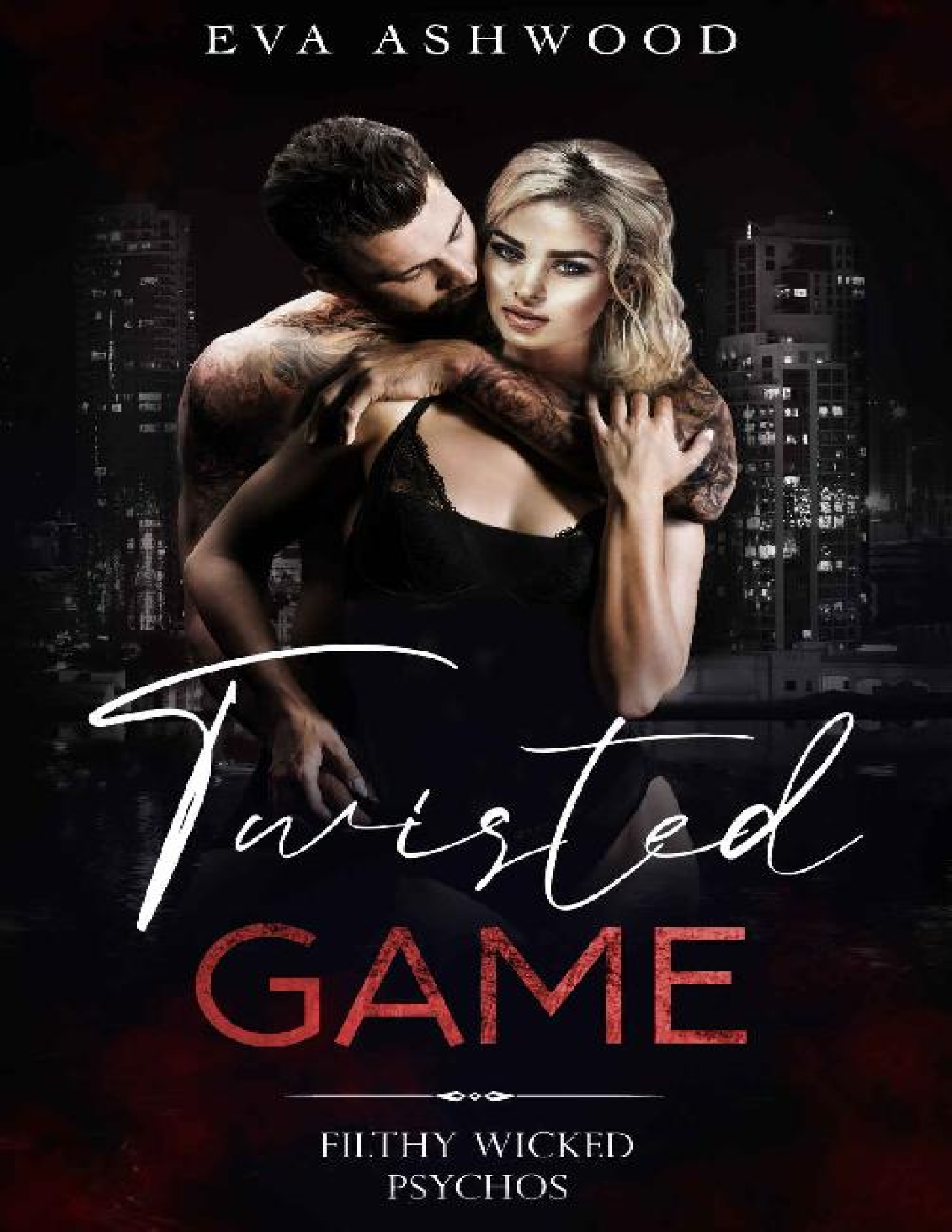
EVA ASHWOOD



Twisted GAME

FILTHY WICKED PSYCHOS

TWISTED GAME

FILTHY WICKED PSYCHOS #1

EVA ASHWOOD

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Author's Note: This is a dark romance and includes themes that may be triggering for some. Please read at your own discretion.

For all the readers who like their book boyfriends
covered in red flags.

Red's my favorite color too.

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WILLOW

"YOU HAVEN'T PAID the remainder of this semester's tuition," the man behind the desk says flatly. "If you don't pay it soon, your enrollment will lapse."

Around us, the sounds of the Wayne State University administration office seem to fade into the background, and I twist my hands together in my lap as nerves chew at my insides. Fuck. I knew this was coming. The moment I opened the email with the subject line TUITION REMITTANCE DUE from the admin office this morning, my stomach dropped like a rock. I've been scraping by on a few small scholarships I've pieced together, but one of them fell through last week, and I haven't been able to cover the difference.

"I know," I say, my fingers tightening around each other. "I had a scholarship lined up, but it didn't work out. Are there any other scholarships I could apply for?"

I try really hard not to sound like I'm begging, but it's difficult to keep the desperate edge out of my voice.

The idea of getting kicked out of college makes me feel sick. I'm twenty-two years old and only a sophomore, which makes me older than all the other students in my year. I've been behind since I got here, and if I get kicked out because I can't pay, I'll have to start all over again somewhere else.

The only way I can ever make something of myself and get out of the shitty world I was born into is to get an education. I have to make something better for myself, and that means I can't lose this chance.

I can't lose my place here.

“First and last name?” the man drones.

“Willow Hayes,” I say, biting back the urge to remind him that he just said my name a few minutes ago when he called me up to his desk. It’s clear he’s already annoyed about having to meet with me, and I don’t want to piss him off any more.

He sighs heavily and starts typing, his fingers flying across his keyboard. It seems to take him forever to go through my records, and when he looks up again, his expression is even more dismissive than before, if that’s possible.

“Ah. I see here that you didn’t come to us with a high school diploma.” He purses his lips. “Just your GED, which you got at an… advanced age.”

My lips press together as I fight to keep my expression neutral. Twenty isn’t even that far off from when most people get their high school diplomas, and calling it an ‘advanced age’ makes me sound like I’m a grandma or something.

“Yeah, that’s right,” I confirm.

“Unfortunately, that means other scholarships are pretty much off the table. The deadlines for the ones you might’ve been eligible for have already passed. Sorry.”

The condescension in his voice sets my teeth on edge. There are a lot of things I could tell him about why I only got a GED instead of an actual diploma—like how I had to work all through high school before finally dropping out, or how my adoptive mother pulled me out of school so often when I was growing up that I barely had time to learn anything anyway.

But none of that would really matter to him, so I don’t even bother.

“I’ll figure something out,” I promise instead. “I’ll pay the rest of my tuition out of pocket if I have to. I just need a little more time to get the money.”

“Right.” He types a note into his computer, sounding skeptical. “I can give you until the end of next week to remit the payment. But after that, your enrollment will lapse.”

I nod, swallowing hard.

It’s not much time, and it’s a pretty big chunk of money. But I meant what I told him. I’ll figure something out.

“Next!” the man calls, looking over my shoulder as he gestures for another student to step forward. I take that as the dismissal it is and leave the office with my head buzzing and my stomach twisted into a knot.

I feel like shit, but at least the school day is over, so I don't have to sit in any more classes right now. I keep my head down as I walk across campus, not wanting to make eye contact with anyone who's hanging around. I don't feel like dealing with April Simms and her cadre of bitches right now, because if they start to torment me the way they usually do, I might just lose it.

Luckily, I don't run into them as I head to the bus stop at the edge of campus, and I manage to get there right as the bus pulls up. My first lucky break of the damned day.

I throw myself onto the worn seat and heave a sigh, closing my eyes for a second to try to shake off the heavy feeling that's weighing me down.

Unsurprisingly, it doesn't work.

Leaning my head against the window, I let the rumble and rattle of the bus vibrate through my body as the driver navigates slowly through the streets of Detroit. Several stops later, I get off the bus and walk the three blocks to the strip club where I work as a cocktail waitress.

Sapphire is one of many strip clubs in this part of Detroit, and I've worked here for the past two years, fitting in shifts as often as I can around my school schedule. I didn't even have time to go home between classes and work, and I heft my school bag higher on my shoulder as I make my way toward the back room.

It's late afternoon, so the club isn't busy yet. Just the regulars are here now, sitting at the bar or close to the stage, already half wasted and lazily ogling the lineup of second string dancers gyrating on the stage.

They're the saddest customers we get in here, the ones who are down on their luck or cheating on a spouse or just so out of it that they come here just to feel something while everyone else is still at work.

After slipping into the bathroom, I change from my street clothes into my waitress uniform—a skimpy dress that rides high on my thighs and dips low in the front. My wavy hair tumbles over my shoulders as I tug at the hem of the dress, adjusting it a little the way I always do.

Still, no matter how much I tug at the fabric of the dress, the burn scars on my right arm, my right thigh, and my left leg are all still visible, although the ones that cover a portion of my ribs and back are hidden. They're long healed by now, but the scarred flesh is still ugly and gnarled, and in the florescent light of the bathroom, the marks look even worse.

My soft blonde hair, delicate features, and light brown eyes might be considered striking on someone else, but I'm pretty sure the scars are all anyone ever sees when they look at me.

"It doesn't matter, Willow," I remind myself, whispering the words to my reflection. "Everyone here is looking at the dancers anyway."

I take a deep breath and pull the skirt of the dress down as far as it will go, then slip out of the bathroom so I can get to work. The tables are starting to fill up, and I make my rounds on autopilot, my mind still buzzing with the ultimatum I got earlier.

I have to figure out a way to pay the rest of this semester's tuition, or I'll lose my enrollment.

Someone wolf whistles, the sound cutting over the hum of conversation and the beat of the music. I turn to see one of the dancers finishing her set, winking at the crowd and gathering her tips before she sashays her way off the stage.

Fuck, if only I could do that.

The dancers probably make ten times what I do. Even the ones who aren't as popular usually leave with stacks of cash by the end of the night. The patrons should technically tip me for serving them drinks, but most of them save their bills to throw at the dancers or tuck into their g-strings, so I don't make much more than the hourly wage Carl pays me.

As I drop off a tray of drinks at a table in the back, that thought sticks in my brain, and I chew my lip as a wild, insane idea pops into my head. Before I can talk myself out of it, I set down my empty tray by the bar and then head to the back of the club to my boss's office, drawing in a deep breath.

The door is cracked, and I peek my head in to see him sitting behind his desk, watching a live feed from the floor of the club. Checking out the dancers, probably.

"Um, Carl?" I ask, knocking on the door frame. "Can I talk to you for a second?"

His eyes snap to me as I open the door wider, immediately flaring with irritation. Carl Gleason runs Sapphire, and there's never been any need to question why he runs a strip club, considering how 'friendly' he tends to get with the dancers and the fact that he always has a live feed of the stage up on his computer screen. It's just a step away from him lurking behind in the

dressing room like a full-on peeping tom, and I don't even want to think about what he does back here in his office where no one can see him.

"Willow," he greets me, already sounding irritated. "What do you want?"

My stomach tightens, my skin prickling with nerves, but I lift my chin and dive right in.

"I wanted to ask about maybe… starting to strip. I need the money."

That definitely catches his attention, his eyebrows shooting up toward his receding hairline. His gaze runs up and down my body, and there's something dismissive and gross about it all at once. I can feel him taking in both every curve and every scar, and I fight the urge to try to cover myself up even more.

Finally, he shakes his head.

"Nah," he says, his eyes lingering on the visible patches of scars. "You've got an okay figure, but no one wants to see that shit. The men who come here are already trying to get away from the ugly, nagging bitches they married, so they want to watch beautiful girls shake what they've got up onstage. Not see something out of a circus sideshow."

My jaw clenches, and I have to swallow hard. His words are harsh, and they sting at the same time they piss me off. But I can't afford to snap at him and risk losing this job. That would just make everything worse.

"That was actually why I was thinking maybe it would be a good idea," I say. "My scars might be ugly, but they make me different. Unique. There's a reason people go to the circus—to see things they couldn't see anywhere else. You could make it a selling point, something no other strip club has."

Although my voice stays steady, my heart pounds a little harder as I speak. I'm basically offering to turn myself into a freak show attraction for him, to let people gape at me or laugh at me or get off on some weird scar fetish as they watch me dance. It's humiliating to think about, but at least it would make me more money than serving drinks does.

Carl narrows his eyes, cocking his head to one side as he considers my words. He pinches the bridge of his slightly crooked nose, then shakes his head.

"Nope. Sorry, sweetheart. No can do."

Disappointment rushes through me, and I drop my gaze to the floor so he won't see it in my eyes.

“Right,” I mutter, turning toward the door. “Okay. Sorry I wasted your time.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Carl calls after me as I start to leave. “Hold on. You really need money?”

I pause with my hand on the doorknob. “Yes.”

“Are you a virgin?”

My heart stutters, and I whirl around, my cheeks burning. “*What?*”

It’s not an answer to his question, but judging by the way he smirks, my reaction was all the answer he needed.

“Yup. Thought so,” he drawls, leaning back in his chair. “Someone like you? Of course you are. I can work with that.”

“What are you talking about?” I demand, trying not to sound as humiliated as I feel.

He just keeps smirking at me with that infuriating look, dragging his gaze over my body again. “I’m not putting you up on my stage, but there are a lot of men out there who would pay a lot of money for a virgin pussy, no matter what kind of girl it’s attached to. If you’re serious about needing money, there’s a woman I know who’s been looking for untouched girls for her whorehouse. I could hook you up… for a percentage of your take.”

My jaw drops open as it hits me in a rush what he’s saying.

I wouldn’t be stripping.

I’d be *hooking*.

For a long moment, I don’t say anything, my stomach churning as my mind reels. This wasn’t at all how I expected this conversation to go, and I feel stunned, caught totally off guard.

“When I say a lot of money, I mean a lot of money,” Carl continues, speaking into the silence when I don’t say anything. “Ten grand. Maybe more, if you make it good enough and someone’s desperate enough—or has a real big fetish that they’re willing to pay out the ass for.”

Dammit. *Dammit*.

That’s so much money.

That’s almost enough to cover the rest of this semester’s tuition, and I could cover the rest with the tiny amount of savings I have.

Still, I hesitate, staring at Carl as if I’ve gone catatonic.

I don’t want to say yes. I know what it’s like once a woman gets into hooking. I grew up living with a prostitute, and I remember all the things my adoptive mother had to do. There were weekends when johns would

come and go from our house just about all day, it felt like. I could hear them sometimes, grunting and cursing and calling her all kinds of names, while she just moaned and pretended to enjoy it.

I never wanted to follow in her footsteps, and now I'm staring the gateway to that world right in the face.

But there's no other way to get the money I need. Maybe if I had more time, I could figure something out, but between classes and shifts here, it's not like I can pick up another job. Unless I want to attempt a small scale bank robbery, there aren't any other options.

And it's not like saying yes this one time means that I'll be hooking forever. Carl's offer is pretty specific. I can only sell my virginity once. Once that's gone, I can take the money and get out.

I feel sick to my stomach, but I can't turn this chance down.

"Okay," I whisper, my throat tight. "I'll do it."

The lanky man smiles, looking pleased.

Of course he is. He's about to get a payday too, and he's not the one who has to spread his legs.

"Alright." He nods. "I'll get in touch with my contact at The Rose Garden and tell her I've got a girl for her. Come see me tomorrow night, and I'll tell you what she's got lined up for you, yeah?"

"Okay," I murmur again.

His gaze lingers on me, and for someone who was just calling me a freak a minute ago, the look on his face is lustful and skeevy.

"Good. Now get out." He jerks his chin. "I've got shit to do."

I walk out of his office and finish my shift in a daze, the deep thud of the bass matching the pounding of my heart. As soon as I'm done for the night, I grab my shit from the back, changing into my regular clothes as quickly as possible.

As I leave the club, the tears I've been holding back all night sting my eyes.

God, I can't believe I agreed to do this.

I already feel sick and dirty, and I haven't even done the deed yet. But I don't have another choice. This is for my future, and it'll all be worth it in the end.

My vision is blurry with tears, and I keep my head down as I walk down the dark street, heading for the bus stop so I can go home. I'm so lost in my

thoughts that I don’t see the large body in front of me until I crash right into it.

“Shit!” I jerk back, wiping my eyes quickly as I try to keep my balance.

“Whoa. Careful, there.”

Large hands steady me, and I look up and blink in surprise. The guy I slammed into is tall and broad-shouldered, dressed casually in a pair of worn jeans and a t-shirt that clings to his muscled arms. The streetlight overhead glints off the metal bar in his eyebrow as he cocks his head. His eyes are a shade of blueish-green that reminds me of the ocean, and they glitter as he looks down at me.

“You okay? You had a pretty good head of steam built up there.”

He quirks a crooked half smile as he speaks, one side of his mouth lifting higher than the other. When he tilts his head a little, the movement shows off the bronze highlights running through his messy brown hair.

My heart lurches as I realize I’m staring at him, tear tracks still drying on my face.

“I’m fine,” I say quickly, stepping back and out of his grip. “Sorry. I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He shrugs, then narrows his eyes a little as he glances at my tear-streaked cheeks. “You sure you’re alright? I don’t need to beat up some fucker for you, do I?”

That startles a laugh out of me, and he grins.

His eyes flick over me, but not with the same nasty leer that Carl had. This seems more like… interest? Or curiosity, maybe.

But Sapphire is in a pretty sketchy area, and even though this guy is gorgeous, he’s definitely dangerous too. He wears an air of ‘fuck around and find out’ like a second skin, and even if we were in a better part of Detroit, that aura would still radiate from him.

“No. No, it’s fine,” I mutter. “I just need to get home.”

Without giving him a chance to say anything else, I turn and hurry away.

I try to keep my head down and keep walking, but I can’t resist looking over my shoulder for one last look at the guy. He’s still watching me, and our eyes meet for just a second. It’s enough to make my stomach flip over, and I whip my head back around, almost jogging the last block to the bus stop.

The bus is just about to pull away when I get there, and I practically throw myself onto it, not relaxing for one second on the ride back to my apartment.

With most of my money going toward school, a tiny one bedroom in a sketchy complex is the best I can afford. Still, I pat the railing with something like relief and affection as I climb the stairs to the second floor where I live.

When I turned eighteen, I got away from my adoptive mom's house as soon as I could. I was tired of being kept up at night, listening to her fuck whoever could pay, and then dealing with her mood swings during the day. She lives in a small house near Eight Mile, and even though she still has a way of sucking me back into her life, at least I've got a place I can escape to now.

A place that's all mine.

After locking the deadbolt, I toss my bag on the creaky old twin bed in my room and then peel myself out of my clothes, heading for the shower.

The pipes clatter and clang as the water starts to pour down, and I breathe a sigh of gratitude that this is one of the nights the water heater has decided to work. I need it after the day I've had.

Usually, a quick scrub is enough to get a long day of classes and work off me, but it's harder to feel clean tonight. I spend a little extra time under the spray, then get out and put on my softest pajamas before curling up on the couch to do homework and watch a home improvement show.

Still, no matter how much I try to lose myself in my usual routines, I can't stop my mind from returning over and over to the deal I made with Carl, nerves and shame and hope warring inside me.

This time next week, I'll be ten thousand dollars richer.

And no longer a virgin.

MALICE

“OH GOD! Oh fuck! *Yes*! Right *there*! Take me harder, daddy, *please*!”

I roll my eyes but give the woman in front of me what she wants, slamming into her so hard that my pelvis slaps against her ass. Each stroke sends me in balls deep, and I grip her hips hard enough that there will be bruises left behind.

She’s bent over the bed in my room, her upper half sprawled out on the mattress while her feet are on the floor, legs spread and hips bucking.

I don’t remember her name, and I don’t like her face, which is why I’m fucking her like this. Her face is too done up. Her makeup is too heavy, and everything about her feels fucking fake, from her bleach blonde hair with dark roots to her bowling ball tits. I hate that shit. But she’s tight enough, and even though her screams and moans are just as fake as the rest of her, I can feel my balls drawing up, so I know I’m gonna come inside her soon.

“Oh shit!” she moans. “Fuck yes, right there! Ooooh, you’re so good!”

It’s some shit straight from a porno, and not even a good one. It’s so over the top, and it’s grating on my goddamned nerves just listening to her high pitched, breathy voice.

I change the angle of my thrusts, jackhammering into her, slamming right into that spot that changes her moans from fake bullshit to the real deal. They stop being moans, sounding more like squeaks and grunts, and the shitty dialogue finally dries up. She almost sounds like she’s in pain as I make her take every single inch of me with each hard stroke.

I look down, watching myself slide in and out of her. My tattooed shaft stretches her walls over and over again, the condom shiny with her arousal.

Those particular tattoos always surprise people, even though they fit in with the rest of my look. I've got ink everywhere—some of which I gave myself, and some of which I got from other people. The skin that's not tattooed is scarred, and every scar has a story that's pretty fucked up. But I don't know anyone who has happy scar stories, so whatever.

The size difference between me and this girl is pretty ridiculous. Aside from her big ass fake tits, everything else about her is petite, and I'm pretty jacked, so it's not hard to grab her and use her however I want to.

Judging from the sounds still pouring out of her mouth, she likes it. Her noises are real now, but they're still getting on my fucking nerves.

"Shut the fuck up," I grunt, slapping her ass hard.

She screams, and if the sounds coming out of her mouth are actual words, I can't understand them.

"I said shut up," I grind out, pumping my hips harder.

Her mouth is open, and I can hear her ragged breathing as I drive into her hard and brutally. I dig my nails into her hips, leaving half-moon indents in her skin as I drag her into each deep, punishing thrust, the sound of skin slapping skin loud in the room.

The girl sounds like an animal now, grunting and groaning, writhing on the bed like she's being exorcised.

"That's it," I rasp. "Fucking take it. I know you like this."

She mewls into the mattress, and I can feel her start to go tighter around me, the spasms and twitching showing that she's close.

Over the sound of my harsh breathing and her cries, the slam of a door and the murmur of low voices downstairs catch my attention, letting me know that my brothers are home.

We all live together in a warehouse space that's attached to our chop shop, and this won't be the first time that Ransom and Victor have come home to find me going to town on some girl.

I need sex a lot, and they just deal with it.

I didn't even bother to shut the door all the way, and I know they can hear us going at it. The way the warehouse is set up, shit echoes. But that doesn't make me stop for a second.

"Oh, *fuck*!" the girl screeches.

She clamps down tight around me, her walls squeezing me in a way that sets me off too. I slam into her hard and fast, chasing that hot, intense

feeling, and I finish in the condom I'm wearing a second later, breathing hard.

I catch my breath, still buried inside that tight, wet heat as Victor appears in the doorway, looking into the room like he's not fazed one bit. It takes more than this to rattle my twin, and he barely even glances at the girl as he pushes the door open a bit wider.

It's pretty easy to tell we're twins from how we look. Vic's hair is almost the exact same dark shade as mine, although his eyes are a clear blue where mine lean more toward gray. Our features are similar too, although we each wear them differently.

Vic is more closed off from his emotions, whereas I usually let mine rule me, leaning into things like anger and lust and whatever the fuck else I feel that day. My twin keeps his shit on a tight rein, and there's nothing he hates more than feeling like he's lost control.

