



Night Moves (Vegas After Dark #8)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Vegas is more than just neon lights and high stakes. It's a deadly game of secrets and revenge.

Diesel

I said goodbye to my shit past and this damn town years ago. But when my sister is murdered leaving behind my little niece, I'm sucked back in. I'm not the screwed-up kid who left with nothing. With years of military training under my belt I'm ready to hunt down the ones responsible—no matter what it takes.

Willow

I moved to Vegas for a fresh start. But after yet another bad relationship decision, my hope runs out when I stumble onto my friend's murder. As the killers move in, I grab the only witness—my friend's terrified child and run. Desperate for help, I contact the child's uncle. Diesel will protect us, but it comes with a price. He wants the people responsible, and he expects me to help him.

The truth is more dangerous than either of us can imagine.

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CHAPTER 1

Diesel Granger

It's two in the morning when the text tone on my phone pings. This is only my second week working for Hardcore Security, but knowing these guys, it's not a drill.

I open the message without looking at the number.

Diesel, your sister's dead. They killed her. I took Eizlee Jane to protect her. She's safe and well. I didn't know what else to do. I made an anonymous call to the cops, they'll find Vicky's body. Come as soon as you can.

Don't tell anyone you were contacted. Or I'll be in danger too. I'm destroying this phone. I'll text you from a new number in twenty-four hours. A friend.

Frantic, I call the Las Vegas police. When they answer I remember the warning from the caller. "I need a wellness check. My sister was supposed to call me. She didn't and I've been trying to reach her for over twenty-four hours. It's not like her." They take her name and address and four hours later I get the call that they found her body on her living room floor. The baby has not been located.

* * *

"Try to stay calm," Silk advises.

"My sister is dead and my niece is missing. And I probably fucked up the best job

I've ever had."

I glance across the cockpit. I've been on the Hardcore Security team for barely two weeks and the first case I get is me. They must think I'm a total screw up.

To top it off, the CO is having Silk fly me to Vegas in the company jet on the company tab. Man, I feel like a loser.

Dragging my hand down my face, I meet his gaze. "A hell of a way to start a new job. I hadn't even finished what you guys call orientation."

He turns his cool blue eyes toward me. "It's not a job, buddy, and you know it. You worked with us when we were all still in the service. It's a team, a purpose. We're family. We take care of our own first. Right now, you need us.

"I don't know if you remember him, but Diego is our operative out of Vegas. He was on the police force for a while before he went private. His wife, Raven, is still on the force. They'll both be there for you. He's picking us up at the airport to take us to the precinct."

I nod, then stare out the side window. The precinct and the morgue to identify my sister.

Has it really been two months since I saw her and the baby? God, it feels like yesterday when I hugged them both and said I'd be back soon for another visit. Eizlee Jane was just starting to take to me, and we talked about early spring so she wouldn't forget me.

This isn't the trip I'd planned for. Grief fists in my chest. I'm barely holding it together. I run a hand down my face and pinch the bridge of my nose to hold my emotions in check.

I gave Vicky shit when she insisted we spend a day at the lawyers to make sure I had sole custody of Eizlee Jane in case something happened to her. Did she have some kind of premonition? Or was there something she wasn't telling me?

I knew she didn't trust the father. His name wasn't on the birth certificate, and she stipulated that he would never see or have any contact with Eizlee Jane. She wouldn't even tell me his name, but said the info was in her lockbox. Is he the bastard I'm after? Or did someone see a baby they wanted? Shit like that happens all the time. "I don't know where Eizlee Jane is. Who has her."

"We'll find her, man."

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I continue. "I'm going to have to find childcare and baby doctors when we get back to Love Beach."

"Don't worry about that shit yet. Look, you're not alone. A bunch of us live there now. Me, Stack and his wife. Patch's wife Nyla has lived there her whole life, she knows everyone. We got your back, brother. Just concentrate on what you have to do to get this mess settled. I can stay a couple days, but then I have an assignment. But I'll come back and get you both when you're ready. Even picked up a car seat for the plane." He shoots me one of his infectious grins.

I nod. As he circles for landing, I study the aerial view of Vegas. They say you love it or you hate it. My mom and sister loved it. I couldn't wait to get the hell out.

'Sin City'. That's the only side my sister and I ever saw growing up. Mom was a stripper slash prostitute who snorted most of her earnings. Leaving her two kids to fend for ourselves.

Vicky couldn't dance worth a shit so took up waitressing at thirteen and bartending when she was old enough.

Me, I had my mom's moves and an adult body by the age of sixteen. She helped me get a fake ID and a job dancing. The minute I was of age I joined the army and got the hell out of town.

Vicky was in and out of drugs because of the dirtbags she dated. We fought about it a lot. I was gone in the army and didn't know everything. She called when Mom died. I was deployed and missed the funeral. A couple months later she called to say she was in recovery and sober again. Next time we talked she was happy and excited. She told me she was pregnant and assured me she'd been abstinent for two years. The baby-daddy was no longer in the picture. I sent money to help out but was deployed when Eizlee Jane was born.

This last winter was the only time I'd seen my niece in person. Now the precious little girl is mine. If I can find her.

* * *

At the precinct I meet the officer in charge. Officer Smith. He goes over my ID's, and I show him the custody papers for my missing niece to make damn sure they know who Eizlee Jane belongs with. Then he takes me to the morgue where I identify my sister.

I'm a soldier. I've seen death before. But looking at my sister's lifeless body breaks something inside me. Regret and sadness fill me first. Images of her happy and holding her sweet little girl. Her promise that now she was going to be the best, most loving mom ever. She was never going to be like our mom.

She meant it. I know she did.

"Tell me what's happened, what you know."

“We got an anonymous call. Officers went to your sister’s apartment at twenty-three hundred hours. There was no response. The door was unlocked. Your sister was unresponsive on the floor. Ambulance was called. Autopsy is not complete, but we suspect a drug overdose.

“There was no sign of the baby?”

“No. Obviously we could tell a baby lived there but no child was found. Once we found out your sister worked nights at one of the clubs we’ve been checking for babysitters.”

“What about the baby cam? I was here at Christmas, and we upgraded from her old one.”

He frowns. “There was no mention of a baby cam in the report. I’ll have someone check.”

“I just saw my sister during the holidays. She was not using. She’d been drug-free for almost five years. She would never take a chance and endanger Eizlee Jane. If it was an overdose, someone gave her the drug without her knowledge. She was murdered.

“Who are your suspects?” I press.

“Sir. The cause of death has not been confirmed. It could have been natural causes.”

“You just said you suspect drug overdose. I’m telling you if it was, it was murder because my sister did-not-do-drugs.”

The man’s jaw tightens. I can tell he just mentally shut me off. I wonder how the fuck he’d feel if it was his sister laying on a slab.

“We are continuing to look for the child,” he continues. “I have no more information for you at this time. We will notify you as soon as we learn something.”

“Do you have my sister’s phone?”

“I can check to see if it was collected and if it can be released. I’ll let you know.”

“I’d like a copy of the police report.”

“You can file a request online. It will take about ten days.”

“You can’t print one right now?”

“You need to follow the procedures.”

“Why are you stonewalling me? What aren’t you telling me?”

He gives me a dismissing glare. “Leave your contact information. We’ll let you know if we find the child or have any new information.”

“I’ll be staying until my niece is found. How long before I can get into my sister’s apartment?”

“I’ll let you know.” He pauses. “I know this is a shock. We’ll do what we can but there’s no evidence of foul play.”

“My niece is missing. I call that foul play.”

“We don’t know that she’s missing. It could be she’s with a nanny or simply staying over with friends while your sister partied.” He sighs. “Look, one of the women where your sister worked confirmed she had a woman who babysat once and a while.

But they didn't have a name. Do you know the name or number?"

"No." So what if it's withholding info. He's doing the same.

Diego and Silk are waiting for me outside. "They're holding back. Won't give me much info. I asked for a copy of the report, and he tells me to request it online."

Diego asks the name of the officer in charge. I tell him. "Name's not familiar. Let me call Raven." He walks away. When he comes back, he's frowning. "She says the jury's out on Officer Fred Smith. He's new.

"She sent a copy of the report to you and HARDCORE headquarters as well. I-Tee can start working his magic. By the way, he's ready to trace the next text when it comes in. Try to get her to actually call you, it would be easier but either way keep her on the line as long as you can. He should be able to get a rough location via the text."

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CHAPTER 2

Willow Burke

I've barely been able to keep any food down since I found the body. It's not the sight of a dead body —how telling is that? It's the guilt. And I don't know how to get over it. I know they killed her. I didn't see it, but I know what they are. What I can't believe is that they left the baby there, alone and unattended. My god, Eizlee Jane was alone with a dead body for hours.

I knew the guy that Vicky started seeing was bad news. I tried to steer her away, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her how I knew. Now she's dead and her little girl is motherless.

Thankfully, I at least had the information for Vicky's brother. She drilled me on the fact that her ex could never get Eizlee Jane. Her brother Diesel was her little girl's guardian and was the only one to be trusted.

Clutching the new burner phone, I glance at the clock. I need to text him. I need to get out of this park. I'm too exposed. We're too exposed. I don't live in the same complex as Vicky did, but I'm also not that far away. Just on the opposite side of the park.

I watch Eizlee play in the sand box. The park is one of our normal routines when I watch her. It was a favorite place we'd go so her mom could sleep. Today we both needed the fresh air. I know Eizlee cares for me but she keeps asking for and calling out for her mom. I'm scared of what she'll remember. Her loss is breaking my heart.

Turning on the new phone I go to the texting app and punch in the number I've memorized.

A friend: When do you get to Vegas.

Diesel: I'm here. Where are you?

A friend : We're safe for now. Have you talked to the police?

Diesel: Yes. They're saying it was an accidental overdose. I know Vicky wasn't using.

Damn. I was afraid there would be a cover up. Whether the officer is on the take or just that they staged the murder scene too well. Time to let it all go. I can't change anything. No one can.

Diesel: Can you just call me. I need to hear Eizlee Jane. I need to know she's okay.

A friend: That's not a good idea. I think it will upset her again. I've got her outside playing. We're about to go take a nap. Tonight, at midnight I'll meet you and hand her over. I'll text you an address.

Diesel: Wait! I need a general location, so I can be in the right area or I might not make it in time.

A friend: Be close to where your sister lived. It will be a different number.

Disconnecting, I disassemble the phone as I watch the precious child. I could have met him now, but I need time to say my goodbyes. She's been my sanity for the last few months. Losing her will take a big chunk of me.

Stuffing the phone pieces in my back pocket, I toss one section in the trash at the end of the bench. Crossing to my little love, I squat near where she plays. “Come on squirt. Let’s go home and have lunch. Then we’ll play with your blocks and maybe cuddle during nap time.”

She’s calmed down and seems content. Going to the park, playing, having lunch is what we do every day. She’ll be good until it’s the time Vicky would wake up from her nap and take over. That’s when Eizlee’s inner clock will go off and she’ll start crying.

Always watchful of my surroundings, I get a funny feeling between my shoulders as we cross the grass. Putting Eizlee on her feet I run ahead a couple feet and get her to chase me, while I scan the area. I don’t see anyone, but the niggling won’t go away. Lifting her, I make a show of spinning her around then walk into the laundromat across the street and cut through to the back door. The clerk who is supposed to be manning the shop doesn’t even look up from whatever video he’s watching on his phone. Some watch dog he is.

It's not a bad neighborhood, just not the best. Daytime is pretty safe, nights not so much.

We make it to my apartment and I slide the locks in place before checking the window in front of the fire escape. All secure. After I get Eizlee to her uncle it will be time for me to move again. I’m going to miss her and her mom. I’ve felt almost normal these last few months.

After lunch, I lay on the floor beside her and watch her sleep.

Telling Diesel to meet us at midnight was a little dangerous considering some of the drug dealers and users who have been hanging around the park the last few months. They’ve been noticeably absent the last four days. The cops at Vicky’s place

probably sent them scurrying like mice until the coast is clear. According to Vicky her brother can take care of himself in any situation. Once I hand Eizlee off, I know how to make myself disappear.

She's finally asleep so I get up and pack all her clothes and diapers that I splurged on washing at the laundromat earlier. At least he can start out with everything under control. I pack the food supplies I have left to get him through the night if she wakes and for tomorrow morning. Then I wash her sippy cup, plate, bowl and spoon. Each task breaks my heart a little more.

I try to swallow back the tears choking me. After tonight I'll never see her again. She'll be gone to who knows where. But she'll be safe.

