I know what's coming, and can brace for all the solid muscle and sculpted abs staring back at me.

Plus, this time, I'm looking for something specific. Signs of injury. New...

And old.

Stepping close, I move my eyes over the reddened skin of his chest. It hasn't bruised yet, but based on the inflamed color of his skin, it's coming. Carefully, I lift both hands, gently brushing my fingers over the smooth skin and slightly textured hair of his chest. "This looks like it hurts."

"I'm okay." Maddox's blue eyes fuse to my face as I continue tracing lines across his skin with a light touch.

I stop when I reach the scar I noticed before, lifting my eyes to his face. Now that I've seen his gear up close—witnessed his vest taking a shot intended to kill him—I'm paying more attention to the location of the slightly shiny patch. It's right at his shoulder, just beyond the coverage of his vest. "Was this from a gunshot?"

Maddox offers a silent nod, and I struggle not to react. The last time I questioned him about this scar, he completely avoided answering, and I haven't seen him shirtless since. I don't want that to happen again, but it's difficult not to start asking questions.

To distract myself from all the things I want to know, I continue looking him over, exploring his bare upper half with both my hands and my eyes.

It's not long before I find another circular scar marring his beautiful body. "Another gunshot?"

Again, Maddox nods silently. I study his face, confused when he almost seems... Guilty? Maybe even ashamed?

The urge to ask for specifics burns through me, and again, I tamp it down, keeping my lips fused together. But it's killing me to see him so upset. Especially since I don't know exactly why.

I find another scar.

And another.

Four. Four gunshots that pierced his skin and caused him pain. Four times someone tried to steal him before I even had the chance to know how amazing he is.

Pulling in a slow breath, hoping it will temper the anger making my trigger finger twitchy, I ask, “Is that all of them?”

Again, Maddox nods, but this time he offers up an explanation. “I was shot protecting Savannah and her sister over the winter. We were ambushed, and since I was the one who went first, I took the brunt of it.”

I force in another shaky breath, this one struggling to pass around the lump in my throat and the tightness in my chest. “She didn’t tell me.”

Maddox brings a hand to my face, smoothing back a little of the hair that’s worked free of my bun. “She probably didn’t want to tell you someone you’d recently met was shot when she was trying to rescue a woman from an abusive situation. It would have hit a little close to home, and you’d already been through so much.”

Surprisingly, a small smile lifts my lips. “Seems like Savannah was trying to protect me the same way I was trying to protect her.”

Maddox’s fingers trace the side of my face, his eyes holding mine. “I guess that means she’ll have to forgive you for holding back on her.”

I swallow, deciding to push my luck. “I’m not the only one who was holding out

though, was I?”

My eyes fall to the scar on his shoulder. Leaning forward, I press my lips against his warm skin. It’s the first time I’ve been able to do more than kiss his mouth, and when he doesn’t stop me, I decide to keep going. I move to the next healed injury. It’s right alongside his collarbone, and I brush my lips over it, breathing the scent of him into my lungs. Following the same path my hands took, I slide my way to the next scar, playing a sad game of connect the dots across Maddox’s chiseled chest.

The final gunshot went in right beneath his ribs, just below the bottom line of his vest. The scar it left behind almost hides in the ridge of his abs, and I drop to my knees so I can reach it more easily.

After pressing another kiss to his warm skin, my hands move to his belt, intention clear, as I work it open.

Or at least as I attempt to. Unfortunately, I’ve pushed my luck as far as it will go, and Maddox scoops me up from the floor, bringing me to my feet before urging me backward with the press of his body against mine.

I frown at him. “Why won’t you let me touch you?”

“You were touching me.” His hands come to grip my hips, holding tight as he eases me toward the bed.

I angle a brow at him. “You know what I mean.”

The back of my legs hit the mattress, but Maddox’s body continues pushing me and I tumble back.

Thanks to his arm snaking across my back, supporting most of my weight, the

landing is soft and controlled. Instead of leaving me sprawled sideways at a weird angle, Maddox shifts me—still using just that one arm to manage my weight—until my head is on the pillows and his body hovers over mine. He completes the entire process without a single grunt or straining expression, even after taking two shots to the vest.

I've never been with someone as strong as Maddox. It should be unnerving, knowing he could hurt me if he wanted. Way worse than Trevor was capable of. But I could never be afraid of him. I know, with complete and unwavering certainty, Maddox would never, ever hurt me. It's yet another way I feel like I know him so well. Understand him in a way that shouldn't be possible so soon after meeting him.

But tonight it's become clear I'm missing something important. Something big that will explain why he holds back the way he does at times like this.

"It's complicated." Maddox offers the quintessential non-answer, answer.

"Is it because you don't want me to touch you?" I struggle to believe that's true. He holds me close every night and practically always has some part of him touching some part of me when we're in close proximity.

"It's not that I don't want you to touch me." Maddox leans in, running his nose up the side of my neck as he breaths deep. "Unfortunately, I want you to touch me more than I've ever wanted anyone to touch me."

"Oh." My brain tries to make sense of what he's telling me. "And that's... bad?"

Maddox sighs, his breath warm against my skin. "It could be." He lifts his head, eyes meeting mine. "I'm not the kind of person who does casual interactions, Audrey. I'm all-in or nothing, and I know not everyone works that way." His fingers move through my hair, working my sagging bun loose as he continues. "And when I say all,

I mean all.”

That... makes sense.

Maddox is filled with love. You can see it in how giving and attentive he is. He's taken care of me better than anyone ever has.

But then there's the other side of him. The one that's all focus and intensity. Determination and single-mindedness.

I can see how the combination probably makes for a man who loves with his whole heart and soul and is completely and utterly committed. Willing to go to any length for that person.

Any length.

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Maddox's blue eyes move over my face, like he's gauging my reaction to what he's telling me. He must not hate what he sees, because he continues. "Do you remember what happened the night I came to your apartment?"

I smile. "You mean other than a strange man coming through my window?"

Maddox seems to relax a little at my teasing. "Other than that."

"I remember trying to hit you with a baseball bat." I was so proud of myself for stepping up like that. For trying to take on someone I was sure came to hurt me. "Sorry for that, by the way."

"Don't be sorry. I was happy it happened, because it meant you were a fighter." Maddox's lips lift. "I wasn't wrong."

He's getting sidetracked—moving the conversation back to me—and I feel like he might be doing it on purpose. So I drag him back where I want to stay. "What should I remember about that night?"

Maddox's smile slips a little and he takes a deep breath. "The part that was a little embarrassing for me."

Ah. That part.

"I don't know that I'd call it little." I tease him again because it seems to help him relax. "And there was nothing to be embarrassed about. You really love your job and excitement is a big part of arousal, so?—"

“That’s not why it happened, Audrey.” Maddox shakes his head, eyes leaving my face. “It’s not usually easy for me to get...”

“Aroused?” I stick with the word I’ve already used since it didn’t seem to make him more uncomfortable than he already is.

“Right. That.” Maddox brings his eyes back to my face, looking at me like there’s something he can’t quite figure out. “I usually need to get to know someone before that starts to come into play.”

“And you didn’t really know me.”

I can see why he’s confused. Sure, we’d met once or twice, but it didn’t go beyond general introductions. For all intents and purposes, I was a stranger. Based on what he’s telling me, his reaction to me wouldn’t make sense. I can see now it probably took all he thought he knew about himself and turned it on his head.

But he’s not the only one whose normal has gone off the rails lately.

“Can I tell you something?” I don’t wait for his approval, because he needs to know this. “I felt like I knew you almost immediately.” I wiggle around beneath him, trying to free one of my pinned legs from the weight of his limbs. “Even though you crawled through my window and scared the shit out of me, it never felt awkward or strange with you around.” I manage to get the leg out and Maddox’s hips angle between my thighs. “It felt natural. Easy.”

His nostrils flare when I slide my other leg from under his body, resulting in the hard line of his dick pressing right against me in a way that makes every inch of me flushed and needy. I almost lost him tonight, and it’s making me feel desperate to touch him.

Desperate to be touched by him.

I skim both hands down his chest, smoothing over his skin with a reverent touch. “I promised myself I wouldn’t be stupid again. That if I ever found someone I thought I might like, I’d take it slow. Get to know them inside and out before I jumped in. That I would make sure they were who they claimed to be, so I didn’t end up in the same place I’d just worked so hard to escape.” Once again, I reach the waistband of his pants, only this time he doesn’t stop me. “But I can’t help it with you. I keep trying to slow down, but that almost makes my feelings run faster.” I lift my eyes to his face, nearly gasping at the intensity in the way he’s looking at me. “So I’ve decided I’m done trying to reel them in. If they want to sprint, they can sprint.” I take a shaky breath. “That’s why I don’t feel bad about shooting that man.” I shake my head as I work the button of his pants loose. “I’d already decided to keep you, and no way was he going to take you away.”

I know I’m saying a lot—spilling some intense emotions and making some wild declarations—but I don’t care. I said I was done trying to control this and I meant it. Maddox wanted to talk about being all-in, so there it is.

I’m all-in.

I nearly grin in triumph when I finally manage to get his zipper down and begin working my hand into the opening, ready to touch him. To show him how I feel. To take care of him the way he takes care of me.

I should have known better.

His weight lifts off me as he shifts away and I grab at him, trying to hold on. To keep him close.

“Relax, sweetheart. I’m not going anywhere.” His eyes drag down my body. “You’re

just wearing way too many clothes right now.”

I peer down at the layers on my body. He has a valid point.

I grab the hem of everything on my top half and wrestle it up my body, feeling frantic. Like my window of opportunity could close at any time.

And I’m nowhere near as good at sneaking in them as Maddox is.

I manage to get both shirts off and throw them over the side of the bed. Then I go right for my pants.

Maddox chuckles. “I wasn’t expecting you to handle that for me.”

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I flash him a smile as I squirm around, pushing down my pants and panties before unhooking my bra. “Surprise.”

Maddox’s eyes rake down the line of my body. “You’re full of surprises, Assassin Audrey.”

“Actually”—I send the bra somewhere in the room—“you’ve seen all the surprises I have. Baseball bat. Lucky shot. And naked.” My eyes lock in as his hands go to the waistband of his pants. “I probably should have saved at least one for later.”

“Nah.” Maddox shoves down his pants, underwear and all, and I get my first look at his cock. “I’m not big on surprises. I like knowing what’s coming.”

Speaking of knowing what’s coming...

It’s impolite to stare. I know that.

But holy shit. His dick is just as pretty as he is, and I can’t wait to get my hands on it. And maybe my mouth.

And for sure my vagina.

When he finally crawls back over me, I’m practically vibrating with anticipation. Ready—desperate—to touch and taste and please and?—

Maddox only makes it partway up the bed before he stops.

I start to reach for him again, planning to drag him closer, but my fingers have barely connected with his shoulder when his hands grip my thighs, spread them wide, and his mouth seals over my pussy, stealing every damn thought from my brain.

Maddox wasn't exaggerating when he said he was either all-in or nothing. I didn't even know it was possible to climax so quickly. Or so hard. But the way his tongue flicks against my clit has me coming undone ridiculously fast.

And I'm not mad at it. Especially since I know Maddox is more of a two-fer sort of guy.

My whole body is relaxed and my limbs are heavy as he slides back over me. The heavy weight of his cock rests against my belly, the leaking tip leaving streaks on my skin as he kisses me, the taste of me lingering on his tongue.

One strong hand hooks behind my knee, bending my leg up and alongside his hip, spreading me wider. Maddox's mouth pulls free, his forehead coming to rest on mine. "Tell me I can have you, Audrey." His hips shift, dragging the tip of him along the seam of my slick pussy to notch into place.

And I've never been more desperate for anything in my life. The first time I asked Maddox to take me was about me wanting to clear the slate. Remove all traces of the past.

Tonight's about the future.

"You can have me." It's not an offer at this point. It's more of a plea.

But he doesn't move.

"I don't just mean like this." Maddox's lips come to move against mine as he speaks.

“I mean completely. I want all of you. With me. In my house. In my bed. In my life. I want everything.” There’s a hit of desperation in his voice, and it brings me back from the edge I’m still clinging to.

Pulls my eyes to his so he can see that what I’m about to say is the complete and utter truth. “It’s already yours.”

And probably has been since that first night he laid beside me, ready to protect me at any cost.

Maddox sucks in a breath, his hand holding my face as he spears into me, filling me completely in one, almost savage, thrust. A deep, masculine groan rumbles through his chest as he rocks against me, pressing even deeper. Like he’s trying to fill every bit of me with every bit of him.

That’s what I want too.

I cling to him as he starts to move, each thrust of his hips dragging me higher. Pushing me faster.

But what does me in is the way his eyes stay locked onto mine the whole time. Like he needs to know I’m right there with him every step of the way. That we’re in this together.

Like he doesn’t know it’s been that way from the start.

When I go over the edge, I don’t go alone, and the sounds of his pleasure heightens mine just as much as the feel of his cock swelling and flexing as he fills me up.

And for a second, I’m sad I have an IUD.

That sobers me up fast, because I've never—never—thought of having kids. I wasn't in a place where I could even entertain the possibility. Wasn't with someone I would allow to play a part in another human's upbringing.

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I know what happens when people shouldn't be parents. Their children grow up broken and looking for love anywhere they can find it. Taking scraps and begging for more.

But imagining Maddox as a father is easy.

Too easy.

Just as easy as falling in love with him is turning out to be.

NINETEEN

MADDOX

"THIS IS UNEXPECTED." My mother answers her phone on the second ring. "Is everything going okay?"

"Everything's good." I rake one hand through my hair, fighting the awkwardness I always feel when I try to talk to anyone in my family. "How are things with you guys?"

"We're good." My mother's tone is casual. "Just ready for the cooler weather."

"I bet. Has it been hot there?" I fall back into the standard conversation we carry on anytime I call home. I don't know how to move past it, because the way my mother communicates is so different from how I do, and I've never figured out how to bridge the gap.

But I want to try. I want to give her—all of them—a chance, because I’m not sure I’ve really done that before.

“It’s always hot here.” She blows out a breath. “We had record highs this summer.”

I grew up in southern Georgia, right along the coast. It’s beautiful and as close as you can get to a tropical climate without actually being in a tropical climate. Warm and temperate and a great place to go through the winter.

Which is why I’m calling.

There’s a lull in the conversation and Audrey squeezes my arm, curling her body closer to mine where we lay in the hotel bed, enjoying our morning as much as we can.

When I mentioned calling my parents, she didn’t push me either way, just listened as I explained the full scope of what’s going on in my head. Having her here—beside me—made it a little easier to take the leap and dial the phone.

Taking a deep breath, I plunge in. “I was wondering if maybe you guys would be open to me coming for a visit sometime soon.”

I have to believe it will be soon, because imagining Audrey in danger for an extended period of time makes me want to peel the skin off my body.

Then go peel the skin off everyone threatening her. And that would be a messy clean-up.

“Oh.” My mother sounds surprised. “Of course. We’d be happy to see you anytime. You’re always welcome.”

It hasn't always felt that way, but I'm starting to wonder if maybe that was more me than it was them.

"Great. Good." I glance at Audrey. I feel like I made my position pretty clear last night, but she could still be surprised by what I'm about to say. "I'll have someone with me, so if you'd be more comfortable with us getting a hotel room, I am happy to do that."

My mother is quiet for a minute, and it leads me to believe Audrey isn't the only one who might have been surprised.

She recovers relatively quickly, clearing her throat before saying, "Of course you can bring someone with you. We have plenty of space." She pauses. "Would you be needing two rooms or one?"

I reach out to play with Audrey's hair. "Just one."

"Then that will make it easy. I'll only have to get one room ready." Again, she pauses. "Do you know when you're planning to come?"