His expression is impassive as he meets my gaze, and this conversation, whatever it's about to be, could be happening anywhere. The fact that I'm balls deep in some woman doesn't even matter.

"Tonight's the night," he says.

He leaves it at that, but I don't need to hear more to know what he's talking about.

My heart stutters in my chest, and I pull out of the girl, letting her drop onto the bed. Now that I'm not holding on to her anymore, she lifts her head and finally notices Vic standing there.

"What the fuck?" She screeches, scrambling over the mattress and trying to cover herself up.

I huff a breath, lifting an eyebrow. "Oh, *now* you wanna be modest? Where was all that when you were begging for my cock an hour ago?"

"That was different! I—you—"

Her voice is just as loud as it was during sex, but it's a hell of a lot more annoying when I'm not buried inside her.

"You don't want Vic to see you?" I ask, jerking my chin. "Then get the fuck out."

"Excuse me?"

"Are you deaf? I said get out. I've got shit to do."

She stares at me for a second, like she's waiting for me to say I'm just kidding or something. I just fix her with a hard stare, making it pretty damn clear that I'm serious and I want her the fuck out of here now.

“Fine,” she snaps at last, sliding off the bed and gathering her clothes in a rush.

Vic doesn’t move. He still hasn’t looked at her or even acknowledged her presence, but she keeps shooting him glances as she tugs on her skirt and skimpy top.

She has to turn sideways to slip past him as she leaves my bedroom, and she shoots me a look over her shoulder once she’s out in the hall.

“Fuck you,” she spits.

“No thanks. I don’t go back for seconds,” I mutter under my breath, pulling off the condom and tying it up so I can toss it in the trash. I grab my boxer briefs and pants from the floor and pull them on, leaving my shirt where it is for the moment as I hear the distant sound of our front door slamming shut.

“I see you had fun tonight,” Vic notes. Someone else might say it teasingly, trying to rile me up. But with Vic, it’s always just an observation. He’s just stating a fact.

I shrug, tugging up the zipper on my pants. “Worked as a distraction for the night. She wasn’t anything special.”

Our younger brother Ransom pokes his head into the room, coming to stand next to Vic. “I didn’t think you went for blondes,” he comments with a grin.

“She wasn’t really a blonde,” I point out. “I don’t know what the fuck color she started as, but that shit wasn’t real.”

“So, did Vic tell you?” Ransom asks, his smirk slipping away as his expression turns serious.

“Yeah.” I glance between the two of them. “He said it’s happening tonight.”

Ransom nods, his eyebrow ring flashing with the movement. “Fucking finally.”

For years, the three of us have been trying to hunt down the man who killed our mother. We didn’t have much to go on, nothing but a description of a tattoo that could’ve belonged to anyone in the city. Or even someone who was just passing through.

But we never gave up. We never stopped trying to find the fucker and make him pay for what he did to our mom.

And then finally, we got the info we needed.

“I still think it’s risky,” Vic says in his quiet, low voice, glancing between me and Ransom. “The Kings of Chaos have never fucked us over before, and I know they want this guy dead too. But if their intel is bad, we could be walking into a trap.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I fire back. “If there’s trouble, we’ll deal with it. We can’t miss this chance.”

Ransom makes a noise in his throat, folding his arms across his chest. He’s the tallest of the three of us, although not by much. “Malice is right. We can’t pass this up. Plus, you saw how Ash and that chick looked when they told us about our mark, Vic. They’re just as serious about this fucker dying as we are.”

Victor shakes his head but doesn’t say anything else.

When a member of the Kings of Chaos and some silver haired woman showed up on our turf to talk to us a few weeks ago, I knew it was going to be something big. We don’t run in the same circles as the Kings do. They run their operations in a different part of Detroit than us, but we’ve worked together before.

If they were coming to see us, I was sure it had to be about something serious. Something real. They wouldn’t go so far out of their way for nothing.

And I was right.

They gave us the name of the man with the tattoo that we’ve been looking for all this time.

Nikolai Petrov.

Along with his name, they gave us enough information to track the fucker down and exact our vengeance, and all they asked in return is that we wait for their go-ahead before we killed him.

I wanted to go find the son of a bitch right then and there and make him regret ever being born, but if the Kings want us to play this a certain way, there must be a good reason. When my brothers and I talked it over after our meeting with Ash, I remember Ransom shrugging, a savage light in his blue-green eyes.

“We’ve waited this long,” he said then. “What’s a few more weeks?”

For people who suck at waiting as much as I do, a few more weeks is a hell of a lot—but finally, the word has come in.

It’s time.

“Do we know where Nikolai is?” I ask Vic. “Where to find him?”

He nods. “Yes.”

Vicious anticipation fills me, the satisfaction I was feeling from getting laid shifting into something else. A different kind of satisfaction that comes from a deeper, darker place.

“Good,” I say. “Start doing recon on the place. We need to know what we’re walking into.”

Vic nods again and heads down the hall, Ransom on his heels.

My twin grew up different than me and Ransom, and he has a tendency to retreat into himself sometimes. But he’s always comfortable in front of his computers, and on any given day, I can expect to find him parked in front of the bank of monitors in his room, tapping away at his keyboard. He’s self-taught, but he’s a fucking good hacker and programmer, and that’s come in handy for us often. There’s nothing he can’t brute force his way into when he wants to.

I run a hand through my hair and shift my gaze to a picture on my nightstand. It’s of me, my brothers, and our mom. It was taken a long time ago, when we were young and she was still alive. Our dad used to be in the photograph too, but I cut him out of it, not wanting to look at the fucker’s face every day. I don’t need any more reminders of that piece of shit.

But the four of us—me, Vic, Ransom, and Mom? We were a unit. A family.

And someone ripped her away from us in the worst way possible.

I stalk over to my dresser and pull out a fresh shirt, catching a glimpse of myself in the mirror as I pull it on. I’ve got tattoos everywhere, but the one on my left arm, right above my bicep, is the one that matters the most.

It’s our mom’s name, Diana, and the date she died.

It’s the first thing I got done when I got out of prison, and whenever I look at it, I think about her. Sometimes it’s kinda soothing, remembering who she was and how much she cared about all of us.

Sometimes it pisses me off.

This is one of those times where grim rage fills my chest. She died while I was locked up, so I wasn’t there to protect her. Maybe that’s why I threw myself so hard into trying to find the asshole who did it after I got out. So I could make it up to her in some way, even though it isn’t going to bring her back.

On some level, I’ve always blamed myself for her death, always wondered if it could have been different if I was on the outside. If I could

have kept her safe.

I drag in a deep breath that hurts like glass in my throat. There's no point in wondering about the 'what ifs' now. Tonight, we're going to get our vengeance against the man who murdered her, and maybe her spirit will rest easier once he's dead.

Rolling out my neck, I pull open another drawer in my dresser. This one has weapons and other equipment in it, not clothes. Guns, a few knives, brass knuckles, whatever I might need to get a job done. I grab a gun and tuck it into my waistband before heading to Victor's room.

The three of us all have our bedrooms upstairs, and Vic's is down the hall from mine. Downstairs, the warehouse we live in is converted into two separate areas. There's the kitchen and living room that's a part of our living space, and then there's the chop shop where we do our work.

The woman I brought home turned her nose up at the place when we walked inside, calling it grungy and greasy, and I ignored her then, because whatever. Who gives a fuck? It's home. The warehouse gives us a place to sleep and to run our business out of, and that's all we need.

Vic's room is more of an office than a bedroom. He's got a bed in one corner, and a closet against one wall, and that's pretty much it for personal effects. The rest of the room is taken up by a large, L-shaped desk that spans the other two walls and holds all his computers and screens.

The sound of keys clacking on a keyboard is loud when I step into the room, and Vic and Ransom are huddled in front of one of the computers, their eyes glued to the screen.

"We can get in here," Vic says, pointing at the screen. He doesn't even look up when I come in, but I know he's talking to me now too. "I took out the cameras, here and here." He points again. "And as long as we stick to this path, we won't get picked up."

"How much time will we have?" Ransom asks Victor. "How long are the cameras gonna be out for?"

"Long enough," Vic replies. "We don't have to rush, but we can't take all night."

As I listen to them talk, the craving for violence wells in my chest.

"We'll make every second count," I murmur, my hands curling into fists. "He's going to suffer, one way or another."

I can hear the darkness in my own voice as I say it, and it's echoed in the look Ransom gives me. Vic's face is less expressive, but I know the

same rage burns in his chest too.

We've been waiting too long for this, pacing like predators in a cage. And now that we've finally been let loose, we're not gonna hold back.

We might not be the most powerful players in Detroit, but that doesn't matter.

There's no one more brutal than me and my brothers.

WILLOW

IT TAKES me two tries to get my front door unlocked when I come back to my apartment after my classes for the day. My hand shakes so badly that I have to force myself to take a deep breath so I can get inside.

All day, I've been having trouble focusing, too aware of what's coming.

I finally get in and close the door behind me, throwing the deadbolt into place as if a locked door will keep the anxious thoughts from catching up to me.

I put my messenger bag down on the floor, leaning against the door with a sigh. I close my eyes and try to let the silence of my tiny apartment wash over me, but then my phone rings, shattering the little bit of peace I was trying to snatch.

"Goddammit," I mutter under my breath, pulling my phone out of my pocket. When I see who's calling, I let out a groan. "*Goddammit*."

It's my mom.

My finger hovers over her name on the screen for a second, but I don't answer it. I just let it ring and ring until it goes to voicemail. My adoptive mother is the last person I want to talk to right now.

Once the screen goes dark again, I breathe a sigh of relief and drop the phone on the couch.

I usually have something to eat when I get home, but I know that's not going to happen today, so I don't even bother trying. My stomach is tied up in too many knots for me to keep anything down, and throwing up right now will just make everything worse.

Instead, I get into the shower and try to focus on getting cleaned up, even if it does feel like I'm never actually going to be clean again.

Last night, Carl told me when and where to meet with the whorehouse madame so I can sell my virginity to some unknown buyer.

Every time I think too hard about what I'm about to do, it's like there's a low-pitched hum of anxiety in my brain, shutting out everything else. Part of me can't believe I'm actually considering doing this, but it's not like I have another option. I need the money more than I need my fucking hymen.

God, I hate this.

I let out a shaky breath and then another, reaching for the shampoo so I can wash my hair. I wish I had something more expensive and luxurious to use, but I'm stuck with the cheap two-in-one I get from the drug store, and that's going to have to be good enough.

The suds run down my body, sliding over my scars and drawing my eyes to them.

They're ugly. They've always been ugly.

They cover so much of me that I can't hide them all without wearing long-sleeved shirts and pants, and I won't be able to do that tonight.

I know I'm nothing special, even outside the scars. I don't have generous curves or big boobs. I'm not leggy or graceful. Someone told me once that when I burrow into a hoodie, I look like I'm trying to disappear, and sometimes I feel so small that I wish I could.

I'm just slight and slender, blonde and pale, and no one really ever looks at me twice—unless I'm at work and they want a drink, or they're talking behind my back about the scars that are on display beneath my little skirt.

Frowning, I scrub harder at the patch of scars on my right arm, barely even feeling it. The scars are the worst on that side, and the nerves are messed up there, making everything feel muted in some places and hypersensitive in others.

"It doesn't matter," I mutter to myself, finishing up my shower and getting out to dry myself off. "Whoever this john is, he's not looking for some stunning beauty. Just like Carl said, all he wants is a virgin."

Although that doesn't make me feel a whole lot better, it's all the reassurance I've got.

But as I hang up my towel and shake out my damp hair, I realize I have another problem. Presumably, they want me to wear something sexy for this thing, but most of my wardrobe is long pants or leggings and oversized sweaters and hoodies.

Shit. That's not going to work.

I rummage through the dresser, trying to find something that will work, and come up with a nightgown that looks passable. I don't even remember buying it, which means it might be one of my mom's that got accidentally mixed in with my stuff when I moved out.

That makes me feel even worse about this, but I pull it on anyway.

It's a soft peach color, silky against my skin, and short enough to show off the tops of my thighs, with a slit up one side. The spaghetti straps irritate my shoulder, and I try to adjust them so they don't rub as much, lowering the neckline until my cleavage shows through the lace.

I take my time fixing my hair, blow drying it into soft waves that tumble around my shoulders. I put on some make up next, lining my eyes with dark liner and painting my lips red.

I don't even feel like myself.

My stomach is still in knots, and bile rises in my throat as I grab my coat and leave my apartment.

"You can do this," I whisper to myself. "It's just one night, and then it'll be over."

Maybe if I just keep saying that, it'll be okay.

Carl gave me the address of the brothel, and I take the bus to the closest stop and then walk the rest of the way. Despite the coat that covers my nightie, I feel like people can tell what I'm wearing as I walk past.

My cheeks flame red, and I practically jog the last couple of blocks to the brothel.

Compared to the strip club I work in, the brothel is pretty plain on the outside. It's nondescript, and it could be anything from an office or some kind of place to get medical procedures done, with the plain brick and covered windows.

But I guess it's one of those 'if you know, you know' kind of places, and I pull the door open and step inside.

The scent of candles and incense washes over me, and a tall man with beefy arms and tattoos everywhere steps up, looking me over.

"You lost?" he asks.

I shake my head, trying to find my voice. "N-no. I have… I'm supposed to meet Giselle?"

He looks at me for a second longer and then turns on his heel, walking through a door that leads into the back.

I stand where he left me, nervously twisting my fingers together and glancing around at the bare walls of the entry room. Just like the outside, this room is so nondescript that it gives away none of what goes on in the back of the establishment.

The tall man comes back a minute later with a stern faced woman on his heels. She's tall and blonde, and she carries herself with an air of someone who takes no shit. When she looks me over, I have to fight the urge to sink down into my coat even more.

"You're the one Carl sent over?" she asks. When I nod, she crooks a finger at me in a sharp motion. "Come with me, then."

Giselle leads the way through the door and into a side room at the back. She closes the door behind me and then looks me over more in depth, dragging her gaze from my head all the way down to the scuffed shoes I put on.

"Jesus fucking Christ." She sniffs. "I thought I told Carl about the shitty girls he sends me. The Rose Garden is about quality, and I'm not seeing it."

Embarrassment and anger flash through me when she says that, and I can't help but bite back, "I didn't know there were such high standards just to lay on your back."

Giselle narrows her eyes at me, not looking amused at all. Then she steps forward and grabs my wrists, yanking them down from where I had crossed my arms. She pulls the coat open and takes in the outfit I put together, and her opinion of it is clear on her face.

"Unbelievable," she mutters.

I feel like my face is going to be permanently red from how fucked up and embarrassing this is, and it gets worse when Giselle's hands start roaming over me.

She gropes me, cupping my breasts in her hands, then reaches behind me to touch my ass. When she touches the patch of scars on my right thigh, she makes a face, and I stare down at the floor, wishing I could disappear.

"What on earth did Carl see in you?" she asks, and I don't know if she wants an answer or if she's just complaining out loud.

"He said you needed virgins," I whisper, shame keeping my voice soft.

Giselle arches a brow at me. "Looking at you, I'm sure you are, but I have to check. If you're trying to run some scam for money, it would ruin my business."

“I’m not!” I insist, horrified that I’m having to defend my virginity to someone like this. Her insults hurt, but she’s right. It’s not like anyone has been interested before.

She acts like she didn’t even hear me, tapping my thighs to get me to spread my legs. Horror creeps in as I realize what she’s about to do, and I feel sick to my stomach as she snaps on a glove, then pushes aside the cheap black panties I put on and presses first one finger and then another a few inches inside me.

It feels clinical, like getting a pelvic exam, but so much worse because of the judgment and what I know is coming.

“You’ll do,” Giselle finally announces. She pulls her fingers free and peels off her glove, then sets into a flurry of movement.

She yanks the coat off me and flings it over onto the side, leaving me standing in the middle of the room in the nightie. Her hands move to my hair, fluffing it and pushing sections behind my ears.

“Here are the ground rules,” Giselle says curtly as she works. “Whatever your john for the night wants, you’ll do. No matter what it is. Nothing is off the table if you want to get paid. At the end of the night, if there are no complaints, you’ll get your money. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I whisper, nodding.

She steps back, giving me one final look over. She doesn’t seem pleased, and she shakes her head. “It’s just going to have to be good enough. Come with me.”

I snatch my coat up before Giselle takes me to a room at the back of the building, and I swear my legs get shakier with every step. Finally, she stops outside a door, opens it, and practically pushes me inside the room. She doesn’t say anything else, just leaves, closing the door behind her.

My gaze darts around, my pulse spiking, but then I realize I’m alone. My john isn’t here yet.

Thank fuck.

I’m not sure what I expected, but with a name like The Rose Garden, I thought the rooms would be nicer. This is very bare bones, just a bed and a side table with a lamp on it, but I guess you don’t really need much more than that for what’s about to happen in here.

I shove my coat under the bed, then pace the floor a bit, unable to stay still as my body pulses with adrenaline and anxiety. But that’s probably not

a good first impression for whatever man is going to come through the door, so I make myself sit down on the bed instead, fidgeting and trying to stop.

After a few minutes that seem to both drag and rush by, the door opens again.

A man steps inside the room, and my breath catches.

The first thing I notice is that he's huge. The bouncers at Sapphire are big, but this man is *massive*. Everything about him looks brutal and harsh, and my heart rate kicks up another notch as his dark eyes meet mine. He has a square jaw and a thick neck, and his dark hair is cropped close to his head.

He takes in the sight of me on the bed and strides over to get a better look, doing the same up and down thing that Giselle did before.

When his attention lands on my scars, I can see his lips twitch into a sneer.

"Where did you get those?" he asks, and his voice comes out deep and thickly accented. He sounds Russian, which I guess explains more things than it doesn't.

My stomach flips over at the question, and my mouth is suddenly dry as a bone. Talking about my scars with this terrifying man somehow seems worse than having sex with him, and even if I wanted to, I can't find my voice. So I just don't answer.

He narrows his eyes at my silence and leans down, his thick fingers grabbing my chin in a tight grip that makes me wince.

"When I ask you a question, you better answer me," he growls. "When I tell you to do something, you'd better do it."

He pauses like he's waiting for me to say something, but I'm not sure how he expects me to get any words out with him looming over me like this.

"If you are not big on talking," he grunts out, "then maybe I should put your mouth to use in a different way."

Even if I could find my voice, he's on me before I'd be able to get a word in edgewise. One of his huge hands grips my shoulder, pulling me off the bed and shoving me down so I'm on my knees in front of him.

My heart crashes into overdrive, pounding heavily against my ribs as he undoes his pants with one hand, drawing out his cock and pressing it toward me.

It’s the biggest one I’ve ever seen, which I guess isn’t really saying much, since I’ve only ever seen one up close before. But his erection looks like a fucking monster, and I can’t see how there’s any way it’s going to fit into my mouth.

I freeze, feeling sick to my stomach, and the guy gives an impatient growl. When I don’t immediately jump to suck him off, he rubs the head of his cock against my lips.

“Open,” he demands, his voice deep and gravelly.

“I—”

I start to tell him that I don’t know how, but he just takes the opportunity to shove his cock past my lips and into my mouth.

I immediately choke, gasping for air around the intrusion. I’ve only done this once before, and I have no idea what I’m doing, but that doesn’t stop him. He just grunts and drags his cock against my tongue, the thickness of it making me drool around him. Spit drips down my chin, and my eyes well with tears.

“Wider. Watch your fucking teeth.”

He grabs a fistful of my hair and uses it like a handle to jerk my head back and forth, forcing me to take more and more of his cock. Each time it hits the back of my throat, I gag, sputtering and coughing.

After a few moments, he mutters something under his breath in Russian, probably a curse word.

“Little bitch,” he grunts. “So fucking bad at this.”

He uses his hold on my hair to drag me back again, yanking me off his cock. I gasp for air as he drags me up from the floor.

“You’ll clearly only be good for one thing.” He chuckles darkly. “And that’s your tight little pussy.”

He deposits me on the bed as he speaks, tossing me around like I weigh nothing. Then he grabs my ankles and yanks my legs open, forcing them to spread for him as he settles himself between my thighs, taking up so much space.

His eyes are dark with anger and impatience, his breath coming faster. When he grabs my wrists with one hand, pinning them over my head, I struggle against his grip, fighting back on pure instinct.

“Be still,” he snarls.

I know I should do what he says. I know I agreed to this, know I need the money. But still, I can’t help the way I squirm under him, my breath

coming in choppy gasps.

His free hand comes down and grabs the front of my nightie, yanking roughly.

The silky fabric rips, exposing my breasts and stomach to him, and a dark hunger flares in his eyes. He looks down my body and when he sees the simple black panties I put on, he shakes his head and goes to rip those off as well.

My breathing turns almost frantic, and I squeeze my eyes shut, nausea churning in my stomach.

Outside the room, I hear a faint sound. I'm not sure what it is, but I try to focus on that instead of the muscled Russian pinning me down with his large body. He slides a hand between my legs, bracing himself above me.

"You're ugly as fuck, but at least you'll be tight enough to make up for __"

The door bursts open, cutting him off mid-word.

There are two soft pops, and the man jerks, grunting as he collapses on top of me.

His weight is heavy and suffocating, and something warm and wet begins to spread over my body, soaking through my torn nightie.

Blood.

RANSOM

THE SHOTS HIT THEIR MARK, and the three of us move as a unit into the room. We've done shit like this enough times that we've learned how to work as a tight team.

Vic does a quick sweep of the room, making sure there are no threats lying in wait for us. That's his usual job, making sure the way is clear, and clearing it if it needs to be handled.

"We're good," he calls out.

Malice strides forward and grabs Nikolai up from where he slumped over the bed, revealing that he fell on top of a girl. She's in a ripped nightie, which is covered in bright red blood now.

"Get the fuck up," Malice snarls, hauling Nikolai off the mattress and hurling him into a corner of the room.

The large man slumps down to the floor, leaving a trail of blood along the wall. He's hurt badly, but he's not dead yet, his chest heaving with labored breaths. His eyes are open, and although they're hazy, there's enough life there for him to realize what's going on.

His hand starts to move, likely going for a weapon, but Malice is right there. He lashes out before Nikolai can do anything more than palm the knife that he had tucked into his pants, kicking the blade away and then stomping on Nikolai's hand for good measure.

The sound of bones crunching under my brother's boot rings out in the room.

Nikolai's nostrils flare, but he doesn't cry out in pain.

It's obvious he's the kind of guy who was born and raised in this kind of shit. Getting hurt, living on the knife's edge. But he's probably way more

used to being the hunter, not the hunted.

Malice leans down and grabs Nikolai by the hair, his fingers curling among the short strands close to the scalp. He yanks the guy's head up and looks him right in the eye.

"Do you remember Diana Voronin?" he spits.

Nikolai's chest heaves with a rattling breath, but he doesn't say anything. He narrows his eyes at Malice, looking like he's about to spit at him.

Before he can so much as gather the saliva in his mouth, Malice stomps down on his hand again, harder this time, grinding his boot down even more.