I should try to leave town. Go somewhere and start over again. It's not like I love Vegas. I have a little money. I have to find new shelter after I hand her off. I can't risk staying around here. Tomorrow, I'll go to the library and use the computer to see how much a bus to Reno costs. I'm afraid I've already stayed in this town longer than I should have.

I'll need to change my hair color again, get some different and oversized clothes. I might be able to go back to washing dishes at the diner. Crossing to where Eizlee is sleeping in the portable playpen, I lean forward and brush the wisps of hair from her face. I just need to get my little love to her uncle safe and sound.

I check my ever-packed bag, making sure I haven't forgotten anything. The few dishes can be replaced. Everything I can never lose is in my backpack that I wear all the time.

A hard lesson I learned a long time ago. Always be prepared to run.

CHAPTER 3

Diesel

Diego glances at his vibrating phone. “It’s I-Tee.” He puts the call on speaker.

“Diesel, go to the area where your sister lived. Your caller is close. There’s a park down the street to the left. She’s there. She already disabled the phone but maybe you can get a visual.”

I surge to my feet. I see a woman in the center of the park lifting a child that from a distance is the same size as Eizlee.

“Wait,” Diego stops me. “Let’s not confront her. We’ll follow and see what we can learn. She probably knows a whole lot more than we expect.”

She pauses and looks around.

“She senses us,” he continues, “Split up and see if one of us can follow her. This is a woman who’s been on the run and in hiding before.”

A few minutes later, Diego’s voice comes through the com. “She just cut through the laundromat. I’ll bet she’s coming out the back side. We’ll trade off following her.”

I get in place in time to see her cut across the road and head between two homes. I glimpse Diego move forward to follow down the next street over. I stay in place until I get his next command. “Go. I’ll follow.”

We continue leap frogging past each other.

Sure enough, she's gradually making her way down the street using the buildings as cover, until she cuts between two sections of what could have been an old motel. The sign in front reads Hollow Apartments.

I watch her take the stairs to the second level Eizlee Jane cuddled high with her arms around her neck. She follows the walkway to the end and bears left, leaving my sight.

"Got her. Second floor, back side, far corner of building two."

I can barely hear Diego's breathing as I imagine him repositioning.

"She went inside the last corner unit that overlooks the alley between another two buildings like hers. I saw her check her window on the alley side. It's big enough she could climb out and go down the rear stairs between the dumpsters. This woman's been on the run before. We need to be careful or she'll bolt."

"My thoughts exactly. She knows what she's doing with the phones, too." I join Diego at the back. I'm at one corner watching the way in and her apartment. He's in the opposite corner doing the same. We'll see anyone coming to her apartment, or if she tries to leave." We settle in and wait for her call.

* * *

At exactly midnight my phone vibrates. For the last thirty minutes we've seen a shadow cross back and forth in front of the apartment window. I wondered if she's cuddling Eizlee to sleep.

A friend: You ready?

Diesel: Yes. Where are you?

A friend: Go to Sunrise East. There's a lighted bus stop. I'll meet you there. If you aren't alone, I keep going.

Diego and I watch as she exits the apartment. Eizlee cuddled against her shoulder as if she's asleep. The woman carries a bag in the other arm and wears a big ass hiking backpack. Burner phones. Long distance backpack. My gut twists. What is she running from?

I text Diego the location. He's going to follow her. I need to take a different route to get to the meet spot. It's not more than a fifteen-minute walk. Ironically, it's close to where we parked my rental car. I sit on the bench under the light. Shoulders slumped, elbows on my knees, trying to look non-threatening. Every sound, every footstep has me on edge.

Diego's voice comes over the com. "We got trouble. Not sure it's coincidence or a problem but a couple thugs picked up her trail about two blocks ago. They don't know I'm behind them yet."

"Fuck. Could it be tied to my sister?" I whisper.

He grunts. "Stand to."

I wait until she gets closer and turn toward her. Standing, hands loosely by my sides, shoulders relaxed. There're three guys a half block behind her, another comes out of the coffee shop on the corner and greets them.

Something about the way he moves bothers me, but I'm distracted. Too many moving pieces and I'm on alert, ready for a physical confrontation. I'd like to think it's just some buddies meeting up, but their attention on the woman tells me it's more.

Like Diego, I'm wondering if it's opportunity or planned? He nods at me from behind the thugs, and it's like I hear him say; let it play out .

She's almost to me when the men quicken their steps. One of them says something behind her. She spins, almost stumbling.

Rushing forward, I reach out to steady her. "Honey, you okay?"

One of the thugs looks at the newcomer who shrugs, then back at me. "Get lost buddy, this ain't any of your business. Bitch, get over here."

"Excuse you. This is my wife. Who the hell are you?"

The men look at each other, the newcomer scowls. "Then she's two-timing you buddy, cuz she belongs to someone else. He's been looking for her. You need to get lost before you get hurt."

"No." The woman is trembling and holding Eizlee even tighter and shaking her head. "No."

Wakened, Eizlee cries into the woman's shoulder. "Mama. Wan' Mama."

Something snaps in me. Are these the men who killed my sister? If not, they're the same kind of scum who prey on women. Stepping forward I shift her behind me.

"I think you need to leave my family alone."

Newcomer gives me a once over, apparently not impressed with my button up shirt and dress slacks. Yeah. Well, looks can be deceiving.

One of them steps toward me. None of them notice Diego. He grabs two of the thugs

by the sides of their heads and slamming their skulls together lets them drop. Newcomer takes off like a rat in an alley leaving the last one behind.

Diego smiles, if you can call a shark showing its teeth a smile and grabs the last man standing by his shirt front. Pulling him close he simply says, "Talk."

"I-I-I don't-don't know nothing. I'm new. My boys," he nods at the two on the ground, "asked if I wanted to make some extra cash. I said yes. We were supposed to follow the broad and keep tabs on her till the other guy showed. That's all I know. That's all they told me. Nobody said nothin' about a baby or things going down."

Diego gets right in his face. "You better find some new boys. I catch you doing this kind of shit again, nobody's gonna find you."

Once released, the kid runs like his pants are on fire.

Diego takes the bag the woman was carrying. "Let's get out of here before anyone else shows up."

CHAPTER 4

Willow

“No. No, I’ve got to leave. Oh god, I have to get away.” He’s got his arm around my back and is leading me down a side street. They’ve found me.

“We’ve got you. We’ll keep you safe. Do you know what that was about?”

It’s too dark to see his expression, but somehow, I feel his concern. “No. I—I don’t know. Look, I need to go, I—I’ll be late. But I’ll need to see your driver’s license to make sure you are who you say. Then I’ll let you take Eizlee.”

“We’re almost at my car.” Another block and he stops in front of a sleek SUV.

The other man puts Eizlee’s bag in the cargo area then opens the back door. A car seat is already secured in the middle, with a pink elephant stuffy in the seat.

Tears run down my cheeks. It’s going to be okay. He’s going to take care of my little love. She’ll be safer with him. My heart is breaking. This is it. I’ll never see her again.

He pulls out his wallet and hands me his driver’s license using the flashlight on his phone so I can see. His picture is without the beard he’s sporting now, but his eyes. The eyes are the same. As if guessing my concern, he pulls out his military Id that shows him with the beard.

I nod. “Thank you. I just want to make sure she’s going to be safe.”

“Are you the babysitter? Were you watching Eizlee Jane the night my sister was killed? Do you know what really happened?”

“I—I can’t. I’ve got to go.”

“Please tell me what you know. For Eizlee Jane’s sake.”

I shake my head. The less he knows... “You don’t live here. Just take her away. She’ll be safe with you.”

“What’s your name?”

“Get in the car both of you. We’ve got company.” The big man comes up behind me and ushers me toward the open door, Eizlee still in my arms. I stumble inside, landing sideways on the seat. He slams the door behind me and climbs behind the wheel.

Diesel, circles the car, jumping in the front passenger seat as the big man starts pulling away.

I glance out the blackened window I see six men running down the block toward where we’d been. Two of them are carrying what look like pipes.

“Get her in the car seat. I want both of you strapped in if we need to make quick maneuvers,” Diesel says.

Eizlee starts to cry harder as I fasten her in. “It’s okay, sweetie. You’re fine. Look at the new stuffy. Oh, so cuddly, just like you. You want sippy, too?”

Snuffling, she nods and reaches for the toy as I rifle through her bag for her drink.

“Wan’ Mama.”

“I know sweetheart. I know.” Once she’s settled, I glance up. That’s when I realize there’s now a glass separating the back from the front like in a limousine.

Vicky never told me much about her brother other than he was a good guy, in the military and would take care of Eizlee Jane if something happened to her. His lips are moving, then he turns his head and glances back at us before looking at his friend. A few seconds later the divider slides down.

“You two okay?”

“Yes. Where are we? Can you drop me off...” Oh hell they’ll be watching bus stations, and I don’t have anything to disguise myself. Where can I even have them drop me?

“I think it’s best if you stay with us for a little while. Those men were looking for you and about to grab the two of you. Until we know why, I don’t think either of you are safe. I could also use some advice and instruction on Eizlee. I saw her at Christmas, but I’ve been told things change so quickly at this age. Please, give me just a little help, a little time.”

His sincerity wins me over. Maybe letting things die down for a couple hours would be a good idea. I nod.

It feels like we drive forever before we pull into a private garage under a high-rise. Diesel grabs Eizlee’s bag and my backpack, I carry her, and we all follow the big guy to the elevator. He swipes a fob and then keys in a code. The elevator ride is so smooth you don’t even feel the motion or the pause when it stops, and the doors slide open revealing another door across a wide hall. He uses his palm print and a code. The door swings open to reveal a large room.

I gasp, struck by the captivating view of the city from the wall of windows. Crossing the room, I look out at the city in a way I've never seen it before. This is the beautiful part you don't see on the street.

Diesel comes to stand behind me, both of us and Eizlee are reflected in the glass. Like a family. Never for me, I remind myself and turn away. "It looks so beautiful from up here."

He scowls, "Yeah, until you look under the glitter and see all the grime."

"Not a fan?" I can't help but ask.

"Couldn't wait to get out of here."

Turning I glance around at what I can see of the very opulent apartment. "Where are we?"

The big guy looks up. "This is my place. Company uses it for a safe house when we need. It's secure. The three of you will be staying here for..." he glances at Diesel, "as long as you need."

He walks closer and holds out his hand. "I'm Diego by the way. And you are?"

"Willow," taking his extended hand, I respond without thinking. Damn. I was going to use a fake name.

"Diesel's already been staying here, and we have a bed set up for Eizlee," Diego continues. "Why don't you two get her settled, then the three of us can talk."

Diesel grabs Eizlee's bag and I follow him down the hall. There are three doors on each side. He taps the first door on the left. "This is my room."

Next is a bathroom, followed by another bedroom. He turns on the light before placing the bag next to a small bed. There's a crib with the front bars gone, a changing table, dresser, and a rocker.

"I wasn't sure if Vicky had transitioned Eizlee to a youth bed yet," he explains. "She'd been talking about it at Christmas when I stayed with her. We took off the front panel of Eizlee's crib because she'd been trying to climb out so I did the same here. He points to a box of diapers. "Hope those will fit."

"They will. I packed all the things I had at my place for you. A few diapers, clothes, shoes, bowls, sippy cups and such. There's some treats and stuff like cereal. I kept a journal so Vicky would know what I'd fed her. That's in the bag, too."

He takes Eizlee from me and snuggles her. "How's my big girl?"

She grabs his beard and tugs. "Wan' Mama."

"Me too, sweetheart. Me too." His voice sounds choked.

I watch as he changes her, talking softly the whole time. Her eyes are drooping, but she's fighting sleep. Once done, he dims the light and cuddles her and the new stuffy while swaying from side to side. Soon she's out and he lays her in the crib with a bumper pillow on the outside so she can't accidentally roll off the bed, although the one-foot drop would not harm her.

Whether it's intentional or not, he's showing me that he does have her best interest at heart. I hope it's true, my judgement with men hasn't always been the best.

Back in the hall he motions to the next door. "There's another bedroom and bath on the other side of Eizlee. Why don't I put your bag in there for now."

Diego is on the phone when we return to the kitchen area and hangs up as we approach. He nods to cups on the counter and a plate of cheese, crackers and fruit.

“This guy can mainline coffee all day,” he nods to Diesel, “but I wasn’t sure if you’d prefer tea or juice,” he says looking at me. “So the kettle is also warmed.”

“I should be going.”