For a long time, my mother's tendency to go silent as she collected her thoughts into carefully crafted words was unsettling. It made me feel like she didn't know what to say to me and had to fish around for conversation. But now I'm thinking that's not what's happening at all. She just takes a minute to process and consider, where I simply let words fly. Both probably have their merits.

And downfalls.

"I have to wrap up some things at work first." I pull Audrey closer at the reminder. "I'm not sure exactly how long it will take, but I'm hoping in the next few weeks."

Audrey didn't seem surprised when she initially discovered I was planning to take her on this visit, but her eyes do widen at my timeframe.

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“So maybe around Thanksgiving?” My mother’s question almost sounds...hopeful.

I would’ve missed it before—been wrapped up in all I mistakenly thought about her—but now that I’ve pushed my own insecurities to the side, it’s plain to see my mom would welcome a visit from me.

“Yeah. Probably close to Thanksgiving. If that works.” I’ve made some strides regarding my family, but still feel like I could be imposing. Like I’m scheduling an appointment instead of planning a visit to the house I grew up in.

“It would be wonderful to have you here for Thanksgiving.” My mom’s words waver a little. “I don’t think we’ve celebrated that holiday as a whole family in years.”

I never thought my absence bothered my mother—any of my family, really. But the emotion in her voice at the possibility our family could be together for Thanksgiving, makes me wonder if that’s another way I was seeing things through a clouded lens.

“Let’s plan on Thanksgiving then.” I’m fairly confident there will be some resolution as far as Audrey’s concerned by then. I doubt the entire mess will be cleaned up—or even fully sorted out—by Thanksgiving, but I’m positive Audrey will be removed from it.

One way or another.

“If your companion has anything special they like, or certain dietary needs, just let me know and I’ll make sure we have plenty for them to eat.”

I turn my head, looking at Audrey. “I’ll let you know.”

We say goodbye and I hang up, feeling strange. Having everything you thought you knew turned on its head rocks your world. Even when it’s a good thing.

“It sounds like we’re spending Thanksgiving with my family.” I watch Audrey’s face, studying her reaction.

I’m ready to straighten out my feelings about my family. Willing to see the error of my own ways so I can make things better between us. But there are limits.

And Audrey will always be my limit. If she doesn’t want to go, we won’t go.

“I sort of figured that out when you said Thanksgiving would be fine.” Audrey gives me a little smile. “Are you okay going there for a holiday right out of the gate?”

I frown. Figuring out how to navigate a relationship with my parents might not be the only thing I’m going to have to wrap my head around. “I’m not worried about me. I’m worried about you. What do you want to do?”

Audrey reaches one finger out and pokes me in the middle of my chest. “And I’m not worried about me. I’m worried about you. This is your family, so we do what’s best for you.”

I might regret hoping for someone willing to give as much as me in a relationship, because Audrey taking care of me back—worrying about my feelings—is making it difficult for me to make everything all about her.

Audrey laughs, the sound light and easy as she sits up, swinging one leg across my hips to straddle me, her hands resting on my chest. “Don’t look at me like that. Did you think I was willing to kill someone for you but wouldn’t give a shit how you felt

about going to your parents' for a holiday?" She leans forward, putting pressure on my chest.

Normally, it would be fine. She could stand on me and I wouldn't care. But today is not normal, so I accidentally wince at the added weight pressing against the still-sore spot.

"Crap." Audrey immediately straightens, lifting her hands up like she's being held at gunpoint. "I forgot." Her brows pinch together. "That's kind of a weird thing to forget, isn't it?"

I shake my head. "Not for me."

This isn't the first time I've taken a bullet to a vest. It probably won't be the last. And, after taking a bullet to the body, I can say with absolute certainty, a vest shot isn't nearly as memorable.

Audrey scowls as she grabs the hem of the T-shirt I pulled on before going out to collect our breakfast. She pushes it up to the top of my chest so she can look over the bruise blooming across my skin. The snarl that twists her pretty face is adorable.

And fucking sexy as hell.

"I should have shot him again." Audrey runs one hand over my skin, her touch gentle. "Maybe someday you can teach me how to properly shoot so if this ever happens again?—"

"If this ever happens again, I'll lose my shit." I reach for her, holding her soft body close as I roll us across the mattress until she's on her back beneath me. "You're going to be lucky if I don't lock you in a padded room."

Audrey scrunches up her nose. “There have been days where I could’ve used being locked in a padded room.” She loops both arms around my neck. “And technically, you have me pretty much locked in a room now.”

I don’t like the comparison she’s making. “It’s not padded.”

Audrey manages to move in a way that bounces both of us against the mattress. “I don’t know. Feels pretty padded to me.”

It takes me a second to realize she’s giving me shit. Teasing me when I was starting to get wound up about keeping her safe. Deflecting my agitation and fear before it could get a grip.

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And fuck if it doesn't make me hard as hell.

"I'll show you how well this bed is padded." I pull her down the mattress, making her laugh and squeal. Almost like she doesn't know I fully intend for that laugh to become a moan in the next two minutes.

On some level I knew the second I let myself have Audrey I'd never be satisfied. That there wouldn't be enough hours in the day for me to have her as much as I want.

I'm still gonna give it one hell of a shot.

I've got her pajama pants halfway off, my mouth watering in anticipation of tasting her, when my computer starts to ring.

Audrey goes still, her head turning to the desk. "Why is it making that noise?"

I groan. "That's a video call."

Turning to Audrey, I quickly pull her pants back into place, making sure she's completely covered before I slide off the bed and cross the room. After turning the laptop so she's out of view—because I'm still feeling a little territorial—I connect Pierce's call. His face populates the screen and I take a step back, surprise lifting my brows. "Rough night?"

The owner of Alaskan Security looks exhausted. His suit is wrinkled, his hair is messy, and there are bags under his eyes.

Pierce rubs one hand over his face. “It’s been a difficult few days. We’ve been working practically around-the-clock trying to figureout what’s going on down there.” He shakes his head. “It’s not looking great.”

I glanced at Audrey, like I need to make sure she’s still safe, before turning back to Pierce. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I think this corruption issue is bigger than we expected.” Raking one hand through his hair, he scans his screen. “Is Becca with you? She should be included in this conversation, along with Audrey.” A small smile curved his lips. “But I already know Audrey’s with you.”

I straighten, ignoring the second part of what he said. “Give me a second. I’ll go get Becca.”

Heading out into the hall, I go to Becca’s room a few doors down, knocking quietly because I don’t want to startle her.

She answers relatively quickly, still wearing the same clothes she had on last night. There’s a blended coffee in her hand and the TV is playing in the background.

I get straight to the point. “Pierce wants to talk to you.”

Becca’s brows lift behind her glasses. “Who’s Pierce?”

“He’s the owner of the company I work for.” I tip my head toward the room I share with Audrey. “He’s on a video chat now.”

“Fine.” Becca quickly grabs her room key and follows me down the hall. I walk in to find Audrey wearing more clothes than when I left and my computer facing the wall.

“I moved it so Pierce wouldn’t accidentally get an eye-full of me stripping down.” She smooths down her hair. “I figured that would be a shitty way to start his already shitty morning.”

If it were any other man, I’d say she was more likely to ruin his morning by not accidentally giving him a glimpse, but Pierce is completely and totally in love with his wife Mona. There could be a beautiful woman standing naked in front of him and he’d just step around her, oblivious to her presence, because Mona is all that exists in his eyes.

Now that I think about it, that’s how most of the men I work with are. I always felt like I was a relatively observant person, but fuck. I’ve missed a lot. Things that would have made me feel better about my own personality and quirky ways.

Becca sucks down a gulp of her drink as she strides toward the computer, flipping it around before looking over the man on the screen. Pulling the straw from her mouth, she narrows her eyes. “You must be Pierce.”

He nods. “I am. And you must be Becca.”

Becca doesn’t acknowledge his assumption, just barrels right into what she wants to know. “Have you found my sister?”

Regret pinches Pierce’s expression. “I have not.” He leans forward. “But I think I have found someone at the Memphis Police Department it will be safe to take this to.”

Becca’s brows lift. “You think?”

“I wish I could guarantee you he’ll listen and take you seriously, but I can’t. But at this point, he’s the best shot we have. So if he’s unable or unwilling to take this on,

things will have to be handled in a different manner.”

Audrey steps in beside Becca. “What does that mean?”

Pierce takes a deep breath, his shoulders lifting. “It means you won’t have the opportunity to see Trevor or anyone affiliated with him prosecuted by the court.”

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Becca and Audrey seem to think on that for a minute. Audrey is the first to respond.

“Will you be able to find Becca’s sister if that’s the case?”

Pierce’s expression sharpens, his features turning hard and deadly. “We will find Becca’s sister—and anyone else we identify as a victim—no matter what.”

Becca turns to Audrey, directing her question at the woman beside her. “What does he mean?”

Audrey glances at me, and I give her a slight nod, letting her know it’s okay to speak freely. I think hearing the truth might help Becca with everything that’s going on.

Audrey focuses on the smaller woman. “If they can’t take these men down through the courts, they’ll hunt them down and eliminate them.”

Becca stares at Audrey for a minute, and I start worrying I’ve made a mistake. Maybe she’s not ready for the reality of what I do—what Alaskan Security does—even though she witnessed a small piece of it last night.

Becca turns to Pierce. “Why don’t you just go kill them now?” She sets her drink on the table, leaning both hands against the surface as she lowers her face in front of the camera. “Hell. Give me a gun and I’ll go do it myself.”

If Pierce is surprised by her words, he doesn’t show it. Instead, he calmly says, “If it comes to that, I’m sure we can arrange for you to obtain retribution.”

That seems to satisfy Becca. She picks her coffee back up, sucking down another long drink as she steps back into place.

But Audrey has more questions. “Who is this guy you found? What do you know about him?”

“He’s worked for the department for over a decade as an undercover officer. A few years ago, he became frustrated with his superiors’ focus on taking down a particular group within the city even though that group was no longer an issue. Since then, he’s been moved from place to place within the department because he’s now seen as a problem for rocking the boat.” A slight smirk lifts Pierce’s lips. “Which was a mistake because now he’s angry and wants to expose everyone involved in the corruption.”

Becca snorts. “He claims she’s angry, but I’ve dealt with enough guys in that department to know they’re so far up each other’s asses they can’t even see the sun.” She shakes her head. “It’s probably just bullshit and he’s trying to set us up.”

Audrey doesn’t seem to be paying attention to Becca. Instead she steps closer to the computer. “Do you believe him?”

“I do.” Pierce’s answer is immediate and unwavering.

Audrey turns to look at me. I know what she’s asking, and I give her another nod.

“Okay then.” Her gaze pauses on Becca before moving back to Pierce. “When are we talking to this guy?”

TWENTY

AUDREY

“This guy better be legit or I’m going to kill him.” Becca sits next to me in the back seat, arms crossed over her chest, scowling like she’s capable of the murder she’s threatening.

I get it now that I have someone I’d kill for.

Have killed for.

“You’ll have to get in line.” Maddox is tense, his whole body strung tight as we drive through downtown Memphis. “But if it makes you feel better, I’ll let you kick him when I’m done.”

Becca’s lips press into a considering line. “I’ll think about it.”

“Pierce believes him.” I’m still clinging to hope. Leaning into optimism. “And Intel didn’t find anything sketchy when they looked into his background.” Even if I didn’t believe Pierce, I’d believe Heidi, Harlow, and Mona. They seemed genuinely upset by what’s going on. If they saw anything during their investigation that caused concern, we wouldn’t be driving to meet Officer Romero at a hole in the wall Chinese restaurant on the other side of town.

We’d be hunting him down so Intel could ruin his life.

Becca gives me the side-eye from behind her glasses before turning to stare out the window. “I guess we’ll find out if they’re as good at what they do as they say they are.”

I understand her skepticism. I’d probably feel the same way if I didn’t have so much faith in Maddox.

Or if it was someone I cared about’s life on the line instead of mine.

“If he’s full of shit, I’ll take care of it.” Owen turns in his seat, eyes fixing on the woman beside me. “Nothing bad’s going to happen today.”

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Becca looks unimpressed by Owen's attempt to reassure her. "You mean nothing bad's going to happen to me." She stares him down. "Because I'm pretty sure my sister's day is still going to be total shit."

"Not for long." Luca pipes up. "We will get her and we'll get her soon." His eyes find Becca in the mirror. "I promise."

Becca's eyes come my way. "Why are they being so fucking weird?"

I'm surprised by her question. It's pretty obvious what Luca and Owen are up to—ill timed as it is—but Becca must be so wrapped up in her sister's abduction that she's oblivious to their attempts to catch her attention.

Romantically.

Instead of explaining—it might push her over the edge and result in blood on the upholstery—I change the subject. "It's probably a good thing you haven't heard of Officer Romero. It means he probably wasn't involved in the screw up with your sister's case."

"I guess." Becca leans to peer between the seats. "Are we almost there? I need to pee."

"Five minutes." Luca gives her our ETA, his eyes once again lingering in the mirror.

At first I thought he was just watching for a tail, but now I think he's watching for a tail and observing Becca. It's bad freaking timing, and I might yell at him and Owen

both when we get back to the hotel. I get that they're lonely, but this woman's going through a lot. She doesn't need two mercenaries trying to make her fall in love.

When we pull into the lot, Becca's out of the car before anyone else, and it leaves Luca and Owen scrambling to make sure she's protected as she hustles to the door of the restaurant.

"I guess she really did have to pee." I shimmy across the seat after Maddox gets out, letting him take my hand and help me out. "Or maybe she's going to throw up. This meeting probably has her stomach twisted in knots."

"What about you?" Maddox's eyes skim over me before he goes back to scanning our surroundings. "How are you feeling?"

"I don't know." I purse my lips as I mull it over. "Cautiously optimistic, I guess. I hope this guy is what we've been looking for and soon this will all be over."

Maddox's lips curve downward. "I'm not sure this will be over as soon as we were hoping." He pulls me close before opening the glass door positioned under a bright red awning. "But no matter what, it will all be dealt with."

"I guess that's all I can ask for."

I want Trevor to be publicly taken down. I want the world to know what he is. But the reality is, that might not happen, and I'm trying to make peace with it. As long as we get Becca's sister back and stop what Trevor's doing, I'll be happy.

I take a deep breath as we step inside the restaurant, which is way bigger than it appears from the outside. The scent of garlic, soy, and ginger makes my stomach growl and I press a hand against it to smother the sound. I thought it was strange that Officer Romero picked this spot, but I'm starting to understand the appeal. It's clean

and well decorated, with gleaming black booths, and glowing lanterns hanging over every table. There's two giant aquariums flanking the entrance, with large, almost iridescent fish languidly swimming inside. It's dim and surprisingly quiet, making the place feel cozy and private.

And that's before we're led to our table.

The two main corners of the dining room are partially walled off around large, circular tables with spinning centers. As we reach the reserved spot, a man stands to greet us. He's tall and broad, with dark—almost black—hair and eyes. A cropped beard is tucked tight to the square lines of his jaw and tattoos cover most of one arm. There's no denying he's extremely good-looking.

There's also no denying I've met him before.

"I know you." I blink, like it might change what I'm seeing. "I met you at Christian and Lydia's." My brain fishes around for his name, but there were so many people there I'm struggling to sort through them all.

His dark eyes narrow on me for a second. "How do you know Christian and Lydia?"

"Butch." I blurt out the name. "You're Butch." Tipping my head, I look him over. "Aren't you?"

I'm starting to doubt myself, because from what I know about Christian and the men he calls his brothers, they may have done some sketchy shit in their lives. I can't imagine a cop would be hanging out with them.