Pain flashes across Nikolai's face, and he bares his bloodstained teeth, breathing hard.

"I asked you a question, asshole," Malice snaps.

"Mal," I call, tossing him a knife. "A guy like this has probably killed plenty of defenseless women in his day. Maybe he just needs you to jog his memory."

Malice takes the knife and bends down, anger and the thirst for violence radiating off him. "Yeah, maybe you're right." His voice is soft. Dangerous. "Maybe he just needs a reminder."

He cuts down the front of Nikolai's shirt, exposing his skin. The man is pale as fuck, scarred and tattooed, although he doesn't have anywhere close to the number that Malice has.

"I'd carve her fucking name into your skin," Malice growls. "But you're not worthy to carry it."

Instead, he puts the knife against Nikolai's chest and just starts carving lines down it, biting deep enough that blood wells to the surface immediately.

Nikolai roars, and it's hard to tell if it's him finally breaking from the pain or if he's just pissed off. Either way, it's not like it matters. There's only one way this is all going to end.

I step closer, entering his field of view, and his feral eyes flip over to me.

"Diana Voronin," I repeat. "She was a nurse. About this tall." I hold my hand up, at about average height. "Dark brown hair, bright green eyes. She had a smile that she gave to just about anyone. Ringing any bells?"

“Fuck you and the bitch, whoever she is,” Nikolai bites out, his accented voice thick with pain.

Malice drives the knife in deeper, stabbing him right near his armpit on the right side.

I make a tsking noise with my tongue, shaking my head. “Sorry. That’s the wrong answer. Let’s see if this works instead. She was coming home from work one night. She was a nurse, and she dedicated her life to helping people. Someone shot her in the head.” I take another step closer, standing right behind Malice now. “It wasn’t a stray bullet or an accident either. It was right here.” I point between my own eyes, not looking away from Nikolai for a second. “And at close range too, from what we learned from the report.”

“We know you did it,” Vic chimes in. He sounds as dispassionate as always, that tight control he keeps over himself intact even now while we stare down the man who killed our mom. “We want to know why.”

Nikolai glances between the three of us, and he looks fucked up. His eyes are bloodshot, and there’s blood bubbling from his lips when he finally speaks again. The bullets Malice put through his back probably punctured one of his lungs.

“I remember,” he rasps after a moment. “I do remember her. It was just business.”

“Business?” Malice demands, rage making him shake a little. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean? She was our *mother*.”

“She was a loose end. She saw me doing… an assassination job, and I could not let her live after that. I killed her, yes. And I never thought about her again after. Do you shed tears for every piece of trash you throw away?”

It’s the exact wrong thing to say, and we all react to it. Malice grinds the knife in even deeper, and I clench my hands into fists, trying to breathe through the rage.

Our mother was a fucking angel. She was the best person I ever knew, and to this day, no one has ever come close to being as good as she was. She was the one who would do everything she could to help someone in need. She was the kind of mom who knew the best way to make us smile and wanted us all to be happy. She was the last person who deserved to die the way Nikolai killed her. We all loved her with everything we had, and hearing this fucker talk about her like this is enough to set us off.

Even Vic seems to be at the end of his rope. He walks forward, and he and Malice are right there in front of Nikolai, twin omens of doom. He rears back and then kicks Nikolai in the side, hard enough to shatter a couple ribs, probably.

Judging from the grunt of pain, that's exactly what he was aiming for.

Malice pulls the knife out and drives it in again, twisting it a little.

That just leaves me. I hold Nikolai's gaze as he takes all this torture and shake my head.

"You won't even be good enough to be trash when we're done with you," I promise.

Between the three of us, we make him suffer. We take our time and we take turns, lashing out, delivering blow after blow.

I stomp on his other hand, and Vic breaks more ribs. When Malice lets Nikolai go, he ends up slumped over, breathing hard, trying to curl around his hurt places. So we give him a few more.

And then even more for good measure.

Malice stands over him when we're done, and the look in his eyes would be close to feral if it weren't so calculated. He picks up a lamp with a heavy bronze base from the nightstand next to the bed and hefts it for a second, holding it in hand like he's weighing it. Then he brings it down hard on Nikolai's head, crushing his skull with a crunch of finality.

The room rings with silence after that. The three of us stand shoulder to shoulder as we gaze down at Nikolai's body, reveling in the death of the man who took something so precious from us.

Then a flash of movement catches my eye.

I glance over just in time to see the girl from the bed grab something from beneath the bed frame and dart toward the door. I almost forgot she was there in the heat of the moment, especially since she hasn't made a damn peep since we burst into the room.

She's fast, but I'm faster. Before she can escape, I grab her by the arm and yank her back.

Her clothes are skimpy and torn, and she's drenched in Nikolai's blood from being under him when he got shot.

She struggles wildly, trying to get away from me, and I hold her closer, pinning her to the front of my body with my arms.

"No. Please," she whimpers, trying to wedge the rumpled coat in her hands between us so she can press against me. "Please!"

She tilts her head up a little as she works to free herself, and as I get a better glimpse of her tear-streaked face, I realize I recognize her. She's the girl who ran into me the other night outside of Sapphire.

I remember thinking she looked upset then, but that's nothing compared to how she looks right now.

Our struggle catches the attention of my brothers, pulling their focus away from the body on the ground to the petite one in my arms.

"Dammit," Malice spits, narrowing his eyes at her.

The girl flinches at the harshness of his tone, shaking like a leaf in my hold. Her face is pale, almost white from shock and fear, and fat tears run down her cheeks. Her eyes are brown, but when the light hits them, little flecks of gold stand out in the dark depths, and it's hard for me to look away for a second.

She looks so damned scared and broken down, and a part of me feels for her for having to see what we just did to Nikolai. She doesn't even look like the usual kind of girl who would work in a place like this, and if it's her first night on the job, that's a hell of a first impression to get.

Those big, wide eyes lock with mine, and she freezes, recognition passing over her face as she realizes she's seen me before too. We're frozen like that for a second, and her wild thrashing slows as she blinks up at me.

Then the moment breaks, and the girl rips herself away from me, taking advantage of me being too distracted to hold on tight enough. She rushes for the door again, but Vic is there before she can get anywhere. He steps in front of the door, arms folded, his face set in a grim expression.

Off to the side, Malice raises his gun.

The girl immediately reacts, flinching hard and flattening herself against the wall like it's going to protect her. Her chest is heaving, and she looks like a cornered animal, glancing around for anywhere she can hide herself.

Like this, I can see more of her. She's got scars all up and down her right arm, and they look like the thick, deep kind left by something traumatic. There are more of them on her leg, disappearing up under the material of her torn slip, so I can't tell how far they extend.

Her gaze flicks toward me while Malice holds that gun at her, pointing right at her head. There's something in her eyes that calls to me, a look of hope, like she thinks I'm going to save her based on the little interaction we've had so far.

Fuck.

Usually, my brothers and I are a unit. We're together on everything we do, and no one can come between us because we're all on the same page.

But something about the look on this girl's pale face makes me stop. It hits me harder than I expected, and before Malice can fire at her, I knock his arm out of the way, sending the bullet off target.

It slams into the wall next to the girl's head instead, and she gives a little half scream, putting her hands over her face.

"What the *fuck*, Ransom?" Malice whirls around to look at me, his nostrils flaring.

"We can't just kill her," I say quietly.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Look. That fucker…" I point down to the lump of flesh and blood that's all that's left of Nikolai now. "He killed our mom because she was a loose end, right? Because she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. If we kill this girl, we'll be just like him." I glance over at Victor, who's standing there with his arms folded, watching this all play out. "Back me up here, Vic."

He just lets out a breath, not chiming in one way or the other. I get the feeling that he hasn't picked a side yet, still running through a bunch of variables in his head.

Malice's jaw tightens, and I watch several emotions play out over his face in quick succession. Rage is the primary one, but that's just how Malice is, so it's not a surprise. He's clearly wrestling with himself, torn between our available options here.

"Come on, Malice," I murmur. "You know I'm right."

His nostrils flare with irritation, and he steps up to the girl, getting right in her face. The gun with the silencer on it is still aimed at her head, but his finger is looser on the trigger now.

"If you tell *anyone* what you saw, we'll fucking kill you," he tells her in a low voice. "No hesitation. No questions. No second chances. I don't give a fuck what reason you have or who you tell. You open your mouth, and you're dead. Got it?"

She nods, her eyes so wide and scared they're taking up most of her face now.

He stands there for a second, taking her in, like he's trying to figure out if she's telling the truth or not. But even Malice, distrustful and angry as he

is, can’t help but see the truth in the fear on her face. She’s clearly terrified of what might happen.

That makes him stand down just a little. Enough to take a step back, even though he keeps the gun aimed at her.

“What’s your name?” he demands.

The girl opens her mouth, and at first no sound comes out. Then she looks at the gun in Malice’s hand again and tries harder to find her voice.

“W-Willow,” she manages. “Willow Hayes.”

Malice looks over at Vic, and our brother nods.

“On it.” He types something into his phone, using that special skill he has for finding shit. A moment later, he nods, glancing back up. “That’s her. She’s telling the truth.”

Malice looks like he’s a second away from spitting on the ground and storming out, disgust and anger twisting his already sharp features. He takes a deep breath and lets it out in a rush, then steps back, lowering the gun at last.

For a second, the girl stays frozen in place, her legs trembling while she looks at him.

I clear my throat to get her attention, and when her gaze darts to me, I tilt my head toward the door.

“This is the part where you fly away, little bird,” I murmur.

That gets her in gear, and she flees for the door, scrambling to leave the room like she’s afraid Malice will shoot her in the back if she doesn’t go quick enough.

“Fuck,” Malice repeats, shoving his gun into the waistband of his pants.

I watch the girl go, dragging the piercing in my tongue absently between my teeth. It might be a mistake to let her live, but I couldn’t just let Mal kill her. We already killed the madame of this whorehouse, as well as the guard out front, and that’s not something I feel all that bad about. But that girl was too sweet and innocent looking. She wasn’t wrapped up in this shit like everyone else who died tonight.

“We should get back on track,” Victor says, putting his phone away. “We’ve wasted too much time already.”

“Right,” I agree with a nod, shaking my head to clear it. “Time to burn this sucker down.”

We split up, spreading kerosene throughout the brothel, getting ready to burn it to the ground to cover our tracks.

WILLOW

MY HEART FEELS like it's about to explode out of my chest.

I make it out of the brothel in one piece, even though the whole time I'm worried one of them is going to change their minds and come kill me. But I escape onto the dimly lit street, gasping at the night air as soon as I leave the building.

I can't take a cab or the bus home, not barefoot and covered in someone else's blood, so I throw on my coat and start on foot, running hard and keeping to the side streets, trying not to be seen. I don't know how I'd explain what happened tonight if someone saw me, and I keep hearing that guy named Malice's threat in my head.

If you tell anyone what you saw, we'll fucking kill you.

Just thinking about it makes me sick to my stomach, and I clutch my waist with one arm as a painful stitch forms in my side.

I feel so exposed running down the street like this—in more ways than one. I still only have on the ripped nightie that I wore to the brothel, and I attempt to keep my coat wrapped tightly around myself as I run, breathing hard and trying not to trip over exposed stones and bricks.

At one point, I pass a dive bar with music pumping from the inside, and a group of guys hanging out at the front catch sight of me.

"Well, well," one of them calls. "Where you going, girlie?"

"Yeah, you need a ride, baby?" another one adds. "I got something for you right here!"

He grabs the front of his crotch and mimes humping into me while the others laugh. I keep moving, skirting past them and praying that they won't decide to come after me.

One of them shakes his head and spits off to the side. “Leave her alone. She looks strung out as hell,” he says. “Or off her meds. Don’t stick your dick in crazy.”

They either don’t see the patches of blood beneath my coat, or they don’t realize what it is. Either way, I duck into the shadows before they can change their minds about leaving me alone, and I keep running.

My body feels like it’s about to give out as I keep pushing myself. My chest hurts, lungs begging for more air than I can suck in, and my heart is going crazy. My feet burn, and my legs are shaky, and each step I take feels like it’s going to be the one that makes me collapse. But I can’t stop. I keep stumbling forward, knowing I have to make it home.

Finally, after running for miles, I see my building come into view up ahead. I almost sob with relief, bolting inside and up the stairs faster than I ever have before. I’m panting and shivering, and I let myself in with trembling fingers, shutting the door behind me and locking the deadbolt.

Then I go to every single window and make sure those are locked too.

My hands shake badly when I try to fill a glass with water from the sink, and I end up dropping it when my stomach heaves. I throw up right in the sink, gasping for air and clutching the counter for dear life.

Usually, I feel better after throwing up, but this time it just makes me feel worse. It’s like everything from tonight is hitting me in a horrible rush, filling my guts with a sour feeling that won’t go away.

My skin feels clammy, and I push myself away from the counter, ripping my coat and nightie off as I do.

They’re both covered with drying blood, and I grab my keys and cellphone out of the coat pockets before stuffing the clothes into a garbage bag, never wanting to see them again.

My hands are covered in blood too, and when I glance down at my body, so is the rest of me.

A little whimper bubbles up in my throat, and I practically race to the bathroom, turning the shower on and letting the water get as hot as I can stand. The ancient pipes clang and complain, but soon steam fills the bathroom, and I get in the shower.

The hot water on my skin feels good, and the blood starts coming off as I scrub at it, swirling down the drain with the dirt and grime on my feet from running home with no shoes on. The soles of my feet are sore, but at least I didn’t step on any glass or anything.

I try to make myself calm down while I stand beneath the pouring water, closing my eyes and breathing in the hot, soap-scented air.

"It's okay, Willow," I whisper to myself. "It's okay. You're okay."

It's something I've done for years now, soothing myself in lieu of having anyone else to do it. Usually, it works out okay, but it doesn't matter how many times I say it now. I can't get the images from tonight out of my head.

They flash through my mind on a loop, from the moment the Russian guy collapsed on top of me and the sticky, warm feeling of his blood pouring out over me.

I was so sure he was dead from the gunshots that sent him sprawling on top of me, but then three men burst in and made sure to finish the job… in the most brutal way possible. Judging from what they said, they had a serious grudge against the Russian, and I remember being frozen on the bed watching as they took turns hurting him, making him suffer. The three of them were so vicious, so determined, and they didn't let up. They were in pain from what he did, so they made sure to put him in as much pain as possible.

And the Russian didn't show any kind of remorse, so I guess that makes sense, but…

The images keep flashing through my head, stained with red from the blood, the sounds of the Russian man's bones crunching and that final sickening crack when Malice, the angry one, smashed his head in.

My knees threaten to buckle as I replay it all, and I end up bent over in the shower, holding on to the wall and breathing hard through my nose.

It's all so much, *too* much, and the humid air from the shower suddenly seems so thick that I can barely breathe.

I scrub myself down as fast as I can, making sure not to leave any traces of blood, and then I get out, throwing on a long-sleeved shirt and sweat pants. It feels so good to be covered up again, after being leered at by the Russian guy and those men outside the dive bar.

My heart is still racing, and I press my hand over it, counting the beats, trying to calm myself down.

"It's okay, Willow," I whisper again, but the mantra still doesn't work.

My phone chimes in the distance with a notification, and the sudden sound makes me jump, a small scream bursting out of me. When I go to

grab my phone from the kitchen, I find the screen lit up with a text from April, the head bitch at school who loves to torment me in her spare time.

"Fuck," I mutter under my breath.

I scan the text, reading it several times but barely processing it at all. It's about a group project we have in one of our classes, and it feels so fucking surreal to be thinking about school right now. It seems so mundane, so *normal*, compared to everything that just happened to me.

The two things don't match up, and it makes me feel even more untethered, like I'm floating in a haze.

It just feels… wrong.

Like none of it can be real.

The phone feels heavy in my hands, and I'm almost in a daze as I type out a reply, promising to email her my part for the project so that she can add it to the PowerPoint.

Then I put the phone down and let out a sigh.

It's late now, and my whole body feels heavy and sore. It feels like this night has been a whole week. A whole year, even. I'm exhausted.

Moving sluggishly, I crawl up onto the bed and burrow under the blankets.

I left the lights on, thinking that would make me feel safer. It's what I used to do as a kid when I needed to be sure there was nothing in the closet or under the bed.

Dark things hate the light.

But as I lie in my small bed, listening to the *thump, thump, thump* of my heartbeat, the light makes me feel vulnerable in a different way. I imagine it shining through my apartment windows like a beacon, calling for those three men to come kill me, and I scramble out of bed and flip off the light switch.

Usually, there's nothing I want more at the end of a long, exhausting day, than to curl up in bed and drift off. Between work and school and worrying about money, I don't get enough rest as it is.

But tonight, it takes hours for sleep to come.

VICTOR

THE LIGHT from the bank of screens around me glows, casting shadows in my otherwise dark room.

My eyes dart back and forth between the computer monitors, narrowed in concentration while I work on my task. I have various security feeds from nearby the whorehouse up, and I meticulously scan through every bit of footage, scrubbing any hint of me and my brothers and that girl we didn't kill from a wide perimeter around the place.

I'm the most comfortable like this—in front of my computers, laser focused on a task. No chatter in my ears, no one asking questions. My fingers fly across the keys, and anytime I pick up a sign of that girl or one of us, I make sure it's gone.

Ransom always calls it 'boring as hell, with maybe one or two exciting parts thrown in,' but there's something comforting about the repetitiveness of scrubbing data.

I have to be thorough, and that scratches an itch somewhere in my brain.

"If we fucked up, then we fucked up together! As a team!"

Ransom's voice breaks through the calm in my mind for a second, and I'm dimly aware of him and Malice walking into my room, mid argument.

"It was a mistake," Malice growls, his tone agitated. "I should've just shot her like I planned to."

I ignore their heated back and forth, tuning them out enough to keep doing what I'm doing. My eyes flick from one screen to another, and I narrow my gaze as I lean forward a little.

It's hard to tell if the person in the coat hurrying from the bus stop in some footage I picked up from earlier this evening is the girl, but just to be

safe, I delete that snippet of the recording and then keep going, tracking through more of it.

“That’s not the fucking point!” Malice explodes, his voice breaking through my concentration again.

“How is it not the point, Mal? She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. It’s not her fault.”

“And what if she can’t hold her shit? What then?”

“You already told her what happens then,” Ransom says. “She heard you, Mal. She knows we’re serious. I don’t think she’ll say anything to anyone. And if she does… we’ll deal with it. But she didn’t deserve to die for being in a bad situation outside of her control.”

Tuning them out again, I refocus, getting drawn back into the images on the screens. They continue to argue, but it washes over me like white noise, buzzing in the background. If I couldn’t work through one of Malice and Ransom’s arguments, then I’d never get anything done.

Considering how different their personalities are, they don’t actually butt heads strongly all that often, but the two of them arguing isn’t anything new. Ransom is more easy-going than I am, but he can be stubborn when he gets his mind set on something, and Malice has a hair trigger temper, so it just happens.

Of the three of us, it’s the two of them who are more likely to not see eye to eye. Malice and I are twins, and maybe that comes with a sort of… link. A bone deep connection that lets us understand each other, even when we disagree.

Ransom is also younger than we are by a couple years, and Malice and I both know that he hasn’t gotten as fucked up and fucked around by life as we have. There’s a general understanding between the two of us that we want to keep it that way, so we look out for him to keep him from ending up too much like us.

That means more disagreements, though.

It’s part of the reason Ransom was so determined to let that girl go tonight. Killing her in cold blood right after learning that’s why Nikolai killed our mother would have fucked Ransom up emotionally for a long time.

Malice was protecting our brother as much as the girl when he let her go, even though it was definitely a risk to let her leave the brothel. Hopefully, she’ll be scared enough of Malice’s warning to keep her mouth

shut. Otherwise, Mal will deal with her, Ransom's feelings on the subject be damned.

My fingers keep moving across the keys, and I finally work back through enough of the footage that there's no trace left of any of us. I nod with satisfaction, and it's like that itch has gotten scratched even more, knowing that the job was done and done to perfection. No trail left behind for anyone to find.

I turn around in my chair, cutting my brothers off mid argument.

"It's done. It's like we were never there."

Malice nods, still looking on edge. His arms are folded over his chest, and his jaw is tight.

"Good. That means there's no digital evidence that we were at the whorehouse," he says, flicking a glance at Ransom. "But there's still a witness. She could go to the cops."

"Why would she talk to the cops?" Ransom shakes his head. "She was in a brothel, about to get dicked down by a Russian criminal. I'm pretty sure the law isn't her best friend."

"It's unlikely," I say, cutting in before Malice can. "But possible. What we did is a bigger crime than prostitution, so she could decide to report it and make a deal for immunity."

Malice works a hand over his jaw. "Or she could sell us out to anyone who cares enough about Nikolai to come looking for who killed him."

Ransom grimaces, worry glinting in his eyes. "Yeah, but we don't even know enough about him to know who that would be."

He's right about that. When Ash O'Donnell from the Kings of Chaos came to tell us who was responsible for our mother's death, I searched every database and site I could for information about Nikolai. But it was like he was a ghost, keeping his digital footprint so light that I couldn't dig much up on him at all.

I tap my fingers together, an old habit. "Still, it's possible. And more likely than her going to the cops. We don't know who Nikolai had connections with, and if any of them put a bounty out, she might decide it's worth it to take it. People don't tend to work in whorehouses because they have a love for the job."

"Meaning she needed the money," Malice says.

I nod, and Ransom looks between the two of us before sighing heavily.

“Okay fine. You’re right. We can’t just blindly trust her to keep the secret. So what do we do about it?”

Malice shoots me a questioning look, and I take a second to think before I speak.

“I could go set up cameras in her apartment,” I offer. “Her address came up when I ran a search on her earlier. It will let us keep an eye on her.”

“Good. Do it.” Malice scrubs a hand over his jaw. “It’s the best we’ve got right now.”

I glance at Ransom to see if he’s going to have some argument against this plan of action, but he doesn’t say anything, so I nod.

The two of them watch me as I go to my closet and grab one of my cases for my equipment. Everything has a place inside of it, and the case is lined and padded to make sure nothing gets damaged in transit.

I know everything I need is there, but I double check it anyway, making a satisfied noise when I see that it’s all organized.

“I’ll be back,” I tell them. Then I head out, making my way down to the first floor and heading for the modified garage.

One of the benefits of our chop shop is we have room for all the vehicles we like. Where Ransom and Malice tend to like theirs showy and full of power, I have something more efficient. My Supra is dark and sleek, and the leather seats are just the right texture when I slide into the car, slinging my case onto the passenger seat.

I type the girl’s address into the GPS and make the drive to her apartment.

It’s late enough that the lights are out in all but a couple of the units in the building, but I move quietly anyway, gripping my small case in one hand. When I reach the front of the run down building, I snort softly at the fact that someone has propped the main door open with a rock.

Saves me having to pick that lock to get in, I guess.

The elevator is out of order, but I wouldn’t have taken it anyway. Instead, I move for the stairwell, keeping my footsteps light as I climb toward her apartment.