“You have to be exhausted. Take a few minutes to rest, maybe refuel. It won’t hurt. You should stay the night and start fresh in the morning.”

“I have a few questions if you don’t mind,” Diesel says pouring himself a coffee.

CHAPTER 5

Diesel

Willow isn't what I expected. I keep waiting for her to ask for something—money, in exchange for protecting Eizlee Jane.

Then there's the men on the street. Who were they? Were they after her? Or was it tied to my sister?

“What do I owe you for taking care of Eizlee?”

“Nothing. I was happy to do it.”

“A thank you doesn't seem like enough for all you did to take care of her.”

“She is always my pleasure.” She smiles studying the cup of coffee she'd taken. “She is the sweetest little girl. But if you didn't notice at Christmas, be prepared for a stubborn streak.”

“That would certainly fit my sister as well.”

She nods, the smile fading. “Don't I know.”

“How'd you meet?”

“At a park. I was nanny for another child, older, who was getting ready to transition

into school. Vicky was sitting on the bench getting some fresh air. I couldn't help but notice how cute her little one was and said so.

"Vic told me she was looking for someone willing to watch Eizlee during her night shifts. Her day job had management changes and brought in all new staff. She'd had to take a bartending job until she could find something else. But she was having a hard time finding a sitter for the late shift.

"We agreed to try it for a couple days and it ended up working perfectly for both of us."

"Do you have other clients?"

"No. That's why I could work with her hours."

"So what are you going to do now?"

She plays with the rim of her cup. "I-ah think I might relocate."

"Vegas isn't home?"

"No. I-ah came here with friends. But they've all moved. I stayed because of Vicky and Eizlee. So, it's probably time to move on." She glances my way. "She said you moved away and have lived all over, even foreign countries."

"Vicky talked about me?"

"Yeah. She wanted me to meet you when you were here, but it didn't work out. She missed you. Said you were a good guy. Wished you'd move back here, but understood your work was somewhere else. She was toying with moving, too."

“Did she tell you what I do?”

“She said you were in the military, one of those elite groups. But you were getting out of the military and doing something else.”

“I am. I’m in private security now.”

“Like a cop?”

“No. I do private work. Diego used to be a cop here in Vegas. His wife still is.”

All the color drains from her face. She stands, knocking over her cup. “Oh shit. I’m sorry. Let me clean it up.”

Diego beats her to it.

“I should go. I’ve... I’ve got an appointment early in the morning that I just remembered.”

“Willow, wait. Please. You found her body didn’t you. You know who did this. Will you tell me the truth? Please. I need to know so I can protect Eizlee. Willow, was it a cop?”

“Taking her away, out of this town will be enough. You’ll both be safe.”

“But you won’t be, will you? So, tell me what you really know. And I’ll help you start over.”

“That’s not why I did it. I didn’t—She was my friend. She shouldn’t have... Eizlee shouldn’t have.... I need to leave. Can you show me out, please?”

“If they’re looking for you, and by the way you’re acting they are,” Diego cuts in. “All the burner phones in the world aren’t going to keep you safe. Tell us, let us help.

“My wife is internal affairs. We know there are dirty cops. Dirty politicians. We’ve been taking them down one or two at a time for a while now. Help us cut the head off the snake. We can and will protect you.

“Once this is settled our company will relocate you anywhere you want to go. Any state, any country. The company Diesel and I work for, **HARDCORE INC Security**, protects those that need help whether they can pay or not. Let us help, please. I don’t want any more motherless children on my watch.”

The door opens and we all turn. Raven walks in. She makes a show of removing her ear bud. “Full disclosure, I was listening. Sorry I’m late and you had to start without me.”

Crossing to Diego, she cups the back of his head and kisses him like they haven’t seen each other in months. When they finally part, she puts a carryout bag and her laptop on the counter. Opening the computer, she pulls up an article and turns the screen toward Willow. “Read that, then we’ll talk.”

Diego has already grabbed plates from the cupboard. “You didn’t eat today, did you?”

“Not now babe, scold me when we get home.”

Willow looks up from the computer. “This was you? I remember hearing about this on the radio.”

Raven nods as she pushes plates in front of Willow and me, while Diego plates her burrito. “Google my name and you’ll probably find photos. Diego has an aversion to cameras. But if you need us too, we can call people to verify his identity.

“We know that one of the clubs is pushing drugs, again.” She takes a bite and chews. “Damn I love these things.” She takes two more bites then lays it back on the plate.

“We shut one of the fuckers down and they open somewhere else. I know how this works.

“I also know there’s good cops and bad cops. Good politicians and crooked ones. People who put out the fire and some that start them. There’s always going to be both. Right, wrong. Good, evil. That’s how mankind is made. But you can’t give up the fight. You can’t give in. You stand for something, and you fight back. It’s all you can do.

“Some of us, like you, learn it the hard way. It’s your decision to make, if you stand up or walk away. No one’s going to force you. Or judge you. It’s scary as hell out there on the streets.

“I know there are scumbags on our force. But I’m sick and tired of the bad cops giving the good guys a bad reputation. I’m third generation of the ones fighting the good fight. I will take down as many as I can, for as long as I can.

“I’d appreciate any help you can give me and I can promise protection for you. And like Diego said, relocation if you want.”

I cover Willow’s clenched fist on the counter. “Tell us what you know, and I’ll take you to safety personally.”

She takes a deep breath and exhales, shaking her head. My hope dips, she’s going to refuse.

“I went to Vicky’s apartment that night at eleven. My normal time to babysit. When I knocked, Eizlee started crying. But Vicky never came to the door. I tried to call. I

could hear the phone ring, but she didn't answer. I knew where she hid the spare key and let myself in.

"Vicky lay on the living room floor, Eizlee Jane sat next to her mom. When she saw me, she pushed her mother's arm and started calling out to her. The poor little thing was hungry, her clothes were soaked and dirty from her diaper. She had to have been alone with the body for hours.

"I freaked out and wasn't thinking. I knew I couldn't leave her, but I also couldn't go to the police. I grabbed as many of her clothes as I could, her favorite stuffy, shoved everything into a bag and snuck out."

"Why couldn't you go to the cops? Tell them you had Eizlee Jane?" I ask.

"Because the man who'd been trying to date Vicky, who'd been flirting with her was a bad cop. I'd seen her talking with him before and tried to warn her. When I saw him with her earlier that day. I had a bad feeling."

"How did you know he was bad?" Raven asks softly.

CHAPTER 6

Willow

You stand for something and you fight back. It's all you can do.

But I didn't. I was scared and alone, so I ran. I hid. And then I was trapped in a lose-lose situation.

"I'd tried to warn her, but he can be very charming as he reels you in. But if things don't go his way, if he doesn't get what he wants, he's brutal.

"When she asked me how I knew he was a bad guy, I couldn't tell her I had dated him and knew from experience. Women never believe the other woman. And I didn't want to lose my job with Eizlee."

"Do you know how she met him?"

"At the club where she worked."

"Wait. When I was here at Christmas, Vicky was bartending at a breakfast club," Diesel cuts in.

I nod. "That's how she originally met him. It's a tag team thing. Look, this is what they do. The first guy meets someone who he thinks they can manipulate and becomes friendly. Gets them fired and has his friend offer them a job where they are promised a lot more money. In the beginning she didn't mention where she was

working only the hours. So, I had no clue what club she was at.

“He and a couple other cops handle the staff and clientele issues for ‘management’. They smile and buddy up as they reel people in. Assuring everyone it’s a great safe place to work and patronize, all the while they’re forcing girls to turn tricks or spiking drinks which basically can lead to date rape.

“I tried to talk to her. She said they weren’t really dating but she was enjoying the flirting, and he seemed harmless.”

“Vicky didn’t tell me about the job change,” Diesel says.

“When I started taking care of the baby, she was all excited about the job and the extra money. But recently she confided she was tired of it and wanted to quit. That it wasn’t as great as she thought. I think she was planning on following you once you got to your new home. She loved having you here and having family for the holidays. She wanted to take Eizlee to a better environment.”

“You said you saw them the day she died?” Raven asks.

“I’d gone to the store by her place and was walking home. I saw him get out of his car and go to her apartment door. He had a bag. He did that thing guys do when they lean against the door frame and flirt. I saw her shake her head, then he went inside with her for just a few minutes. Maybe five, max, and left.

“What’s the name of the club,” Raven asks.

“Swagger.”

“That’s the place where they have the male dancers. Fancyman or something dancers,” Raven cuts in.

“Fanta-Sensual Dancers,” Diesel corrects.

“Yes,” I confirm.

“You said you dated him,” Raven asks softly.

“I—I need to go check on Eizlee. She gets fussy in new places.” I stand.

“Willow, you are safe here. It’s almost like lock down when the alarms are set. You know that right?

“And Diesel is good at his job, he’ll watch over you for a couple nights until I can get back to you. Think of this as your home away from home. Just for a couple days. I promise,” Raven continues.

I nod. I do trust Diesel.

“Is there anything you need from your home?”

“No. I’m good I’ve got everything. Is it okay if I use the shower?”

“Sure, everything you could need is in one of the drawers,” she says.

Raven glances at Diego. “We need to head home too. I need to do some research, go back through the police reports and see what else I can find. Finally, I have a place to start.”

She looks at me. “Willow, one more thing before you go.”

She pauses until I look her way.

“Will you give me a name?” Raven asks. “You know I can find out. You’ll be saving me some time.”

“Ryrden.” Even saying the name makes me sick to my stomach.

“Thank you. You’re very brave.”

I’m not. I’m a coward and a fake. If I’d done something more my friend would still be alive. Eizlee would still have her mom. Shame sends me racing down the hall to beg forgiveness once again.

In the bathroom I let the tears fall in the shower. I’m such a fool. A real sucker. My choices in men have never been good. Always so hungry for attention and affection. How did Ryrden say it? ‘Such an easy mark. So needy’.

God, how he played me. Sweet talking me, building up my confidence, buying me gifts and affection. The first month was like a fantasy. And it was.

Working as a scantily clad waitress wasn’t that bad. Hell, it’s Vegas. At least we weren’t topless. The tips were pretty good. I’d do one dance routine with the other women each night. The rest of my shift was waiting tables and trying to upsell the drinks. The first time he pulled me into the hall to have sex I thought it was kind of romantic that he wanted me so badly.

I quit accepting the drinks he’d bring me when I realized I’d often feel lightheaded afterward. That’s when I realized the one bartender was spiking the drinks.

His sweet, considerate, off hours sex became almost rape. Then straight out rape when, and where, he pleased. No consent required. Everything blew up the night he told me to go service a customer. I snuck out, but realized I’d forgotten my purse. I’ve been in hiding ever since.

* * *

After dressing in jeans and a shirt I go to check on Eizlee in the room made up for her. Diesel is stretched out in the chair, Eizlee and the new stuffy cuddled against his chest. White noise plays gently in the background.

He signals to give him a moment, so I continue to the kitchen. Another coffee is tempting. But I feel safe here after seeing what it takes to get in and a really good night's sleep would be a luxury. I grab a water instead.

I know it's probably not smart, but I do trust Diesel. Caring like he does for Eizlee, I don't think he could fake that.

When he comes to the kitchen, he's changed to a pair of grey sweats and black T-shirt that hugs every muscled contour of his broad chest. So hot, but nice too. And so out of my league. Just like Ryrden had been. He'd played me perfectly. Silly little, small town girl with big town dreams.

Pausing in front of me, he studies me. "Are you doing okay? Really?"

"Yeah, I'm good."

"What can I get you? You've been taking care of Eizlee, let me take care of you a little while. I can make you something more to eat, or there's ice cream and dark chocolate. Studies show dark chocolate is good for stress."

A laugh erupts from me before I even think about it. This stud muffin is citing documentation on the stress relief properties of dark chocolate. "Do you have a lot of stress that you treat with chocolate?"

He grins, "I can think of a lot of reasons to eat chocolate, stress is just an acceptable

reason. You just smiled so you see even thinking of it helps. When was the last time you had ice cream with dark chocolate?

“I honestly can’t remember.”

“Then I think we should perform our own test.”

Opening the freezer, he pulls out two cartons of ice cream. “Vanilla or coffee?”

“Coffee” we say together.

“Is there a washer and dryer I could use. For my clothes and Eizlee’s?”

“Sure, let me show you.”

Once I have the clothes on, I head back to the kitchen.

He’s just squirting crisscrossing drizzles all over the top of both bowls. Sliding one to me, he takes the other and leans against the opposite counter to eat his.