Unless he's just as crooked as everyone else at the Memphis PD.

I start to back up. "I think this is a bad idea."

“How do you know Christian and Lydia?” Maddox steps in front of me, blocking my view of the man I was sure I recognized. One hand snakes back to curve against my hip, keeping me in place, as he throws the same question back at Officer Romero.

The man I think I know sighs, raking a hand through the waves of his dark hair. “Christian was part of my first undercover case. At the time I was the only guy on the force who looked young enough to infiltrate the group he was part of. I spent a solid five years trying to take down an old man running a criminal enterprise built on the backs of foster kids and cast outs.” His jaw tightens. “But nothing ever seemed to stick to him. I managed to get him sent to prison once, but the bastard got out on a technicality. He was killed before I could come up with enough to send him back.”

I step out from behind Maddox. He allows it, but keeps a hand on me. “Does Christian know you’re a cop?”

Butch shakes his head. “No. Once the old man—King, they called him—died, I was reassigned.” Regret pinches his features. “Then about a year ago, they tried sending me back in. But this time they wanted me to collect information on the men King used. Men who’d helped me try to take him down. Men who now had wives and families and were doing good fucking things for this world.”

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My stomach drops, all traces of my earlier hunger vanishing in an instant. “You mean Christian.”

Butch tips his head. “Among others.”

I think back to the group that welcomed me into their fold after I left Trevor. They were so kind and giving. A big family, not by birth or genetics, but by choice. It gave me hope that one day I might find something like it.

And the Memphis PD wanted to tear it all apart.

I frown. “But why?”

“That’s a good fucking ques—” Butch stops short.

“What the fuck?” Becca’s voice is loud behind me.

I turn to find her staring at Butch, her mouth dropped open. “What in the hell are you doing here?” Her eyes snap around, bouncing from me to Maddox to Butch. “Holy shit.” Her eyes widen. “You’re who we’re meeting?”

Butch seems just as shocked to see Becca as she is to see him. “I...” His brain seems to short out for a second. “How are you involved in this?”

“My sister was abducted by her ex-husband, Trevor Hawthorne.” She moves closer to where Butch stands, her dark eyes moving over him. She points to the full sleeve of tattoos covering his arm. “That’s new.”

Butch glances down. "I had to cover up the tattoo I got when I joined The Knights." His focus comes back to Becca. "You look good."

Becca's brows pinch together. "You look... Different."

"It's been a few years." One hand moves to smooth along the hair at the side of his head. "I've probably got a few more gray hairs."

Becca shakes her head. "No. That's not it." She peers up at him, like she's examining something under a microscope. "You look tired."

It's not the most polite thing to say, but she's not wrong. Butch does look a little rough now that I'm really paying attention. The creases at the corners of his eyes seem a little deeper. The beard on his face was neatly cropped the last time I saw him, but now it's a little unruly, just like his hair.

A slow smile spreads across Butch's face. "Your powers of observation continue to be unparalleled." His smile slips, and he pulls out a chair, motioning for Becca to sit. She slips into the seat and he takes the chair directly beside her, still entirely focused on Becca. "How are you doing?" he asks, deep voice gentle.

"Not great." Becca crosses her arms over her chest. "You'd know that if you hadn't disappeared on me."

"I had to." Butch leans close, speaking low, like they're the only two people at the table. "You were going to figure me out. It was only a matter of time before that brilliant brain of yours connected all the dots."

Becca frowns. "I wouldn't have told anyone."

Butch lifts one hand, almost like he's about to push back the strand of dark hair

falling in her face, but then pulls it back. “It wasn’t about you telling people, Becca.”

She studies him, her eyes moving over his face. Her focus is direct and unabashed. She doesn’t try to hide her stare as she scrutinizes every inch of his expression. Finally, she pulls in a deep breath. “Still. I would have liked to know why I never saw you again.”

“I know.” Butch seems genuinely regretful. “I’m sorry. I wish things could have been different.”

The way he says it makes me think there’s a specific sort of different he had in mind.

I must not be the only one who comes to that conclusion, because Luca grabs the chair on Becca’s other side, dragging it loudly across the floor before sitting down, shooting daggers at Butch. “Are we gonna talk about why we’re here, or are you gonna keep trying to explain why you walked out on her?”

I lean back at the hostility in Luca’s tone. He’s not as easy going as Maddox, but I’ve never seen the guy this worked up. Not even when he was running from the men trying to get Becca.

“It wasn’t like that.” Butch practically snarls at Luca as he scoots closer to Becca, locked in a stare-down with one of the men who pretty obviously planned to make a play for her when the time was right.

Things are getting really heated, really fast, and it’s not going to be good for anyone. Especially Becca. Both Luca and Butch seem to be about two seconds from whipping it out to mark their territory.

“It doesn’t matter what happened.” I keep my tone calm since I might be the only voice of reason here right now. Even Maddox is starting to get agitated. He’s got me

pulled in closer, like he's ready to grab me and bolt the second things get out of hand. "What matters now is stopping Trevor and getting Becca's sister back."

Luca and Butch glare at each other a few seconds longer before finally breaking eye contact. Neither of them gives up any of their space though, and poor Becca seems almost squished between two broad sets of shoulders.

But there's only one man holding her attention, and it makes me sad for Luca because it's pretty obvious he doesn't stand a chance.

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“How long has she been gone?” Butch’s question is directed at Becca.

“Three weeks. She called me once, but couldn’t tell me where she was.” She points at Maddox. “I gave him the number she called me from.”

Butch’s eyes flash to Maddox, moving over where his arm’s wrapped tightly around me, before sliding back to Becca. “And you’re sure Trevor Hawthorne is who has her?”

“I’m sure Trevor is responsible for her disappearance, but I don’t know who has her now.” Her voice breaks a little. “She could be states away.” Her chin wobbles. “Or five minutes from where we are now for all I know.” She reaches out to grab Butch’s hand. “That’s why we need your help. I tried to make the police understand she wasn’t a runaway, but they wouldn’t listen. You can explain it to them. Make them look for her.”

Butch’s eyes drop as he leans back in his seat, scrubbing one hand over his face. “Fuck.”

I pull out the chair next to him and sit down. “What’s that mean? What’s wrong?”

“Are you ready to order?” The waitress wedges herself in beside Maddox, oblivious to the tone at the table.

“Give us a few minutes.” Maddox sends her away before turning to Butch. “Are you saying you can’t help us?”

“I’m saying I’m not sure there’s anyone at that station who will help you.” He glances around, assessing gaze raking over Owen and Luca with suspicion before going back to Maddox. “There’s a reason no one’s looking into this, and I’m not sure me being involved will do you any good.” He sighs. “It might actually hurt your odds.”

“It’s because no one wants to touch Trevor.” I want to cry. Want to scream. Want to find some way to get all this frustration and guilt out of my body.

“What?” Butch seems genuinely confused. “No.” He shakes his head. “Trevor’s not the issue.” He drapes his arm across the back of Becca’s chair. “This is way bigger than some pissant state senator.”

“Wait.” I shake my head like it will reorganize my scattered thoughts. “Trevor isn’t in charge of this thing?”

Butch snorts. “Trevor’s a dumbass they’re using as a wall they can hide behind.” He shifts in his seat. “And from what I was able to find before they shut me down, he’s who they plan to throw under the bus if everything goes south.”

“You keep saying they.” Maddox slides into the seat beside me. “Who’s they?”

“If I knew that, we’d be on our way to find Becca’s sister right now.” Butch shakes his head, one hand fisting tight as his jaw clenches. “Whoever they are, the number of cops they have in their pocket is pretty fucking high.”

I deflate like a balloon. I came into this hoping we were closing in on the end. That a resolution was in sight. I thought Butch would know who could help us take Trevor down and find Becca’s sister.

Maddox exchanges looks with Luca and Owen, unspoken words passing between

them. I don't have to hear it to know what they're thinking.

Apparently neither does Becca, because she lifts her shoulders in a shrug. "I guess that means we have to find her ourselves and kill everyone who gets in the way."

Part of me expects Butch to argue with her. To explain murder is against the law and vigilante justice isn't the way to handle this.

Instead he straightens, hard gaze meeting Maddox's. "She's right. The cops aren't going to help. The corruption in the Memphis PD runs deep. I tried to show them, but they didn't want to see it. Makes me think it goes higher than I thought." He offers Luca and Owen a look. "If you want to save Becca's sister, you're going to have to handle it carefully and discreetly, because there's no way to know who's involved."

"You know part of who's involved." Maddox studies Butch with an appraising gaze. "Can probably make some educated guesses based on your years working undercover."

Butch tips his head in a nod. "Probably."

"Do you think you can stand on both sides of the law for a little while?" Maddox asks.

Butch laughs, the sound almost bitter. "Man, I've been standing on both sides of the law for years."

TWENTY-ONE

MADDOX

"THAT WAS CRAZY." Audrey widens her eyes at me as she sets her purse on the

desk in our hotel room. “I totally didn’t expect it to be Butch meeting us at the restaurant.”

“That makes two of us.” Not for a single second did I think I’d recognize the man Pierce found for us to speak with.

In spite of what we’ve learned about the Memphis PD, not for a single second did I expect that man to tell us taking the lawful route to deal with Trevor probably wouldn’t be an option, but here we are.

And I’m not mad about it. I’m also not mad at the rest of what he told us. Because now there’s nothing stopping me from doing what I’ve wanted to do nearly this whole time.

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“Do you think Pierce will want to keep Butch involved if he can’t help us prosecute Trevor and everyone else involved with him?” Audrey’s been working to wrap her head around this new development since we left the restaurant. I’m sure finding out Trevor wasn’t top dog was a bit of a mindfuck for her. He held so much power in her life for so long, it was probably easy to assume he held that power everywhere.

“I think if there’s any chance Butch can help us find Becca’s sister, Pierce will want him involved.”

Taking these assholes down has been temporarily moved to the back burner now that we know we haven’t even come close to finding the top of the food chain. It will take us time to follow the path upward. But it sounds like Butch can help us with that too. He’s managed to collect a pretty decent amount of intel on this group and is willing to share all of it.

Which means our reasons to keep Trevor alive have dwindled to nothing.

“What do you think will happen to Butch if the police department finds out he’s working with Alaskan Security?” Audrey asks, her brows pinched together in concern.

I’m not sure if it’s for Butch or Alaskan Security, or if she’s worried he’ll back out of this deal. I want to calm her fears, but I can’t make myself lie.

“Based on what he said, they probably won’t take it well.”

It sounds like Butch already has one foot out the door. He’s jaded and frustrated and

disgusted with the way the department is run. He claims he's only stayed as long as he has because he hoped he could turn things around. But he's only one man, and money and power are hugely motivating factors for most people. Factors they won't give up easily.

Audrey frowns. "Do you think he'll get in trouble?"

"Trouble?" Trouble is relative in my line of work, and it seems like Butch is toeing that line pretty hard. "I think getting in trouble is probably the least of his worries."

Audrey's eyes widen and her voice drops to a whisper even though we're alone. "Do you think they'll try to hurt him?"

"Anything is possible at this point."

I move close, pulling her against me. Spending all day worrying about having her out in public has made me restless. I want to hold her close. Remind myself she's safe with me.

And she'll be even safer once I do a little light housekeeping.

Audrey wraps both arms around my waist, resting her head on my chest. "I'm so tired of this." She lifts her eyes to my face. "What are we going to do now? Our whole plan to use what I found on Trevor's computer to get him arrested is out the window." Worry pinches her expression. "And how are we ever going to find Becca's sister when she could be literally anywhere?"

"We'll find her." But Trevor's no longer the key to accomplishing that. Butch is.

And I like our odds.

But first, I'm going to take care of the top task on my list.

"Sweetheart, I've got to run an errand." I cup Audrey's face in my hands. "I'm taking either Luca or Owen with me. Who do you want to stay here with you and Becca?"

Audrey's blue eyes move over mine. "Are you going to go kill Trevor?"

"No." I brush my thumbs against her soft skin. "I'm going to get your dog." I lean in to press a kiss to her lips. "Then I'm gonna kill Trevor."

LUCA SITS BEHIND the wheel, glowering.

Audrey suggested I take him. Good call. He probably needs to let off some steam after Butch basically swooped in and stole Becca's attention.

Not that she'd paid much attention to Luca or Owen to start with, but I feel like it would be a bad time to point that out. I guess that's one of the pluses to being the way I am. I'm not one to set my sights on a woman I don't know. Even Audrey. My attraction to her was unusually instant, but even then I needed a little time being close to her before I was ready to act on it.

It was literally just a little time, but still way more than Luca's spent with Becca. He'll realize there wasn't anything between them eventually, but tonight he's still pissed. Or maybe disappointed. They tend to look a lot alike.

For now, I can offer him one hell of a distraction.

"I say we start at his house. If he's there, this will be over pretty quickly." Part of me wants that. To bring Audrey her best friend back and rid her of the shit stinking up her life.

Another part of me wants to hunt Trevor down. For him to know I'm coming. To look over his shoulder, always expecting to find me there.

But I'll take what I can get, because more than anything, I want Audrey to myself. I want her smile brightening up my house. Her scent filling my lungs. Her body warming my bed. And that can't happen as long as Trevor's breathing. Audrey's too protective of the people she cares about. And I love that about her. No way will I force her to go to Nashville—close to Savannah—until she feels safe doing it.

“Hopefully he'll have friends over, because I could use a little entertainment tonight.” Luca grips the wheel tighter. “Does Pierce know we're doing this?”

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“We have his full support.” He agreed that since we now have Butch helping us navigate the hierarchy, Trevor’s existence is pointless. I also got the feeling Intel was able to scrape a good amount of data from what Audrey gave them, nullifying the need for Trevor to continue breathing even more.

Luca taps one finger against the wheel, looking as restless as I feel. “When I talked to him earlier, he mentioned sending Zeke and a few more guys here tomorrow since it doesn’t seem like this is going to be as simple as we thought.”

I huff out a laugh. “This has never been as simple as we thought.” It got complicated before I even parked my fucking car and has only gone downhill since. “But to be fair, nothing’s ever as simple as we think it’s going to be.”

Luca laughs, a little of his upbeat personality coming through the gloom he brought for the ride. “Isn’t that the fucking truth.”

We turn into the subdivision where Trevor lives. The same subdivision I rescued Audrey from less than a year ago. The houses are just as nice as I remember. Big and new and expensive, with flashy cars in the driveway and meticulously manicured lawns.

“Nice neighborhood.” Luca glances my way, a smirk lifting the corner of his mouth. “I almost feel bad we’re about to lower their property value.”

“I’m sure they’ll be just fine.” I grin. “And it only lowers their property value if people know what happened.” I shake my head. “I don’t plan on leaving evidence behind.”

I'll drive Trevor's dead body all the way to Alaska if that's what it takes to make it disappear. I don't care. All that matters is erasing him from Audrey's life.

"Sounds like a plan to me." Luca slows as we near the address he plugged into the GPS. His brows pinch together as he scans our destination. "Looks pretty dark in there."

My hopes for finding Trevor and eliminating him tonight sink. "Let's go in and see what we can find. If we're lucky, he's just in bed." I doubt it, but anything's possible.

Maybe not plausible though. Even at night, most houses have some sort of light inside. Appliances glowing. Nightlights illuminating hallways and bathrooms. Televisions left on. Something.

Trevor's house is pitch black. It makes me think we might not be the first to pay him a visit.

Luca must be thinking the same thing, because he drives past. "Let's park somewhere else and come in on foot."

A few minutes later, our car is stashed in an area where it won't be conspicuous, and we're closing in on the backside of Trevor's home. Like the front, it's completely dark. Not a single sign of any sort of light permeates the blinds or curtains.