The hallway is silent except for the muffled sounds of someone’s TV a little farther down the corridor. It’s late, so that makes sense, and there shouldn’t be any unexpected surprises.

Letting out a soft breath, I squat down in front of Willow’s apartment door, taking out a lock pick and jimmying it into the lock. A shitty place

like this won’t have a delicate or sophisticated system for keeping people out of apartments, and I’ve done this enough times that I know the movements by heart.

I slide the pick in and up, jiggle it twice, and then one more time. Then I press down and…

The lock opens with no sound at all, but I feel it when the handle gives under my hand.

I allow myself a little smile at that, pleased.

Lock picking is a precise thing, and when it works out the way I played it out in my head, it’s very satisfying. There’s a logical order to it, and it should work the same way, every time.

In an otherwise chaotic world, having those little things that work like constant rituals makes me feel calm in a way I can’t quite describe.

I ease the door to Willow’s apartment open, pleased when it doesn’t creak, despite the shitty rusted hinges it’s on. I slip inside like a shadow, closing the door just as silently as I opened it.

My brothers and I run a chop shop now, but we’ve done plenty of breaking and entering too—especially with some of the jobs we’ve had to do for X. No job for him is too small or petty, so all of us have a well-rounded collection of skills to break out when we need them.

Creeping through Willow’s apartment is easy, and practice has me instinctively stepping over places where floorboards usually creak and give intruders away. I skirt her furniture and put the case on the couch before flipping the lid open, going right for the compartment where I put the tiny cameras I’ll need for this.

It’s dark in the apartment, but I use a little flashlight to pick the best spots for the cameras to go. One gets placed near the door, to better watch her coming and going in and out of the apartment and see who she has coming over.

If the cops ever stop by to pay her a visit, I’ll be able to see it.

Another camera goes in the kitchen, tucked into a corner that will let me get the best angle to see most of the space. Another goes in the living room, and then I hold the last two in my hand, debating for a second.

It’s a tiny apartment with just one bedroom, and I creep closer to the bedroom door and stand still, listening.

All I hear inside is soft, even breathing, so I put my hand flat on the door and push it open. It creaks just a little, and I scowl at the noise, my

gaze darting over to the bed.

There's no movement, so I let out a breath and move in, keeping to the shadows.

The girl—Willow—is on the bed, curled up beneath the covers. She's wearing a long-sleeved shirt, from what I can tell, and she's still buried under the blankets tucked around her.

It's warm in the room, and there's a light sheen of sweat on her forehead, so clearly she's too warm.

What's the point of wearing so much to bed, then?

The streetlight outside her window throws just enough light into the room that I can see her clearly. It glints off of her blonde hair, catching my eye and holding my attention for longer than it usually would.

I don't know why, but it almost mesmerizes me, and I can't look away.

I step a little closer, looking down at her in the bed. Her breathing is soft, and every so often her forehead scrunches up and then smooths out, like she's having a dream about something perplexing.

My fingers itch, and I give in to the urge to reach down and pull out the switchblade I keep on me pretty much all the time. The blade flips open with a soft sound, barely audible in the room.

The silver of the blade shines in the light from outside as I bring the blade closer to Willow's throat, the movement slow and deliberate.

The logical thing to do here would be to kill her. We could mess around with cameras, watching her and waiting to see if she fucks up and rats us out, but it would be so much easier to just cut her throat right here and now.

I could trash the place, make it look like a break in. Murders like that happen every day in Detroit, especially in this part of town, and no one outside of her family and friends would probably even think twice about it.

It would absolve Malice of having to be the one who killed her, and Ransom wouldn't have to see it.

I bring the knife closer to her skin, almost touching the soft, pale flesh of her neck. It would be so easy. One slash, and she'd be bleeding out in her bed. I could slip away and then erase any traces that I was ever here.

But then her lips fall open as she shifts slightly in bed, a soft sigh falling from between them. My eyes are drawn to the soft pink bow of her mouth, and my cock twitches a little in my pants.

Irritation rises in me, hot on the heels of that brief flash of arousal, and I force both reactions down, breathing through them. Clearly, I'm due for my

usual beat-off if something like this is affecting me.

I only let myself feel arousal on certain days. I set aside time to jack off three times a week, the same way I make time to do laundry or clean up the kitchen. Outside of those times, I don't feel it, and I don't let myself feel it.

Getting turned on by the sight of this girl is unusual and unplanned, and I hate that. I really fucking hate that.

The way her hair falls over her pillow and the way my gaze keeps drifting back to her neck and her mouth make me want to kill her even more.

She's a distraction and a liability, and we don't have time for either of those things.

My fingers curl tighter around the knife's handle, and I narrow my eyes, willing myself to do it. To cut her throat and be done with it.

But I don't move.

Something stops me, and after a few seconds, I let out a sigh and put the knife away.

My eyes flash over Willow's body one more time, and then I turn my back on her.

Killing her wouldn't make sense anyway.

We agreed to leave her alive, and going against that would cause disorder in our family, which none of us want. So instead, I make sure there's a camera in every room of her apartment, then I pack up the rest of my things and leave, locking the door behind me.

The drive back is quiet, the streets nearly empty at this hour, even in a large city like Detroit. When I get back home, Malice is still up, sitting in the kitchen with a bottle of whiskey almost half empty in front of him. He doesn't have a glass, which means he's just been swigging from the bottle.

His right forearm looks red and swollen in places, and I can tell he's been working more on the tattoo he's been giving himself lately. It's one of those hobbies he picked up while he was in prison, up there with learning how to speak fluent Russian.

I know the language as well, thanks to my father forcing me to learn it, but I never really speak it unless I'm talking to Mal. Ransom knows a little—enough to pick up if we're talking shit about him in Russian, at least. He can understand more than he can speak, but there's no real reason for him to know more.

"It's done," I tell Malice.

“Good.”

He leans back in his chair until he can reach the counter behind him. His fingers hook around two lowball glasses, and he leans forward again, bringing the metal legs of his chair back down on the floor with a thud.

He pours two fingers of whiskey, then passes one glass across the table to me.

I barely glance at it, shaking my head. Malice and Ransom never have any issues indulging when they want to, but I don’t drink much at all.

“For Mom,” Malice says, before I can turn it down.

We both know I can’t say no to that.

“For Mom,” I echo softly, picking up the glass. The amber liquid glints in the light as I swirl it, and I hold the glass in my hand for just a second, letting myself think about our mother and how much I miss her.

Malice raises his own glass, and I lift mine as well, in a silent toast to the woman we loved so much. Who loved us so much.

We both knock back the whiskey, and it burns all the way down.

Malice slams his glass on the table and sighs. For once, he doesn’t look angry at the world, just a little tired.

“It’s over,” he says, staring at the glass on the table. “We did it.”

“We did,” I agree. “We killed the man who killed her.”

“He deserved worse. He deserved whatever fucking hell we could rain down on him.” My twin curls his fingers into a fist on the table.

I watch him for a second and then shrug. “He got what was coming to him. That’s what matters.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m going to bed,” I tell him.

He nods, already looking lost in his own thoughts again. I clean my lowball glass, dry it, and put it back in its place before taking my case and heading up to my room. My thoughts churn as I make my way up the stairs, and I run my tongue over my teeth, tasting the remnants of the whiskey I drank.

Malice said it’s over, but in a way, that’s not true.

Nikolai is dead, I erased every trace that we were ever there or had anything to do with it, and the whorehouse has been burned to the ground. But there’s still that girl.

She’s a loose end. Unexpected. A wrench in our otherwise smoothly plotted plan.

I don’t like that.

I don’t like it one damn bit.

We don’t know her or much at all about her, so we can’t predict what she’ll do. That means she’ll *keep* being a dangerous unknown, and I grind my teeth a little at the thought of that.

I told Malice I was going to bed, but instead, I set things up on my computer so I can watch the feeds from the cameras I installed in her apartment.

Each one works perfectly, showing me angles of each room I put the cameras in. I flip to her bedroom, bringing it up on the biggest screen. She’s still there, curled up in bed, sleeping on her side now. Every so often, she twitches, and at one point she nestles down deeper in the blankets, despite the fact that she still has to be so fucking overheated.

It’s late, and it’s been a long fucking day. I should go to sleep so I won’t be exhausted when my alarm goes off at six-thirty tomorrow morning like it always does.

But for a little while longer, I just watch her. Curious about her, even though I don’t want to be.

WILLOW

In my dreams, I see the three of them.

Ransom. Malice. The one called Vic.

Malice is angry, punching a wall, slamming his fist into the drywall and leaving a dent behind. Ransom is smiling, but somehow it doesn't reach his blue-green eyes. He talks, but I can't hear what he's saying over Malice's rage. The quiet one, Vic, just stands there, taking it all in. His eyes are cold and unreadable, and he doesn't speak or move. He might as well be a robot, observing and not interacting, and it sends a chill down my spine.

The Russian man is there too. One minute, he's on the bed, pinning me down. His hands are on my body, touching me, groping me roughly, and no matter how hard I fight to get away, he keeps holding me in place.

"You asked for this," he snarls in his thick accent. "You can't say no."

In the back of my mind, I know he's right. I know I can't turn him down, even though I don't want this. I don't want it.

I yell for him to get off me, but no sound comes out.

Then, almost like he teleported there, the massive Russian is across the room. His body is crumpled on the floor, and there's blood everywhere. It soaks into the floorboards and creeps its way across the scuffed wood toward the bed.

I scramble up, every muscle in my body tensed to run.

But then the three men who killed the Russian converge on me.

Ransom helps me off the bed, his grip firm but almost gentle. Then Malice rips me out of his grasp. He pins me to the wall, one hand at my throat, the other holding his shiny, dark gun.

I tremble, opening my mouth again, wanting to beg him to let me go. Ready to promise that I won't say anything. I swear I won't.

But I can't make the words come out. All I can do is watch him, my gaze locked on his. A fierce, wild rage burns in his eyes, and I feel like I'm falling into the swirling gray of his irises, unable to look away. They're beautiful, in a way that a dark thunderstorm on the horizon is beautiful. Full of chaos and destruction, but breathtaking too.

All of him is beautiful, just like all of him is terrifying, and it makes him mesmerizing in a strange way.

The gun is aimed at my head, and I finally manage to break eye contact with him and squeeze my eyes shut, not wanting to see the moment when he pulls the trigger. He presses the barrel to my temple, and I flinch, my breath coming faster.

"Please," I whisper.

His breath fans across my face, a soft gust of air. "Please what?"

"Don't… kill me."

There's a long moment of silence, and I'm sure he's not going to listen to my plea. After all, I've seen too much. Why would he let me live?

He doesn't know me. He doesn't care about me.

To him, I'm just what the Russian man described their mother as. A piece of trash to be discarded.

But then he shifts his grip on me a little, and the gun leaves my temple. I let out a small sigh of relief, then gasp as the cool metal of the barrel touches between my breasts, tracing the jagged tears the Russian left in my slip.

Is he going to shoot me in the heart instead? Will I die faster that way?

"Open your eyes."

His voice is low and rough, and I obey the command without thinking, as if it's an instinctual response. My eyelids fly open, and I stare up into his stormy gray eyes, breathing so hard that I can feel the gun digging deeper into my chest with every inhale.

My entire body is tensed, ready for the moment when he fires, but instead of pulling the trigger, he drags the gun down even lower. The smooth metal glides over my stomach and along my upper thigh, and I choke on my next breath when he moves it to one side so that it slides between my legs.

"What are you—"

The question dies with a squeaked noise as he grazes the barrel of the gun over my clit. My heart is pounding and my skin is prickling all over, as if I'm about to be struck by lightning.

"I'm not going to kill you," the man named Malice murmurs in that rough voice of his. "Don't worry."

I am worried, though.

I'm extremely fucking worried, because he's got a gun between my legs, rubbing circles against my clit.

I'm worried because… I'm getting wet.

Nothing about this should turn me on. It's so fucked up, so wrong. But when he eases the barrel of the gun away from my clit, I find myself moving my hips, chasing the touch of the hard, smooth metal.

Malice doesn't react to that, and he also doesn't stop. He gives me what I'm silently asking for, slipping the barrel of the gun between my folds and then rubbing it against my clit again, smearing the gathering wetness over my skin.

I'm still trembling, just like I was when he first pressed the gun to my temple, but now I think it's for a different reason.

"Please," I whisper, but I don't know what I'm begging for now.

Do I want him to stop? Or to keep going?

Do I want him to spare me or ruin me?

"Don't worry," he murmurs, his voice like gravel. "I know what you need."

Slowly, he presses the gun into me, deeper and deeper. It hurts at first, since I've never had anything other than my fingers in there before, and the gun isn't really meant to be there at all.

But Malice doesn't stop. He keeps pushing until he meets the resistance of my hymen.

A smirk crosses his darkly handsome face, and I gasp sharply when he shoves the barrel in that last bit, ripping through my hymen, taking my virginity.

I writhe against the wall, and it's more pain than anything at first. I'm wet, but the gun is big and oddly shaped, pressing against my walls and amplifying that tender, sore feeling inside me.

The longer Malice keeps fucking me with the barrel, though, the better it starts to feel. I stop wincing and start moaning softly, heat building between my legs.

He keeps working it in, going as deep as he can, and eventually, I can't stop the moans that pour from my lips. My hips roll against every one of his thrusts, heat building low inside me. I'm so close to coming, so close to falling apart, riding the knife's edge of adrenaline and euphoria, desire and terror.

Then, just as my legs start to shake, Malice pulls the gun out, leaving me empty.

The barrel of it is covered with my arousal and smeared with small streaks of blood from where he tore my hymen, and Malice looks right at me as he drags his tongue up the length of it.

My mouth drops open, disgust and a strange, sick sort of arousal churning in my stomach. That's wrong. That's so, so, so wrong.

But why does the predatory gleam in his eye and the animalistic way he licked the gun make some part of me feel drawn to him?

His pupils dilate as he watches my reaction, the pitch black color overtaking the gray of his irises. The other two men have been standing behind him this entire time, and now they step closer, their gazes just as intent on me as his is.

They surround me, boxing me in as they move as a unit, and I don't have anywhere to go. I'm stuck between them and the unyielding plaster of the wall, my heart pounding and my chest heaving as I try to remember how to breathe.

The one named Ransom cocks his head, his bright blue-green eyes seeming to see too much of me.

"You're bound to us now, little bird," he murmurs, his tone oddly gentle. "You have to keep your mouth shut."

"I will," I promise, breathless. "I swear. I won't say anything. Please."

Malice grips my chin and closes the remaining distance between us. His dark eyes scan my face, like he's looking for any trace that I'm lying or holding something back.

He's so close that our noses are almost touching, his muscled body looming over mine.

"If you don't keep your word, we'll find out. And we'll wreck you," he tells me, running his thumb along the line of my jaw. "Do you want to be wrecked?"

I gasp, surging up in the bed, my heart beating so hard in my chest that I can hear the blood rushing in my ears over the sound of my ragged

breathing.

I'm soaked in sweat, and my hair is a tangled mess. The sheets are wrapped around me, twisted in a way that makes me feel trapped. Adrenaline is pouring through my veins, and I have to force myself to take deep, even breaths to calm the frantic race of my heart.

"It was just a dream," I murmur, shaking my head as I press the heels of my hands to my temples. "Just a dream, Willow. Just a dream."

Finally, the tension in my shoulders and chest starts to ease a little, and I glance over at the clock. It's earlier than I would normally wake up, but not by much. I'm grateful the dream didn't wake me up in the middle of the night, because I know there's no way I'd be able to go back to sleep now.

After a few more moments of trying to gather myself, I get up, dragging my exhausted ass to the shower. It's not blood and dirt this time, but I need to wash the sweat off me. Plus, I still don't really feel clean from last night.

I let the shower run a little colder than I usually would, trying to shake off the last of that… nightmare and clear my thoughts.

After everything that's happened, it feels weird to be doing anything normal or mundane, but after my shower, I force myself to pour a bowl of cereal. Each bite tastes like sawdust in my mouth, but I have to eat.

Besides, the milk is on its last legs, and I need to finish it before it goes bad.

Thoughts like that are still there, still in the back of my mind like they usually are, but overlaid on top of them, glowing like a neon sign in my head, is the fact that I watched a man die last night.

"Stop thinking about it, Willow," I mutter to myself. "Just get up and go to school."

My school bag is right where I left it yesterday, before everything went down, and I grab it, hurrying out of the apartment to catch the bus to campus.

It's the same route I take every day, but I feel so disconnected from it. From everything. My stomach is in knots, and I'm glad I didn't eat more than cereal.

My skin flashes hot and cold and then hot again, the waves of anxiety making me feel like I've got a fever or something.

It's like I'm a different person now. Like everything that happened before last night happened to someone else, and I'm trying to step into this new person's life and figure out how to navigate it.

Campus is the usual busy mess of students. People call to each other from across the grounds, and someone goes whizzing by me on a skateboard, laughing as they head toward another group of students.

For a second, I just stand on the paved walkway, blinking in the bright sunlight. It feels like the first day of school all over again, and I have to force myself to remember what day it is and what classes I have to go to today.

“Hey, Willow!”

The voice jerks me out my thoughts, and I turn my head to see Colin DeVry heading toward me.

He has an easy going grin on his face, and on any other day, the sight of him would probably have my heart racing a little. Colin is handsome in a classical way. Sandy blond hair falls over his forehead, and he shakes it away from his clear blue eyes as he comes to a stop in front of me.

“Hi, Colin.” My voice sounds raspy and weird to my ears, and I wonder if it sounds the same to him. “What’s up?”

“Not much. Same old, you know.” He lifts one shoulder in a shrug. “So listen, I was wondering something about the reading we’re supposed to do for Fowler’s class. Have you done it yet?”

I can barely remember what homework assignment he’s talking about, but I shake my head anyway. “Um, no. Not yet. Have you?”

“Yeah, I started to. I just don’t quite get what Fowler is looking for in the response.” Colin makes a face. “Anyway, let me know when you finish it. Maybe we can compare notes before we turn our stuff in, yeah?”

“Oh. Sure.” I nod, trying to put a convincing smile on my face. “That would be great.”

“Cool. Catch you later.”

He grins at me again, then turns and heads across the quad toward a few of his friends who are hanging out nearby. I watch him go before finally forcing my feet to start moving.

Colin is a lot more popular than I am, and he’s one of the few people on campus who hasn’t followed April’s lead by either bullying me or ignoring me. We’ve never really hung out, but he’s asked me to study with him a few times, and usually, talking to him first thing in the day like this would put me in a good mood.

But nothing can break through the cloud that seems to follow me across campus like a dark haze. It clings to me as I go to each of my classes,

wrapping around me and making goosebumps rise up on my skin as the professors drone on. It follows me out onto the quad at lunch, so thick around me that I barely even hear April and her cronies making fun of me as they walk past.

The only thing that pulls me out of my stupor for a moment is the sight of the administration office as I pass by it on my way to the bus stop at the end of the day. A sharp pang of worry shoots through my stomach, cutting through the knot that already sits low in my belly.

The money for my tuition is still due soon, and I still don't have a way to get it. Selling my virginity was supposed to be the answer, but since the man who was going to pay for it is dead now, that clearly didn't work.

And now I have no idea what to do or how to get the money.

I sit in the back of the bus on the way to work, keeping my head down and letting my long blonde hair fall around my face like a curtain, blocking everything else out.

After getting off at the usual stop, I walk the rest of the way Sapphire the way I do every day. On top of how I was already feeling, nerves twist in my gut at the thought of going back to the club after what happened.

Part of me—a huge part, actually—wants to call in sick and not have to deal with Carl or anyone else today, but I know it's probably for the best to just go about my life as if nothing has happened.

So when I reach the club, I take a deep breath and step inside.

"Willow!"

Carl barks my name as soon as I step through the door. I jump at the sound of his loud voice, pressing my hand to my chest to try to calm my racing heart as I glance over at him. I don't know what he's doing out on the floor. It's pretty rare to see him outside of his office.

The few patrons already at the club are lost in their drinks, so they barely even glance at me as I make my way over to where Carl is standing, his arms crossed over his chest.

"My office," he says, jerking a thumb at me as I approach. "Right now."

"Okay."

My heart starts to beat faster as I follow him to the back, the hairs on my neck prickling. What does he want?

Inside his office, Carl closes the office door with a snap and then sinks into the chair behind his desk, his eyes narrowed as he looks at me. He

doesn’t say anything, just looks at me with an expectant expression, like he’s waiting for me to speak.

When I don’t, he huffs, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the desk. “What the fuck happened?”

The feeling of ants crawling over my skin intensifies. “I… um, I don’t __”

“Apparently, the brothel burned down last night,” he interrupts. “The whole fucking place went up in smoke.”

My eyes widen, the breath freezing in my lungs. *Holy shit*. That must’ve happened after I left. Maybe it was an accident, or…

No.

It wasn’t an accident. Those three men who killed the Russian guy did it. They must’ve burned the brothel to cover their tracks.

“Giselle died in the fire,” Carl continues, I can’t tell if he’s genuinely upset about that or not. I didn’t get the impression the two of them were close friends—more like reluctant business associates.

He raises his eyebrows at me, clearly demanding some kind of explanation.

“I didn’t know about any of that,” I say, my throat tight. “I-I wasn’t there long. The john who came in, he… he kicked me out before that happened. He wasn’t happy with me.”

It’s only a half lie. The Russian man really wasn’t happy with me. He made that clear enough before everything exploded into chaos and he was killed.

Carl sits back in his chair with a snort. He looks me up and down slowly and then shakes his head. “Guess I can’t be surprised about that.”

My stomach clenches. Of course that’s how Carl feels. He thinks I’m a freak, so why wouldn’t he believe that the Russian sent me packing instead of fucking me, even though he was willing to pay more for a virgin?

“Hey,” my boss says, snapping his knobby fingers. “Pay attention.”

“I *am*,” I reply, biting back everything else I want to say to him.

“You keep your mouth shut about all this, you hear me? I don’t need the cops poking around and asking questions.”

He glances around the office as if a police officer might somehow be hidden behind a filing cabinet or something.

I know he just doesn’t want them to find out that he was funneling girls to a brothel if they decide to investigate, but he’s not the first person who’s

told me to keep what went down last night a secret, so I nod.

"Of course. I won't say anything. I promise."

"Good." Carl nods, looking satisfied. "Now get to work."

It's a relief to leave his office, even if it does mean putting on the work uniform I hate so much. After running through the streets half naked and barefoot last night, wearing this moderately revealing dress makes my skin tingle with discomfort, but I try to swallow it down and stay focused on my job.

Even with everything else going on, I can't afford to get fired.

I've worked at Sapphire long enough that I can wait tables on autopilot, which is good. It might not be the best service I've ever given, but whatever. People get their drinks.

As the evening wears on, the club starts to get busier. A table of seven comes in at one point, and it sounds like they're celebrating something—either a birthday or a promotion. It's hard to tell, since it's clear they've already been pre-gaming somewhere else. I lean in close to get their orders, and from behind me, I feel a hand on my ass.

I jerk in surprise, more jumpy than usual after being manhandled so much last night.