I sigh contentedly and push my empty bowl aside, licking the last little speck from my lips. “Well, I must admit I do feel better.”

“Good. Making you feel good makes me happy, too.” His gaze widens as if he hadn’t meant to say that out loud. Grabbing both bowls he puts them in the sink. “Why don’t you try to sleep. If Eizlee wakes tonight, I’ll take care of her so you can get a full night’s sleep. Which I’m sure you haven’t had since this started.

“There may be a couple nights where I’ll need to be gone on business,” he continues, “and I’d like you to watch her for me. I’ll pay you like Vicky. Would you do that for me?”

“I need to move on, too.”

“Just give me a few days. It’s safe here and you have your own room. Please.”

The money could pay for a bus ticket. The farther I can go, the safer I’ll be. I nod. Climbing off the stool I head to the hallway and pause, “You were right, about the chocolate. Thanks.”

Sleep comes easier than it has in months.

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CHAPTER 7

Diesel

I spend what's left of the night taking tactical naps, checking on Eizlee, sitting on the couch, plotting, and listening outside Willow's door.

The first time I noticed a soft sound coming from her room, she was crying. I almost went in. Later it was a whimpering, mewling sound. I tapped gently on the door. The sounds ceased and I heard the mattress shift, but she didn't respond. I suspect she was having a nightmare, and the sound was enough to rouse her from the dream.

I wanted to go to her, ask her what was wrong. Hold her and wipe her tears. I held back for fear that me going into her room would frighten her even more. It's evident in the way she tries to hold herself apart that she's scared of something or someone. Her defensive posture, how she stands back at least six feet, and how she always looks on the verge of running.

There's more going on than she's telling me. Diego senses it too. I need to go slow, earn her trust, but we may not have time. I want the bastard who murdered my sister.

I prep breakfast and put on a second pot of coffee. I'm sitting at my computer at the counter when I get a text from Raven.

Raven: I couldn't find anyone on the club records by the name of Ryrden. Not totally surprising since he's a cop being paid under the table. I checked with personnel and there's no one with that first or last name on the force. I need a photo or Willow to

work with a sketch artist.

Raven: "I want this bastard and his cronies. Yesterday."

Diesel: "We may have another option. Can I send you a list of food items I need for Eizlee, and some clothes and a special order I need picked up? I'll send you the pickup info. Have Diego do the special order. I'd like both of you to come so I can explain my plan."

Raven: "Why do I feel I'm not going to like this?"

I chuckle to myself.

Diesel: "Knowing what I do about you, you're gonna love it."

Willow joins me a little while later with Eizlee in her arms. "What's going on?"

Closing my computer, I cross to the two of them, kissing my little one on the forehead. I'm pleased she's cuddling the elephant.

"I've got breakfast warming and Raven and Diego are going to bring more food, toys and a highchair. Do you mind holding her while I dish up the food. Then I can feed her while you eat."

She nods. "I-I'm glad you have good friends to help. I-ah-maybe I should go, get out of your way. You have your friends."

"Please stay. Willow, I could really use your help a few more days. They can't help with Eizlee. Besides, she trusts you and so do I. I'll double the pay. Please stay."

She starts to shake her head. "No, I don't need more money. It's... I don't want to be

in the way.”

“You aren’t. You’re a life saver right now. And the baby’s security.

“It’s just a few more days. She doesn’t deserve to have any more drastic changes in her life. There are some things I need to do. She knows you and it’s obvious she loves you. Both of you will be safe here. I promise.

“Think about it while we eat.”

Remembering that Vicky made happy face pancakes and bacon for breakfast when I was here. I made a stack with bacon on the side for all of us and place the oven tray on the counter. The syrup is already warmed.

Eizlee sits on Willow’s lap and immediately sticks her finger in the pancake as I slide her plate across the counter to her. “Eye.”

“Yes. Sweet girl. That’s an eye.”

Willow smiles and kisses the top of her head. Cradling her in her lap, she cuts bites and feeds them to her in between the bites of bacon.

Raven and Diego show up with the requested supplies a couple hours later. He’s carrying the highchair in one arm and slaps the special order against my chest with the other. “Sure as hell hope you have an explanation for that.”

“I do. Will you help Willow with the groceries? I’ll be right back.”

The timing is perfect since we just put Eizlee down for her nap. After changing, I pour fresh coffee for all and carry the tray to the living room.

After everyone's seated, I pull out a folding chair from the closet and place it across from them and take my place.

"Have you learned anything more?" I ask.

"The club sold about five years ago to a privately owned company. I'm trying to find out who's behind the new ownership and the name. Diego reached out to his cyber guru but we're still waiting. I want this damn Ryrden and his cronies."

"What do you know about Swagger the club?" I ask. "The male dancers? Have there been other missing staff, waitress or bartenders reported?"

"Not specifically tied to the club. To get their employment records to cross reference deaths I'd have to get a subpoena. For that I'd have to have a damn good reason.

"The department gets the bodies, we don't always know where the people worked. And if the families don't contest the death.... We don't have the manpower."

"The cops on the take, they're good," I add. "Covering their bases. Probably hand in hand with the new management. Using fake names. Given what happened to my sister I'd say this isn't the first time they've set up like this."

"I'd agree." She grimaces. "If we could get photos. But your guy said there's no cameras inside that he could tap into and nothing on the street outside.

"So, what we need is someone on the inside who can get us photos or info on the guy calling himself Ryrden."

"No. I won't risk any of my officers. It's too dangerous until we know more. If they are cops, they could recognize my people."

“I’m not talking any of your officers. I’m talking about a dancer, a player who can buddy up and play the role. I’m talking about me.”

“It won’t work. You need to have years of training to be a dancer. You can’t just walk in and drop your pants and sell it.”

“You know I grew up in Vegas, my mom was a stripper and a hooker?”

“And reading a book on surgery doesn’t make you a surgeon,” she snaps back.

“I can do this.”

“No, absolutely not,” Raven snaps. “I’m in charge of this investigation and it’s a hell no. You have to be able to do more than wiggle your ass to be a dancer.”

“That’s right. I forgot you were a dancer. Right?” I smile. I’m used to being overlooked for certain things. That’s always made me good at what I do.

Standing I ask, if anyone else want more coffee.

At the counter, I hit the app for the song I queued. A hard pulsing beat starts to play over the speakers.

Rolling my shoulders, I inhale deeply, closing my eyes to get into my groove. Strutting across the room, I spin the chair so that I straddle the seat and thrust my hips forward to the beat. Rolling off, I glide toward Raven and hold out my hand for her to join me.

“Hell no,” Diego snarls. “She can watch.”

Raising an eyebrow I turn to Willow. Blushing, she shakes her head. “Help me show

them,” I whisper.

Reluctantly, she takes my hand and rises to her feet.

I slow dance her toward the chair holding her loosely in my arms and let my knee slip between her thighs. Something I wouldn't do on the dance floor, but this is Willow.

Willow who calls to me on a sensual level I haven't felt this strongly in a very long time. When sex is a job, it loses some of its appeal. With this woman it's coming back in spades.

I want more with her. I want heart and body.

Pretending to brush my fingertips down her arms, I cup her hand and bring it to my lips. I can't resist planting a kiss on her palm then sucking one digit into my mouth. Her gasp and lowered gaze let me know she's not as immune to me as she pretends.

Enfolding her hands with mine, I bring them to the front of my shirt, then in a move to look like she did it, I pull it open letting the fabric slide off my shoulders to expose my back and chest. Circling her, I lean in close enough to feel her heat, smell her essence.

Once I've seated her in the chair, I continue to perform body rolls, bumping and grinding the air between me and the floor. Circling and stalking her, getting close enough to air brush her whole body with my moves. Ending the song with a knee slide and thrust right in front of her.

Silence fills the room.

Standing, I take Willow's hands and kiss the backs. “Thank you.”

Raven clears her throat. “Who the hell are you?”

Grabbing my tearaway shirt from the floor I slip it back on and drop into a chair. “Back in the day when I was performing, I was known as D-Man. I was one of the headliners when I left Swagger to join the Army.”

“There’s no way. You wouldn’t have been old enough.”

“I wasn’t. I had a fake ID and name. Denzel. I also insisted they pay me under the table. Which they were happy to do.”

“Why?” Diego asks.

“My sister and I were living on the street. She was four years older but—vulnerable. Vicky was just getting drug-free after breaking up with an asshole boyfriend. She needed something stable to pull herself together.

“I’d been picking up shit jobs at construction sites, mostly the heavy labor. I was in pretty good shape and big for my age, but I was also trying to get through school and needed day hours open. I heard this guy bragging about how much he made dancing and whoring.” I hold Raven’s gaze. “I spent every dime I had on fake papers and went to work.

“I’d been around strip joints and hookers from the day I was born. Vicky was not cut out for the life. In two weeks, I had us in a place with a real bed. In another month we had a two-bedroom apartment. I was eating at the best restaurants in town on my clients dime. Vic was getting counseling and had a job as a waitress.

“When I turned eighteen, she was stable. I had enough in a savings account for a year’s rent for her. I joined the army.”

“Have you talked to Jed and Steel about your plan?” Diego eyes me.

“Early this morning.”

“They know all this. They’ve got more support for us since we don’t know who we can trust?”

“Hell, you know Jed and Steel. With I-Tee on the keyboard they always know everything. Or will soon.”

“We’ll need someone else. Busboy or something as backup for you.”

“Excuse me,” Raven snaps. “Did the two of you forget I’m here? Who’s in charge?”

Diego smiles, “Babe, it’s you. But we can give you plausible deniability.”

“Please, Diesel. You can’t.” Willow looks at me with worried, pleading eyes. “They’re dangerous. They do things at that club. People are tricked. You could be hurt. And... and Eizlee needs you.”

“That’s why I need you to stay here and take care of her until this is over. I will pay you. The company says it’s all covered. Diego and Raven will keep an eye on you and everything you need will be brought to you. I know you like to go to the park, but for now I need you to stay put unless Diego or I can take you. This shouldn’t take long. We just need to get photos of this guy Ryrden and see who he really is.”

“What’s your plan to get in?” Raven asks.

“They still have my poster up, which surprised me, but it makes it easier. I’ll shave off my beard and go in like I’m reliving the good old days. Hint that I’m thinking of opening my own place. See if they’d like me to headline a couple nights for them to

build my hype.”

“You’re going to get yourself killed. And then who is Eizlee going to have?” Willow pushes from her chair and heads to the baby’s room.

CHAPTER 8

Willow

I can't do this. I can't believe he's even thinking of putting himself in this kind of danger. He doesn't understand.

Tell him.

Lifting Eizlee Jane from her bed, I sit in the chair and slowly rock. Diesel nudges the door slightly open, sees me with her, and backs away. I knew he wouldn't disturb nap time, and I need to think.

Ryrden is more dangerous than they know. He's a drug broker and pusher. A killer. A rapist and sexual deviant. He has no conscience and the sweetest most sincere face and demeanor to reel the innocents in. No one can resist him or see through his facade. Until it's too late.

What am I going to do? How can I tell them without exposing myself? If Diesel knew, he surely wouldn't leave Eizlee Jane with me.

How many more people have to die?

I rock back and forth, lost in the past, fearful of the future. When my little one starts to stir, I change her then we make our way to the kitchen for her meal.

Diesel is at the counter working on his laptop and glances up. "I've got lunch ready.

You can sit her in the highchair.”

He pours tomato soup into mugs and some of the same in a sippy cup, adding cold milk to make it the right temperature for her. Then pulls a tray of grilled cheese sandwiches from the oven and cuts Eizlee’s into eight small strips before giving her a tiny bowl of soup for dipping. She’s in her highchair smacking the tray crying, “Sticks, D. Wan’ sticks, D.”

He chuckles. “Got em’, baby girl.’

“Sticks?” I look at him. “Since Christmas she’s been asking for sticks. I couldn’t figure out what she wanted. We were both frustrated.”

“I made them for her while I was visiting. The wife of one of the guys on the team did this for their kid and that’s what they called them. I’m kind of surprised she remembered.”

“She’s a little sponge.”

“And a heart stealer.” He taps her nose. “Eat up so we can play.”

He turns to me. “You, too. After lunch we’re going on the roof. Diego said there are some chairs and a little grass area where she can get some fresh air and run around. Access is restricted, but he doesn’t want you going up without one of us.”

“So, you’re going through with this?”

“Yes. Willow, it’s an easy job. I just need photos for Raven. Then I’m out.”

“When?”