Instead of going for a door or window, I make a path along the perimeter. What I'm looking for is in a similar spot on most homes, so I find it relatively easily. The unchanging electric meter attached to the brick at the back corner of the house confirms my suspicions. "Looks like someone cut the power."

"For the record, I'm not cleaning up anyone else's mess, so if we get in there and he's already been taken care of, we're leaving his fucking ass." Luca wrinkles his nose.

“God I hope it’s fresh.”

I wince, my stomach turning at the thought. “If I don’t get to kill him, I sure as fuck don’t want to have to smell his stink.” I want Trevor dead, but I’d prefer for it to occur under certain parameters, and none of them involve me dealing with decomposition.

“I’ll go first just in case.” This is my plan. My job. If anyone has to get a whiff of dead Trevor, it should probably be me.

Luca falls in behind me as I make my way across the backside of the large home, testing windows and doors as I go. I reach what seems to be a breakfast room, and the side sash of the bay window slides open. It’s not a huge opening, but there’s enough room for me to squeeze through.

I’m just gripping the sill, intending to heft myself up, when Luca gives me a light whistle, dragging my attention where he’s moved a few feet away. His white teeth flash in the moonlight as he grins at me. “I’m gonna use the door.” He disappears through the opening, and I roll my eyes.

“Smart ass.” After sliding the window back into place, I join him, silently closing the door behind me. “I didn’t know you wanted to check every possible entry point before we picked one.”

“I didn’t know you wanted to try to squeeze your ass through the tiniest fucking window on the place.” Luca scans the room around us. “This isn’t looking promising, man.” He inhales. “On the plus side, it doesn’t smell like days-old death in here, so if Trevor’s inside, it’s recent.”

I blink a few times, adjusting to the extra-dark interior of the home. Once my eyes find their focus, I see what Luca’s talking about.

The place is trashed, likely ransacked by the same people who cut the power. “Seems like whoever was here came looking for something.”

“Seems like.” Luca walks deeper into the home, peering from room to room. “Wonder what they were after.”

I shake my head. “Audrey said there was some incriminating stuff on Trevor’s personal computer, so maybe whoever’s involved found out about it and didn’t want it to be used against them.”

It’s possible the collection of evidence was there because Trevor realized they were planning to use him as their scapegoat and was trying to cover his ass in case he was arrested. People doing bad things don’t love finding out someone plans to throw them under the bus to save their own skin. And they hate being beat at their own game. If that’s the case, Trevor might never be seen or heard from again.

Which means I won’t get to kill him.

And Audrey’s beloved dog might be gone for good.

But I’m not giving up yet. “Let’s check the whole house. Make sure Trevor’s not here and see if we can find anything that might tell us who has him or if he left of his own free will before someone came in and tore the place apart.” I lean to peer down the hall leading from the kitchen. “And keep a lookout for anything related to a dog.”

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“Got it.” Luca falls into step behind me as I begin systematically working my way through the first floor. Every room looks about the same. Drawers have been emptied. Furniture is upended and destroyed. Paintings are pulled off the walls and cast aside. It makes for a chaotic task, but also makes it easy to cover our own tracks.

We finish the first floor without finding any sign of Trevor or Audrey’s dog, so we move to the second level. I’m starting to give up hope when we reach the final room. It’s the owner’s suite. The bedroom where Audrey once slept. It’s impossible for me to imagine her in this place. Envision her in this world. She doesn’t fit.

The only place she belongs is with me.

“I think we’re out of luck.” Luca holsters his weapon, hands on his hips as he looks around. “There’s nothing here.”

I’m just about ready to agree with him when I notice a slight color variation on the carpet. Pulling out my LED stick light, I flick it on the lowest setting, doing my best not to let the beam touch anything that could reflect outside. When I shift it over the spot I thought I saw, the added glow makes the difference even more obvious.

“Damn.” Luca comes to stand beside me, staring at the large circle of blood dried into the fibers of the textured floor covering. “Looks like Trevor probably didn’t leave here on his own.”

“Looks like.” I flick off my light, tucking it back into place. “I didn’t see a dog crate, did you?”

“There’s nothing for a dog in this house. I checked just about everywhere, and there’s no food, no crate, no leash.” Luca shakes his head. “I get why they’d take Trevor, but why would they take the dog?”

“It’s a pretty fucking cute dog.” Audrey has tons of pictures of it, and not only is it cute and carriable, it also seems like it has a good temperament. “Even the biggest pieces of shit can like dogs.”

And now I have to figure out which piece of shit has Audrey’s beloved pet. It’s become a fucking quest, and I’m even more determined to succeed than ever. Especially since it seems like I’m not going to have the gratification of being the one to put Trevor Hawthorne the fucking Third out of everyone’s misery.

“We should get going.” Luca scans the room one last time. “I don’t like the look of this. And I wouldn’t be surprised if whoever’s responsible comes back for a second go at finding what they’re looking for.”

“Agreed. They wanted whatever it is pretty fucking badly.”

There’s a possibility they already have it since I haven’t seen a single computer, tablet, or phone while we’ve been here, so there’s a possibility they already have it. But that doesn’t mean they won’t return.

Luca leads on our way out, taking us down the stairs and through the same door we entered. It’s silent outside, so we’re able to return to the car and drive away without crossing the path of another living soul.

Once we’re in the car, I dial Darion’s number. The PI was supposed to call me if anything unusual happened at Trevor’s house. I’d sure as hell classify the power being cut and the place being ransacked as unusual.

I wait as it rings. And rings. And rings. When it goes to voicemail, I leave him a clipped message to call me back.

Then I call Pierce, letting him know what we discovered. He fills me in on what he told Luca earlier about sending Zeke and part of the team our way tomorrow. To my surprise, he also explains he'll be flying into Tennessee in the next few days.

I hang up the call, turning to Luca. "Sounds like Pierce wants to talk to Butch in person."

Luca's shitty mood from earlier comes back full force. "I'd like to have a little in-person talk with Butch myself."

I sigh, because I didn't want to get into this tonight. Not when it's so fresh. "Were you really that into Becca, or were you just into the idea of finding someone?"

Luca's jaw sets, his brows dropping low. "You don't know what it's like to have no one, Maddox. I know you and your family aren't close, but they're still there. They still exist."

Luca's never been big when it comes to sharing about his life, so I'm surprised by his sudden openness.

"You're right. I don't." And I can't really imagine it. But I can imagine trying to force something with the wrong person. "Do you just want anyone, or do you want the right one?" I try to keep my delivery non-accusatory. "Because there's a big fucking difference."

Luca's lips press together, his hand on the wheel gripping tight. "I don't know that the difference is as big as you think it is."

I don't think the difference is as small as he wants to believe it is, but I don't point that out. "I guess everybody has different needs."

Luca goes quiet, and the rest of the drive passes in silence. We pull into the hotel, and I make my way up to the room Audrey and I share. I quietly let myself in, assuming Audrey is likely asleep. And I'm right. She's curled up on the bed, blonde hair splayed across the pillow, looking cute as hell.

Unfortunately, she's not alone.

Becca's sprawled across my side of the bed, her small body taking up more space than I could ever hope to. She's still got her glasses on, but they've shifted around and now sit crooked across her face. A pair of Audrey's new pajamas hang from her frame with the waistband of the pants rolled up a few times to accommodate her much shorter stature.

Both women are totally passed out, and there's no fucking way I'm going to wake either of them up. Based on the two empty bottles of wine on the nightstand, I'm not sure I could even if I wanted to.

Instead, I collect the spare pillow and blanket from the closet and settle into the armchair tucked in the corner, kicking my feet up on the ottoman.

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I left Trevor's house thinking tonight was a total fucking loss. I didn't get to kill him. I didn't find Audrey's dog. But listening to the soft sound of Audrey breathing and Becca's occasional snores, a smile works across my face.

Audrey's been alone for so long. Kept everyone at arm's length because she didn't want to endanger them. But tonight, she got to hang out with a friend. Someone she doesn't have to worry about tainting. Someone who understands exactly what she's going through. Someone I suspect might be just as good of a friend to Audrey as Audrey would be to her.

She might not kill for her, but I know firsthand Becca will assault a man with a full bottle of laundry detergent without batting an eye.

TWENTY-TWO

AUDREY

"That second bottle of wine might have been a mistake." Becca's voice is rough and ragged beside me. "We might be idiots."

I feel a little bad because I don't feel bad this morning. Becca was struggling last night, so I ordered a couple bottles of wine from room service to go with our dinner. I wasn't sure what Becca liked, so I got a red and a white for her to choose from.

She picked both, which is probably why she looks like death warmed over right now.

"Maybe some breakfast will help?" I'm not sure how to make her feel better. She's

super tiny and consumed the bulk of the wine all by herself, so I can imagine she is feeling pretty freaking terrible right now.

But last night she was in a great mood and able to forget about everything for a little while, so maybe it was worth it.

“Eww.” One hand clamps across her mouth. “I don’t even want to think about food right now.” She slowly works her way upright. “I just want to take a shower and go back to bed.”

“That’s probably a good idea. Showers always make me feel better.” That’s a lie. There’s been plenty in my life a shower couldn’t come close to easing. But in this instance it might actually help a little.

Becca gets to her feet, wobbling a little before finding her balance. She looks down at the pajamas she’s wearing. “Do you want these back?”

“Keep them.” I feel bad she doesn’t have any extra clothes and I do. I can’t even lend her any of mine because I’m at least five inches taller than she is, so not a single bit of it will fit her. “I’ll talk to Maddox today. See if he knows when they’ll be able to go to your house and get some of your stuff.”

Becca’s now walking with her eyes closed, making her way toward the door of my room. “I literally do not give a shit about my clothes right now.” She reaches the door, pulling it open before patting the sides of her hips. With a groan, she turns back to collect her key card off the table, then attempts her exit again. “I’ll talk to you later.” She stops, turning back my way before going out. Managing some semblance of a smile, she gives me a little wave. “Thank you. I really needed last night.”

I smile back, because while it might not have been under the best circumstances, and seems to have resulted in a monster hangover for Becca, last night was really fun.

And I haven't had fun with a friend in a really long time. "Anytime."

Becca grimaces. "Not anytime. Maybe never again." Her nostrils flare as her eyes close. "Next time we'll just gorge on chocolate or something."

"Deal." I watch her go, expecting the door to shut behind her.

Instead, it swings right back open as Maddox passes Becca, giving her a concerned look as she disappears down the hall. He turns to me, angling a brow. "Did you girls have fun last night?"

"Yes." I smooth down my hair. "But I'm not sure Becca's enjoying the fallout."

Maddox looks me over as he comes my way carrying two coffees and a bag of delicious smelling food. "What about you? You look pretty good considering there's two empty bottles of wine."

My eyes zero in on the caffeine. "That was mostly Becca." Sliding off the bed, I move toward him, intent on filling my belly with food and my veins with sweet and creamy invigorating goodness. "What about you?" I pull one of the drinks free of the carrier and lift my eyes to his. "How was your night?"

I'm not sure I want to know. It's obvious he wasn't able to find Coco, but that doesn't mean he wasn't able to accomplish the rest of what he went out to do.

And I feel... Surprisingly indifferent about it.

After Maddox left, I expected worry to creep in. Maybe sadness. Some sort of negative emotion at knowing my ex-husband could be dead at any moment. That's why I initially went to find Becca. I assumed she would be having just as strange of an evening as I was, and hoped we could help distract each other.

But it turned out only one of us was really having a rough night, and it wasn't me. If anything, I was feeling hopeful. Excited that maybe I would get to see Coco soon.

That my life could finally move forward.

"My night was not what I expected it to be." Maddox sets down the drink carrier and opens the bag, fishing out one of the ham and cheese pastries I love so much and passing it over. "Trevor's house was ransacked, and there was no sign of Coco anywhere inside."

I'm disappointed, but not surprised. "He might have given her away. Passed Coco off to someone else just to spite me." That would actually be preferable to him keeping her. Imagining Coco with Trevor turns my stomach.

If she's part of a loving home where she gets pets and cuddles and treats? That I can live with.

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“There was something interesting though.” Maddox’s blue eyes move over my face. “We found a pretty sizable bloodstain on the carpet in the big bedroom upstairs.”

I bite into my pastry, eyes rolling closed at how good it is. After giving it a couple of chews, I swallow and ask, “Do you think someone else killed Trevor?”

Maddox lifts one shoulder as I take another bite of my pastry. “I can’t know for sure, but that’s my best guess. The power had been cut. Everything was torn apart, like someone was looking for something, and then we found the blood. When you add it all up, it seems like there’s a good chance Trevor was killed by whoever trashed the place.”

I keep chewing my breakfast, waiting. Surely I’ll feel something about Trevor’s demise at some point.

Right?

“But, until I have undeniable evidence he’s dead, I’m going to continue operating as if he’s alive.” Maddox’s expression is serious. “That means you can’t go back to work yet, and no one can know where you are.”

I swallow, finally mustering up some feelings. “For how long?”

I like the hotel we’re in. It’s beautiful. The bed is comfortable, the room service food is delicious, and there’s always hot water in the shower. But I’m starting to get stir crazy.

Maddox smooths down my hair as I keep eating, his fingers gently working through the tangled waves. “I’m not sure yet, but I should know more in the next few days.”

A few more days. I can probably handle that. If it keeps going, though? I might start climbing the walls.

I know I’m not changing the world or reinventing the wheel at my job, but I enjoy it. I love how busy it keeps me. The way it occupies both my time and my mind.

And my mind could use some serious occupying right now.

I sigh. “I guess I’ll just have to tough it out.”

After washing down another bite of pastry with a few swallows of coffee, I notice Maddox seems a little off. Quieter than normal. Less upbeat and easygoing than he normally is when we’re together.

“Is everything okay?” I set down my food and coffee and step close, resting both hands against his chest. “You seem upset about something.”

“I wanted to get your dog back.” Maddox’s expression turns hard. “I’m going to find whoever has her, and?—”

“Stop.” Stepping closer, bringing our bodies flush, I loop both arms around his neck, hating the turmoil in his eyes. “I came to terms with losing Coco a long time ago. I had to. Otherwise I was going to end up crying every day. I don’t expect you to find her, so stop putting pressure on yourself.”

I know Maddox would do anything for me. But I also need him to know I don’t expect it. There are limits to what one man can accomplish.

And he does so much for me already. Feeds me. Protects me. Gave me full use of his phone and computer so I don't feel completely isolated. Brought me to the nicest hotel I've ever been in so I can hide out in comfort.

And then there's the other things he does for me. The ones that make me see stars. That already have me addicted to his touch. I only wish he'd let me do the same for him. I get more desperate to touch him every day.

Eventually I might just tie him up and have my way with him.

Maddox's hand comes to my face, cradling my cheek. "Coco's important to you, and you are important to me." He leans down, pressing his forehead to mine. "If I can't kill Trevor and I can't bring you your dog back, then I've broken not just one, but two promises I made you."

He would see it that way.

The more time I spend around Maddox, the more obvious it becomes why he was so easy to fall for. Most people don't bat an eye at going back on a promise they made. Wouldn't see a problem if what they'd offered to do became inconvenient or simply uninteresting.

Not Maddox. If he says he's going to do something, he fully intends to do it. And when he can't...

Apparently it doesn't go over well.

"I guess you'll have to come up with a couple new promises then." I poke him in the chest, offering a smile. "But this time pick ones that aren't dependent on so many other variables."

I was hoping to lighten his mood, but Maddox's frown holds. "I don't want to keep making promises I don't keep."

"Then start making promises you can keep immediately." I let one hand slide down his front. "Maybe you could promise you'll have me naked and spread across the bed in five minutes."