It's not the first time someone has tried to cop a feel on me at work. Mostly, everyone's focus stays on the stage, but sometimes the men here get so shit-faced or horny that they can't tell the difference between the dancers and the waitresses.

"Sir, you—"

I start to tell the guy off, but before I can, someone grabs his hand in what looks like a crushing grip.

The man yelps in pain, and I look up and suck in a sharp breath when I realize I know the person who's come to my rescue.

It's Ransom.

His lips quirk up at the corners like he's about to smile, but there's ice in his eyes as he turns his attention to the drunk club patron.

"You wanna keep this hand?" he asks conversationally, squeezing it even tighter and making the guy contort to try to ease the pressure. "Then don't put it on that girl. Ever. Got it?"

He releases the man's hand as he finishes speaking, and all the guys' friends stare at the two of them, probably wondering if there's about to be a

fight or something. The guy cradles his hand against his chest, puffing himself up a little with what's probably a lot of liquid courage.

"Oh yeah?" he slurs. "And who the fuck is gonna stop me? Huh? You?"

Ransom shrugs, his eyes glinting. "If that's what it takes, then yeah."

The man stands up from his chair, lifting his chin like he's about to go toe to toe with Ransom, but something he sees in those blue-green eyes makes him back down almost immediately, taking the wind out of him.

"Whatever," he mumbles, dropping his head and slinking away through the crowd.

Ransom watches him go for a half second before turning his focus back to me, and my stomach drops with a sickening lurch as our gazes meet.

Why is he here? Did they change their minds about killing me? That guy Malice wanted me dead for sure, and maybe he managed to make his case overnight, sending the one who argued to save me to do the job.

Ransom seemed to be against it last night, but why would he stick up for me and put himself at odds with his friends?

I take a small step backward, on the verge of dropping my tray and running, but Ransom reaches out before I can do anything.

"Come on," he murmurs, plucking the tray from my hand and dropping it anyway. Then he tugs me through the crowd, pulling me into a room near the back where the cleaning crew keeps all their buckets and mops.

It's a small, cramped space, not meant to fit two people and a bunch of cleaning stuff. The closet is filled with the scent of various cleaners and stale water, but somehow, over all that, is the scent of Ransom.

It fills my nostrils, blocking out everything else with the scent of something almost spicy and sharp, with an undercurrent of grease and motor oil. It's unique but not bad, and it makes my heart thud heavily in my chest.

This close, I can't deny how handsome he is. All three of the men from last night had a beauty about them, but the other two were sharper, like you could cut yourself just by looking at them too closely. Ransom is more classically handsome, with looks that seem designed to draw a person in.

But despite that, I'm still terrified of him. Gorgeous or not, I know he could kill me if he wanted to without breaking a sweat. I saw what he helped do to the Russian last night.

"W-what do you want?" I demand, trying to sound annoyed at being dragged away from work instead of like I'm about to piss myself from fear.

He gives me a crooked smile.

“Don’t worry, Malice didn’t change his mind,” he says, as if he’s read my mind. “And neither did Victor. They just wanted me to come here tonight to make sure you remember our deal.”

“Right. And to let me know that you know where I work. And probably where I live too.” I snort, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

Ransom’s pierced eyebrow twitches upward, and his smile widens. “You’re smart. I like that. And brave, even though I’m sure you’re freaked the fuck out.”

He’s right about that, but I’m not about to admit it. It already feels like he knows too much about me, like he can read me too well.

“I remember our deal. I won’t say anything to anyone,” I assure him. I bite my lip, then continue in a rush. “My boss asked about it. But I said I didn’t know anything about what had happened.”

The smile fades from Ransom’s face, his brows pulling together. “Why did he want to know?”

“He…” I swallow. “He was the one who set me up with the job. He sent Giselle—the madame, or whatever—my name.”

“Ah, I see.”

He narrows his eyes, gazing down at me with such an intent expression that it makes my skin flush. There’s a muffled cheer from outside, which is usually a sign that one of the more popular dancers must be about to start her set. Ransom looks past me, like he can see through the door to the main area of the club where the dancers and the patrons do their thing.

“You need to quit this job,” he says finally.

My eyes widen. “*What?*”

“Regardless of whether your boss believes you or not, you need to put more distance between yourself and this place, especially since he’s the one who sent you to the whorehouse last night. We don’t want anyone connecting the dots that put you at the brothel before it got torched.”

“I can’t!” I tell him, my heart thudding heavily against my sternum. “I need the money. I’m already behind on trying to pay the rest of my tuition for this semester, and if I lose this job, I won’t even be able to make rent.”

Ransom steps closer to me, and I instinctively step back—but I only make it about two steps before my back hits the door. He rests his palms on the wood on either side of my head, boxing me in as I crane my neck to

keep looking at his face. I'm of pretty average height, and this guy and his two friends are all tall, over six feet.

There's heat in Ransom's eyes as he stares down at me, but it's not the heat of desire. It's something that makes my blood run a little colder with fear.

I've only interacted with him and the other two for a little bit, but in that small amount of time, Ransom has always seemed like the nicest one. If any of them could be called nice after what I saw them do, I guess. At least he's more charming and seems more… *human* than the others.

But in this moment, I know I was right to begin with, that first night I bumped into him.

He's dangerous and deadly, and the hard look on his face proves that. He can be just as terrifying as the other two when he wants to be.

His voice drops down a little when he speaks, and a shiver runs through me as his words hit my ear.

"It wasn't a request," he says simply. "This is your last day working here."

I blink, my heart sinking. Tears well in my eyes, and I want to look away from him, but he's just so close. There's nowhere else to look, nothing else to focus on with his muscled body crowding mine like this.

A tear slips down my cheek, and when I sniffle a little, trying to stop it from becoming a torrent, the hard look on his face softens. He sighs, reaching over to run a knuckle down my cheek.

"I'm sorry you got mixed up in all this shit, angel," he murmurs. "It's not fucking fair, but that's the way life is sometimes. I have to look out for my brothers, you know? We're all we've got."

Brothers.

Right. The three of them are brothers.

I remember Ransom mentioning something about how the Russian guy killed their mother, Diana Voronin. And even if I hadn't heard him say that, I could probably have guessed that the three of them are related. There's definitely some resemblance between him and the two men with dark hair, and the similarities between the dark-haired men were obvious—even if their demeanors seemed to be almost polar opposites.

Three brothers.

Three monsters.

Three men who wouldn’t hesitate to kill me if they had to, to protect each other.

A wave of fear rushes through me at the thought, and my throat tightens as something almost like envy follows on its heels. They have each other, and I don’t have anyone. No one to watch out for me. No one to have my back. No one to help me as my life spins out of control.

“Okay,” I whisper, another tear slipping through my eyelashes and trailing down until it reaches Ransom’s hand. “I’ll tell Carl I quit.”

Ransom nods gravely, brushing the teardrop away from my cheek. “Good girl.”

He lingers for a moment longer, gazing down at me with his knuckles still lightly touching my face. The point of contact between us tingles, making goosebumps rise up on my skin, and I hold my breath, staying absolutely still.

When he opens his mouth, I think he’s about to say something else, but then he just shakes his head and closes it again. He tugs me away from the door and slips out of the closet, disappearing into the crowd.

WILLOW

As the door to the closet shuts behind Ransom with a soft click, I wrap my arms around myself, taking a few deep breaths and trying to get a handle on my emotions.

My heart is still racing way too fast, and my skin feels cold and hot at the same time. I can still feel the brush of Ransom's fingers and the way he boxed me in against the door, and it reminds me way too much of the dream I had last night.

I don't like the way my body responded to him.

I don't like the way my heart beat harder and faster, or the way my skin prickled like I was touching a low volt battery. It makes me feel unbalanced and out of control. I haven't felt like myself since last night, and I was hoping that just doing my job and getting back to some semblance of my normal life would help, but now that's being taken away from me too.

I scrub a hand over my face and then draw myself up, finally leaving the closet to go knock on the door to Carl's office.

"What?" he barks, sounding as irritated as usual.

I edge the door open and stick my head in. "Do you have a minute?"

He looks up from his computer screen and glares at me, shaking his head. "Jesus, Willow, if I wanted to see you this much, I'd put you on the fucking stage like you asked me to. What the hell do you want now?"

For a second, I think about reminding him that he's the one who dragged me into his office earlier, but I hold that in, deciding to get to the point instead.

"Um, I… I'm quitting. This is my last day."

He purses his lips for a second and then shrugs. “Fine. Leave your uniform before you go.”

“It’s just that I need more money if I’m going to be able to pay my tuition, so I have to find another job.”

Carl scoffs, rolling his eyes. “That’s what they all say, sweetheart. And usually they come crawling back. But good luck out there.”

It’s a clear dismissal, and my stomach ties itself into knots as I close the office door and head for the bathroom. I change out of my uniform and leave it folded up in the back room, since I won’t be needing it anymore.

Fuck, I hate this.

Sure, this job wasn’t great, and Carl could be shitty more often than not, but cocktail waitressing was paying the bills. It was the *only* thing paying the bills. Without it, I have no idea what I’m going to do.

I walk out of Sapphire earlier than I ever have before, and each step I take toward the bus stop feels heavy and terrible, like I’m trudging through molasses or quicksand that’s pulling me down.

It feels like my life is crumbling around me. And there’s nothing I can do to stop it.

OVER THE NEXT COUPLE DAYS, I get very jumpy. Every time I leave my apartment, I find myself looking over my shoulder, half expecting to see Ransom or one of the other two following me.

Someone brushes up too close to me on the bus on the way home from school once, and I nearly jump out of my skin.

But it’s just a little old woman with a bag too full of groceries, and I breathe a sigh of relief, my hand sliding out from my messenger bag. Ever since Ransom showed up at the club, I’ve taken to carrying a small switchblade with me in my bag. It’s just a little thing to make me feel safer, even though I know if it came down to a fight, I’d probably be dead before I had time to even pull it out.

I start looking for a new job too, but I keep getting turned away. No one is interested in hiring me, and I know it’s because my resume isn’t great. Even though I’ve worked a lot since I was younger, it was all shady, under

the table stuff that my mom got me into. Not stuff I can put on a resume when applying to work at the local seafood restaurant.

On the third day after quitting the club, I head to campus, feeling like crap.

The window of time for me to pay the school the rest of the money I owe is rapidly closing, and I can't help but think of that as I sit through every class, trying to focus and take notes.

After my last class of the day, I have to go to a meeting April called to work on our group project. It's a hike to get across campus, so I'm few minutes late, and when I walk into the study room she booked, she's on me in a second.

"Where have you been?" she demands, her hands planted on her hips as she tosses her red hair over one shoulder. "We said three-thirty. *Sharp*. Do you know what time it is now?"

Usually I try to ignore April's bullshit, or at least distance myself from it, but this time, I give in to the angry feelings in my chest. She's had it out for me since the minute I showed up on this campus, when she saw me in ripped jeans and a threadbare long-sleeved tee and decided I clearly wasn't of the same caliber as her and her friends.

"Get over it, April," I snap. "I showed up, didn't I? I'm ten minutes late, it's not the end of the fucking world."

Her eyebrows shoot up, her jaw dropping open a little. Then she laughs, her expression morphing into a smug smirk.

"Whatever," she drawls. "It doesn't matter anyway. After all, you won't be here for much longer, will you? If I knew I was gonna get kicked out of school for being too poor, I'd probably slack off too."

My cheeks heat, my stomach twisting as I glance around at the other students from our class, who are all watching our exchange with interest.

Dammit.

One of April's crew must've been in the admin office the same day I was and overheard the discussion about my tuition being late. Or maybe it was someone trying to get in good with her, bringing her whatever gossip they could to try to get in with her and her crowd. Either way, she knows how close I am to being booted from Wayne State, and that knowledge makes embarrassment and despair rise up inside me in equal measure.

Because she's right.

Unless some miracle occurs, there's a good chance I won't even be here next week.

Turning away from April, I take a seat at the long table in the middle of the room. The rest of our classmates sit too, and I avoid looking in April's direction as much as possible as the meeting gets started. As soon as it's over, I rush out of the room, striding quickly across campus toward the administration building.

I have to try to get one more extension. I need more fucking time.

The office isn't very busy today, thankfully, and when I see the guy I spoke to last time, I approach his desk. He looks up as I near, adjusting his tie.

"Can I help you?"

"Um, hi." I settle into the seat in front of his desk, dropping my messenger bag beside me. "My name is Willow Hayes, and I was hoping… I wanted to talk about the tuition payment I have due. I know that the deadline to pay it is coming up, I was just wondering—"

He holds up a hand, cutting me off. "Willow Hayes, you said?"

I nod, fiddling nervously with the hem of my shirt.

He types on his computer for a bit and then looks up, smiling. That shocks me, because unless he's just as happy about me getting thrown out of school as April is, I have no idea what he has to smile about.

"Ah, I see you got your tuition issue sorted out," he says. "That's great."

I blink, leaning forward a little. "I… what?"

"It says here that you're all paid up for the rest of the semester. So you're good to go."

"But that—how?"

He looks at me like I'm a bit slow, and honestly I feel like I might be in this moment. My mind is having a hard time processing his words.

"Hold on," he tells me, and then prints something off on the printer next to him.

Once it comes through the feed, he hands me the sheet, and I stare down at it.

There in black and white is my name and a list of fees and costs for the rest of the spring semester. All the way down at the bottom it clearly says, OUTSTANDING BALANCE: $0.00.

It's hard to believe, but I can't deny what's right in front of me, even if I have no idea how it happened. My stomach churns with a weird mixture of

joy and anxiety. I'm glad that I don't have to stress about this anymore, but also super freaked out by how it happened in the first place. Mostly freaked out.

The man behind the desk looks at me expectantly, and I remember that I'm having this little freak out right there in front of him. I shake myself a little and force a smile.

"Thank you," I say stiffly. "I just wanted to… check on the status of things."

"No problem," he replies, turning back to his computer. "Have a good afternoon."

I get up and leave the office, feeling like I'm in a daze. Something good happened to me for once, but I have no idea how. Or why. Or what is even going on anymore.

"Hey, Willow." Colin nods to me as I pass by him and a few of his buddies lounging on the steps to the economics building. "You done for the day?"

"Yeah," I mutter, barely glancing at him as I continue walking.

As my feet carry me across campus, a thought occurs to me, tickling the back of my mind. I turn and head for the area near the cafeteria, where the closest ATM is located. My fingers shake a little as I put my bank card in the slot and type in my PIN.

My account comes up, and I stare down at the screen.

There's extra money in it.

Not just a few dollars, either. My account balance usually hovers in the three figures range, dipping down to two figures when things get really tight. But now there are four numbers ahead of the decimal point.

"Holy shit. I knew it," I whisper to myself, my heart racing.

It's a payoff. It has to be. There's no other explanation for it.

The tuition payment, the extra money in my account… it has to have come from the three brothers. And it's not a kindness, not really. They're just looking out for their own interests. Making sure I don't have any reason at all to go back on our deal.

But it's starting to feel like they control me and my life now.

Like they *own* me, and they can play with my job and my education and whatever else they want, whenever they want.

It makes the sour feeling in my stomach even worse, and I stand in front of the ATM, staring at the numbers for several long moments.

Finally, I jab my finger at the machine, clearing my info off the screen. Then I turn around and start heading back across campus, hiking my messenger bag higher on one shoulder. Dozens of thoughts are flying through my head all at once, and it's as if they're all fighting to be heard over the pounding of my heart.

This is insane. How is this happening?

I'm barely paying attention to where I'm going. I should be heading toward the bus stop since I don't have any more classes or meetings today, but I end up walking through a quiet part of campus where the paved pathway cuts between two buildings.

I don't catch the flicker of movement in my periphery until it's too late.

The man named Malice steps out of the shadows behind me, and I glance over my shoulder, freezing at the sight of him.

He meets my eyes and then starts to prowl closer.

WILLOW

MY HEART SLAMS against my ribs, my fight or flight impulse surging into gear as Malice strides toward me.

He's just as terrifyingly beautiful as I remember him. All dark gray eyes and sharp cheekbones, like some kind of gorgeous demon. A devil walking the earth and coming right toward me.

I take a step back, wanting to put more space between us, but he doesn't let me. He keeps coming, and I stumble backward until I smack into the back of the nearby building.

As he closes the last bit of distance between us, my hand delves into my messenger back, closing around the cool metal of the switchblade handle. Acting on instinct and pure, raw fear, I grab it out, flicking the mechanism to release the blade at the same time I bring it up.

I raise it to the level of Malice's throat just as he takes a final step forward, and the sharp edge of the blade makes contact with his skin.

His eyes widen, and he goes still, stopping with about a foot of space left between us. It's clear he didn't expect someone like me to do something like this, and I wonder how long it's been since someone fought back against this dominating, powerful man.

The surprise in his expression doesn't last for long, though. His face twists into a grim smile, and instead of backing away, he leans in closer to me, letting the edge of the knife press a little more firmly into his skin.

I swallow hard, and his smile turns into a smirk.

"If you're going to pull a knife on me, *Solnyshka,* you'd better be prepared to use it," he purrs, his voice low and dangerous.

It sends a shiver up my spine, but I try not to show it. My mouth is dry, and my heart feels like it's going a mile a minute in my chest, but I don't back down. I keep the knife where it is, tightening my fingers around the handle.

"If you and your brothers want me to pretend you don't exist, maybe you should stop showing up wherever I am," I shoot back. "Stop. Following. Me."

Malice's smile turns hard and sharp around the edges—just like the rest of him.

"Sorry. That's not how this works," he says bluntly. "We do whatever the fuck we like, and you'll do whatever the fuck we say."

Something in me lurches at that, and I squeeze the handle of the knife tighter, my knuckles turning white.

"Who was that guy?" Malice asks, changing the subject so fast it leaves me reeling.

"What guy?"

His eyes narrow. "The one who talked to you earlier."

I blink, because I genuinely don't know what he's talking about for a moment. Who? The admin guy?

"Oh. You mean Colin?" I say after a beat.

Malice's lips press together. "Is that his name?"

"Why do you want to know?" I fire back.

He fixes me with a hard look. "Because I want to know every-fucking-thing."

Control freak.

The thought flits through my head, but I don't let the words come out of my mouth. I really don't want to know what happens if I piss this guy off more than I already have. Instead, I just shrug a shoulder.

"He's just a guy who goes to my school. We talk sometimes, mostly about homework."

Malice grunts, still watching me intently.

He doesn't say anything else, and I can feel the question I want to ask hovering on my tongue, fueled by the burning need for answers. I lick my lips and take a deep breath, gathering my courage.

"Why did you do that? Pay my tuition? Put money in my bank account? I know it was you guys."

Dark gray eyes smolder with irritation as Malice snorts under his breath in response. “If you don’t get why, then you’re dumber than you look.”

I swallow hard, allowing myself to hate him in this moment. He’s harsh and cruel, and he clearly doesn’t give a shit about me.

“Do you expect me to thank you?” I ask, even though it’s probably about as stupid to taunt him as it would be to kick a hive full of bees.

Malice leans in, seeming to take up more space than any one man should be able to as he presses harder against the knife at his throat. I glance down to see blood welling where the sharp blade cuts shallowly into his skin, and my gaze follows the single bright red droplet that trails down his throat. He’s got tattoos creeping up his neck from beneath his shirt, and there’s a rough, raised scar on one side, just below his ear.

Yanking my focus away from all of that, I look back up at his face again as he murmurs, “I expect you to keep your mouth shut.”

“I *have*,” I snap, but the words stick in my throat.

Whatever bravery I was feeling when I pulled the knife is starting to fade as fear rises up again. I know he wasn’t kidding about being willing to kill me. I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t even hesitate if it came down to it.

The way he’s looming over me fills my mind with a sudden flash of the dream I had the night I ran home from the brothel. It’s almost the same, except for the difference in location, and the fact that I’m wearing more clothes now than I was in the dream. Malice is probably armed—he seems like the kind of guy who goes armed *everywhere*—and it makes me think of what he did to me with his gun in the dream.

Oh god. No, Willow. Don’t think about that. Don’t let him know you’re thinking about that.

My body responds to the memory of the dream, my pulse picking up and my breath catching. A simmering heat pools in my belly, mixing with the fear and anxiety that were already there to create a strange cocktail.

I do my best to keep any of that from showing on my face, but it’s almost like Malice can smell it on me. He cocks his head like a dog picking up a scent, his eyes narrowing.

He looks at me like he can see right through me, and something about his unwavering gaze just makes my skin flush even hotter. I feel like I can’t breathe, and my tongue darts out, licking my suddenly dry lips.

“I’ve kept my mouth shut,” I repeat. “I would’ve done that anyway, even without the money.”

“Good.” Malice nods slightly, sending one more droplet of blood cascading down his throat. “Keep it that way.”

He steps away from me suddenly, putting space between us.

“You won’t see me or my brothers again,” he says. “As long as you stick to the deal and don’t say shit to anyone.”

I hold very still, not sure what else to do or say, and for a long moment, Malice doesn’t move either. He just watches me with those sharp, intense eyes, making me feel like I’m prey and he’s a predator with his sights on me, just waiting for me to run so he can chase me down.

Then he flicks his gaze toward the knife, which is still clutched in my hand.

“Learn how to use that or get rid of it,” he says before turning and walking away, leaving me staring after him.

He follows the path between the buildings and then turns left, disappearing from sight. Once I can’t see him anymore, I let out a shaky breath, sagging against the side of the building I’m pressed against. A wave of delayed adrenaline floods my veins, making me feel sick in a rush.

My breath comes faster, and my body hums with a weird energy. I feel completely disoriented, like two worlds that were never meant to touch have collided, leaving me shaky and unsure what to do in the aftermath.

My phone rings in my pocket, and I jump at the sudden sound, dragging it out and hitting the button to answer it without even checking to see who’s calling.

“Hello?”

“Willow. Hi, baby.”

The voice on the other end makes me jerk back to reality with a sickening lurch.

It’s my mom. *Fuck.*

We don’t speak very often anymore. Usually, I screen her calls better, not answering when I’m not in the mood to deal with her, but I wasn’t thinking this time.

My fingers tighten around the phone, and I keep the knife clutched in my other hand, as if holding it will somehow keep me grounded during this conversation.

“Hi, Mom. What’s up?” I ask, trying to sound neutral until I know what she wants.

“Nothing, baby. I’m just calling to check up on you,” she replies. “I know you’ve been busy with school, and that things have to be rough with tuition and all. Those places really overcharge, considering they can’t even guarantee you a job when you graduate.”

I roll my eyes but relax just a little. She’s clearly in one of her ‘be a good mom’ phases, where she showers me with love and affection, pretending like all the times she’s stolen from me and manipulated me haven’t happened.

Those phases never seem to last very long, but I can’t seem to bring myself to tell her to fuck off when they do happen. Because it feels nice, having someone care. Even if it’s just temporary.

“I’m working it out,” I tell her. “Picking up extra shifts when I can. I think it’s going to be okay.”

There’s no way in hell I can tell her that the money has been taken care of, or how.