“In a couple days. The company I work for, HARDCORE Security, has an office in Maryland and one in Love Beach, South Carolina. They’re sending one of our guys to watch over you and Eizlee when I can’t be here. Diego is going to be backup for me on the street and we’ve got another agent who’s trying to get a job as a waiter at the club.”

We eat in silence. I can barely swallow. What am I going to do? Carl and Ryrden run their little scam like a tag team. Carl is the muscle and brute, Ryrden is ‘too nice to be real’. It didn’t take me long to piss Ryrden off. I knew I had to get out of there, I just waited too long.

They killed your friend.

“Eat, Willow. You’ve barely touched your food.” He covers my hand with his. “It’s going to be okay. Trust me.”

Shaking my head I glance up. “It’s dangerous. They’re dangerous. Don’t do it. Please.”

“I’m not letting him get away with this. He murdered my sister.”

“They’ll kill you too. Life means nothing to them.”

“I have to, Willow.”

Pushing from the counter, I stand. “I need a shower.”

After crying out my fear and frustration under the water spray, I go to my closet and the new clothes Raven brought. Two pair of jeggings, one black one beige. A lavender top with faint flowers along the scoop neck and another in soft yellow, white canvas sneakers and black ballet flats. Brushing my fingers over the last item I can’t

help but smile. A Chinese red dress. I finger the soft fabric. I've always wanted a red dress. Mother always said I was too big to wear red.

All I've had for months is two sets of clothes and one extra shirt. That's all that fits in my backpack. I've been mostly hand washing or putting my clothes in with Eizlee's if I was babysitting. All the money I earned babysitting went to my burner phone, food, and my bus ticket fund.

I don't know how he knew my size, but everything fits perfectly as I try them on. I settle on the yellow top and beige leggings. Having something new and pretty feels like such a luxury.

There's a tap on my door.

"I packed snacks and some toys to take to the roof. I've changed and dressed Eizlee Jane in the outfit you laid out. We're ready when you are."

When I return to the living room, he's playing with Eizlee on the floor. He runs a heated gaze over me. "My girls match. I like you both in yellow."

My girls. I shake my head. I need to leave soon. I can't endanger them, and I will if Diesel sticks to his plan. Not to mention the danger my heart is in. I already love Eizlee like my own, now her uncle is threatening my heart as well.

The fresh air feels good. Relaxing on a lawn chair with my juice as instructed, I watch as Diesel chases Eizlee around on the astro turf then holds her hands as he teaches her to kick the ball.

After a while she's content to sit and play with the blocks and he settles into the chair beside me.

“It’s nice up here. Feels relaxing. It’s not a park with real grass and dirt but it is sunshine and fresh air. It will do in a pinch,” he says. “I just moved to Love Beach. It’s a nice town on the southeastern coast. Busier in the summers I’ve been told but not as bad as some places on the coast. I haven’t gotten a place yet and have been crashing with Silk, one of the other single guys, while I was going through orientation.”

Taking a drink, he glances at me. “Are you from here? You ever been to the east coast?”

I shake my head. “No and no. I grew up in the Midwest. A really small town, farming and cattle. I was related somehow to half the people in town. Everyone knew everyone, and their business. And everyone in town had one way of doing things. Their way.”

“And that was a problem?” he asks softly, when I don’t continue.

Releasing a sigh, I lean back in the chase lounge. “My mom and dad met in college. Both came from small towns. They moved back to Dad’s hometown to help Gramps with the farm when Dad’s older brother died. Dad didn’t want to farm but he was kind of stuck because that’s what families did.

“I have two older brothers who took to farming like ducks to water. I liked going to town, seeing more than cows. Dance and art were my passion.

“I guess things were okay for my parents for about fifteen years. There was a new English teacher who moved to town. She also did dance club at school and taught dance out of her home. I begged to take lessons. Mom was too busy with all her church and ladies’ clubs, so Dad always took me to my classes then we’d go to the coffee shop or ice cream parlor, sometimes my teacher would join us. Somewhere along the line the two of them started an affair. Mom and Dad divorced. Dad moved

to town but still worked the farm until my brothers were able to take it over completely.

“And the town talked, and talked, and people took sides, and judged. It was hard for my Dad, but he never shirked his responsibilities to the family.

“When I got to high school, I tried out for dance club and made it. I was bigger than all the other girls, but because my stepmom taught me, I could really dance. Not just preen around. A lot of parents were upset that I got on the team instead of one of their little girls. Favoritism by the slut .”

“Why do you say that?” His brow furrows. “You’re beautiful. You look like a woman, a real woman, not some plastic, starving doll. Fuck, I hate how marketing and the media have made women afraid to be themselves. Do you think men really want to cuddle up with a chicken bone?”

He shakes his head and looks toward our little charge. “Given the circumstances, I should keep my mouth shut. I’m here to protect you, not hit on you. But you are so fucking gorgeous.”

I stare at him in disbelief. I have never once been told I’m beautiful or gorgeous. I’ve gotten the ‘nice eyes’ and ‘pretty hair’. But Diesel just said both.

“Tell me you didn’t quit the dance club?” he asks.

“No, I love to dance, and I wouldn’t give it up. I was close to my stepmom. More so than my mother who was more repressed. Mom was obsessed with being perfect, so the town didn’t talk about her. But she loved it when they badmouthed Dad.

“Senior year, I was dating a guy. His dad owned the feed lot. They were a big deal in town.” I feel the heat flood my face, but I’m tired of trying to be what I’m not. “We-

ah-were caught having sex in his car.

“And the town talked, and talked, and people took sides.

“He skated by with a ‘boys will be boys’, and I was just like my cheating father. Of course that sent my mother over the edge. Again. We haven’t really talked since, except for her to criticize.

“As soon as I graduated, I moved to Chicago. My dad and stepmom moved as well and are happy in Florida.

“I worked and took dance classes in Chicago, got a couple small parts in local theater musicals. Met a guy at the gym and we ended up moving in together. Within six months, he’d drained my savings and left me for someone else. He said I was too needy, and I should work on my body.

“Then I tried New York, LA, and now here. Same story, rinse and repeat. I have terrible luck and judgement with men and not much better with dance.

“I was told full figured women could work here. But that hasn’t happened and so I babysit to make ends meet until I can save up enough to move again.”

Eizlee toddles over to me, holding out two red peg blocks. “Holp, Low.”

I press them together. Leaving them with me, she goes to the bucket and gets two more and hands two blue to Diesel. “Holp, D.”

Making one more trip she hands a pink block to each of us to add on our individual sides. Then grabbing both of our hands that are holding the blocks, she tries to press them together to make one long log. “Holp, D. Holp, Low.”

Once all the blocks are together, she climbs in my lap and reaches for Diesel, holding both our hands. Asking for and taking what she wants.

If only life was that easy as an adult.

CHAPTER 9

Diesel

Willow is putting a very resistant Eizlee Jane down for her afternoon nap. Been there, done that, I chuckle. It's probably going to be a five-book struggle. Which reminds me to order some new books. I wish I could risk taking them to a bookstore.

Putting in my earbuds I cue up a current song and start practicing my moves. The beat of the music always drove me, and the physicality comes naturally. I like dancing. Now I only want to do it for my pleasure.

An image of Willow in a wispy gown pops in my head and I imagine the two of us swirling to a Salsa or Rumba, our bodies temping and teasing as we lightly brush each other, our legs intertwine. Then slowly taking the moves to bed where I can show her the attention and affection she deserves. So beautiful, so hot.

Shit. Just the thought is making me hard. Damn, it's been a long time since I've wanted a woman like this. Actually wanted something more than release.

A lot of people judged me for what I did to support my sister. They can shove it. I took care of her when we couldn't get help from anyone else like social services or the church.

The holier than thou minister was banging his secretary while his wife sat at home and he preached celibacy from the pulpit. The clerk at social services said we didn't qualify but she had a fake account she was funneling money to for herself. I may not

have skills like I-Tee, but they weren't that clever either. I busted them both before I left town.

I wish I'd have been there for Willow when she needed someone.

My phone beeps and I see a text from I-Tee.

I-Tee: There's more going on with your girl than you think. The apartment she was living in belongs to an old guy who's in the hospital. She's been squatting. Diego lifted a couple prints. We discreetly ran them. There's a warrant for her in connection to a murder. Her real name is Etta Willow Burke. Raven wants us to hold tight and just watch her. Something about the warrant: how it was written, what it doesn't say, is bothering her. Silo will be there soon to watch her and Eizlee. We'll keep checking. Watch your six.

Me: We know there are cops on the take, they could be setting her up.

I-Tee: Roger that.

Twenty minutes later Willow comes out of the bedroom. "Tough one?"

"She did not want to sleep. Four books and finally zonked out in the middle of the fifth. She—she keeps asking for Mama?—"

Tears are streaming down her face. I pull her into my arms and against my chest. "I know. It breaks my heart too. I'll reach out to my friend who's a doctor to see how to handle this, or at least for direction."

Stepping out of my arms she swipes at her cheeks. "You need to leave. You need to take her and go back to your home where she'll be safe. You shouldn't get involved. You're all she has."

“She has you.”

“As much as I lo—care about her, I don’t get to keep her. She isn’t mine. And she deserves someone better than me. I couldn’t even help her mom.”

“You warned Vicky. That’s all any of us can do.”

“I should have said more, told her more. Made her listen. I should have....” She spins away from me. “I should have done something more than run.”

“You had Eizlee. Run is what you needed to do. But anything else you remember about the night she died could be helpful. Or when the guy was talking to her earlier in the day, if you heard anything.”

She shakes her head.

“The package her visitor brought her. Could you tell what was inside? Was it a box, a bag? Was there a logo?”

“It was a bag, pink. Probably from the Sweet Tooth. That’s her favorite candy shop. The white macadamia chocolate truffles.”

I laugh. “Yeah, I remember I must have gone every other day for her when I was visiting. Did he take the bag when he left?”

“No.”

“Did you see it when you found Eizlee?”

She shakes her head. Grabbing my phone I dial Diego.

“Have Raven check the report from my sister’s crime scene. There should have been a pink bag, probably from The Sweet Tooth with a box of candy tagged and catalogued. Even if it was empty, it would have been in the trash.

“Do we have the autopsy report back? If it was drugs, how were they administered? The candy could have been doctored without her knowledge. If the bag is missing, either the killer came back to retrieve the evidence or one of the cops working the scene was doing clean up.

“Have they found the missing baby cam? Has I-Tee been able to hack into it?”

“Slow down, man,” Diego breaks in. “Let me get all this. I do know they have not found the baby cam. I’ll get the rest of this info to Raven and see what she says.”

“Thanks.”

When I glance up, Willow has gone pale and looks like she might bolt at any second. I slip my phone into the pocket of my jeans. “Willow, what’s wrong? Talk to me. Babe.”

“Can someone really hack into a baby cam and see the files?”

“Depending on the server and the model, yes. Vicky had a sims card on hers, but I don’t think she ever linked to the vendor server. I was going to do it for her next time I visited.”

“I have her baby cam. I— I took it in case...”

“You didn’t want to be seen on the camera. I know you’re keeping something from me, Willow. I don’t believe you would hurt my sister or the baby. I wish you could trust me to help you. You know about me, what I’ve done. I’m a no judgement zone.

Maybe I can help you, too.”

She nods and heads to her room, coming back with the cam. “I was afraid someone would see me come in and think I’d done something. Technically I was breaking and entering even though I had a key.”

“I understand. Vicky wouldn’t have shown you the hidden key if she didn’t trust you.”

Taking the cam from her, I hook it up to my computer to download everything, so we have back up of what’s on the device. Together we watch through when Vicky puts Eizlee down for her nap and the multiple times she comes to check on her. We hear the knock on the door, but the cam isn’t pointed that direction and the voices are too low to really follow. When the guy turns to leave. I focus in on his wristwatch and snap a couple shots on my phone. Vicky takes the bag to the kitchen and pulls out the box leaving both on the counter. Twice she goes to the box and walks away.

The third time we hear her mutter, “What the hell. No sense letting good chocolate go to waste.”

She pops one in her mouth, and you can see the delight on her face. Shortly after, Vicky looks toward the camera. A knowing expression crosses her face, and she mutters, “Diesel, save my baby.”

Vicky slumps to the floor. A while later Eizlee, comes out from her converted crib and spends almost six hours alone trying to wake her mom. After fast forwarding though a lot we get to the part where Willow comes in and ultimately disconnects the machine.

They just left the baby there. Alone. Willow saved Eizlee.