Maddox scoffs. "Five minutes?" His arms drop to band around my body, lifting me off the floor. "I can have you spread across the bed, naked, and coming in under three."

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I wiggle my brows, glad he's finally circling away from grumpy Murder Maddox territory. "Is that a promise?"

"Let's call it more of a guarantee." He carries me to the bed, drops me onto the mattress, and is crawling over me when someone knocks on the door.

Loudly.

Maddox groans. "You've got to be fucking kidding me." His demeanor shifts in the blink of an eye, his teasing temperament immediately replaced by sharp intensity and focus.

I tense at the sudden change. "What's wrong?"

"That's the something's wrong knock." Maddox climbs off me. "Let me see what it is." His eyes snap to where I lay. "Don't move."

I feel silly, but I do as he says and stay right where I am, the promise of his hands on me enough to keep me in place.

Maddox answers the door, speaking in hushed tones with Luca. After a few tense words, he closes the door and comes back, looking irritated. "You're not going to believe this."

At this point, I'll believe just about anything. "Try me."

Maddox holds out a hand, taking mine and pulling me up off the bed. "Butch is here

and ready to talk about everything he knows.”

I think I understand how Luca felt when Butch showed up at the restaurant yesterday, because the guy is turning out to be kind of a cock block. “So I’m guessing this means you’re gonna give me a rain check, right?”

“You can have as many rain checks as you want.” Maddox pulls me close, pressing a kiss to my lips. “But I don’t know how long this is going to take. It could be an hour. It could be three.”

“I’ll be fine.” I look around the room I’ve spent the majority of my time in recently. “I’ll probably take a shower and straighten up a little bit. Maybe call and check in at work.”

Maddox’s expression tightens at the last bit. “Don’t tell them where you are.”

“I know.” I grab him by the shoulders, turning him toward the door. The sooner he gets this done, the faster they can hunt down Becca’s sister and kill everyone involved in her abduction.

And the sooner I can go home. Wherever that is.

Maddox stops to give me one more kiss and then he slips out the door, ducking into Luca and Owen’s room next door.

Turning back to my own room, I blow out a loud breath. “Guess it’s just you and me again.”

I decide to hit the shower first. I didn’t have as much to drink last night as Becca, but I’ve still got a little bit of a headache, and the hot water will probably ease that. Going into the bathroom, I flip on the light and scowl. I’ve skipped housekeeping

since it's weird to hang out while someone cleans your mess, but we've been here long enough that it's probably time to get some fresh towels. I don't mind using the same one a few times, but they're starting to get a little past their prime.

While I wait for housekeeping to start making rounds, I decide to move on with my to-do list. Grabbing Maddox's cell phone, I call Ginny. When she doesn't answer, I leave a message, asking her to call me back. Then I try Dane. He's on the schedule today, so he should be able to fill me in on how things are going.

But his phone also goes to voicemail. I leave him the same message I left Ginny, then I sit at the desk for a minute, completely unmotivated to make the bed or collect trash.

It's still a little early, but I decide to poke my head out into the hall anyway, hoping I'll get lucky and the housekeeping staff will be making their way through the rooms, but there's no one in sight.

I should just suck it up and start cleaning, but I can't make myself do it. Instead, I go to the phone on the nightstand and dial the front desk, planning to ask them to bring towels. It rings a crazy number of times before someone finally answers and puts me on hold. I wait. And wait. And wait.

I finally give up and decide I could probably use the exercise anyway. Grabbing the room key, I head out to place my request for more towels in person.

The halls are quiet as I make my way down to the main floor, but once I get there, I see why I had so much trouble getting through to the front desk. There are teenagers everywhere. They're loud. They're rowdy.

They're making my head hurt.

I start to turn back to my room, but the prospect of picking up and organizing the

same things I've picked up and organized countless times over the past few days is way less appealing than whatever this is, so I make my way through the crowd. The line at the desk is pretty long, but eventually I step up to the counter. After giving the overwhelmed looking woman on the other side a smile, I put in my towel request. Then I ask, "What's going on?"

She sighs. "They're hosting the Future Farmers of America conference here this year, and somehow they got the dates wrong. Everyone showed up a day early and now they don't have anything to do, so they've turned the lobby into their personal hangout spot."

I cringe. "What a nightmare."

She shakes her head. "You have no idea."

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Her phone starts to ring, and I step away, barely making it a foot before my own phone—technically Maddox’s—starts to ring. Dane’s number flashes across the screen, and I roll my eyes, because it would figure he’d be the one I’d have to talk to.

I connect the call and answer. “Hey.”

The noise of the kids is astronomical, and now the woman behind the counter is practically yelling as she answers her phone, so I plug my opposite ear and tell Dane, “Hang on for a second.” I quickly walk out of the lobby, making it to a quieter area before asking, “Can you hear me?”

“I can now.” He laughs. “Are you at some sort of a party?”

“Yeah. Because I’m such a party animal.” I dodge a few wayward teenagers. “How are things going?”

“Good. The store is clean and everybody’s showing up for their shifts.” He snorts. “Ginny’s acting like a dictator, but I wouldn’t have expected anything less.”

Me either. That’s why I put her in charge and not him. Ginny’s younger than Dane by a few years, but she’s way more responsible and doesn’t mind if people get mad when she tells them what they have to do. And that’s a big part of my job. Telling people what they have to do. Because it’s shocking how many adults seem unable to figure that out on their own.

“I’m glad everything’s going well because I don’t know when I’m going to be able to make it back in. I’ve emailed corporate so they already know. I just wanted to touch

base and make sure you guys were doing okay.”

There’s the chance I may never be going back to Birch and Ivy, and I don’t know how I feel about that. If I don’t go back, it’s because I’ve moved away. And that means I’m staying with Maddox, which sounds fantastic.

But I don’t want to give up working. Especially if Maddox travels a lot. I gave up my life once, and I don’t want to do it again. I trust Maddox completely, but I don’t want to lose myself.

Especially when I’m finally getting to know her.

TWENTY-THREE

MADDOX

THAT TOOK FUCKING forever. Way longer than I wanted. But finding out everything Butch knows is a necessary evil.

I want to take Audrey home. I want to start our lives together. To do that, she has to be able to put this one behind her. Completely. In order to make that happen, I have to make sure Trevor’s taken care of. And the only way I can do that is to find out what the fuck is going on.

And there’s a lot fucking going on.

Audrey’s at my computer when I let myself into our room. The place has been freshly organized and cleaned, and her hair is falling in smooth waves over one of the new sweaters she ordered.

I look over everything, spending most of my time drinking her in. “You’ve been

busy.”

She smiles wide. “I have.”

Standing, she comes straight to me, both arms linking at my neck as she pushes up onto her toes to press her lips against mine. I’ve never come home to someone before, but this is pretty damn close. It makes me eager to have her in my house. For Audrey to greet me like this every time I walk in.

That eagerness quickly morphs into need. Need that’s been gnawing at me for hours since Luca interrupted what was about to be a great fucking time. My desire flares back to life, and soon I’m pushing her across the room, ready to mess up the freshly made bed.

“Is it rain check time already?” Audrey smiles against my mouth. “I thought maybe you were going to tell me what you guys talked about and what Butch had to say.”

“Later.” I’m not even sure how to begin explaining what Butch had to say. It’s either going to make her feel better, or worse, and I don’t like those odds.

“Later it is.”

Audrey’s grip shifts, coming to my shirt. She holds tight and seems to stumble. In my attempt to stabilize her, I end up being the one who lands on the bed first.

Dropping my ass onto the edge, I focus mostly on making sure she’s steady on her feet. It’s not until I notice Audrey’s got a wicked grin on her face that I suspect I’ve been set up. “What are you doing?”

Her hands are already at the waistband of my pants, so there’s not a lot of room for things to get lost in translation, but I’m still trying to wrap my head around what’s

happening, and why.

“I’m cashing in the rain check you gave me.” She flips my belt open, eyes coming to my face. “One of the many infinite ones you said I could have.”

“The rain checks were for me making you come,” I clarify. “Not whatever you think you’re about to do.”

Audrey grips the end of my belt, holding the buckle tight as she tugs the leather free, snapping it off my body in a sharp move. Angling a brow at me, she holds it between us. “There’s nothinkto it. Iknowwhat I’m about to do.”

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I raise my brows. “And it involves that belt?”

I didn’t think Audrey could surprise me, but maybe she can. So far we’ve been on the same wavelength when it comes to just about everything, but if she thinks she’s going to spank me, our waves are about to hit a fork in the road.

“Only if you’re going to try to stop me.” Her lips curve. “I’d hate to have to restrain you.”

Well then. Our waves are once again back together.

“Are you suggesting you tie me up and use me?” I never expected I’d be much into bondage—especially if I’m the one on the receiving end—but if this whole scenario keeps Audrey’s pleasure at the center? She can tie me up whenever she wants to.

Hell, I’ll teach her how to tie the knots.

Audrey’s blue gaze locks on my face. “You sound a little excited by that.”

“If you think it’s only a little, you’re not paying close enough attention.” I peel off my shirt, tossing it to one side. “Where do you want me?”

Audrey’s jaw goes slack, like she wasn’t expecting me to take her up on the threat. Too late now. I’m not the kind of guy you can mention something like this to thinking he won’t take the bait.

Sex is another area where the two sides of me converge in an interesting and

oftentimes unexpected way. I'm laid-back and easy-going. As long as I'm in charge. I'm adventurous and eager to try just about anything. As long as it's my partner's enjoyment the act focuses on. I get off on getting Audrey off, and if she didn't figure that out when I came in my pants the night we messed around in her apartment, she's about to figure it out now.

Audrey's blue eyes drop to the belt in her hand. "Can I even tie you up with a belt?"

"Technically, if you're motivated enough, you can tie someone up with just about anything." I take the belt from her, looping the end through the buckle before slipping my hands in and pulling it tight with my teeth. "But with a belt, you're going to be limited to pretty much this."

Her lower lip plumps in a hint of a pout. "That doesn't seem very restraining."

I hold my hands out, letting her flip the prong into place before securing the end through the stationary loop. Then I stretch out down the center of the bed, lifting my hands over my head. "What if I promise to stay just like this?"

Audrey's lips curve. "You're making an awful lot of promises today."

"I've got a lot to make up for." And this is an excellent place to start. If Audrey wants to feel like she's the one in control of things, I'll let her. Especially if her being in control involves nearly suffocating while she sits on my face followed by watching her perfect tits bounce while she rides me.

Audrey sobers. "That's not how this works."

She climbs onto the bed, hands at my waistband again. "You didn't do anything wrong, so there's nothing to make up for." Her eyes fix on my face as she flips open the button of my fly and drags down the zipper. "I get that you're a very giving

partner, but I'm not the kind of person who's only going to take." She grips the front of my open pants, but goes no further. "So if that's how you're expecting this to go, you're going to have to get over yourself."

I swallow hard, because for some reason her words have my dick hard as steel. "You don't have to give me anything, Audrey. I just want you. That's enough."

"You have me, but you're going to have to take me as I am." She tugs on the fabric gripped in her hands, easing it past the rigid line of my cock. "And if you think I'll kill for you but won't expect to be allowed to suck your dick every now and then, you're very wrong."

"Fuck." I swear under my breath as heat races through my veins.

She's right. Knowing she would kill for me the same way I would kill for her changed things between us. Changed things in me.

But sex is different. It always has been. And maybe a little part of me was still scared to completely give in. To fully admit Audrey could match me tit-for-tat in every way.

Even this one.

She leans down, the length of her soft blonde hair brushing against my skin as her mouth hovers over the leaking head of my cock. "What's it going to be? Are we going to keep killing for each other, or do you want to take a step back?"

Just imagining taking a step back from Audrey causes actual fucking pain to stab through my gut. She's been exactly what I need from the second she swung that damn baseball bat at my head, and I need to trust that she can be what I need now.

Even if it's not what I think I want.

I slowly shake my head, body strung tight. “No steps back.”

My leap of faith is rewarded with the most beautiful fucking smile I’ve ever seen.
“Good.”

Without warning or hesitation, her lips wrap around me, the wet heat of her mouth sinking down until I feel the back of her throat. A groan rips from my chest at the velvety feel of her tongue gliding against me as she pulls back, humming her enjoyment as she takes me down again.

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I can't look away from her. Can't even blink as I watch her bob over me again and again, each pass of her lips making them glisten more and more. It feels fucking amazing, but that's not what has me nearly coming in record time.

It's the little sounds she makes as she does it. Small groans and soft moans that almost sound like pleasure. As if making me feel good, makes her feel good.

And I'm an ass.

I wanted to rob her of this out of fear and selfishness. Was going to refuse her something I'd never give up myself.

But, while I no longer plan to keep things so one-sided, she needs a little bit of a warning.

"Audrey." My voice is tight as I fight to keep control. "I'm not sure what your plan is here, sweetheart, but if you intend to make full use of me, you should probably slow your roll a little."

She makes a disappointed little sound that vibrates around my shaft and pulls my balls tight, testing my ability to maintain control. By some miracle, I manage not to come down her throat, and I let out a sigh of relief when her mouth pops off of me.

She uses the back of one hand to wipe across her mouth. "I guess it would be a shame to go to all the trouble of restraining you if I'm not going to enjoy all the benefits."

"I agree." Wholeheartedly. My dick flexes in anticipation. "You should get naked."

Audrey gives me a sexy little grin as she slides off the bed and begins peeling away her clothes. I love how bold she is when it comes to getting naked in front of me, and it has me solid as a rock by the time she's fully undressed.

My eyes roam her creamy skin, following the line of her collarbone to the full weight of her perfect tits. I love the gentle curve of her hips and the bit of cushion at her belly. Every inch of her is feminine and soft, and more than I probably fucking deserve.

I'm going to enjoy it anyway.

"Come here." I tip my chin to beckon her close, sticking to my promise of keeping my hands where they are.

Audrey goes to straddle my hips, but I shake my head. "Higher." I zero in on the object of my desire. "I want you on my mouth."

For the first time during this interaction, Audrey seems shy. But she still only hesitates a second before making her way up my chest and carefully maneuvering herself until the seam of her pussy hovers above me.

Just out of fucking reach.

Swallowing down a growl of frustration, I try to keep my voice smooth and even when I say, "You've gotta bring it to me, sweetheart. I only get what you let me have, remember?"

Audrey looks down at me, lower lip pinched between her teeth as she slowly lowers.

I'm impatient—and maybe a little desperate to have her on my tongue—so the second she's within reach, I crane my neck as far as it will go and seal my mouth

over her. Another deep groan reverberates through my chest at how wet she is. It means the sounds she was making were genuine—as was her enjoyment of my cock in her mouth—and has me nearly ready to spill again.

One of Audrey's hands weaves into my hair as I flick the hard nub of her clit with the tip of my tongue. I wish I could grab her hips and bring her closer, but I'll have to settle for the sweet way she's working them over me, riding my tongue as she chases her climax.

When her hand tightens in my hair and the weight against my mouth increases as her legs give out, I nearly come along with her. It's only sheer will and determination to watch her fuck me that saves me.

I expect Audrey to take a minute to recover, but as soon as her thighs stop quaking, she moves away, backing down my body until the wet heat of her flushed pussy drags over the backside of my dick.

"I think I like this." Audrey pushes upright, being careful not to press her hands against the bruise on my chest. She lifts high on her knees, reaching between our bodies to angle my cock into place. "Maybe next time I'll make you come with my mouth, and then let you make me come with yours." She sinks over me, the glide eased by her release. Her eyes slip closed, head tipping back as the air rushes from her lungs. "You feel so good."