“Are you sure? I can try to help you with your school costs if you need me to.”

“That’s okay, Mom. I’ve got it covered.”

She makes a soft noise, but she doesn’t sound annoyed. Yet. “You always say that. We’re family, Willow. Family helps each other.”

Hearing those words makes me grind my teeth a little. That’s what she always says. *Family helps each other*. She used to say it when I caught her going through my purse, or when she asked me not to say anything to the people from school who came sniffing around when I was younger, wondering why I was never in class.

It always seemed to be me helping her, though, never the other way around. But whenever I got upset about it, she’d remind me that she was all I had in the world. That she gave me a roof over my head and food to eat, so I owed her for that.

“I know,” I hear myself say, the words falling from my lips on autopilot. “If I need you, I’ll call. Bye, Mom.”

I end the call and then take a deep breath, shoving my phone back into my pocket and the knife back into my bag before heading across campus to the bus stop.

As I go, I keep glancing side to side, half expecting the third Voronin brother to jump out of a bush somewhere. Victor is the only one I haven’t had an encounter with yet, so it feels almost inevitable.

Malice promised I wasn’t going to see any of them again…
But somehow, I don’t think that’s true.

WILLOW

A COUPLE of weeks go by, and just like Malice said, I don't see the three brothers at all during that time.

Even so, there are times when I can't help but feel like I'm being… watched.

It feels like even though I don't see them, they can see me.

Surprisingly, my grades have been improving a lot, and it makes me realize how thin I was stretching myself before. I was always so tired and worn down, and now that I'm not going straight from school to work long hours at Sapphire, I've actually had time to study and get a reasonable amount of sleep.

On a Thursday almost a month after my first encounter with the brothers, I show up to school early to do the final bit of prep for the presentation I've been working on with April and the rest of our group. By the time I walk into my history class, I feel completely ready to go.

We stand up in front of the class and present our research, and when I have to talk about my part, I'm only a little nervous because I realize I actually do know my stuff for this.

"Well done," Professor Walsh says when we're done, and April glances my way with a sour look on her face.

I can tell she's been counting down the days until I was supposed to get thrown out of school for not being able to pay, but it didn't happen. So me doing well on the project, not giving her a chance to mock or belittle me, clearly pisses her off.

"I'd say you paid someone to do your part of the project for you, but we all know you don't have the money," April hisses as we go back to our

seats.

Usually, that would make me feel like shit, but this time I just grin at her, not even bothered. Even her bitchy attitude can't bring me down when I'm so pleased by how well I'm doing.

We're dismissed after the final group presents their project, and the last class of the day goes by quickly. I head down to the bus stop, listening to music in my earbuds as it trundles down the streets of Detroit.

I adjust my bag across my shoulders as I step off the bus, but even as I sing along softly to the lyrics of *Sunflower*, I keep glancing from side to side as I walk toward my apartment. It's become a habit I'm not sure I'll ever shake, an almost compulsive need to keep an eye out for any of the brothers, to catch a glimpse of them.

Those three men feel like ghosts haunting me, always present, just out of my view, and always on my mind because of that. Even when I'm just going about my day, they're never far from my thoughts. I'm constantly looking over my shoulder, expecting to see one of them lurking somewhere.

"Breathe," I whisper to myself, switching off my music as I near my apartment. I take the stairs up to the second floor two at a time, eager to be behind the closed—and locked—door.

There's actually food in my fridge now, so I have more options than mac'n'cheese or rice and beans. I throw together an improvised dinner of chicken and broccoli, sitting at the scuffed up little kitchen table in the corner to eat it. When I'm done, I stand up and stretch, a grin spreading across my face as an idea occurs to me.

Despite the chaos that's invaded my life lately, today was a good day. I'm almost positive we'll get an A on our presentation, and not only will that improve my overall grade in the class, it'll also prove to April that I'm not some charity case or deadbeat.

"I deserve to celebrate a little for that," I murmur, padding toward the bedroom and into the attached bathroom.

I dig around under the sink for a few minutes, pulling out some old candles I bought a while ago. I arrange them around the bathroom and light them all, then turn off the light and twist the tap on the bathtub.

Steam begins to curl up into the air as the tub fills with water, and I shed my clothes, dropping them onto the floor and then kicking them into the corner to deal with later.

When the tub is full, I ease myself into the water, hissing at the rush of heat until my body gets used to the temperature. After a few seconds, I can feel my muscles start to relax, and I slide down into the water and tip my head back against the edge of the tub.

I close my eyes, trailing my fingers absently through the water, letting myself zone out. I haven't had time to do this in forever, and I'm determined to enjoy it.

A contented little sigh falls from my lips, and without thinking, I start moving my fingertips over my skin, dragging them over my stomach and thighs. A spark of arousal lights low in my belly. It's been a while since I touched myself—in the weeks immediately following my encounter with Nikolai, I wasn't really in the mood for it. Whenever I'd slide a hand between my legs as I zoned out before falling asleep, the feel of his calloused hands would pop into my mind, or I'd remember the taste of his dick in my mouth, and I would end up just rolling over onto my side and curling up into a ball instead.

But for the first time in a while, the touch of my own hand feels good, and I can feel my clit throbbing lightly, begging for attention. Spreading my legs, I drop my hand lower and brush my fingers over my clit, sucking in a soft breath at the sensations that spark in my veins in response.

Slowly, I trace a circle around that bundle of nerves. My hips buck forward, sending water sloshing lightly around me.

"Fuck," I whisper, the sound somewhere between a whimper and a sigh.

My eyes are still closed, but I'm aware of the flickering light of the candles in the dim room, and I try to let my mind wander, building a fantasy as I keep working my clit in slow circles.

With one hand still buried between my legs, I bring my other hand up to tug lightly at my nipples, first one and then the other. In my head, I imagine it's someone else doing these things, and I allow myself to get lost in the feeling of being pampered and pleasured. My fingers move faster on my clit, and I drag my bottom lip through my teeth, making soft noises of approval as my head tilts back even further.

"Feels good," I breathe, pinching one nipple harder and drawing a hiss from my lips. "God, yes. Fuck."

In spite of never having had sex—or maybe because of that—I've gotten to know my own body pretty well. I've always been able to get myself off easily, and I can already feel pleasure coiling low in my gut. I

pinch my eyes shut more tightly, rocking my hips into the pressure of my hand as I work my clit harder and faster.

My nipples are stiff and peaked now, and as I arch my back more, they poke out from the water. The feeling of cool air hitting them makes me gasp, my breath coming faster and faster. In my head, I replay moments from movies I've seen or books I've read, allowing the fantasies to play out in my mind's eye. Imagining *I'm* the one being worshipped.

The hot water jostles around my naked body as I clamp my thighs around my hand, planting my feet on the bottom of the tub.

"Yes," I murmur again. "Yes, yes… fuck, yes…"

In my imagination, a rough hand palms my breast, and I do it in real life, squeezing hard enough to make myself moan. I slip two fingers into my core, thrusting them shallowly as I grind the heel of my hand against my clit, licking my bottom lip as I imagine being kissed senseless.

Every time I get close to coming, I ease off a little, wanting to draw this out as long as possible. It's my reward for doing well in class after all, and for surviving the past weeks, ever since…

The motion of my hand stutters as three faces pop into my mind—each one of them similar to the others, but unique too.

Malice, Ransom, and Victor.

My heart, already beating hard from the pleasure coursing through me, kicks into overdrive, slamming against my ribs. My clit throbs beneath my fingertips, and my eyes pop open as I realize I'm not sure if my reaction is from fear or… something else.

"Don't be crazy," I whisper to myself, my gaze darting around the bathroom as if one of them might jump out of the shadows in the tiny room at any moment. "Don't be stupid."

But there's no one there. Just the flickering light of the candles and the soft scents of rose and vanilla as steam hovers in the air. I blow out a breath, resting my hand on my chest for a moment as my pulse finally starts to slow a bit. My pussy is swollen and achy, my clit sensitive from being pushed right to the edge, and I squirm a little, desperate for the release I was working toward.

Letting out one more long breath, I close my eyes again, letting myself fall back into the rhythm of getting myself off. My hand finds my breast again, my fingers moving between my thighs, and this time, I'm not gentle with myself at all.

This time, I’m pushing myself toward the edge with everything I have.

And as pleasure starts to build inside me like a looming hurricane, I don’t let myself think of the Voronin brothers again.

VICTOR

THE FEED from Willow's apartment is up on one of the screens in my room, and I sit behind the desk, watching it intently.

I watched as she went from the kitchen to the bathroom. I watched as she stripped out of her clothes and filled the tub, and then as she started to touch herself.

It's not strictly necessary to have a camera in her bathroom, but I'm a thorough person, so I wasn't leaving any space out in my surveillance of her apartment.

I've tuned into the feed from her apartment for hours every day and night. I know her routine by heart now, from the moment her alarm goes off in the morning to the moment she lies down to sleep at night.

I've watched her until I know dozens of little things about her. Like the fact that she leaves time left on the microwave when she reheats things, instead of clearing it or letting the time run its course. She talks to herself when she's alone, muttering little affirmations or going over lists to make sure she has everything. I saw her practice giving some kind of report or speech, something for school probably, going over it until she had it down.

I've been keeping meticulous track of what she does and what she likes, cataloging her habits and quirks to build a profile on her.

Even so, there's no real need for me to be watching this. What she's doing right now is a first.

My gaze is glued to the screen, and I clench my jaw tightly. At the moment, I wish I'd put another camera in the bathroom to get a different angle.

I can tell what she's doing, and I can see her face in profile. I can partially make out the expressions flitting over her features, the way her eyes are closed and her lips are parted.

But it's not enough.

I want to see all of it.

I want every expression. I want to see under the water, where I can tell her hand is moving.

She took her time at first, letting it build up. Maybe she was playing some fantasy in her mind, and I wonder what it was. Nothing I've seen of her so far has given me any indication what might turn her on, and she's not at all like the women Malice sometimes brings here—the ones who scream that they want it harder and try to call him 'daddy.'

Aside from a few moans and breathy curses, and a moment where she briefly stopped and muttered to herself, Willow hasn't said much at all.

One of her hands rests on her breast as she teases and toys with her nipple. Her fingers pinch and twist at it, and I can see her spine arch, letting me know she's not being gentle with herself.

She likes it rough.

I file that away for some reason. Just adding to the information about her that I keep in my head.

Water slops over the side of the tub as she scrunches up her face, and I can tell she's getting close. Her arm jostles a little as she moves her hand faster under the water, and her body arches into her touch again and again, her head tossing from side to side.

My body reacts to the sight, my abs clenching and my shoulders going tight. I'm hard just from watching her, from hearing those breathy moans. I'm almost tempted to shove my hand down my pants and jerk off, but it's not the day I normally do that. Or the time. Jerking off now would mean deviating from my routine, and I never do that.

So instead, I clench my jaw and suck in air through my nose, letting it out in a rush through my mouth. My hand balls up into a fist against the desk, my nails biting into my palms while I try to control my reactions.

It's usually not this hard.

I've watched porn before, although I usually don't need anything to get me hard on the days when I take care of my body's needs. But this is nothing like anything I've ever seen. Willow looks like she's lost in it

entirely, her hand moving from one breast to the other, her pink tongue flashing out to lick her lips.

My hand almost has a mind of its own as I direct the hidden camera to zoom in on her face. The flush to her cheeks looks like a dusky rose in the flickering candlelight of the bathroom, and her lips look soft and wet.

Her head falls back, a soft cry pouring from her lips. *That's it.* She's right there, poised on the edge, about to fall apart, and it's as if that knowledge vibrates through my entire body. I'm tense as I lean over the desk, my gaze glued to the screen.

And then she comes.

She cries out again, and the sound seems to echo both in the bathroom and in my head. She writhes under the water, her chest rising and falling as she gasps for breath.

It's like my body is somehow synced with hers, and my cock pulses in my pants, my balls drawing up tight. I exhale harshly through my nose and grit my teeth, forcing it all back.

No.

It's not the right day or the right time, and I can't afford to be losing control like this.

Not over some girl that we should have killed in the first place.

In my head, I start counting the seconds as I inhale and then hold the breath in, waiting until my lungs burn to release it.

It's something I've done since I was a child, a way to cope with the shit my father put me through. Settling deeper into the chair in front of my desk, I watch the water lapping at the edge of Willow's bathtub and remember how my father used to hold my head underwater. How I'd take a huge, gasping breath beforehand, filling my lungs to the brim with as much air as I could fit in them. Then I'd count the seconds, waiting to be allowed to breathe again.

My vision goes blurry for a second, and my chest aches the way it used to back then, when I had to remind myself to breathe more often than was probably normal. But who the fuck knows what normal is anyway?

Thinking about that isn't helping, so I shake the memories off. I don't like to remember that shit.

My fingers feel stiff, aching with a phantom memory of my dad breaking them, one by one. I flex them and shake my hands out, trying to banish the feeling.

None of that is useful to be thinking about now.

"And neither is this," I mutter to myself, clicking away from the video feed in Willow's bathroom just as one of her arms moves to grab for her body wash. My fingers hesitate, and a small part of me wonders what she'd look like, wet and soapy in the bath. My cock gives an interested twitch, and I growl under my breath, furious with myself for this fucked up addiction to watching her.

It serves no purpose and does nothing to make things better for me and my brothers, so there's no reason to do it.

By that logic, it's a waste of time, and I hate wasting my time.

Still, I find myself checking the feeds to her apartment several times a day.

With the video of Willow minimized and out of sight, I switch over to check my inbox for messages. My eyebrows twitch upward when I realize I've gotten an encrypted message from X. My brain switches back into work mode immediately, and it feels comforting, like putting on a jacket that fits perfectly.

I put Willow out of my head and get to work decrypting the message, my fingers flying over the keyboard as I run the necessary programs.

Once decrypted, the message is clear to read, and I scan through it, memorizing the necessary details before pushing my chair back from my desk. I open the door and head downstairs, following the sounds of muted cursing and metal on metal that mean someone is working on something in the garage.

The cursing isn't angry enough to be Malice, so it has to be Ransom.

I find him where I expect, working on his motorcycle. His head bobs, and I notice he has earbuds in, playing music and mouthing the lyrics to some song while he works. There are tools and pieces of car parts scattered around, piled in what Malice calls 'organized chaos.' They're leftover from the last car we chopped up, but the bulk of the garage is empty, since we don't have anything we're currently working on.

"Ransom," I say, trying to get his attention.

He spins a wrench in his hand and keeps bobbing his head, using the wrench like a drumstick to play imaginary drums one-handed.

I roll my eyes and step closer, snapping my fingers in his face.

That catches his attention, and he jerks a little, leaning back before pulling one earbud out.

“Shit, Vic. Give a guy a heart attack, why don’t you?”

“We have a message from X,” I tell him, getting right to the point.

He understands the importance of that, and he straightens up immediately, wiping his oily hands on an already oily rag.

“Should we wait for Mal to get back before we go over the details?” he asks. “I know how you hate to repeat yourself.”

The words are half teasing and half serious, but he’s right. Repeating myself isn’t up there with my favorite things to do.

“We’ll give him a few minutes,” I say.

“Is this thing that X wants urgent?”

I shoot Ransom a look. “What do you think? It’s X.”

He nods, taking my point. Although we don’t know a lot about our mysterious benefactor’s identity, we do know that he likes things done promptly. Even when he doesn’t give us an exact date, it’s always best to treat every task from him as being fairly urgent.

Before we can discuss much more, the front door to our living space bangs open and then slams shut.

“There’s Mal,” Ransom notes, shooting me a half smile. “Good timing.”

Heavy footsteps ring out on the concrete floor in the hallway, and Ransom raises his voice and calls out for Malice to join us in the garage. My twin appears a moment later, shucking his leather jacket and tossing it over a workbench before he strides toward us.

“Did you unload those parts?” Ransom asks, cocking his pierced brow.

“Yeah,” Malice grunts. “Checked up on the girl too.”

Ransom nods, grabbing a few of his tools and hanging them up on the rack set up against one wall, although he places them in an order that makes me immediately want to re-organize them. “Is she back home now?”

“Yeah, got back like an hour ago,” Malice says.

In the back of my mind, I think to myself that I know exactly what she’s been up to since she got home, but I keep my face impassive, not saying anything.

Malice shakes his head, a grimace twisting his lips. “She’s becoming too much of a fucking distraction,” he grumbles. “She’s taking up too much of our goddamned time. We have shit to do, and the more time we waste on her, the less time we have for the important shit.”

“Important shit like what?” Ransom asks, folding his arms. “Fucking random girls and then throwing them out?”

There’s no heat in it, and Malice won’t take offense to that comment anyway. Everyone knows he doesn’t care about those women, and we don’t care that he brings them here. He needs to work out that energy somehow, and he’s found a system that works for him.

“No, important shit like trying to secure a deal with the Donovan gang,” Malice grunts. “That should take priority. We’re one of the best chop shops in this part of Detroit, and it’s time for us to level up our game to match our skills. Wasting hours checking up on this girl takes time away from our business, and we wouldn’t have to do it if we’d dealt with her already.”

Something about his last words makes me uncomfortable, and I shift in place, frowning at an engine block on the work bench close to me. It’s not because Malice is talking openly about murdering someone, but more because we’ve had this conversation at least five times in the last two weeks.

We talk about killing Willow often, but we haven’t done it.

We haven’t done anything, other than watch her.

The question of *why* we haven’t haunts me—because it’s not logical. Not at all. It’s not the careful, controlled choice. It doesn’t make sense that we’ve left her alive and now have to spend time monitoring her to make sure she’s not going to fuck us over.

And I don’t trust things that don’t make sense.

Shaking off that thought, I refocus on the reason I came down here, turning to Malice to repeat what I just told Ransom.

“We have a job from X.”

“Fuck.” He curses with feeling, dragging both hands over his hair and shoving it back from his forehead. “Goddammit. Speaking of distractions we don’t fucking need.”

Ransom sighs, scrubbing a hand through his hair too and leaving a dark streak of oil behind from where he missed some when he wiped his fingers. “So what’s the job?”

“We need to steal some files and destroy a warehouse in Philadelphia,” I explain to them both. “We should head up there in the next day or two to get it done.”

“Fucking hell.” Ransom makes a face. “He wants us to go all the way to Philly? That’s gonna add at least a day on either end of however much time it takes us to do the job.”

“It’s not ideal,” I agree. “But it’s also not like we have a choice.”

“I know,” he replies, sighing. “It’s just…”

Malice lets out a breath too, and I can see the echoes of Ransom’s frustrations on his face. None of us are thrilled at having to jump whenever X sends us a job. It makes Ransom cranky and sends Malice into a stalking rage when it cuts into something we were already doing.

But they’re both as resigned to it as I am, because I’m right. We don’t have another option.

“How many jobs is it worth, do you think?” Ransom asks, glancing over at Malice. “The favor X did for you?”

Malice growls under his breath. “I dunno. It’s been years already. If I’d known it was going to be this big of a pain in the dick, I’d have just stayed in jail.”

“No, you wouldn’t have,” I tell him. “We wouldn’t have let you make that choice. It’s better that you’re out here with us, no matter how long it takes us to repay the debt.”

He glares at me, and I just stare back at him. Whatever twin connection we have, I know it allows him to read my expression even when other people might not be able to, so I know he can tell how deeply I mean those words. After a moment, the harsh lines of his face relax a little, and he swallows and nods.

“It’s still fucking bullshit,” he mutters bitterly.

“Yeah, it is,” I agree. “We’ve paid him back at least two-fold by now, but…”

I trail off with a shrug. It’s been four years since X got Malice out of jail, and just under four years since we did our first job for him. He’s only ever communicated with us via encrypted messages that I’ve never been able to trace, and we all hope that one day he’ll consider our debt repaid and stop contacting us, but it hasn’t happened yet.

X has the power to send Malice back to prison if he wants to. He’s the one who pulled strings behind the scenes to get our brother out of what should’ve been a thirty-year sentence decades early, and he could take it all back if he decides we aren’t doing what he wants well enough.

He holds all the cards, so we do whatever he asks.

Whether we want to or not.

“Anyway,” Ransom says, getting us back on track. “Philly?”

“Yes,” I tell him. “I have a location, and I can get the exact coordinates for us.”

“We’ll have to drive up there, since flying leaves too much of a paper trail—plus, we’ll probably need to bring equipment. So that’s two days, there and back.” Ransom holds up one hand, ticking things off on his fingers. “Prep for the job, carrying it all out… that’s another couple of days.” He glances sidelong at Malice. “We’ll have to leave Willow alone while we do the job.”

“I fucking know how it works, Ransom,” Malice snaps. “It’s not like we can drag her up there with us.”

“Do we trust her enough to do that?” I ask. “To leave her without us watching her for a few days?”

“What’s the alternative?” Malice asks, shaking his head in frustration.

“We still have the cameras, at least,” Ransom points out, always the one to try to look on the bright side. “Vic can watch her from the road whenever he has time. It won’t be the same as when we’re here, but he can at least keep tabs on things a bit.”

“Yeah.” Malice purses his lips, staring at the car parts on the floor, although I get the sense that he’s not really seeing them. “I guess that will have to be enough.”

WILLOW

GETTING off the bus to head to campus in new clothes feels… weird.

Not in a bad way, just in the way that I haven't bought new clothes for myself in a long time. I was making do with clothes that were threadbare and stained and worn out because that's all I had.

Even buying these clothes for myself felt like a luxury. For a while, I barely touched the money that appeared like magic in my account. I think a part of me was afraid that it was going to disappear overnight, or that it was some kind of trap that would spring the second I let myself buy anything with it. But the longer it sat there, untouched, the harder it was to ignore, and eventually I gave in and let myself use it, just a little.

In a way, it's like taking a tiny bit of my power back. I have no control over the men invading my life, but at least I can better my own situation as long as it lasts.

That's something.

When I walk past the quad where most of the students are gathered between classes, April and her usual group are there, holding court. One of her flunkies notices me and whispers something in April's ear, making her turn to look at me. Her gaze flashes over me quickly and then slower, taking me in from head to toe and then back again.

"Wow," she says. "You look good in that skirt."

I can tell she doesn't mean it, but I don't feel like getting into shit with her today, so I just keep walking, ignoring her entirely.

"Huh. New clothes for Willow," she continues, raising her voice enough that I can still hear her even as I stride away. "I wonder how she got the money to afford stuff like that."

“Maybe she got a new job,” one of her friends says loudly.

“Yeah, right.” April gives a short laugh. “I bet her knees are sore from her new ‘job.’ Maybe that’s why the skirt is so long. To cover up the bruises.”

I freeze in place, picking up on the heavy-handed implication that I whored myself out to afford new clothes. My hand clenches into a fist, and I want to whip around and drive my knuckles into April’s face.

But I don’t.

It’s too close to the truth. I remember being forced onto my knees by that Russian man, and how he shoved his cock into my mouth. I remember why I was there in the first place, and what I was going to do before those three men burst in and killed him.

Admitting how close I came to hooking makes me burn with shame. And I know I shouldn’t mention anything that could tie me even loosely to the whorehouse and the men who burst in.