CHAPTER 10

Willow

The longer he watched the quieter he became. So focused, yet so distant. It's almost like I could feel the plans he was making. The revenge he would seek.

He keys some stuff in on the computer then I hear the swoosh when he hits send.

Grabbing his phone he makes a call. I'm only privy to his side of the conversation.

"I'm going in tonight."

..-..-

"I don't need back-up."

..-..-

"I don't give a fuck who's on the way. Just have someone here by nine to guard Willow and Eizlee."

Hanging up, he glances at me. "I need to work out some kinks in my routine. Do you mind going to the kitchen or your room? I need the space."

I nod, unsure of what to say to comfort him. I feel his devastation, his anger. But he's shut himself off. Focused only on what he sees as his mission.

My heart breaks for Eizlee and what she went through. I hope like hell she has no memory of all this later in life.

I slide my palm over my midriff. At least Vicky's death was quick.

In the kitchen I busy myself with preparing a casserole for dinner. Something quick and easy that might last a couple days. Something, anything to try to distract myself. All the while wishing for my own revenge.

He struts and rolls, grinds and thrusts. Again and again. The sweat glistens on his body. He's in so much emotional pain.

After checking on our little one, I grab a towel from the bathroom and dampen another. Waiting until he stops to catch his breath, I put both along with a bottle of water on the chair he's using for his imaginary client. He nods his thanks.

When Eizlee wakes, we play in her room until I hear the shower come on. Then take her to the kitchen for a snack.

When he joins us in the living room he immediately lifts and snuggles her, kissing and cuddling her like he'll never let her go. He won't. He'll love and protect her all of her life.

I understand his need. I felt the same, holding her, hoping that the trauma of being with a dead body would not linger. Only time will tell. Diesel will get her whatever help she may need. I wish I could be there.

"Thank you." He holds my gaze. "For how you tried to help my sister. For saving this little one. For contacting me. It could have been so much worse with out you. I could have lost her, too.

“I know there’s something you aren’t telling me. Something that happened to you, I’m guessing in this city. Something you’re hiding or running from. I want you to know you can trust me. I owe you everything. Whatever I can do to help. I’m here for you. I’ll protect you.”

“Who’s going to protect you? Who’s going to be there for you if something goes wrong with these people? Please don’t do this. Don’t go on your own.”

“Diego can’t go. I need him on the street. I need Silo to watch over the two of you. Trust me. I’m trained. I can handle myself.”

He takes my hand, leading me to the kitchen counter and gives me a new burner phone.

“I won’t have my regular phone on me. I’ll be going by my dancer persona tonight, but you can call me on this. I’ve programed my new number for you. If you need me, if something happens. Text me. I’ll know it’s you just by the number.

“But you don’t have to worry about being safe. No one is getting past Silo.”

His phone buzzes. “That’s him. He’s on his way up. Look, he’s not much of a talker and he’s big. He’s got a resting asshole face but a heart of gold. He’ll protect the two of you with his life. Do as he says.”

The two men meet at the door, giving each other a bro-hug.

Diesel’s not wrong. Silo is huge. Only a couple inches taller, but broad, really broad, with muscles stretching his shirt to the bursting point. And a deadpan expression.

Diesel introduces us. “This is Willow, and the little cutie is Eizlee Jane. I understand you’ve been here before and know the security system.”

Silo nods.

“I texted you my new number and the number for Willow’s burner. I’ll let you know when I’m on my way back.” Diesel heads for the door.

I rush up to him. “Wait. I’ve heard things. Don’t drink anything. Not even an unopened bottle of water. They do something, slip you something. The management is dangerous. Please. Please be careful. W-Eizlee needs you.”

“It’ll be okay. Tonight is just a meet and greet.” I’ll see you in the morning. Get some rest.”

After he leaves, I try to play with Eizlee but even she can sense my anxiety. I end up reading her every book we have.

Once she’s down for the night. I offer Silo dinner and he politely refuses and goes back to walking from room to room or staring out the massive picture window.

When I realize he’s also watching my every move in the reflection on the glass, I retreat to my room. I’m antsy and end up following Silo’s lead and walking from my room to check on the baby and to Diesel’s room and circle back. Close to midnight I’m exhausted and flop down on Diesel’s bed. His scent surrounds me, comforts me, and soon I’m falling asleep, arms wrapped around his pillow.

CHAPTER 11

Diesel

I drive to a predetermined part of town, slip in the staff door of an exclusive hotel and walk out the front where Diego meets me with the limo. Playing the part like a pro, he opens the door and takes the driver's seat.

Pulling into traffic he meets my gaze in the rearview mirror. "You're rushing this, asshole. You could get yourself killed. Then what happens to that little girl?"

"My team takes care of her. And Willow. I already contacted our lawyer just in case."

"I don't like this. Willow's holding back something important. She could be setting you up."

"I agree she knows more, but she's afraid, too. Do we have anyone inside?"

"Not working. But Roja knows you'll be there tonight and will be there partying."

"Willow warned me that they drug the drinks, even the closed water bottles somehow. Make sure everyone knows. Have you had a chance to review the baby cam video?"

"Yeah." He rubs a hand down his face. "Watching that little baby—" His voice cracks. "These fuckers are gonna pay."

I look out the window. They'll pay. I'll personally make sure they're all taken down.

We set a pickup spot and Diego drops me off. Passing the general admission group, I go to the reserved seating line and show my code. The guy scanning looks at me then looks again. "You look familiar."

I smirk. I've bulked up a bit and had to shave most of my beard down to the old style, but my life-sized image is plastered behind him on the wall. "You may have seen me around."

"Oh my god! It's you," the woman behind me gasps. Turning to her friends she shouts. "D-Man is here. He's here! OhMyGod. OhMyGod."

My reputation is still intact and the reaction down both lines is exactly what I'd hoped for. No way current management can miss me now. Or my draw.

She clutches my arm. "Please, please can I have your autograph. Please."

"Got a pen, Sugar?"

The girl behind her hands me a red marker. "I've got this."

"For that, you can have one too. If you'd like."

"Yes!"

"How do you want it," I ask the first woman, and wink.

"How you always give it," she quotes back the exchange I was known for. She pulls down her blouse exposing the sizable swell of her breast. I didn't even practice, but muscle memory takes over. I draw a pair of lips and underneath scrawl my signature

D-Man. While she bounces in place screaming, I do the same for her friend who lifts her short, short skirt and gives me her ass cheek.

By the time I've finished, security has arrived to escort me inside. I pause dramatically at the entrance hoping that Diego was in place with his long-range lens to get a photo. They walk me through the seating area to a side hall and up to the second-floor office. The one-way glass looking down on the floor is still in place, but the wall around it is lined with a dozen camera views displaying almost every corner of the building.

A bulky man a little shorter than me stands behind the desk and holds out his hand. "I'm Carl. I tried to find you when I bought the place, but you were totally off grid. I'd decided you were only a legend. Nice to finally meet you, D-Man."

"Just Denz. Nice to meet you, Carl."

We both sit. He's supposedly the owner, but his hands are too gnarly to be a pencil pusher. His suit doesn't fit well and he's trying to hide a shoulder holster. To top it off he wasn't smart enough to even have a folder or piece of paper in front of him on the empty desk.

I make a show of looking around the room. "I like the updates. Would have been nice to have the camera screens back in the day." I smirk. "As long as they aren't in the star's dressing room. Not that I mind getting it on when someone's watching, as long as I'm paid."

We both laugh.

When you know what you're looking for it's easy to spot. There's a small camera lens hidden in the artwork behind Carl focused on the chair where I'm sitting. I relax into the seat, wondering who's watching.

“Can I offer you a drink?”

I shake my head and tap my abs. “I have to watch my intake, keep in shape.”

He raises an eyebrow.

“Still got my moves, and the ladies love a hard core.”

“Where you been?”

“Wandering around Europe. A buddy of mine is throwing a big bash, so I came back for the activities. Been reliving the good days. Heard Swagger sold and wanted to see how it was holding up. Thinking of opening my own place.”

“Checking out the competition,” he says lifting his own glass to drink.

“Maybe here, maybe somewhere else.”

His phone lights up and he glances at the message. “There’s an issue I need to tend to. I’m going to have Ryr, my assistant, come in and show you around. We’ll touch base before you leave.”

The door opens and a guy in a midline suit and harried expression bursts in. Obviously, the harried employee. A little too much so. The edge of a watch peaks out from his left sleeve but not enough for me to get a good view.

“I’m sorry sir. Security said you have to handle this. One of the dancers....”

“It’s alright, Ryr. I got it.” Carl stands as do I. “Being the management isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, Denz. You’re always on the job. I’d have more time to visit if I was working for someone else.”

After he leaves, Ryr holds out his hand. “Mr...”

“Just Denz.”

“I regret I never saw you perform. Rumor has it you were the best. Can I offer you something? A drink, or... something?”

“Maybe later. I’m good for now.” I cross to the wall where pictures of past and present dancers are posted. There’s an eight by ten of me and some of my buddies from before.

“Have you been performing somewhere else?”

“I’ve been in Europe mostly. Doing some shows, a couple escort engagements. It was a quieter life. I’ve missed some things about Vegas. And it’s been a while since I performed for a crowd on the dance floor.” I skim my finger over my old photo. “Damn, I miss this.”

“The guests outside are really hoping you’re here to dance. Perhaps we could strike a bargain. Maybe you’d like to headline for us once in a while. Tonight, could be a little teaser?”

“I told Carl I’m thinking of opening my own place.”

“Do you have a timeline?”

“Not yet.”

“Then what better way to start setting expectations. Tease them by performing here once or twice a month. It would be good PR for both businesses. I’m sure Carl would make it worth your while.” He shrugs. “I checked, we still have your signature song

in the que. And a house full of willing women. That is, if you're interested."

This sly little bastard is the brains. I glance at him and smile. "I could use a workout. Any extra tear away shirts?"

I follow him to the costume room, remembering what's the same and memorize what's different in the layout. There's a room near the exit that has a security lock that looks recent. There are cameras but they must be blocking the feed somehow. That's I-Tee's expertise. I'll let him know.

Ryr grabs a shirt from the costume room and shows me to the gender-neutral changing rooms. His phone rings and he steps aside. There are about twenty lockers, a small couch, table and chairs when you enter. To the left is an alcove of makeup stations, on the right bathroom stalls. Changing my shirt, I slip my jacket back on and turn to leave. And stop dead in my tracks.

A banner hangs on the inset wall that says:

In Memory of Those We've Lost.

Stay Safe Stay Drug Free Stay Sober

Beneath the sign are nine photos. The middle one is of Vicky. The one below is Willow. She's blonde in the photo and the date in the corner is months ago, but I'd know her anywhere.

I follow Ryr up the stairs to the back of the stage. The pulsing strains of my signature song comes on. I feel the beat but I'm having a hard time regrouping.

Rolling my neck, I stretch my shoulders from side to side. Focus.

I love to dance. The pulse and drive of the music are inside me. But dancing for a group of grasping hands that don't see me, know me, or care about me, lost its appeal years ago. Even then it was only about the money.

Now I only want to dance for one woman. She's hiding something and in danger, but I'm going to save her. Closing my eyes I take a couple deep breaths visualizing my Willow.

"Ladies, ladies, ladies, have we got a surprise for you tonight. Let's welcome back one of the original Fanta-Sensual Dancers. He's been gone for a few years but trust me, he's bigger and badder than ever.

"Welcome back D-Man."

I swagger out onto the stage. I'm coming Willow and I'm gonna make you mine.

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CHAPTER 12

Willow

Shifting deeper into the blankets, I clasp the hand holding mine to my chest and sigh. I haven't felt this warm or secure in... I try to bolt up.

"Willow, it's me. Diesel. You're safe. I've got you."

"Wh-what are you doing in my bed?"

He chuckles and leans back so I can roll onto my back and look up at him where he hovers along my side. "You were in my bed when I got home. I didn't want to wake you."

"Oh." I remember being almost frantic with worry, pacing the apartment. I came into his room to be close to him and his scent on his pillow was comforting.

"Did you get what you needed?"

"Hmm. Some answers. More questions."

"Tell me."

"I want to kiss you, Willow. I've wanted to since I first saw you. May I?"

I've wanted that too. But I didn't dare. Because this good man is going to ruin me.

And once we talk, he'll never want me again.

Take it. Take it now. It's your last chance.

I cup the back of his head. "Please."

Soft and gentle like a summer breeze his lips brush over mine again and again. The third time he suckles my lower lip before gently sliding his tongue along the seam and seeking entry. Lovingly, almost reverent. Back and forth, tender yet demanding. Taking yet giving.