All my patience and my willingness to hand her the reins is rewarded when she begins to move and the soft swells of her tits bounce as our bodies meet. It's mesmerizing and erotic as fuck, and...

It suddenly occurs to me I can't do anything to help Audrey finish the second time. She normally needs direct contact with her clit for round two, and my hands are quite literally tied.

“I want you to come with me, sweetheart. But to do that, you’ve either gotta get this belt off my hands, or you’re going to need to touch yourself.”

I don’t know which option I find more appealing. Both have the base of my spine tingling.

Audrey’s lids lift, gaze slightly dazed. “I’m not letting you go until we’re done.”

She slips one hand between her thighs, fingers brushing against the base of my dick as she works circles around her clit. And it’s in this moment I begin to realize this was a really bad fucking idea. I want to hold out. More than I’ve ever wanted to hold out in my life.

But it’s just not gonna happen. Not with her tits bouncing the way they are and her fingers wedged between our bodies. And sure as fuck not with the wet sounds her pussy’s making every time she bottoms out on me.

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The tingling at my spine becomes a full bolt of lightning and my balls ache as they cinch so tight I'm afraid I'm going to pull something. I still manage to hang on a few more seconds, but that's all I have. I lose the fucking fight, groaning loud and long as my cock flexes inside her, the already wet sounds we're making becoming downright obscene.

As a stroke of pure luck, Audrey only makes it a few more seconds herself, and she's able to finish before my body runs out of steam. When she collapses against my chest, I finally bring my arms down, hooking them around her body. Her face is smashed against my neck, hair scattered across my face as she breathes heavily, trying to catch her breath.

After a few long minutes, she raises up, looking happy and satisfied and a little sleepy. "What's your headboard like? Does it have posts?"

I laugh, the sound surprisingly loud as it comes out of me. "I guess you'll have to wait and see. If it doesn't suit your needs, I'm more than happy to replace it."

She smooths down her wild hair and ducks beneath my grip. Her soft fingers move over the belt at my wrists as she unfastens it and sets me free. "Does that mean you want me to come to Nashville?"

I hold still as she rubs the lines creased into my skin. "I feel like I already made my position on where you should be pretty clear."

Instead of looking happy by my words, Audrey's lips flatten, her brows pinching. "I really like working."

“Are you saying you don’t want to leave Memphis?” I don’t like the thought of that. At all. I would make it work if it’s what she really wants, but?—

“I’m not saying that. At all.” She laces her fingers between mine, continuing the connection still holding us together. “I just mean I don’t think I would be happy if I didn’t have a job.”

I get that we haven’t worked out the specific parameters of what our future looks like, but I guess I thought Audrey knew me well enough to know I would never stop her from doing what she wanted. Even if that involved staying in Memphis.

“I’m sure there are lots of stores in Nashville that would love your expertise.”

“Yeah?” She seems pleased with my answer. “Maybe while I’m stuck here waiting, I’ll look around and see what’s out there.”

I take a deep breath, knowing I’ve got to tell her not only what Butch shared with us during our meeting, but also that Darion, the PI Trevor hired to follow her, is missing. I’m not looking forward to explaining either one. As if the universe can sense my desire to delay, the phone on the table beside me starts to ring before I can open my mouth.

Stretching to grab it, I press it against my ear. “Hello?”

“I need to talk to Audrey.” Becca sounds wound up.

I pass the receiver right over. “It’s Becca.”

Audrey takes it and I head for the bathroom while the two women are talking. I’m pretty sure I left one hell of a mess on—and in—Audrey, so I grab a washcloth and run it under the warm water.

When I get back into the room, Audrey's pulling on her clothes.

"What's going on?"

"Becca needs some..." She scrunches up her face as she wrestles on a sneaker. "Feminine products." Audrey goes into the bathroom and comes out with a handful of plastic packages. "I'm going to take her some."

"Hurry back." I stretch out on the bed without bothering to get dressed. "You've got a whole stack of rain checks to get through."

Audrey gives me a sweet smile, but her cheeks pink up as her eyes drag down my body, pausing on my re-energized dick. "I'll make it quick."

TWENTY-FOUR

AUDREY

"COULD THIS DAY get any fucking worse?" Becca rants as she grabs one of the pads I brought over and carries it into the bathroom, leaving the door open. "Like I didn't have enough problems, now I've got to deal with cramps and clots on top of everything else."

I cringe because I've been there. I think every woman has. "Have you ever thought about having an IUD put in?"

"For what? It's not like I'm having sex," Becca yells from the bathroom. "And that's bullshit too."

"It doesn't only keep you from getting pregnant. If you get the one that has hormones, it will also get rid of your period."

I don't point out that's what I have, because I don't want to rub my lack of periods in her face right now. She might try to murder me, and Maddox has worked so hard to keep me alive.

Becca groans, then the toilet flushes and she comes sulking out. "I should have made Owen get me pain medicine when he was out today. I've been a little distracted and wasn't paying attention to what day it was, so I totally forgot this was coming." She's gone from yelling to sounding like she might cry in the span of only a few seconds.

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“I bet the front desk has pain medicine.” I wrinkle my nose. “There might also be ten million teenagers in the lobby, but it would be worth it if you could get rid of your cramps.”

“And my wine hangover headache.” Becca stands there for a minute, shoulders slumped, looking miserable. “Yeah. Let’s go see if the front desk has pain medicine.”

“I think that’s probably a good idea.” I hook one arm around her shoulders and lead Becca out into the hallway. “Once we get you a little more comfortable, I’ll talk to Maddox and we can go out and get you whatever you need.”

I’m sure he’ll be okay holding off on round two once he hears how miserable Becca is. Actually, I’m sure he’d be fine holding off on round two even if Becca wasn’t miserable. If I simply wanted to go out for a snack, Maddox wouldn’t bat an eye.

Because he’s amazing.

So amazing, that a few minutes ago he let me tie him up and do whatever I wanted to him. I didn’t really expect to like it as much as I did, but I could get addicted to having a man like him completely at my mercy.

Maybe not completely—Maddox is probably never completely at anyone’s mercy—but still.

“I know we didn’t meet under the best circumstances.” Becca rests her head on my shoulder as we walk. “But I’m really glad you’re here.” Her already somber expression turns sad. “All my old friends have gotten married and started having kids.

I'm the only single one left, and it's really lonely."

Now I feel like a jerk, because I've been blissfully planning my move to Nashville without even thinking about where Becca's going to end up. "Maybe once your sister's back, you'll need a change of scenery and you can move to Nashville with me."

Becca doesn't immediately reject the idea. "Maybe." She rubs her lips together, eyes peeking my direction. "But Memphis isn't all bad. I'm sure I could find reasons to stay."

I'm no rocket scientist, but I'm betting the reason she's thinking of is six feet tall with bulging muscles, dark hair, and a slightly unruly beard.

"Either way, I know things are all going to work out." I give her shoulders a squeeze as we enter the elevator. "For both of us."

Becca stares into the corner as we lower toward the ground floor. She tips her head, eyes squinting. "How many people a year do you think Alaskan Security is responsible for eliminating?"

"I don't have a clue." I'm not sure I want to know either.

I don't think it would upset me, but it would make me think of how dangerous Maddox's job is. I know he loves it, so I would never ask him to stop. But I also don't want to worry myself to death while he's gone.

"That would be interesting to find out." Becca zones out for a minute, her eyes snapping back into focus as the elevator doors open. "Maybe I'll ask Luca later."

"Luca?" I know I didn't read that whole restaurant interaction wrong. "I thought you

were into Butch.”

Becca’s brows come together as we step out into the lobby. “Will asking Luca a question make him think I’m into him?”

“I mean.” I’d noticed Becca was pretty blunt, but maybe she’s also a little oblivious. “It’s pretty obvious Luca was hoping to eventually spend some more time getting to know you.”

“Why would he want to get to know me better?” Becca asks, seeming surprised.

“Why wouldn’t he?” I focus on my new friend. “You’re smart and successful and determined.” I motion at her small frame. “And built really freaking well.”

Becca frowns down at her body like she’s never considered its appearance. “Interesting.” She purses her lips as she stops and turns to face me. “Maybe later you could help me go shopping and pick out some clothes.” Her eyes move over my outfit. “Ones that are a little...”

I’ve only seen Becca in oversized sweatshirts and baggy jeans—plus the pajamas I loaned her that she’s currently wearing—but I also saw the way she was looking at Butch earlier, so I make an educated guess about what she’s going for. “Sexier?”

Becca points at me. “That.”

I smile, perking up a little now that I have something new to do while I’m stuck here in Memphis. “We can look around online when you’re feeling better. I bet we can find lots of stuff that will fit your style and just elevate things a little.”

Becca’s still pointing at me, but now her finger’s wagging around. I wait, expecting her to say whatever’s on her mind, but her mouth just hangs open. When her eyes

widen behind her glasses, I take a closer look at her finger. She's not actually pointing at me.

She's pointing behind me.

I turn just as a big, scary-looking man comes barreling at me. Something hard jams into my ribs as he leans into my ear. "Be a good girl and stay quiet or your friend's nerdy little brain is going to end up all over the place."

I roll my eyes to the side and see a matching scary man has Becca in his hold.

"Leave her alone." I say it quietly. "She didn't do anything." I'm bluffing. Becca has definitely done things—especially if it's Trevor behind this—but maybe this guy doesn't know that.

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“I think your ex-husband will beg to differ.” The man holding my arm in an iron grip confirms my suspicion as he twists me in the direction of the back entrance. “He’s going to be real fucking happy to see both of you little pains the ass at the same time.”

I can almost feel the bruises blooming over my skin as I’m led outside and shoved in a waiting SUV. Becca’s practically tossed in behind me, then we’re wedged between the guys who grabbed us.

The man driving pulls away as soon as we’re in and I close my eyes as they put more and more distance between me and Maddox. I’m not going to cry. I won’t give these assholes the satisfaction, and I don’t want to upset Becca.

I peek her way, uncertain what I’m going to find. I know she seems tough, but acting tough and being tough are two different things.

It appears Becca might be both, because she’s got an unimpressed look on her face as her eyes move from man to man. After a few minutes, she asks the one who grabbed her, “What kind of gun is that?”

The man next to her seems confused by her question. “Why? You don’t know shit about guns.”

Becca shrugs. “Just curious.” She leans forward a little. “You guys keep your car really clean.” This time she directs her question to the guy next to me. “How often do you have to vacuum it?”

The guy next to me ignores her.

She's undaunted and continues looking around. "How many miles per gallon does this get? Is it a hybrid?"

The guy driving spins to glare Becca's way before gesturing at the men who abducted us. "Can one of you shut her up?"

"Fine." Becca lifts her chin. "I was just curious. I like knowing things."

I'm not sure what she hoped to gain by engaging criminals in small talk, but Becca's almost bored reaction to this whole thing is actually helping me not freak all the way out. But now that it's quiet, I can feel the panic starting to creep in, so I lean her way and ask, "How's your period? Is there a lot coming out?"

"Feels like it." She shifts around. "Probably gonna start leaking everywhere soon."

The man on her side tries to scoot away, but there's nowhere for him to go.

"It's too bad we don't have any extra pads with us." I wrinkle my nose. "Soon it's going to be everywhere."

Now even the man next to me is leaning away. I've never been happier about society's fucked-up patriarchal ways. They've fucked women over for so long, but are about to come in handy. Because I'm gonna use them against these twats.

"Unless you want a huge mess on your hands —" I start.

"Literally," Becca pipes up. Making me think she and I are working out very similar plans in our heads.

The two of us together can't fight these guys. They outweigh us by hundreds of pounds, so even though we can obviously out-think them by a whole lot, brute strength will be hard to overcome. That means we've got to work smarter, not harder.

And it would be smart to stall.

"You should probably stop at a drugstore and get us some more products."

I doubt they'll be willing to take us inside, so one of these dumb asses will have to try to pick out a feminine hygiene product. I'm willing to bet not a single one of them can even identify a tampon, let alone locate it in a store. If I'm lucky, they're not the kind of guys who would ask someone to help them find it either.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me." The guy behind the wheel seems to be our biggest problem. I'm not sure if he's smarter than the other two guys, or just more high-strung, but he's starting to annoy me.

"Oop." Becca sits up straighter in her seat. "That last clot was a big one."

I could swear the dude beside me gags.

"For the love of God, stop at the next store." The guy next to Becca has already had enough. "It'll take me two minutes to get her some pads to cram up in there."

I don't think this guy understands how pads—or vaginas for that matter—work.

Mr. Hyper cranks the wheel to the right, taking us toward a drug store. He's still going so fast the tires squeal against the blacktop as they search for purchase and I end up squished against the ugly guy beside me. We jerk to a stop in the parking spot closest to the door and Hyper turns to the guy sitting next to Becca. "Get your ass in gear."

As the big guy gets out of the car, the driver turns his glare onto Becca. “And you better not try anything stupid.”

I’m pretty sure Becca’s never tried anything stupid in her life. Even drunk she’s smart enough to beat me at every round of online Scrabble we played, so I can only imagine what she’s capable of sober.

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Becca frowns at him. “Do I look like I’m capable of escaping?” One hand goes to her lower stomach. “Even if I wasn’t hemorrhaging through my vagina, I’m still barely a hundred pounds. If you guys can’t handle me, you’re in the wrong business.”

The guy beside me gags again at the word hemorrhaging, and I have to work hard not to snort. I’m not sure if my fight-or-flight is broken after everything I’ve been through, or if I’ve just burned through my personal supply of adrenaline this week, but I’m still not freaking out. Neither is Becca, and I feel like our odds are going up with every minute we manage to drag this car ride out.

Because Becca’s right. We can’t save ourselves. We simply don’t have the physical ability to take any of these guys down. Not even one at a time.

But Maddox will absolutely come for me—for us—and when he gets here, these guys aren’t going to like what happens.

As I expected, big and stupid takes a very long time in the store. Well over ten minutes. At one point, I thought the guy behind the wheel was going to get out, but then he turned and looked at me and Becca and seemed to change his mind. It’s possible being calm is making him think we’re up to something.

And we are, so technically he’s right.

Eventually—still way too soon—Becca’s handler comes out carrying two bags. Instead of taking the spot next to her, he goes to get in the front seat. The guy behind the wheel glares at him. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Our secret shopper motions to where Becca sits. “I don’t want her fucking bleeding all over me.”

Our driver—definitely the brains of the operation—thumbs over his shoulder. “Get your ass in the back seat and do your job.”

I could swear Mr. Tampon’s skin pales a little as he closes the door and begrudgingly gets in next to Becca. He practically throws both bags at her. One lands on Becca’s lap and the other slaps me in the boob. Becca reaches in and pulls a plastic wrapped bundle from her bag. “These are adult diapers.”

That makes me curious, so I check to see what’s in my bag. I pull out a box of Monistat and a package of panty liners.

“None of this is what I need.” Becca sounds almost annoyed, and again I work hard not to laugh.

“Make it fucking work.” The driver backs out of the spot, obviously unwilling to give anyone the opportunity to go back in. As we get back on the road, I fish around for reasons we could stop again. “I’m feeling a little queasy. I think I’m gonna throw up. Can we pull over?”

“Use one of the fucking bags he gave you.” The driver shuts me down.

The guy next to me doesn’t seem thrilled with the driver’s suggestion, because he leans as far away from me as he can get. I press one hand against my mouth, making a gagging noise. Maybe I can get him to jump out. Then we’ll be down a guy.

Not that it will make us evenly matched, but it’s better than three on two.

“She can’t throw up in here, Aaron. If she throws up, I’m gonna throw up.” My

seatmate seems to really be struggling. His distress seems to distract the guy behind the wheel, and he slows down, so I keep going.