My life literally does depend on keeping that secret.

So while April and her group laugh and toss around ideas for how much I might charge for various ‘services,’ I force myself to walk away with my spine straight.

I do my best to shove all the disgusting shit they were saying out of my head as I focus on my classes, and by the time I leave the large lecture hall where I have my last class, I feel a bit better. I pause on the steps of the building, tilting my head up toward the sun and letting the rays warm my face, but when I shift my gaze straight ahead again, I almost fall down the rest of the stairs.

Ransom is standing on the walkway in front of me, his hands shoved into his pockets.

I grip the metal railing that runs up the stairs, steadying myself to keep from tripping as I continue walking. Without me even consciously telling them to, my feet start to carry me in his direction.

It’s half because I feel a weird pull toward him—and on top of that, there’s a terrifying thought in my head that if I turn and run, he would chase me down.

Turning my back on any of these men seems like a very bad idea.

As I get close, I can see him looking me over. His eyes move from head to toe and then back up, and there’s a small smile on his handsome face.

“New outfit?” he asks. “It looks good on you.”

I blush, my skin heating. Coming from his mouth, it doesn't sound anything like the way it did when April said it.

"What do you want?" I ask, trying to get right to the point. I hate how flustered I get around him.

"Walk with me," he says.

It's not really a request, so I nod, falling into step with him.

As we make our way across campus, I notice heads turning to look at us, which feels… strange. I'm used to being mostly invisible to people, but now we're turning heads.

Or more accurately, *Ransom* is turning heads.

Several girls openly ogle him, and some of them shoot me jealous looks as I walk beside him. Of course, none of them have any idea what the real situation is here, or maybe they wouldn't be so jealous.

"How much longer is this going to go on?" I ask after a moment. I don't point out that Malice said I wasn't going to see any of them again, and here one of them is. Even after he said that, I was pretty sure they were still following me anyway. "How much longer are you going to be keeping tabs on me? Haven't I proved by now that I'm not going to tell anyone what I saw?"

Ransom shrugs. "Everything seems in the clear right now, but in our line of work, assuming that peace and quiet are the same things is pretty fucking dumb. It's a good way to get yourself killed."

I shiver at the casual way he talks about death. Like it's just such a constant and accepted part of his life. Considering how they took down the Russian without batting an eye, maybe it is.

But I shake myself, getting back to the matter at hand. "Will it ever be enough then? Will enough time ever go by that you'll feel confident no one is looking for answers anymore?"

When Ransom doesn't answer, I glance over at him. There's a grim look on his face, and it pretty much says all it needs to. It seems like the answer is a firm no.

My stomach twists around itself a little, and I try to shake back the tide of nausea that wants to rise up.

"So," Ransom says, changing the subject abruptly. "How are classes going for you?"

I blink. "You really want to know?"

"Yeah. Why?"

“Nothing. I’m just surprised you care one way or the other.”

He shrugs again. “Well, you made such a big deal about getting tuition for college, so I figured it’s important to you. Are you one of those people who just loves school or something like that?”

I chew on my lip, trying to think of how to answer that.

“It’s not that I love it,” I tell him. “It’s that it’s my chance to make a better life for myself.”

I realize a beat later that I really didn’t mean to say that much. I could have just told him that yeah, I love school, and moved on. But somehow, the truth just came spilling out of me.

Ransom nods thoughtfully. “I get that. I guess that’s what everyone wants, in one way or another. It’s what I want for my family—for my brothers.” He chuckles wryly. “We’re going about it a different way than you are, I suppose. But at the end of the day, I just want us all to be better off than we were before.”

“Yeah. Me too.” I swallow, a little unnerved by how well he seems to understand me.

We keep walking until we reach a spot where a motorcycle is parked by the side of the road on the west side of campus.

Ransom gets on it, swinging his leg over the side and settling in. He winks at me with a little smirk.

“Well, I’m out. Be good, angel.”

I frown. “Wait a minute. What did you come here for? You never told me. Did you need to tell me something?”

His blue-green eyes flash up and meet mine, and the smirk dims down into something else. Something not quite soft, but not as hard-edged either. “No. I just wanted to see you.”

“You see me all the time,” I reply, deciding to use this chance to test my little theory that they’re still stalking me.

He grins, and something in his expression confirms that I was right. Even though I haven’t seen them in weeks, that doesn’t mean they haven’t been around.

“Good point. I guess I just wanted *you* to see *me*,” he says softly.

He revs the motorcycle then, giving me one last look before he peels out.

For a second, all I can do is stare after him as he rides away, gunning the engine and rolling smoothly down the road. I feel stunned by his

answer, because what does that even mean?

Was he trying to intimidate me the way Malice did the one time he showed up on my campus? It doesn't really seem like it. It's almost like he just stopped by to… talk to me.

But why? That makes no fucking sense.

A cab passes by on the street, probably scanning for students who just got out of classes, and before I can think better of it, I raise my hand to flag it down. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I give the driver directions, telling him to head in the direction Ransom took.

He got a head start, so we drive for almost a minute without seeing him, but then we turn down a new street, and I see his bike up ahead.

"Follow that motorcycle," I tell the driver in a rush, feeling a bit insane.

He glances over his shoulder at me, his eyebrows climbing up into his hairline. "Are you fucking kidding me? What is this, a spy movie? Jesus, girlie, I'm not gonna—"

I cut him off by pulling a wad of cash out of my bag and shoving it at him. "I'll pay you extra."

He looks at the money, then at me. Then back up to where Ransom is riding his bike several blocks ahead of us. With a little curse under his breath, the driver grabs the cash and keeps going.

I sink down in the back seat just in case, my heart thudding. Every time Ransom turns, the driver follows his path, and the driver keeps enough distance between us that I don't think Ransom will figure out he's being followed.

There are a couple of times when we almost lose him because we don't want to get too close, but eventually, I see him pull his motorcycle into a nondescript building several blocks ahead.

It looks like it might have been some kind of factory or warehouse once, but now there's no telling what it is.

"So, are we stopping here?" the driver drawls, arching a brow at me in the rearview mirror.

I shake my head. "No. Um, I just wanted to…"

To what? I can't exactly tell him I'm reverse stalking one of the men who's been stalking me since I accidentally witnessed a murder. More likely, the driver thinks I'm a jealous ex-girlfriend or something, and it's better if he assumes that's all this is.

"No," I say again. "You can just turn around."

He rolls his eyes. “It’s your money, lady. That’ll be another surcharge, you know.”

“Okay,” I say automatically. I’ve actually got the cash to cover it for once, so I’m not worried.

He flips a U-turn and starts to drive away, and I can’t stop myself from looking back at the building Ransom disappeared into as he does.

Why the hell did you do this, Willow? What were you trying to accomplish?

I know it was probably risky to follow Ransom like this, but I felt like I needed to know where these men go when they’re not watching me.

It makes them seem more real and human, rather than some untouchable gods or demons or whatever.

My phone rings as we start to drive away, and I jump so hard that the taxi driver looks back at me with concern. Holding up a hand to wave off his worry, I dig out my phone, half expecting it to be Ransom telling me I fucked up by following him.

But it’s not. It’s my mom.

Fuck.

I swipe across the screen and then bring the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

“Willow, baby, it’s me.”

“Mom, this isn’t a good time.”

“It’s a great time.” Her voice slurs a little as she speaks. “I haven’t heard from you in so long, baby. Why don’t you call me?”

I narrow my eyes, my heart sinking as I realize what’s going on. The last time I talked to my adoptive mother, she was having a good day. Today, she’s on a downswing and is clearly high out of her mind.

My chest tightens, and I bite back a sigh. I’ve dealt with her like this many times before, and it’s never fun.

“Mom, what did you do?” I ask her.

“Nothing. Why are you always so—” She cuts off, not finishing that sentence.

“Mom?”

“Shhh,” she says. “I’ve got company. You’re gonna—” She giggles, and I hear a deep voice in the background. I can’t make out what he’s saying, but it’s definitely a man.

Goddammit.

She’s strung out with a john still in her house. Anything could happen to her. I’ve told her a hundred times not to get fucked up when she’s got strange men in the house, but she uses drugs and alcohol to cope with shit when she’s feeling rough, so there are plenty of times when she’s done it anyway. Worry twists in my stomach as I imagine all the worst-case scenarios of what could happen to her if the guy decides to take advantage. He could rape her, rob her… kill her.

“Mom, I need you to tell whoever that is to go, okay? Just tell him to leave.”

“You’re no fun, Willow, y’know that?” she slurs. “I’m havin’ a good time.”

The last word is drawn out, and she giggles again. I can’t hear what the guy is saying, but he’s there and still talking, and it makes me feel sick.

“No, you’re not,” I mutter. “I’ll be there soon.”

The line goes dead, and I shove my phone back into my pocket as I give the cab driver her address. He rolls his eyes at having to change direction yet again, but I ignore him, staring out the window as my feet tap agitatedly on the floor of the cab. I can’t tell what feels worse, honestly. The fact that my mom is using again, or the fact that I’m riding to her rescue. Again.

It takes the cab about fifteen minutes to reach her house, and as soon as I pay and step out of the car, the driver peels out, clearly not wanting to deal with me anymore. I take a deep breath and square my shoulders, marching up to the house and letting myself in.

Mom and a short, middle-aged guy are on the couch. She’s clearly strung out, her head weaving back and forth a little, her eyes shuttered. She barely seems aware of what’s going on, and her robe is half open.

The john of the day has one hand on her chest, groping at her, and the other between her legs. He looks like he’s having the time of his life, and it sets off a protective instinct inside me.

“Get the fuck off her,” I snap. “And get the hell out.”

He looks over at me, eyeing me up and down, and I can read the clear dismissal in his eyes. I know what he sees. A slender slip of a woman, standing here with nothing to back her up. He thinks he can ignore me and do whatever he wants, and he’s probably the sort of man who has been doing that to the women in his life forever.

“Why? Who the fuck are you?” He scoffs. “Her mother? She likes it, see?”

Mom just giggles, listing to one side enough that she nearly collapses onto the couch cushions.

“She doesn’t know what she likes right now,” I bite out. “And I’m sure you already got your money’s worth. She might not be in her right mind to know that, but I am. So I’d suggest you leave before I call the cops.”

He scowls, dragging his hand out from between her legs. “They’d arrest her too, you know.”

I shrug, not budging an inch from where my feet are planted in the living room. “I don’t care.”

It’s only half a bluff, and maybe he can tell how close I am to following through on that threat, because he makes a disgruntled noise and heaves himself off the couch.

“Fucking cunt,” he mutters under his breath. “This is why all you bitches are better on your back. Or on your knees, so I don’t have to hear your yapping.”

He walks past me toward the door, clipping me with his shoulder as he goes, and my pulse spikes as I curl my hands into fists. I’ve still got that knife in my bag, but if he decides to lash out, I’m not sure how much good it would do me.

Just go. Please, just get the fuck out of here.

I watch him like a hawk as he heads toward the door, and when he pauses with his hand on the knob, I tense up all over again. Then he yanks it open and steps outside, slamming it behind him.

I let out a relieved breath, my body still shaking from pent up adrenaline, then go over to where my mother is sprawled on the couch. She’s muttering to herself now, and her eyes are half closed until I put my hands on her shoulders.

“Mom.” When that doesn’t get much of a reaction, I try her name. “Misty. Are you okay?”

“What?” She blinks at me blearily, and I can tell it takes some time for her to focus on my face. “Willow. What are you doing here?”

“I came to make sure you’re okay.”

Her jaw falls open a little, and she gazes at me, blinking again. In the space of a few heartbeats, the hazy, dazed out bliss of her high flips to the other side of the coin, and her chin wobbles, her face crumpling up.

“I’m so sorry, baby,” she slurs, tears forming in her eyes. “I’m a mess. You had to come all the way here to get that fucker off—”

I clench my jaw, shaking my head. I can't deal with this right now. "It's okay. He's gone. Let me get you some water, okay?"

"Okay." She sniffs. "My mouth tastes like an asshole."

Oh god. That colorful bit of description makes me shudder, and I step over a pile of clothes on the floor to go to the kitchen and fill a cup with water.

Even now that I don't live here anymore, doing stuff like this is like muscle memory. Making sure the johns leave and don't try to get more than they've paid for. Cleaning up the messes left behind. Pulling my mom off the floor or the couch while she's high off her ass, and making sure she doesn't choke on her own vomit when shit gets really bad.

I could do it all with my eyes closed. I've been doing it since I was too young to even be seeing stuff like this.

It's a part of me now.

After flipping off the tap, I bring the glass back into the living room and hand it to my mom.

"Don't spill it," I say, just in time for water to slosh out of the side of the cup and onto the couch.

"I'm sorry," she whimpers. "I'm such a mess. You always have to do this. I'm so sorry, Willow baby."

"It's fine," I tell her with a sigh.

"You're so good to me," she murmurs, tears tracking down her cheeks as she holds the glass unsteadily. "So good. So good. So good. So…"

"Drink the water, Mom. It'll make you feel better."

She does, lifting the cup and taking small sips. Eventually, some of the glassiness fades from her eyes, and she sits up a little bit straighter.

I can feel her eyes on me as I sit beside her, and she gives me the same look as everyone else has today, taking in my new clothes.

"You look… good," she says, sounding surprised. "I've never seen that outfit before."

"It's new," I reply self-consciously. I still haven't told her about the extra money that showed up in my account, or about how I paid for tuition. "I needed new clothes for school. Do you think you can stand up and shower?"

"Yeah." She holds her hands out to me, and when I help her up, she pats my cheek unsteadily. "I'm glad you're doing so well for yourself, baby. That's good. That's really good."

“Thanks,” I murmur, glancing away. Then I wrap an arm around her waist. “Come on. Let’s get you in the shower.”

RANSOM

THE DAY after I visit Willow at her school, we get ready to head out for the job in Philly.

By the time we all convene down in the garage, Victor has packed and repacked the car about a half dozen times, making sure everything is right where he wants it and that we have everything we'll need, and Malice has worked himself into a deeply foul mood.

Whenever we have to drop everything to go do a job for X, it pisses Malice off more than any of us. Vic and I don't like the interruptions or being told to jump and fetch like we're dogs, but it hits Malice somewhere more tender.

Probably because he's the one X got out of prison, which makes him the reason we owe this guy in the first place. It's why we're on the hook to a person we've never even met.

That grates on Malice, and whenever the job is something big or something that takes more time than we'd like, it really gets to him.

Vic and I have never blamed him for any of it, of course. He's the one who took the fall for our dad's murder, when really, it was all of us who killed him.

And there's no doubt the fucker deserved it.

The man was a piece of shit who tortured Victor just because he could and abused our mom. He beat the hell out of me and Malice whenever he felt like it too, and he treated all of us like trash. He deserved to die and probably should have suffered more if there was any justice in the world.

So we took that shit into our own hands.

We thought we did a good enough job covering our tracks, but we weren't as skilled then as we are now, and when the cops pieced together enough evidence to came sniffing around, Malice was the one who took the blame for it all. He protected us. He claimed responsibility and was sentenced to thirty years in prison, of which he served four, so the least we can do is have his back now.

"Let's get this show on the road," Malice says as Victor slams the trunk closed. "The quicker we get out of here, the quicker we can call this shit done and come home."

"Amen to that," I say with feeling, and we all pile into the car, ready to head out.

Malice glances at me in the rearview mirror as I settle in the back seat. "You checked on the girl yesterday?"

I nod. "Yup. Nothing out of the ordinary."

What I don't mention is that instead of just watching her to make sure she's going about her regular routine the way I was supposed to, I stopped by her school and talked to her.

I know it was probably a bad idea, all things considered, but I meant exactly what I told her.

I wanted her to see me. I wanted those mesmerizing brown eyes of hers to focus on me. Wanted to hear her voice.

There's something about her that intrigues me. Something I saw in her the first day we met, and something I've seen more of ever since then. She has this incredible strength mixed with vulnerability, and it's alluring as fuck.

She's delicate and fragile, like a doll that you'd think would be easy to break. But underneath that porcelain exterior, there's something more like iron at her core.

There's a hell of a lot more to her than meets the eye, that's for sure.

And even though it's probably a bad idea, I want to know every fucking thing about her.

THE DRIVE to Philadelphia feels long, but it probably goes by a lot faster than most people's road trips.

Victor and Malice take turns behind the wheel. They're both control freaks in their own ways, each of them wanting to drive as much as possible. So I let them, spending my time plotting out how we're going to steal the file X wants and then burn down the warehouse when we're done.

It should be a pretty simple job. Vic managed to find blueprints from the company that built the warehouse, so we've got a decent idea of where things will be located, ideal entry and exit points, and those kinds of things. What we *don't* know is what kind of security the warehouse has, and that will be the biggest sticking point. If it's heavily guarded, we'll have to modify our plans.

Luckily, Vic loaded up the trunk with pretty much anything we could possibly need for this job, so even if we end up having to improvise a bit, we won't be left scrambling.

I'm no idiot, and neither is Malice, but Vic is definitely the smartest of the three of us. Always has been. His mind works in a way that most people's don't, constantly gathering data and analyzing and calculating.

Our dad saw that too, and that was what fucked Vic over in the end. Dad had some bullshit idea that he would become a major player in the criminal underground, so he tried to turn Victor into his perfect soldier. He tortured my older brother and put him through hell to try to "toughen him up" and turn him into a warrior.

By the time Dad finally decided none of us were worth his time and left us behind to try to build up his empire alone, the damage was already done.

All that shit left a permanent mark on Vic, fucking him up in the head.

He has a hard time relating to people, and I think Malice and I are the only two people he's ever felt truly comfortable with, besides our mom. That's why I was so fucking glad when Mal got out of prison, despite the fact that it left us indebted to a man who will probably hold it over us forever. Vic wasn't the same when Mal was gone. Those were a rough few years, and although we leaned on each other when we needed to, it felt like we were a three-legged stool that was missing a leg.

Vic *needs* Malice, in a way that not even I do. They're twins, and that's a heavy bond. It's like something connects the two of them, some intangible force that binds them together.

By the time we get to our destination, we're all a little tired of being crammed inside the car, and we're ready to get this shit done so we can get back home.

But rushing through a job would be bad, so we're as careful and thorough as we always are. I don't think any of us want to find out what would happen if X decided he wasn't happy with our work one of these days.

On top of that, these jobs aren't even for our benefit. They're for X, and the last thing any of us want is to get busted doing one of these errands for our unknown blackmailer turned boss. So we can't afford to let ourselves get sloppy.

The warehouse is tucked away at the end of a row of similar buildings. It's in the heart of Philly, right on the river, and Malice pulls the car to a stop outside the chain-link fence that surrounds the row of warehouses, making sure to stay a good distance away. It's late in the evening by now, but there's still some activity in the area, so we're careful not to draw attention to ourselves as we stake the place out for a bit.

"Looks like things die down around here by around eleven," Malice notes a couple hours later, raising his binoculars again.

"Agreed. But we should plan on hitting it even later than that. Better to go in when as many people as possible are cleared out of the area," I say.

"Yeah." Malice nods, then lowers his binoculars and glances at our brother. "Vic, what do you see?"

Victor purses his lips thoughtfully, staring out the window at the low, hulking buildings. "Two things," he says after a moment. "One, I think we're better off starting a fire in the building next to the one we want to hit than our target itself. And two, we're gonna want to take out a few of those lights first."

He jerks his chin toward several tall floodlights that illuminate the area around the warehouses. They're meant to keep the area well-lit and probably safer, but he's right—they won't help us at all with what we're trying to do.

"Okay." Mal cranks the key in the ignition, pulling away from the spot beside the chain-link fence. "We'll do more recon tomorrow, but that gives us a lot to start with." He shoots Vic a look. "You think you can take out the lights without it looking like they were tampered with?"

"Yeah. Should be able to."

We check into a hotel several miles away under an alias that Victor built for himself a couple years ago. Then we set up a mini command station in the room, unpacking just the stuff we need for now and leaving the rest in

the car. It takes us two days to prep the job, which is actually pretty fast, all things considered. But it feels slow, and I know it's because all of us are itching to get back to Detroit.

On our third night in Philly, we pack up all our shit, then gear up and head to the warehouse. Victor spent the day strategically blowing the fuses of some of the lights that surround the warehouse, making sure not to hit too many at once. It's three o'clock in the morning when we pull up alongside the chain-link fence, and I can see the evidence of Vic's handiwork immediately. Instead of being flooded with light like last time, there are now patches of darkness around the warehouses, giving us cover to sneak inside.

We pile out of the car, gathering wire-cutters, weapons, and accelerant from the trunk. I pull the balaclava over my head and glance at Vic. "You've got security handled?"

He nods, tugging his own balaclava down and glancing at the tablet he uses when he needs to hack and be mobile at the same time. "Yes. I'm going to try to limit the number of feeds I cut so that it won't seem suspicious. So do everything you can to stay out of sight."

"Got it." I glance at Malice. "You sure you're good getting those files on your own?"

"Yeah. Just let me know before you torch the place," he tells me with a snort.

I grin, even though I know he can't see it under my face covering. "You got it. Vic and I will give you a heads up. We'll use enough accelerant that the place should go up quick, and since it's attached to the warehouse we're trying to hit, the fire should spread pretty fast."

This whole job would be a hell of a lot easier if we didn't have to work so hard to cover our tracks, but X made it very clear that he doesn't want this to look like sabotage—or at least, not sabotage against our actual target. That's where Vic's ingenious idea of burning down the warehouse next door comes in. It allows us to torch the place we ultimately want to bring down, without making it obvious that that's what we're trying to do.

"Good to go?" Malice asks, his gray eyes shifting from me to Vic. We both nod, and so does he. "Good. Be safe. Be smart. Get it done."

I grin again, because that could almost be the Boy Scouts motto or something, except for the fact that I don't think the Boy Scouts give merit badges for arson.

We split up, climbing over the fence and darting through the shadows toward the warehouses. Malice stops near the one at the end, making his way toward the back door, while Vic and I continue on.

As soon as we reach the warehouse we're planning to burn, he comes to a stop and starts tapping away on his tablet, his fingers flying across the screens. I watch him, poised to go as soon as he gives me the signal. After a few minutes, he looks up.

"Okay. We're good. Security is disabled on this building and the next one. I've let Malice know."

I nod, then pick up a rock and use it to smash out a window on the first floor of the building. Since we're not exactly going for subtlety here, we can break shit on the way into this space—unlike Malice, who'll have to pick the lock to get into our target warehouse and steal the files.

Vic and I climb through the window, careful to avoid the shards of glass still clinging to the edge of the frame, and then glance around to get our bearings.

"You know the drill," I say in a hushed voice, handing him a carton of accelerant.

The two of us get to work immediately, moving quickly and silently through the space, spreading the accelerant in a way that should make the building light up fast when we want it to. It probably says a lot about us that this is a skill we've developed to the point where it's practically an art form, but fire is an effective way to cover your tracks, so we use it a lot.

Once we've used up all the accelerant, I glance at Vic. "Any word from Malice? Is he done?"

He glances down at his phone, then shakes his head. "Not yet."