I want more. So much more.

He slides his hand up and over my hip as he deepens the kiss. Too late I realize he's run his palm under my night shirt and over my bare belly. He jerks his head back and glances down to where his fingers stroke the scars on my flesh.

I grab his wrist as tears fill my eyes. "Please stop."

The muscles in his recently shaven cheeks clench and unclench. He shakes his head. "Tell me how you got these. Tell me everything you really know. Trust me and my team to stop this."

"Willow, I've seen you with my niece. How you saved her. I know you tried to help my sister. I know you're trying to do the right thing, but you're scared. I can help."

I'm so tired. Tired of hiding, being afraid. What if they come after Diesel or Eizlee Jane. I'd never forgive myself. I can't do this by myself anymore.

"I used to work at Swagger. When I found out that's where Vicky was working I tried to warn her but there were things I couldn't say. Things that would have put her and

Eizlee in danger. But I think it was already too late.”

“Start at the beginning.”

“When I first got to town, I was working three really shitty low paying jobs. I met Ryr at one of the coffee shops. That’s not his real name, by the way, but I don’t know what it is.

“He talked me into applying for a job at the club where I could dance and make more money. Carl owns it publicly but he’s just muscle and the front man.

“Ryr runs everything. From the dancers to selling the drugs, to prostitution, arranged rapes, spiking drinks. He can get anything you want for a price. With a guaranteed get out of jail because in his day job he can clean a death scene and tamper with evidence. He’s a cop.

“Most of the employees don’t know what’s going on. One of the bartenders does because he’ll spike the drinks when told. And of course, the cops who provide security.

“He was all sweet and lovey-dovey in the beginning. But soon started pushing things I wasn’t comfortable with. I realized I wasn’t the only girl he was playing and was planning on quitting.

“I was upset one night and left right at closing, then halfway home realized I forgot my purse with my apartment keys. Once back inside, I thought I heard faint screams. So, I went to investigate. They hadn’t shut the door completely to the storage room at the end of the hall. They had one of the girls in the room and Carl was cutting her while Ryr watched and egged him on, telling him what to do next.

“Carl saw me. I tried to run but he grabbed me by the shirt and started slashing at me

with the knife, cutting me a few times. I was able to hit the fire alarm and break it setting off the alarm. Ryr yelled and Carl threw me to the floor. I must have hit my head.

“When I woke up the other girl’s body was gone but there was blood all over the floor. They must not have been worried about me waking up because the door opened when I tried it. I went to the backdoor and saw Carl putting an old rug in the trunk of his car. I think Sara may have been in it.

“Ryr was BS’ing with the firemen. I snuck upstairs and was able to get out the front door. I ran until I passed out behind a dumpster. I’m not sure how long I was there. I woke up in daylight and waited until well after dark to go to my apartment. It had been ransacked. I should have realized they’d be watching.

“I had enough time to stuff a couple outfits in my backpack before I heard someone coming up the stairs. I snuck out the window and up the fire escape crossing a couple other roof tops before going back to street level. I kept losing myself in crowds. But I’d catch glimpses of a couple guys I thought were following me.

“That’s when I realized they could be tracking my phone. I stole a hat and a jacket at an open-air restaurant. I went to a bank, took out all my money with my phone and then destroyed it.

“I was afraid to go to a hospital. I think they have to report stuff like what happened to me. I couldn’t risk the police being called. I bought some medical stuff and did what I could. The bleeding had stopped but... the scars...they are what they are. I didn’t die.

“I hid in parks or alleys for a couple weeks. One evening I saw an old man being taken away in an ambulance and snuck into his apartment. That’s where I’ve been staying.

“I overheard Vicky talking to the baby at the park about what was she going to do for a sitter. I lied to your sister about having a babysitting job that was ending. I also faked my references. I’ve done so many things to stay alive.

“I’d been trying to save enough for a bus ticket out of town. But then I fell in love with Eizlee and your sister.

“And they killed Vicky because of me.”

“You don’t know that for sure. Maybe she saw something, too. Did you introduce her to them?”

“No, Ryr had already recruited her before we met. I didn’t know where she was working until close to the end.”

“None of this is your fault, you know that.”

“But I knew, Diesel. I knew and didn’t do anything.”

“If you would have gone to the police, you could have been recognized by one of the officers from the club. How many are there? Do you know any of their names?

“They all use fake names. I think two besides Ryr, maybe three, are cops. I heard him bragging to someone that he was invincible, and they could be too. After I saw what I did, a lot of things clicked into place.”

“What do you mean.”

“There were other staff who stayed late at his request or just had to work late, then never came back to work. Some of the dancers complained that they couldn’t remember the night before but felt like something bad had happened to them.

“Knowing what happened to Sara, I’ve wonder now if the ones from the bar really did accidentally overdose or go back home. Or were they victims too.”

“Together we can work with a sketch artist.”

Willow shakes her head. “He wears a wig at the club, but I think he has hair. He only wears the watch when he’s in his club personality. He also has colored contacts and shoe lifts.”

“Pretty observant?”

“Art classes and waitress. You have to pay attention in both.”

“Speaking of, are you blonde or brunette?”

“What? How...”

“I saw a picture of you.”

“He posted a picture of me? On his bullshit Memory wall? He must be pretty sure I’m going to die.”

“Not happening on my watch.”

CHAPTER 13

Diesel

She sits up. “I should go. I need to check on Eizlee and let you get some sleep. Did Silo leave?”

“I checked on her before coming in here. Silo is camped out on the couch. And I’d like you to stay. Even if it’s just to sleep together.”

“Diesel, I—I’m really attracted to you. But I know I’m a terrible catch. One screw up after another. Look at the mess I’m in right now.

“I can’t seem to make a relationship work. I can’t hold a job. Like I told you, my whole life: rinse and repeat. But contrary to what it seems, I’m not some booty call. I want something real.”

“I understand more than you think, Willow.

“I’ve been attracted to you since I saw you at the bus stop. I wanted you right then and there. But I need you to want me, for me. Not for Eizlee Jane.

“Nobody wanted the boy who grew up poor in basically a whore house drug emporium. Parents kept me away from their kids at school, teachers overlooked me as a loser. I’ve been chased because of dance moves, wanted for my body, a sex toy to play and pay. I can act all those roles, Willow. But none of them are me.

“I found my true self in the army. I’m a mechanic, the guy who likes to fix things that you can fly or drive. The soldier who saw too much battle and lost true friends. A teammate and friend to my squad. The friend to a friend who’s got your back and helps you move for the hundredth time.

“I’m learning to be a father, and I want to be a husband. I want something real.”

“But I’m a screw u?—”

I press a finger to her lips. “A beautiful caring person who sees the good in everyone. Willow, it’s not your fault that you were used. That’s all on the assholes who took advantage of you. There’s nothing wrong with NOT seeing evil. The pure of heart never do. While you were trying to watch out for others, you just never had anyone who had your back. I will.

“I don’t want sex, Willow. I want a connection. You are the first woman in more years than I care to admit that made me even want to try.

“But I need it to be for me. Not the baby you love. So, lets just hold each other tonight and see where tomorrow takes us.”

She nods. “I need to use the bathroom.”

“I don’t know what you’ve been sleeping in. But there’s one of my T-Shirts and pajama pants on the counter.”

When she comes back dressed in my clothes, I’m standing by the bed waiting in just lounge pants. “Is it okay if I don’t wear a shirt? I’m a little hot blooded.”

She smiles. “Good, because I’m always cold.”

I hold out a hand. “Come on. I know you want to check on her. We’ll go together.”

Willow straightens Eizlee’s blanket. I smooth her hair. Back in my room I double check the baby monitor that’s just like the one that I have installed in Willow’s room.

I let her climb in first then take the other side of the bed. After a couple moments she asks. “Can we snuggle like we were before when I woke up?”

Rolling to my side I burrow her back to my front. I agree. This feels right. Soon she’s asleep and I’m feeling more content than I ever have. Vicky, if you’re watching over me. Let this be real.

I’m lost in a beautiful dream when a moan wakes me. Lying still, I take in my surroundings. I’m cuddled up against Willow’s back, my leg is between hers and seated against her sex, my arm is over her waist and my thumb is stroking her nipple. My cock is a pole pressed against her ass.

“Diesel, if you just woke up you damn well better finish what you’ve started.”

“You were in my dream.”

“Well, I’m wide awake now and you have me aching.”

I kiss her shoulder. “Yes, ma’am. I aim to please.”

“I want you, Diesel.”

She wants me. She didn’t say needs. She said wants.

Kissing her shoulder, I whisper, “I want you, Willow. Your sweetness.” I kiss the hollow of her neck. “Your kindness.” I kiss behind her ear. “Your loving.”

Rolling her to her back I ease over her, spreading her legs with mine followed by my hips as I kiss a trail down her luscious body. Plumping her full breasts with my palms, I suckle one hard nipple then the other. “My sweet, sweet Willow, I want all of you.”

She’s so warm, her skin so soft, her moans and gasps as I lick and taste my way over her body are so honest and responsive. “Beautiful. So fucking beautiful.”

I glance up, hoping she can see my expression in the moonlight. “Mine.”

She clasps my face as I shift lower. “I trust you, Diesel. But I haven’t been tested since he cut me. There would have been an exchange of blood from the knife wounds on Sara. She was reckless and into drugs. I don’t want to risk you. Do you have a condom?”

“Yes. It’s been a couple years for me since I’ve been with someone. When I was an escort, I went on PrEP as soon as it came out. The team still tests regularly every nine months due to some of our exposure. I was negative at my initial testing a couple weeks ago. I’ll grab a condom, and we’ll get you tested tomorrow. I’d like a doctor to check your wounds anyway.”

When I return from the bathroom she’s sitting up in bed. Seeing her bare shoulders, I assume she naked under the sheets. My anticipation, my desire is stronger than it’s ever been.

Stopping beside the bed I put the condom box I found in the medicine chest on the bedside table and push off my sleep pants.

Looking up I meet her gaze. Tossing the sheet aside she kneels up, exposing all her beauty. She brushes her palm down the side of my face, “I see you Diesel, for who you are. Make love with me.”

“Yes love. Always love.”

She wraps her hand around my cock and works it up and down a few strokes then leans forward to take me in her mouth. I stop her.

“Not until I can give the same to you, babe. This isn’t going to be a one and done. I want more. I want it all with you. I’ll give you time to see it my way, but I will convince you.”

“Pretty sure of yourself, big boy.”

“Sure of what I want with you.”

Grabbing a condom, she leans forward and kisses my tip before rolling the protection on my shaft. Shifting to the side, she takes my hand and gives me a tug. “Lay down. I get the top this time.”

Once I’m settled, she straddles me, centering my rod right where she wants it. She slides over me, bathing me in her juices. “Oh damn, babe. That feels so good. Lean forward, I want your nipple in my mouth.” One hand braced against my shoulder, she uses the other to feed me her nipple. She feels so good, tastes so sweet. My stamina is taking a hit. I don’t know how long I can hold on.

She lifts to her knees. “Help me. Guide yourself in.”

I line up my cock to her entrance and she slowly lowers her hips. Once I’m an inch in with my hands cupping her hips, I close my eyes and just feel. Her heat envelopes me like a soft winter blanket. Holding me close, taking me in, taking me home as she slides down. Never. Never has it felt this good. This right. This is where I belong.

This is love.

She cups my face, kisses my forehead, the tip of my nose and takes my lips with hers. Then she starts to ride me.

“So good. You feel so good, D. Never like this. Never before. Oh my god. I’m going to come.”

“Take me, babe. Take us together.” Arching my hips I meet her thrust for thrust until we both explode.

Instead of shouting her name, I growl, “Home.”

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CHAPTER 14

Willow

Home, he said. That's what it felt like. Like finally I'm where I'm meant to be. Rising, I go to the bathroom and get a warm cloth and the trash can. After he removes the condom, I take my time cleaning him.

"Much more of that attention and you're going to be grabbing another condom."

"I need a little more time to recoup, big boy."

He laughs. "Then come cuddle me."

None of my exes ever wanted to cuddle. Diesel is the whole package. We sleep for a couple hours wrapped in each other's arm before I hear Eizlee on the monitor.

I open the door to find Silo on the other side ready to knock. "Get Diesel. We have a situation."

Turning back to the bed, Diesel is already on his feet with his pants on and a very lethal weapon in his hand. "Is Eizlee's room secure?"

Silo nods.