I close my eyes, breathing in deep like I'm trying not to be sick. "I had biscuits and gravy for breakfast too, so it's not going to feel good coming up."

Once again, Becca rolls with the plan. "It'll probably look the same though."

The guy beside me's whole body jolts as he retches. "Pull over Aaron. Let her out."

"No fucking way, asshole." Aaron keeps eyeing me in the rearview mirror like even he's starting to get a little worried I might puke. "If she barfs, you're just gonna have to deal with it. We're almost there anyway."

Well, shit.

I managed to buy us a little time, but it doesn't feel like it was enough. I don't even know how Maddox will find us at this point. Neither Becca nor I have a phone he can track. I doubt any of the teenagers filling the lobby saw us get dragged out. We might be on our own if they get us inside a building.

And that will prove problematic.

Problematic happens quickly, because soon we're pulling into the parking lot of a rundown structure that looks like it may have been some sort of shop at one point in time. Now it just looks boarded up and one strong wind away from collapsing.

Aaron pulls around to the back where there's already two cars parked, and one of them is vaguely familiar.

"Get them out." Aaron barks out the order and the guys who grabbed me and Becca

from the hotel follow his command, each one of them practically dragging us free of the back seat before shoving us in the direction of the door leading inside.

The thick sheets of plywood screwed over the windows make it dark and difficult to see, but from what I can tell, the place looks just as terrible inside as it does outside. There's trash everywhere and the floor is squishy under my feet. I stumble at an uneven spot and end up essentially being carried into the only lit room of the space. What I see when I get there takes my breath away.

"It's about fucking time you two found her." Trevor sneers at the men who brought us in. "But you can't even take any responsibility for it, can you?" He motions to the man standing next to him. The man currently getting all my attention. "Because he told us exactly where she was."

Dane won't even look at me. He's acting like I'm not even here, which pisses me off just as much as hearing he's the one who told my ex-husband—a man he knew had abused me—where I was staying.

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“What the fuck, Dane?” I scoff. “Is this because I put Ginny in charge instead of you?”

He continues to ignore me, but Trevor is happy to explain.

“Of course it’s because you put her in charge instead of him. She’s fucking twelve and a bitch.” He smirks at me. “Once I explained I own a store he could manage, Dane was happy to help me out. He reached out right away to tell me he overheard someone answering a phone for The Hotel Damarco in the background of your call earlier.”

Shit. I didn’t even consider that.

I also didn’t consider Dane would ever do something like this, so apparently I’m not as smart as I thought I was.

“So when do I start?” Dane continues to avoid looking my way, shifting on his feet as he tries to close the deal he made. “I’m ready whenever.”

Trevor angles a brow at him. “I didn’t say you would be managing my store. I said you could. It was simply a possibility.” Trevor shrugs. “You’re actually not what I’m looking for in an employee. Loyalty is important.”

Dane’s eyes widen in shock, like he can’t believe Trevor would screw him over. “What the fuck? I helped you.”

“You did. And now I no longer need your help.” Trevor lifts his arm. I barely have a

second to register the pistol in his hand before he pulls the trigger, shooting Dane in the head at point-blank range.

My skin goes cold and the room starts to spin as Dane's dead body drops to the filthy floor. Trevor crouches down and I think he's checking to make sure Dane's not breathing. When he stands, I nearly break down.

He's holding Coco. She looks awful. Even with her pretty fur overgrown and matted, I can see she's lost weight. Her eyes are dull and she seems weak, but her little tail still starts to wag when she sees me.

But then Trevor aims the gun he just used to shoot Dane at her. "Unless you want to watch her die too, you're going to tell me what the fuck you did with the files you copied off my computer."

TWENTY-FIVE

MADDOX

THE CLOCK ON the nightstand next to me is positive Audrey only left ten minutes ago, but I'm not convinced. I was hoping her visit with Becca would be quick, but the situation must be more involved than I thought.

I have a sister and a mother. I know periods can be a nightmare. It's possible Becca needs more than just the items Audrey had on hand.

"So many fucking interruptions."

I swing both legs over the side of the bed and stand, collecting my clothes and pulling them on before shoving both feet into my boots. Audrey hasn't been gone long, but if Becca needs pain medication or a heating pad, I'd rather get it done and out of the

way so I can have Audrey to myself for the rest of the evening. I want time to make her happy before I have to tell her Butch is pretty certain Trevor's still alive.

He overheard a few cops he's suspicious are part of the group responsible for protecting Trevor and his ilk talking when he went into the precinct. They were quietly discussing someone who'd gone missing right before they were supposed to have a meeting with a guy they only referred to as 'the man'. They clammed up once they noticed Butch nearby, so he wasn't able to get anything additional.

But that was enough to tell me two things. I might still have the chance to kill Trevor, and whoever's in charge of this whole criminal enterprise is more than a piece of shit, he's also a twat.

The man. Fucking idiot.

After tucking in my shirt, I grab our room key and head out, going down the hall to Becca's door. I knock and wait. And wait.

And wait.

Luca must have heard me, because after my second knock, he pokes his head out of the room he shares with Owen. "What's going on?"

"Audrey came down to check on Becca, but she hasn't come back." I knock again. "They're not with you guys, are they?"

"Hang on." Luca disappears into his room and comes back out carrying a key card. He swipes it across the scanner on Becca's door before cracking it open. "Becca? Audrey? We're coming in." He pushes it wide and steps inside.

I follow him and stop short.

The room's empty.

There aren't many places they could be. If they're not with me and they're not with Luca and Owen, I can only think of one other spot they might have gone. "Maybe they went to the front desk." I bite down on the unease creeping over my skin. It's the same feeling I had the night I woke up and couldn't fall backasleep. The same night Darion called telling us to get the hell out.

I know what this feeling means, but I don't want to consider it. "Get Owen."

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I head for the stairwell, knowing I can get to the main floor faster on foot than I can if I wait for the elevator. Owen and Luca catch up with me just as I reach my destination, and the three of us storm out into the lobby.

A lobby packed with fucking kids.

“What in the hell is going on?” Owen scans the area. “How are we gonna find them in this?”

“Quickly.” The bad feeling I have is only getting worse, and I start elbowing my way through the crowd, looking for the familiar head of wavy blonde hair that slides through my fingers every night.

I’m halfway across the room when a freckle-faced girl with bright red hair steps in my path. “Are you looking for those two ladies?”

I zero in on her. “One blonde and one with dark hair and glasses?”

She nods, pointing toward the back exit of the hotel. “They went out that way with the guys they were with.” Her nose wrinkles. “They didn’t look very excited about it though.”

Thank fucking God for nosy teenagers. “How long ago?”

She shrugs. “Maybe five minutes?” Her brows pinch together. “Could be more. I was watching cooking videos on my phone.”

Videos. Good call.

I thank her before turning for the front desk. I cut in line, going straight to the front. “I need to see the feed from your security cameras.”

The woman on the other side looks me over, eyes scanning my black tactical gear. I wear it because it’s a convenient way to manage all the weapons I regularly carry, but it’s also pretty fucking useful when it comes to opening doors I probably shouldn’t be let through.

“Oh my gosh. Did someone call the cops?” Her eyes widen. “It’s been so hectic here, but I didn’t know anything bad happened.” She turns and hustles toward a door behind the counter. I round the curved edge of the reception desk, catching up to her quickly. Luca and Owen are right behind me as we step into a small, dimly-lit room where a security guard sits in a chair playing on his phone instead of doing his job.

“The police need to see our security footage.” The girl from the front desk does the hard work for me and saves me from having to lie.

The security guard fumbles his phone and quickly stands up, swallowing hard at the sight of me, Owen, and Luca taking up most of the space. “Yeah. Sure.” He turns to the bank of screens. “Anything specific?”

“The one directed toward the back entrance. Starting ten minutes ago.” I step in behind him, eyes fused to the screen as he starts to play the recording.

Sure enough, at about five minutes in, Audrey and Becca appear with the two dead men beside them. They lead the women out the sliding door and into a waiting vehicle.

I point at the blurry SUV. “Do you have a feed that will give me a better view of the

car they got into?”

“Uhh...” The security guard fumbles around his desk, trying to get me what I want.

I turn to Owen. “Call Butch. Get him here as fast as you can.” I swing back to face the security guard. “I want you to send any video you have of those men or the women with them to this email address.” I grab a pen and write across the closest piece of paper. I shove it at him. “Now.”

He jumps a little at my barked order. “Yes, sir.”

I stride past both Luca and Owen, going out into the lobby, headed for the stairwell.

“Butch says he can be here in five minutes.” Owen is right on my tail with Luca on his. “What’s the plan?”

“The plan is to find Audrey and Becca.” I take the stairs two at a time, racing up to our floor. Knocking the heavy metal door at the top open, I go to my room and drag the key across the sensor, turning as Luca and Owen do the same. “And then we kill anyone who fucking touched them.”

“I KNOW THESE guys.” Butch enlarges the video playing on my phone as he rattles off three names. “They’re low-level criminals who’ll do anything for a buck.” He hands me back my phone. “How long have the girls been gone?”

“According to the security footage, they walked out of here fifteen minutes ago.” Up until this minute, I would have been thrilled to discover I was only fifteen minutes behind my target. But up until this minute, Audrey wasn’t the one in danger. Now fifteen minutes might as well be an eternity. “Do you have any idea where they might have taken them?”

“A few, but only one of the locations is close by.” Butch starts walking, heading for his truck. “Since it doesn’t seem like Trevor has anywhere of his own to go, they’re probably taking them to one of the properties the two bigger guys inherited when their father died.”

I stay right with him as he walks. “Brothers?”

Butch nods. “And they’ve got about three brain cells between both of them, which could work in our favor.” He unlocks his truck, motioning for us to get inside.

“How would them being dumb work in our favor? My experience is, the dumber people are, the more dangerous they tend to be.” Luca wedges his tall body into the back seat of the extended cab. It looks uncomfortable as hell, but Butch knows where we’re going, and that’s all I care about.

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“That’s why it will work in our favor.” Butch starts the truck and the engine roars to life. “Becca’s smart enough to use their stupidity against them. They’ll be reactive and easy to manipulate.”

His boot hits the gas and we fly out onto the main road. Butch doesn’t have as much finesse behind the wheel as Luca does, but he makes up for it in his willingness to stretch the laws of physics and speed.

“Becca’s not the only smart woman we have on our side.” My eyes move over every vehicle we pass, making sure none of them match the one in the video. “I sent everything we have to the team at Alaskan Security who handles the bulk of our cyber investigations.” Twisting in my seat, I catch Luca’s attention. “Send Harlow the names of the three men Butch identified.”

Luca’s watching just as closely out the windows as I am. “Already did.”

This is why I would do anything for the men I work with. Not only do they have my back, but they keep their heads on straight when I’m not capable of it. I’m doing my best, but knowing Audrey’s in danger has me ready to lose my fucking mind, and it’s making it impossible to do my job well. If Luca and Owen weren’t here to pick up the slack...

Owen’s hand reaches between the seats to rest on my shoulder. “We will get her back.”

“We fucking better.”

That's the only option. The only outcome I can entertain. Because Audrey hasn't been in my life long, but I don't want to face any more of it without her.

"We're coming up on the closest location I think they might be." Butch points to an old fast-food restaurant. The place is boarded up and vacant, and there's no sign of the vehicle Audrey and Becca were shoved into.

"I don't think they're here." Owen voices my own thoughts.

"Agreed. The other best option is a little more secluded, but it's in worse shape." Butch pushes the truck faster. "If that's where they are, and they stationed someone outside, it might be trickier to get in without being seen."

"I don't care about being seen." I want Trevor to know I'm coming. I want the three men who abducted Audrey to shit their pants when they realize they're about to die.

And I want Audrey to know I'm there. That I will always find her.

"Don't listen to him. We're not going in guns blazing." Luca's the voice of reason in the back seat. "But we will clean the house before we leave."

"No argument here." Butch's grip on the wheel is so tight his knuckles are white. And when I finally really look at him, I can see I might not be the only one struggling right now.

It almost makes me feel bad for the men who took Audrey and Becca. They have no idea what's coming for them. I don't feel bad enough that I won't kill them. They're absolutely going to die for daring to put their hands on her.

The buildings around us start to come farther and farther apart, and soon Butch points through the windshield at a shitty looking commercial building. There's still an old

plastic sign affixed to the front, but any letters that once identified the name of the business inside were worn away by the weather long ago. “This is our second option.” His eyes narrow. “Hopefully they’re here, because option number three is twenty minutes away.”

I hold my breath as we coast past, nearly jumping out of my skin when I see three cars parked behind the building. “They’re here.”

“What’s the plan? Want me to just pull in?” Butch meets my gaze across the console. “Because I know that sounds like fun, but I don’t want anyone to get hurt.” A slow smile works across his lips. “Not until we say they do.”

“Find a place we can park and go in on foot.” I twist in my seat, getting as good of a look at the place as I can as it fades into the distance. “Do we think it has cameras outside?”

“It’s possible, but I doubt it.” Butch takes the next right hand turn and follows a road that roughly positions us behind the building about one block up. “Honestly, I’m not even sure the place has electric. It’s been empty for years, and I can’t imagine those two have the funds to keep the lights on.”

I check all my weapons as Butch parks his truck. As soon as we’re stopped, I’m out the door, stalking toward the patchy tree line separating me from Audrey.

It doesn’t take everyone else long to catch up with me and we walk as a unit across a browning stretch of grass before breaking into the trees.

As we close in on the parking lot ending our cover, I unholster my weapon and switch off the safety. “Butch and I will go in the back. Luca, you and Owen take the front.”

Luca jerks his head in a nod, branching off with Owen to circle the building as Butch and I make our way to the dented and rusting steel door leading inside.

I barely pause, listening for any sign someone's on the other side. When I'm relatively confident they're not, I ease the door open, careful to adjust its weight as I go so the hinges won't squeak overly loud. I make a gap just big enough for my body to fit through—the interior is dark enough any outside light will be noticeable—then I slide in, holding my position as Butch comes in behind me.

As soon as he has the door quietly back in place, we begin to move, stepping in tandem as we work our way through piles of trash and discarded furniture. The place stinks and is covered in filth, only making me more pissed off Audrey's been brought here.

She should never be in a place like this. She deserves to be safe and pampered and... Loved.

Fuck. I love her. Now's one hell of a time to acknowledge that shit.

Butch's hand grips my arm and I stop, going still.

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Up ahead, a dim glow spills through a doorway into a long hall. Voices carry out, but they're low enough I can't identify any of them. The acoustics in this place are shit. It's like the darkness swallows up everything in its path. Light. Sound.

My patience.

Pushing the mic on my earpiece, I fill Luca and Owen in on the approximate location of our targets. Then Butch and I continue moving in.

I've never heard Trevor's voice, but the arrogance coming out of the man speaking makes me believe that's who I'm about to finally come face-to-face with. Based on what Butch discovered, it would make sense. Trevor hasn't made it as far up the ladder as any of us initially believed, so if he wanted help dealing with a situation—Audrey's flash drive for example—he would have to hire an outside set of hands.

It's also likely he's trying to deal with this on the down low since admitting he was collecting incriminating evidence on the men he's working with would likely be a death sentence.

Little does he know, taking Audrey has the same outcome.

"I didn't do anything with it." Audrey's sweet voice nearly has me walking straight into that room and opening fire. Taking out everyone standing between me and her.

But doing that would put her in the line of fire too, and that's not a risk I will ever be willing to take.

“Bullshit. You’ve always been a lying bitch. I have you on camera fucking around with my computer right before you walked out. I know you copied everything you could onto that flash drive.” The unhinged edge of his words turns my blood to ice. “I’m going to give you one more chance to tell me where it is and who you gave it to, before I shoot her.”

Now it’s Butch who’s ready to step in. I place my hand on his chest, stopping him before he can give away our position.

Tapping my mic again, I ask, “Where are you?”

“I’ve got eyes on your man.” Luca’s voice is low. “Looks like he’s holding the dog. There’s one man down and three others still in play.”

One man down? There were only three men I saw taking Audrey and Becca. Who in the hell is the fourth?

I’m about to find out.

“Can you take anyone out from where you are?” If Luca and Owen shoot first, it will pull everyone’s attention their direction, giving Butch and me the chance to come in and finish what they start.

“I’m pretty sure we can take out two of the three, but I don’t have a good sight line on your guy.”

“Do it.” I tip my head at Butch, inching as close to the edge of the doorway as I can, ready to strike as soon as Owen and Luca fire their shots.

I don’t have to wait long.

The sound of silenced bullets cutting through the air immediately precedes yelling. I wait a heartbeat, ensuring everyone is looking away before I step inside. Butch is right behind me, his gun trained on the hostile who is now reaching for Becca like he thinks he can use the smallest person in the room as a human shield.

I go straight for Trevor, closing in on him fast. When he finally realizes I'm there, I'm so close I could touch him, and it's far beyond too late for him to do anything but gape in shock.

The second his eyes lock on me, I pull the trigger, sending a bullet into his skull. As he begins to tip backward, I scoop Coco out of his arms, gently cradling her frail body as I turn to see Butch take out the final target. Everything is over in a matter of seconds. Both too slow and too fast at the same time.

I wanted Trevor to know who I was. Wanted him to understand why he was going to die. But seeing the fear in his eyes as he stared down the barrel of my gun will have to do.

I holster my pistol, going straight to where Audrey stands. She seems a little shocked, but unharmed.

Wrapping one arm around her, I pull her against me, pressing my face into her hair and breathing deep. I hold her like that for a few minutes, trying to calm myself down. Trying to cool the rage still coursing through me.

But I want to get her the fuck out of here. Away from this place and the asshole who hurt her.

Who tried to hurt her again.

I loosen my hold on her just enough she'll be able to walk beside me.

But Audrey doesn't begin to walk. She tips her head back, looking so sweet and perfect as she smiles up at me. "See?" Her eyes fall to the neglected dog in my arm. "You keep all your promises after all."

EPILOGUE

AUDREY

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:54 am

“YOU’RE FROWNING AGAIN.” Maddox angles a brow at me as he slides his laptop into its sleeve. “You can’t stay in Memphis, sweetheart.”

“I know.” I sigh as I pack the last of my clothes into the suitcase Maddox bought to hold the clothes I’ve accumulated while we were in the hotel. “I just feel bad leaving Becca behind.”

“You told her she could come with us.” Maddox comes to stand in front of me, smoothing his hands down my arms. “She wants to stay here until they find her sister.”

The frown I’ve been sporting since Becca refused to come to Nashville with me deepens. “But you still haven’t figured out who came to her house that night. If it wasn’t Trevor trying to get to her, then it was someone above him.” I swallow hard, worry for my friend clogging my throat. “What if they figure out where she is?”

I understand there’s a bunch more people here now to keep her safe. A ton of guys from Alaskan Security—including Zeke—showed up not long after Maddox, Luca, Owen, and Butch saved me and Becca from Trevor and the trio of idiots who took us. It would have been great if they arrived just a little earlier, but at least they were around to help clean up the mess.

And there was one heck of a mess.

“They won’t,” Maddox tries to reassure me. “But if they do, they’ll end up where Trevor is.”

That isn't super helpful. "I don't know where Trevor is."

Maddox flashes me a smile. "No one does. That's the point I'm trying to make."

Coco scratches at my foot, wanting to be picked up. I crouch down and scoop her into my arms. "When is Pierce coming in?"

I know the owner of Alaskan Security is planning to come to Memphis so he can help sort out the mess happening here. I didn't initially understand why Pierce cared so much about the police department, but then Maddox explained how inconvenient it is for them to operate when the local cops are uncooperative. Everything runs much smoother when there's an understanding that they're both on the same side.

They just go about things a little differently.

At least they're supposed to be on the same side. Right now the Memphis PD is a crapshoot. Some of the cops are like Butch. They want to do good and work hard to make Memphis a safer place.

But many of them are bad. Really freaking bad. In bed with men like Trevor and only interested in money and power.

"Tomorrow." Maddox zips up the bag holding all his belongings. "He wants to talk to Butch before making any decisions on our next plan of action."

Understandable, but I hate the delay. Not as much as Becca does, I'm sure. Which circles me back to my friend. "Can you make sure Becca gets a phone so I can call her and check in?"

My own phone has been replaced with an Alaskan Security issued device. It was evident Trevor hadn't told anyone—outside of the three thugs he hired—about the

flash drive. Since they're all dead, I'm no longer in danger.

Mostly.

Apparently being connected to Maddox—and by extension Alaskan Security—means I'll always have to be on guard since I can be used against him. Against them. So I get the same untraceable devices as everyone else. I also get to have a long talk with Heidi and Harlow about internet safety.

I don't mind. I want to do everything I can to stay safe. The haunted look is just starting to leave Maddox's eyes and I don't want him to ever have to fear for my life again.

"I believe Pierce is bringing her a phone and a computer so she can continue to work at some capacity."

That stalls my hands. "I don't even know what Becca does for a living." Now I feel even worse about leaving her here. "Maybe we could?—"

"No." Maddox comes over to flip the lid of my suitcase closed. "You're going to Nashville to keep Savannah company while Zeke's here." He zips the bag closed and hauls it off the bed. "Do you want to stop by your apartment to pick anything up before we head out?"

"I can't think of anything I'll need in the next few days." A team is there now packing everything up so it can be shipped to my new home.

Maddox's home.

But while I don't feel the need to say goodbye to my apartment, there is someone I'd like to see before I go. "Can we go to Ivy and Birch?"

I'm still struggling to come to terms with Dane's betrayal. I knew there were people who wanted to hurt me, but I never would have suspected he was one of them. Sure, I knew he was interested in running a store one day, but to be willing to hand me over for his own gain? Especially to a man he knew had hurt me in the past?

I didn't see it coming. And that made it hit even harder.

"We can go anywhere you want." Maddox wraps an arm around my shoulders, pulling me close while being careful not to squish Coco between us. "As long as you're sleeping in my bed tonight."

I hate leaving Becca. Hate that she'll be here on her own.

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But holy cow is the idea of sleeping in Maddox's bed appealing. "I can agree to that."

"Good." He presses a kiss to my head. "Let's get going then."

As we walk down the hall, my eyes find their way toward the room Becca used to occupy, and my throat goes tight. "She's going to be okay, right?"

"She's going to be way better than the men Pierce has guarding her." Maddox grins. "Sounds like she's full of questions."

I think back on her ponderance over Alaskan Security's yearly body count. "I think she just likes to know things." Becca will be thrilled to have internet access again. She about peed her pants when I whipped out Maddox's tablet so we could play Scrabble while we drank wine and ate French fries. "FYI, if you end up coming back here to help, don't play Scrabble with her. She's impossible to beat."

"I think I'm going to be sticking around Nashville. Zeke knows I'm almost as protective of Savannah as he is, so if he can't be there with her, I'm the next best thing." He stops at the car we'll be taking home and loads all our bags into the back. Then he helps me into the passenger seat, pressing a kiss to my lips before getting behind the wheel and aiming for my requested destination.

Nerves bite at my insides as we drive to Ivy and Birch. I don't know how I'm going to feel walking in there. Facing the place I last saw Dane before he threw me to the wolves, knowing they'd eat me alive. But I want to see Ginny. I want to thank her for working so hard. To wish her luck as the new store manager.

To hug her for refusing to tell Trevor anything about me.

After I identified the fourth man at the rundown building Trevor had me brought to, Heidi, Harlow, and the rest of Intel started digging. And what they found still turns my stomach.

Dane had been feeding Trevor information about me for months. They'd exchanged dozens of emails covering everything from what kind of car I drove to where my apartment was to the new hair color deepening my blonde locks. Every week he sent them my schedule and an approximation of how much money I made.

It was violating and disgusting, and if it wasn't for Becca, I would have left Memphis that minute.

We arrive at the shopping center where I work—used to work—and Maddox keeps me close as we go inside. I hold my breath as I walk in, waiting for whatever emotions are coming for me.

They hit, but not as hard as I expected. I'm sad, sure. Disappointed. Mad even.

But more than anything, I can't wait to leave. To get away from this place and this city. To put it all behind me and move forward.

It's only a few seconds before Ginny sees me. Her expression is guarded as she approaches, a stack of jeans piled in her arms. "Hi."

"Hi." I don't know what comes over me, but I grab her in a hug, my throat tight. "I just wanted to say bye and I know you're going to do an amazing job."

Ginny stiffens for a second before freeing one hand to pat my back. "Thanks."

I lean back, hit by a wave of appreciation for the young woman in front of me. “You’re a good person and I hope you get everything you want out of life.”

Ginny’s mouth softens into a slight smile. “You too.”

I don’t know what I wanted to get out of this, but I feel like I have it. Maybe it was closure. Maybe it was to see the person who shut Trevor down from the start. Told him if he reached out again, she’d call the cops.

Should she have told me he contacted her? Probably. But I don’t fault her for not wanting to get in the middle of my mess. Actually, knowing what I know now, I’m glad she didn’t.

Because if I’d known Trevor was watching me, I would have reached out for help sooner. And it wouldn’t have been Maddox who was sent to save me.

So, as weird as it sounds, there’s nothing I would change about my life. Everything I went through is what brought him to me.

And my Murder Maddox is worth every bit of it.

Maddox

“Who wants cookies?” I carry the tray of warm baked goods into the great room where Audrey and Savannah are piled on my couch, snuggled under blankets, watching television.

“Me.” Savannah pokes one arm out from under her blanket, raising it high enough she can snag a cookie from the tray as I pass. Taking a bite, she moans. “These are so good.”

“They should be. You taught me how to make them.” I’ve never been more grateful for the cooking skills Savannah taught me than I was when I brought Audrey and Coco home. They were both underfed and in need of the nourishment a home-cooked meal provides.

And I’m not just talking about calories.

Coco’s little nose lifts in the air as I reach where she’s curled on Audrey’s lap, her eyes lighting up when she sees me.

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“I’ve got a cookie for you too.” I dig into my pocket, pulling out one of the homemade dog treats I make up every Sunday, passing over the crunchy square of sweet potato and peanut butter before giving her a gentle pet.

Sitting down next to Audrey, I slide the plate of cookies onto the coffee table, handing one to her before pulling her close.

She’s been with me for a month. A month of sleeping with her every night. A month of feeding her every day. A month of snuggling on the couch and coming home to her smiling face.

It’s been better than I ever would have imagined.

“Gross.” Savannah throws a pillow at me. “Stop looking at her like that. She’s gonna get pregnant.”

“I put up with you and Zeke.” I lift my brows at my friend. “And you did get pregnant, so...”

Savannah smiles. “Fair point.”

Audrey leans against me, resting back against my chest. “It will take an act of God for me to get pregnant right now.” She tosses the pillow back at Savannah. “So stop trying to drag me into morning sickness and stretch marks with you.”

She lifts her left hand, looking at the ring sparkling in the overhead light. “Plus, I can only focus on one thing at a time, and I’ve got a wedding to plan.” Her eyes roll

Savannah's way. "In Georgia."

"I told you we could get married wherever you wanted." I don't give a shit where it happens. As long as it does. The sooner, the better.

"I know, but wouldn't it be nice to get married somewhere warm?" Audrey lifts her brows at me. "Unless you want to wait until next summer, in which case?—"

"If you try to make me wait until next summer to make you my wife, I will drag your cute ass to the courthouse." I try to keep a straight face, but a smile manages to work its way onto my mouth because we both know I'd never force Audrey to do anything.

Audrey laughs, finding my empty threat as amusing as I do. "Can you imagine what would happen when your mother found out you hauled me to the Justice of the Peace instead of letting her take me dress shopping?"

"I can." And it wouldn't be pretty.

I knew our trip to see my parents for Thanksgiving was going to change a lot. I didn't expect it to change everything.

Not only did it shift my thinking toward my parents and siblings, but my mother and Audrey quickly became thick as thieves. By the end of the trip, they'd exchanged phone numbers, were following each other on social media, and made plans for us to visit at Christmas.

They also planned a trip for my mom to come visit us here in Nashville.

It was unexpected and a little weird, but also fucking amazing. Audrey's bloomed knowing she has people supporting her. Between Savannah being right next door and her daily phone calls with my mother and sister, she's always got someone to turn to

besides me. Because apparently sometimes she just wants to talk to another woman.

And knowing I'm the one who gave that to her pleases me on an unprecedented level.

"That reminds me," Savannah says. "I need to tell Zeke when that is, because I can't spring things like that on him. He has to have lots of time to prepare for me being away from home." She rolls her eyes a little. "Which is hilarious considering he leaves home all the time, but I guess it's different somehow."

"It is different." I understand where Zeke's coming from. "Most of us have been alone for a long fucking time. Having someone waiting for us is something most of my teammates—myself included—never expected to have. Knowing we have to go home to an empty house reminds of us what it used to be like." I run my fingers through Audrey's hair. "And I don't know about him, but I fucking hate thinking about it."

Technically I haven't had to face it yet, but it's coming. At some point, Audrey's going to want to take a girls' trip or visit my mom and sister alone, and I'm going to have to suck it up. Manage to muddle through without her sweet smiles and soft words brightening my days.

Reaching out to give Coco a pet, I make a suggestion. "Maybe you could leave Coco here to keep me company."

I've quickly become attached to the little dog. Love cuddling with her on the couch and teaching her new tricks. I understand why Audrey was so devastated at the loss. It makes me even more glad I was able to bring her back.

"Oh my gosh." Audrey laughs. "Can you see your mom's face if I walk in without Coco?"

I can also imagine my mother's reaction to that. "For someone who's never had a

dog, she fell in love with Coco awful fast.”

Saying my mother fell in love with Coco feels like an understatement. My mother’s a little obsessed with the little fluffball. Granted, Coco’s sweet and smart and well behaved, but I’m suspicious it’s more about my mother treating her as a stand-in for a grandchild.

And that makes me worried for my future. Because it seems like I might go from a distant relationship with my mother to having her show up on my doorstep on a regular basis.

Toting a packed bag.

“Maybe we could get her a puppy for Christmas.” Audrey’s suggestion makes sense, but I don’t know that it would go over as well as she’s hoping.

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“I don’t think it would be the same.” I tuck the blanket tighter around Audrey, making sure she’s toasty warm. “Dogs are probably way less adorable when you’re the one who has to feed and walk them all the time.”

She angles an eyebrow at me. “You still think Coco’s adorable.”

That is a fair point, but I still don’t think my mother loves Coco the way Audrey thinks she does. “Also, my dad would lose his shit.”

My dad doesn’t dislike Coco, but he’s not obsessed with her the way my mom is. He’s more indifferent to her existence. Is that an indication of how he’ll be with my kids in the future?

Probably not. He’ll likely be right next to my mother on the porch with his own bag in hand.

Because now that I’ve stopped being certain of all I thought I knew about my family, I’m seeing that my parents and siblings aren’t what I believed. Do they talk less than I do? Absolutely. Is their demeanor a little more closed-off? Unquestionably. But do they love me any less because of it?

I can honestly say I no longer believe that’s true.

They might not understand me, but I’m starting to think maybe they don’t have to. They love me. They accept Audrey. They support us and want to spend time with us.

And maybe that’s all I should have ever asked for.