"Willow, go to her and lock the door. I'll be there as soon as I can."

After changing her, I try to keep her busy, but she's always been an eat right now child.

"Eat, Low. Hunwe."

Rooting in her diaper bag I find a packet of baby biscuits and give them to her. Can't be that bad. I've had cookies for breakfast before.

Another thirty minutes pass and I'm starting to get scared. There's a tap on the door. "Willow, it's me. Open up."

His hair is mussed, and his jaw is tight. "What's wrong?"

Eizlee toddles over holding her arms up and starts to whimper. "D, hunwe."

"I know, love. I'm so sorry."

He kisses my cheek. "Come on. I'll start breakfast and explain." He runs his gaze down my body, taking in his T-shirt that I hastily donned. Grinning, he leans forward and kisses my cheek and whispers near my ear. "I love how sexy you look in my shirt, but we have company so you might want to dress. I sure as hell don't want Diego and Silo looking at what I claim as mine."

"Mine, my ass," I say softly as I brush past him. Neanderthal.

"Yeah, that too," he replies walking down the hall.

Ten minutes later I walk into the kitchen to find Diego and Diesel easily cooking and maneuvering in the kitchen. Raven is at the counter on her computer talking to someone on the screen. And shock of all shocks, Silo is playing blocks on the floor with Eizlee.

“What’s happened?”

Raven looks over and pats the stool next to her. “Someone tried to break into this building. Security was notified immediately, and they contacted Diego. We wouldn’t have thought too much of it, except they tried to use my thumbprint. And I wasn’t attached to it.”

“What? How?”

“Got something.” the guy on the screen interrupts.

“Go ahead, I-Tee. Oh, this is Willow by the way.”

He nods in greeting. “The person who was at the security console at the time in question was pretty well covered up. Dressed to look like an everyday street person hoping to get lucky. Or in this case, an educated person trying to break in. They must have checked your security pad set up beforehand. We’re running another program to see if we can see who or when on another computer.

“Anyway, the building keypad says thumb, but in your case it’s the fun finger. The question is, how did the person get a pretty clear image of your thumb print.

“By the way, what are you drinking? And what does your mug say?”

Wrapping her palm around the mug under the handle she holds it up. “It’s Sexday.”

“And that’s how they got it.”

“Huh?”

“Someone took your coffee mug and lifted the print. The way you hold the mug you

leave a perfect print. Any mugs missing at work lately?

“I’m going to take it a step farther. Start checking your internal affairs staff. Anybody been sucking up lately?”

“Sucking up? No. There is this one shit head who thinks he’s better and smarter than I am. I heard him ask someone else who I was fucking to get the job. Lately, it feels like every time I turn around, he’s there.

“I’ve heard from others that he doesn’t like women on the force. Most of the other female officers call him Mr. Invisible because he’s never where he should be and always kissing the ass of superiors.”

“Wait, did you say invisible or invincible,” I ask.

Diesel stops what he’s doing. “Raven, I need to see what this guy looks like.”

Turning off the stove he comes to stand behind me.

Raven logs into her office and pulls up Jeffry Renolds. “There’s no photo in his file. We all have photos in our file. What the hell?”

“Read me his social security,” I-Tee snaps. “A few minutes later he sends her a photo. “Is this him?”

She studies it for a few minutes. “At first glance I almost said yes, but no. The hair is too long. He wears glasses, thick glasses. His eyes are brown not blue and he has a little bump on his nose like it was broken.”

“That’s Ryr from the club,” I say glancing over my shoulder at Diesel.

“Where did you get this,” he asks I-Tee.

“Roja was undercover at the club. This guy started hitting on her really hard. Wanted to know where she worked. Said she should be a professional dancer. Wanted her number. She got a shot of him when he was standing in front of one of the mirrors. She took a picture of her and her drinking buddy making sure she got his image in the background.

“You’re the wizard, right? Can you remove the bump from his nose. And make his eyes brown. Maybe shorten his hair,” I ask.

“Coming right up.”

“He’s too tall,” Raven says.

“He wears lifts in his shoes at the club. He’s not that tall,” I say.

Five minutes later, I-Tee displays the two photos side by side.

“That sonofabitch” Raven jumps to her feet. “He’s the inside man. I’ve got to get a hold of Belcher and let him know what’s going on.”

CHAPTER 15

Diesel

I slam my hand down on her phone. “Who the hell is Belcher?”

“He’s legal counsel for internal affairs. Why do you care?”

“First name Sidney?”

She shoots a glance to Diego, then nods.

“Show Willow a picture.”

“I got it,” I-Tee offers.

“Start digging on him right now,” I demand.

“Who is he, Diesel?” Willow asks.

“Eizlee’s biological father. When Vicky told him she was pregnant, he told her to get rid of ‘it’. That she’d never get a dime from him. He’s married to some rich princess and isn’t risking his paycheck.

“A few weeks later she was mugged on the way home from her job. A couple army dudes came to her aid and got her home. She always felt it was Belcher who had her attacked. She moved, took a new job, changed her number. When I was here at

Christmas, she made sure she had everything in order that I would get Eizlee Jane if something ever happened to her. I wonder if something spooked her.”

A photo displays on Raven’s screen. I look at her. “Is that him?”

She nods.

Willow grips my wrist. “He’s been in the club. I’ve seen him in the back hall with Ryr. I saw him with one of the girls who went missing a couple weeks later. Ryr, Carl, this guy, they’re all in this together.”

Raven rubs a hand down her face. “Internal affairs is fucked up, too. We’re gonna need a lawyer to help us interface with the state’s attorney general.

“I-Tee?” Diego says.

“Already contacted Jed, Steel and Reggie. They’re on their way to the com room. I’ll conference you all in. I’m pulling as much info as I can before they’re on to us and it gets destroyed.

“Who are all those people he’s talking about?” Willow asks.

“Jed’s our CO.”

“Boss now,” I-Tee chimes in with a laugh.

Like any of us have been able to stop calling our ‘bosses’ by rank. “Reggie is our lawyer and Jed’s wife.”

Willow glances to the living room. “Where are Silo and Eizlee?”

“Here,” a gruff voice says softly. Looking up I’m almost as shocked as Willow. Eizlee has her arm wrapped around Silo’s neck, and is kissing one cheek and petting the other.

“I changed her. She’s dry now. She’s hungry and needs a snack. I promised her cheese and grapes. We’ll be in her room.”

Willow looks at me. “Did I fall down Alice’s rabbit hole? Nothing makes sense anymore.”

* * *

Two months later

Willow, Eizlee, and I found a great little house for the three of us to rent in Love Beach. Willow’s already bonding with the other women on the team. It all just feels right.

I’ve been in Vegas assigned to help Roja on a job for the last two weeks. I’ll be going home tomorrow. There were just a couple things I had to take care of before I left.

Carl and Ryr were charged with selling drugs, administering a controlled substance, pandering, tax fraud, to name just a few counts. Since no bodies were found they were not charged with murder. While awaiting trial they were found dead in their cells of apparent suicides.

The files exposing Belcher we were able to identify that day somehow got deleted and the investigation against him was dropped due to lack of evidence. He rewarded himself by buying a brand new top of the line sports car. It was a shame when he lost control on the mountain roads late last night. Curving roads, high speeds, and blinding lights can cause that to happen.

Apparently, he was trapped in the car after it crashed, and it burst into flames. They said he always drove too fast, like he was invincible.

I study the skyline of the city I never liked. Yet I'm oddly thankful because it gave me Willow, my love. And our daughter.

Gazing over the landscape below me I take in the crash site on the charred mountain. The trees will grow back and flourish. Just like Willow, Eizlee, and I will.

Turning to my rented Harley I see a robin perched on my handlebar.

Ah Vicky, thank you for sending me to them. Wish you could be here too. Come to Love Beach. We'll look for you.

EPILOGUE

Willow

I stand in the kitchen watching out the window as Diesel chases Eizlee and her little friend from next door around the back yard. I just put the finishing touches on her birthday cupcakes and checked the pans of lasagna that are keeping warm in the oven. Salad, fruit bowl, relish tray are already on the picnic tables outside. The rest of the team and their families will be arriving shortly to help complete the celebration.

“Honey, is there anything we can do to help?”

Turning, I hug my Dad. “Just having you and Helen here is all I wanted.”

“Any time, sweetheart. Anytime.”

Shouts of greeting from the back yard signal the arrival of more guests. “Actually, maybe you can help me start carrying the bread and lasagna out.”

“You grab the bread, I’ll get the first tray of pasta.”

Eizlee comes rushing up to me. “Mama, Mama. He came. Silo’s here. He made it.”

Diesel walks up behind me. Slipping his arm around my waist, he kisses my neck.

“Daddy, did you see he made it?”

“Yes, sweetheart. I see. You can go to the gate and wait for him. Do not go outside the fence.”

“I won’t. Can I show him the Robins nest?”

“Yes.”

We both watch in wonder at the bond that magically formed between those two. While some kids are terrified of Silo, he’s a marshmallow for our little one.

There’s been a lot of learning and growing for all of us. Eizlee still has trouble sleeping through the night and almost always joins us at some point. We’ve been told she’ll grow out of it, but being left unattended, abandoned, is still fresh in her consciousness.

After being around other children, Eizlee started calling us Mama and Daddy just like the other kids called their parents. The therapist said it was natural and to not make a big deal about it, more explanations will come at the appropriate time and age. When she looks at a picture of Vicky we call her Mama Vicky.

All that is important right now is the love and nurturing she receives. And we’ve got a ton of that.

Much later that night when my Dad and stepmom have retired, and we finally got Eizlee to sleep. I’m in the kitchen finishing up the last of the dishes while Diesel takes out the garbage.

The soft strains of a slow dance gradually get louder. Diesel comes up behind me placing his phone on the counter and his palms on my waist urging me back against his hard body.

His touch, his heat, the way he moves his hips are a sensual magnet. I will never get

enough of this man. “Shut off the lights. Do your thing with the doors and window and meet me in bed in five minutes, D-man. I can’t wait any longer. I need your horizontal dance moves.”

He licks my neck and whispers, “I’ll be there in four, be ready. I’ve got a surprise for you tonight.”

I toss the dishtowel on the counter and head to our bedroom. Thank god, it’s on the opposite side of the house from Eizlee and my parents.

I’ve got a surprise for him, too.

Exactly four minutes later I’ve rolled the bedding down to the end, lit a candle on each bedside table, stripped off my clothes, and am lying naked on the sheets, feet crossed at the ankles and hands clasped above my head with a trail of raspberries on my torso.

He comes in the room immediately locking the door before looking toward the bed. Slowly his gaze travels up my body from feet to headboard.

“Fuck baby, I’m starved, and you lay out a feast like this for me. How did I get so lucky to find you.”

Barefoot and using his dancer’s strut he slowly makes his way to the end of the bed while stripping off his shirt and belt. Pausing he slowly undoes the buttons on his jeans and pushes them off. Dragging his open palms up his thighs he cups his balls then pumps his shaft twice making sure I see how hard he is for me.

He leans forward like a panther on the prowl. “Do. Not. Move. No matter how good it feels I want you to stay just like this.”

I should have known better than to tease him. The next fifteen minutes he drives me

crazy. Licking, sucking his way up my body. When he reaches the raspberries he shares, feeding me every other one. When they're gone, he kisses me before working his way backdown my body.

Worshiping my clit, he brings me to climax twice before lining his cock up at my entrance and slowly driving home. Molding his body to mine, he slides his arm under my back and cups my shoulders.

Locking his gaze with mine. He kisses my forehead, the tip of my nose and my chin. "I love you, Willow Burke, will you stay with me, by my side wherever this road called life takes us?"

"Yes, my love."

"Will you marry me in front of all our friends and claim me as your husband?"

"Yes, my love."

"Will hold on to me, stay with me, the rest of my life?"

"Yes, my love."

"I promise to always protect you, support you, worship you and love you as long as I live."

I cup his face. "I know my love. As I promise to stand by you, support and defend you, worship you as long as I live."

"I can't even think of a life without you, Willow. That is how much I love you."

"There is no life without you, my love. We will build a home, grow our family, nurture our friends, together."

He kisses me and slowly thrusts into me. The desire builds, the heat spreads and soon we're exploding together as one. "I love you."

Afterwards, he tends to me and unlocks our door. Then climbs into bed beside me.

"Sweetheart, there's one other thing I need to tell you."

He raises his head and looks down on me, instantly in defender mode. "What is it, babe? I'll take care of it."

"Technically, you already did." I smile. "We're pregnant."