"Fuck."

I grind my teeth in agitation, hoping like hell that he'll get the files and alert us soon. With only three of us, there's always one who ends up working solo when we have to divide forces, but it always makes me feel antsy. I like it better when we can all have each other's backs.

"He'll get them," Vic says, confidence ringing in his voice. "Get your lighter ready. I'll disable the sensors that are supposed to set the sprinklers off. Be ready on my signal."

His fingers move across his tablet at lightning speed again, and I swivel my head back and forth, glancing around the shadowy interior of the building and making sure our path to the exit is clear.

After another few minutes, Vic looks up, his blue eyes glinting in the dim light. “We’re good. Light it up.”

A grin stretches across my face as I do just that, lighting the accelerant and watching flames spring up. He jerks his head toward the window we entered from, and the two of us make a run for it, careful to stick to the shadows as we slip out of the building.

We meet Malice on the way, and the three of us move out, heading back toward our car and making sure no one sees us on our way.

As we climb the fence and land quietly on the other side, flames start licking around the warehouse behind us, roaring through the building as thick dark smoke starts billowing out of shattering windows. We all pile into the car, watching silently as the fire spreads to the warehouse at the end of the row, beginning to devour that one too.

“That’s it,” Malice says after several long moments, cranking the key in the ignition. “It’s done.”

Another job for X finished, which should keep him off our backs for a little while, at least.

MALICE

I'm behind the wheel as we pass under a road sign that says "Welcome to Detroit." Vic and I have been trading off all the way back, and I pushed the pace a little harder than usual, ready to be done with this shit.

Something like relief fills me when I finally pull into the garage, killing the engine and letting the feeling of being home settle in.

Ransom woke up as the car rolled to a stop, and now he sits rubbing at his face.

"Oh good, we're here," he mumbles around a yawn.

Vic's in the passenger seat, wide awake. He never sleeps when someone else is driving. Not even me. He's always gotta have his eyes on the road, ready to anticipate what's coming next.

We talked a bit while I drove, keeping our voices down so we wouldn't wake up Ransom, but for the last few hours, we just rode in silence. I could tell Vic was counting in his head, something he does when his shit is off balance and he needs to center himself.

He doesn't like leaving his routine, even though he can do it when he needs to, but he has all these little habits and mini routines to help him cope with it. To keep him feeling like he's in control.

The usual stab of guilt hits me as I think about that.

I know Vic's issues come from the shit our piece of trash dad did to him when we were younger. Vic got the worst of it, but dear old pops was a monster to all of us.

We all have our own scars from that, and we all would've protected each other from those things if we could've. I know Vic and Ransom feel

guilty that they're not the ones who went to prison for murdering the bastard, but I wouldn't have wanted either of them to go in my place.

"Fucking hell," Ransom says, shoving his door open and getting out with a groan. "You know I love cars, but road trips suck ass."

Vic and I follow, stretching our legs and working out the kinks in our muscles. I agree with Ransom. It feels good not to be on the road anymore.

Before we can even unload the car, Vic is heading up to his room. I already know he wants to get back to his computer and all his screens, something routine and familiar for him.

Ransom rolls his shoulders and cracks his neck with a little sigh. "I've got to get ready to work on that car the Donovan gang is bringing through soon. We probably didn't lose too much time."

"Good," I say. The last thing I want is for other shit we need to do to fall through because we had to fuck around playing X's errand boys. "When I get back from doing the drop, I'll give you a hand."

"Nah, I'm good," Ransom says. "I've got it under control. And if I need help, I'll drag Vic down from his computers and put a wrench in his hands."

I snort at that, already picturing the sour look on Vic's face if it comes to that.

"Help me unload the car first," I tell Ransom.

Between the two of us, we get all the shit unloaded, piling it into a corner for now.

"Vic's gonna be pissed if we leave that there, you know," Ransom warns me as he starts to grab a few tools from the rack on the wall.

"I'll deal with it when I get back."

There's only so far into our home Vic's influence can spread, and the garage where we do our work is harder to keep in line. Ransom and I have a theory that the reason Vic keeps his room so immaculately organized is to make up for the fact that the rest of the place sometimes falls into chaos.

With a groan, I get back in the car and drive to the drop point. X's latest task came with instructions to leave the file we stole in a designated spot—somewhere out of the way and remote—so that's what I do.

When we first started getting jobs from this fucker, Vic did everything he could to track down X's identity. But he didn't have any luck. Whoever the hell this mysterious man is, he managed to pull strings to get me released from a thirty year prison sentence after serving only four. On top of that, he has enough resources that he covered his tracks completely.

It’s almost fucking impossible to hide from Vic when he really puts his mind to finding someone, but despite all his hacking skills, he couldn’t figure out who X is.

It eats at me a little, owing something to an unknown person. It makes me feel like I’m still in jail, in a way, even though nothing is as bad as that shit was.

I reach up as I pull to a stop near the drop point, absently rubbing at the scar just below my ear as a phantom pain shoots through my neck. The shiv I was stabbed with never managed to get deep enough to kill me, but the memory of it still makes my stomach clench and my skin feel too tight.

Shaking off memories I’d rather not dwell on, I pull the key out of the ignition and slide out of the car, glancing around as I take in my surroundings. We’ve never gone to the same drop point twice, and just like always, there’s no one here. No hint of X at all.

Just the way he likes it.

I grunt and stride toward the bench with the large metal trash can beside it, surreptitiously dropping the files into the trash can. Then I turn around and head back to the car, done with this shit.

I start driving back to the warehouse we live in, thinking about helping Ransom get set up for the next job or cleaning up the bags in the corner so Vic doesn’t flip out.

But instead, I find myself heading off course, driving toward the campus where Willow goes to school. There’s a feeling in my chest that’s like… fuck, I don’t know what to call it. It’s a want, and it’s tied to Willow, but I figure it’s just me wanting to make sure she didn’t get up to anything she shouldn’t have while we were gone.

It’d be smart to check on her, just to be safe.

Thanks to Vic’s hacking abilities, we all know her entire school schedule, and I reach her campus just before she should be getting out of her midday class. Leaving my car parked in the nearest lot, I scan the building she’s supposed to be in, waiting for her to emerge.

But as the other students come out in a rush of bodies that eventually slows to a trickle, there’s no sign of her.

I narrow my eyes, my shoulders tensing.

What the fuck is going on?

If there’s one thing I can say for Willow Hayes, it’s that she’s always fucking consistent. She goes to her classes and then goes home. Sometimes

she stops off at the grocery store, but that's about it. There's never anything that strange about her routine.

Once the students have filed out of the building, I step inside myself, poking around to make sure she's not just in the bathroom or something.

But she's not here.

Suspicion burns in my chest, hot and fast. Did she try to leave town while we were gone? Is she pulling some shit on us?

We didn't tell her we were leaving, but maybe she found out somehow and decided to use that time to escape.

"Motherfucker," I mutter under my breath.

I stalk away from the building and pull out my phone, calling Vic.

"Mal?" he answers. "Was something wrong with the drop?"

"No. I can't find the fucking girl," I snap. "She's not on campus."

"Wait," Vic says, and I can hear his fingers clacking over the keys of his keyboard on the other end of the call. A few seconds go by while he checks the cameras we put in her house. "She's not at home either."

What the actual fuck?

Anger rises in me, burning hotter and brighter, and I grip the phone in my hand. This is what happens when we don't stick to the fucking plans. This is what happens when we leave loose ends dangling in the goddamn breeze.

"Wait." Vic speaks up again before I can say anything else. "She just got home. You think she skipped classes?"

I bite the inside of my cheek, eyes narrowed as I walk back to the car. "I don't know. But I'm about to find out."

Dropping the call, I shove my phone back into my pocket, then get in the car and speed off toward her place.

It's a shit-hole of a building, and the front entry door is cracked open. A few people are smoking on the steps, and they eye me with curious looks as I stalk up the stairs and push the door open.

None of them are stupid enough to ask if I belong there, and that's good. Given the mood I'm in, it would not have ended well for them.

I head right to Willow's floor and bang on the door, counting the seconds in my head like I'm Vic or something.

There's a moment of silence, then I hear the soft shuffle of footsteps inside. There's a clicking sound as the deadbolt unlocks, and as soon as the

door starts to open, I shove it wider and barge in, stepping into her apartment.

"What—? Malice?" Willow stumbles back a few steps, looking shocked. "What are you doing here?"

Rather than answering her question, I swivel my head back and forth, taking in her small, run-down apartment. I've never been in here before, but I've caught a few glimpses of it on the screens in Vic's room from time to time, so I know the general layout of the place.

When I glance over at the wall between the living room and the kitchen, I freeze, my eyes narrowing.

"What the hell is this?" I grit out. "Are you planning on running, *Solnyshka*? Trying to skip town on us?"

"No." She shakes her head, her light blonde hair shimmering with the quick movement. "No, I'm not—"

"Then what the fuck are those?" I jab a finger toward the boxes lined up against the wall. "Looks like you're packing up to me. So what is it? You're trying to leave? Trying to give us the slip? We told you what would happen if you set a foot out of line, so what the fuck is this?"

She shakes her head again, swallowing hard. "I haven't done anything. You said not to sell you out, and I haven't. Those boxes don't have anything to do with you!"

"That's not good enough. You need to tell me what's going on, or I swear to fuck—" I bite off the threat, because she already knows what's going to happen.

"It's not—I have to—"

Irritated and tired of her shit, I step toward her. She stayed by the door when I barged in, and as I move closer to her, she presses her back up against it, her eyes wide.

"I'm only going to ask you this one more time," I tell her, bracing my hands on the door beside her head and dropping my face so my eyes are level with hers. "Why are you leaving?"

"Because I have to!" she finally blurts.

"Why?" I keep pushing, not letting up until I hear what I need to hear. "Has someone been threatening you? Asking about what happened that night?"

"No! It doesn't have anything to do with that. Not everything is about that! I still have a life, and there's still shit that happens that I have to deal

with. I told you, this is none of your business!”

The words all burst out of her in a rush, and she’s gasping when she finishes. Her eyes flash as she stares at me, her delicate chin lifted. There’s so much anger and defiance in her expression, but they aren’t the only things there. Something vulnerable and tired lurks under the surface, and it makes me pause for a second.

“Just tell me what the fuck is going on,” I say at last. “You know you can’t lie to me, *Solnyshka*. Not for long.”

We both know I’m right. She glares at me for a beat, seeming to be fighting some inner battle with herself. Then her chin wobbles and she sighs, slumping in place against the door as if something heavy is pulling her down.

Her voice trembles a bit when she speaks again, but it’s not from fear or anger this time.

“I’m not leaving town,” she whispers. “But I have to leave this apartment. I don’t… I can’t pay my rent.”

“What? Why not?”

When we paid the rest of her tuition, we put money in her account. I remember, because Ransom and I argued over how much to give her. At the time, I thought it was too much for a bribe, especially considering that our plan to take out Nikolai had never included having to pay off a witness.

Willow looks down at the floor, her voice dropping so low I can barely hear it. “Because my mom stole everything from me.”

My head jerks back in surprise. “*What?*”

“She… she’s so good at stuff like this. Making people trust her, acting like she’s a victim, pushing the fact that she’s my mom. I guess she went to the bank and convinced them she needed access to my account, and they just gave it to her. She took everything I had.”

My jaw tightens. I can feel my anger rising again, although this time it’s directed at someone other than the girl in front of me.

Fuck, no. Her mother isn’t getting away with this.

WILLOW

MY BREATH CATCHES as I watch something dangerous spark in Malice's dark gray eyes. He looks pissed, maybe more so than I've ever seen him before. Even when he came barging in here, he didn't look this mad.

The wood of the door is cool against my back as I stay pressed against it, hardly daring to breathe. He's quiet for a long moment, staring at me with his face only inches from mine, and I don't make any sudden movements, not sure what's going on in his head.

"Take me to your mom," he suddenly demands.

I blink, caught off guard by that.

"No." The word is out of my mouth before I have time to think about it, but I double down, shaking my head. "No. I already tried to get the money back, Malice. It's too late. She spent some on herself and lost the rest gambling. It's gone. There's nothing to get back."

"It wasn't a fucking request," he bites out. "You're going to take me to your mom's place, or I'll have Vic tell me where it is. And you won't like it if I have to go that route."

I can't help the shiver that works its way through me at his words. This man is so brutal. He's so dominant and hard, so used to getting what he wants and not being afraid to take it if he has to. I can never read him, never guess what he's going to do, and that scares the shit out of me.

Is he going to bust into my mom's house and kill her? Will he kill me if I don't tell him what he wants to know?

Malice steps closer, clearly tired of waiting for me to make a decision. His hand comes up, and I flinch instinctively, but his fingers are surprisingly gentle when he tilts my chin up, making me look at him.

“Willow,” he says, and his voice drops, not hard this time, but deep and serious. Just like his eyes in this moment. “Tell me.”

I lick my lips, my mouth suddenly dry. My lips feel numb as they form the words, whispering her address.

He doesn’t hesitate. As soon as I finish speaking, he tugs me away from the door and opens it, striding out into the hall.

I follow him immediately, my heart fluttering like a bird’s wings. I can’t just let him leave, knowing he’s going to my mom’s place.

He takes the stairs two at a time, going down to the tiny foyer and out of the building. I follow him all the way to his car, and he doesn’t stop me when I grab the handle of the passenger door and get in.

Everything in me is screaming that I should *not* be doing this, but I can’t stop myself. I buckle my seatbelt, and I’m along for the ride.

Neither of us talks as Malice drives. The air in the car is tense. He’s like a statue, staring out the window with his tattooed hands gripping the wheel tightly.

His scent fills the car with something deep and smoky, and it feels like too small of a space to be in with him. It’s hard to breathe. He fills up every corner of the car with his presence, radiating fury and irritation and that dominant intensity that both draws me in and terrifies me.

I have to swallow hard, glancing out the window instead of looking at him.

It’s not a long drive to my mom’s place, and Malice is out of the car as soon as he pulls up. I have to scramble to keep up with him, and he bangs on her door the same way he was banging on mine.

Mom answers it after less than a minute, and Malice pushes his way inside with me behind him.

“Oh. Willow.” My mother glances past his shoulder at me, surprise registering on her face.

She smiles at me as if there’s nothing wrong, as if we didn’t have a huge fight the other day when I confronted her about stealing from me. There’s something about the way she carries herself that makes me think she might be high, and I have to take a deep breath to keep my emotions under control.

Her gaze slides back to Malice, and I can see her taking him in with an appreciative gleam in her eyes. “Who’s your friend, baby?”

“He’s not—”

Before I can figure out how to finish that sentence, Malice cuts me off, stepping right up into my mother's space.

"You took something that doesn't belong to you," he growls. "That money was Willow's, not yours."

Mom blinks, her jaw dropping open. But she recovers quickly, finding her casual smile again. "I don't know what Willow told you, but that's—"

"She told me you took it." His voice is unyielding. "And I'm telling you to give it back."

My mother scoffs lightly, raising a hand as if to brush the whole thing away. "It's not like that. This is a family matter that really doesn't involve you. So—"

Malice takes another step toward her, looming over her like a god of death. "Too fucking late. I'm already involved. Now are you gonna give the money back, or am I going to have to make you?"

Usually, it takes a lot to make my mom back down. She's so secure in herself and her lies that I've seen her stare down bigger men than Malice. But those men didn't have that threatening air that he does. Everything about him is dangerous and intimidating, and even though he's not yelling or raising his voice at all, the threat is still right there, front and center.

Mom looks away for a second, and she actually seems to shrink a little. All I can do is stare on in shock as she looks cowed for the first time in her life.

"Fine," she says, her slurry words dripping with irritation. "I took the money. I needed it, okay? But it's all gone. Just like I told her."

She jerks her chin in my direction, but Malice keeps his focus entirely on her, his shoulders set and his hands curled into fists.

"I think that's a lie," he says softly. "No, scratch that. It'd *better* be a lie. Because we're not leaving here empty-handed."

Mom's eyes go wide, and she takes a step back. "I… I don't…"

"I'm gonna start counting. If I get to ten and you've got nothing to show me, you're not gonna like what happens next. One. Two."

My mom's eyes dart around the room as he counts. She looks at me like she wants me to step in, but I just stand where I am, rooted to the spot, almost holding my breath.

"Five. Six. Seven." Each quiet word cracks like a whip.

I've never seen my mother this freaked out before. She licks her lips, breathing faster and wringing her hands together, glancing around the living

room as if she's looking for an escape route.

"Eight. Nine—"

"Fine!" Mom blurts. "Fine. Not all the money is gone. I have the rest of it in a cash bag upstairs."

She glances at me almost resentfully, as if I betrayed her somehow by bringing in someone who can stand up to her better than I can.

My throat goes tight, and I have to work to hold her gaze and not look away.

I hate that she's always using me. That even now, she's blaming me for shit that she instigated. I hate that she lied right to my face, telling me some sob story about losing all the money gambling, just so I'd go away and she could keep the rest.

Malice steps back, looking satisfied. He folds his arms and lifts his chin, pinning my mom with a hard stare.

"Go get it," he says, leaving no room to argue. "*All* of it, everything that's left. And give it back to her."

Mom doesn't even try to argue. She goes upstairs and then comes back down a few minutes later with a bank bag. With a sullen look, she thrusts it out toward Malice, but he shakes his head.

"Did I tell you to give it to me? Give it to her," he repeats, nodding at me.

My mother's lip curls, and she all but throws the small envelope-shaped bag at me. I take it, curling my fingers around it tightly.

"Is that all of it?" Malice demands.

"Yes," Mom spits back. "Or do you want to go searching through my underwear drawer to make sure?"

He basically ignores that comment, leaning down so he's right in her face again.

"Don't you ever pull shit like this again," he says. "If you touch so much as a single fucking dime of Willow's money, you'll pay for it. I don't do second chances."

Before my mother can splutter a reply, he grabs my arm and drags me back out to his car.

I get inside and buckle myself in, feeling like I'm in a daze. I'm just… stunned, and I don't know what to say. The whole thing happened so fast, and this is one of the first times in recent memory that my mom has had any real consequences for something that she did.

I’ve stood up to her before, but she always finds some way to flip things around and avoid taking responsibility.

It’s weird, but I’m grateful to Malice in a way, and it changes how I look at him a little.

“Has your mom done shit like that before?” Malice asks.

The sudden question almost makes me jump, his deep voice breaking the silence in the car. I glance at him, and his eyes are still focused on the road, the steering wheel gripped tightly.

Part of me almost wants to laugh as I consider my answer. The list of crappy things my mom has done is long. From lying to me and stealing from me to letting a john grope me for a little extra money. I take a deep breath before the tide of awful memories can take hold.

“Yes,” I answer. “She’s… it’s hard. She’s not my real mom—not by blood, I mean. She adopted me when I wasn’t even two years old, when I had no one else. She gave me a home, and I’ll always be grateful for that. But it hasn’t always been easy.”

My stomach twists as I speak, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment at admitting so much personal shit to this man I barely know. Now that Malice knows she stole from me, part of me worries he’s going to see me as weak for the way my mom has used me.

So what if he does? Why should it matter what he thinks?

I don’t have an answer for that, but the thought keeps pricking at me.

Glancing down at my lap, I drag my fingers over the fabric of my jeans. “I guess you’re probably wondering why I put up with it,” I whisper. “Why I haven’t cut her out of my life yet.”

Malice shakes his head. “Nah. That part, I get. Sometimes the people you love turn your love against you, and it’s the most brutal weapon in the world.”

I look over at him as we pass through an intersection, surprised at his words. They’re revealing, and they show a side of him I haven’t seen before.

But he’s right. That’s exactly what it feels like.

“Yeah,” I whisper. “It is.”

There’s a beat of silence, and then he glances over at me. “Have you eaten today?”

“What?”

The sudden change of topic catches me by surprise, and he raises an eyebrow as he repeats the question. “Eaten. Have you eaten anything today?”

Have I?

It takes me a few seconds to remember. The past couple days have been a whirlwind, as I tried to pay rent and realized that my account had been zeroed out, then went to my mom’s place to confront her, only to have to go back to my landlord and beg him for an extension. Of course the asshole said no, so I scraped together some boxes and started packing early this morning, skipping classes so I could get it done. I ate some leftovers over the sink last night, but other than that…

“No,” I whisper tiredly, shaking my head. “I’ll get something at home.”

Malice doesn’t respond. But a few blocks later, he flips his blinker on and turns into the parking lot of a little Mexican food place. When he pulls into a parking place and stops the car, I stare at him in surprise.

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” he grunts. “You need to eat, or you’re gonna pass out. Your face is white as a damn sheet.”

He throws open his car door and gets out, and I manage to rouse myself enough to do the same, following him into the restaurant. There’s a counter up front with a giant menu board above it, and Malice gestures to it. “What do you want?”

“Um…” I’m still reeling a little from the fact that he’s offering to buy me lunch, especially after getting back the money my mom took from me—or a big chunk of it, anyway. It feels weird, so I glance quickly at the menu before muttering, “A beef taco.”

He narrows his eyes at me, then turns to the round-faced woman behind the counter. “Three beef tacos and a chicken taco.” He glances back at me. “Do you eat fish?”

“Uh, yes.”

“And a fish taco,” he tells the woman, rattling off a few sides, drinks, and a vegetarian burrito before digging out his wallet to pay.

I watch in stunned silence as she puts in the order, telling him it’ll be ready in a few minutes. Malice stands like a statue beside me as we wait, his arms crossed and his gaze fixed on the kitchen in the back where they’re preparing our food.

When the woman at the front counter finally hands him a large plastic bag full of Styrofoam containers, I expect him to head back out to the car. But instead, he walks over to one of the rickety looking tables set against the front window, yanking out a chair and sinking into it as he sets the bag down. He starts digging out containers of food, and I tentatively take the seat opposite him.

Almost every single container gets placed in front of me, with the exception of the foil wrapped burrito, which he takes for himself.

"I…" I swallow, glancing from the food to him. "I just asked for a taco."

He shoots me a look, his elbows resting on the table. He's wearing a dark t-shirt that hugs his muscled arms, and a multitude of tattoos swoop and curl over his exposed skin. "Was that all you wanted?"

No.

My stomach is starting to grumble just from the spicy scent of the food. Now that some of the nerves twisting my stomach are starting to fade away, I'm realizing how hungry I am.

I don't say that out loud, but Malice can clearly read it on my face—either that, or he hears my stomach, which lets out an audible gurgle.

"Eat." He jerks his chin at the food.

Too hungry to resist any longer, I tear into the containers, polishing off two of the beef tacos so fast it's like they never existed. I move on to the chicken one next, following that with some rice and beans, and I glance up to see Malice watching me, his gray eyes glittering. He's only gotten through a few bites of his burrito, which makes me think he's probably spent the last few minutes just watching me stuff my face.

A flush creeps up my cheeks, and I glance back down. I'm still a little hungry, but it's starting to fade, so I pick up the soda he got me and take a long sip. When I look back up at him through my eyelashes, he's still watching me.

"Do you not eat meat?" I ask, mostly just to fill the silence.

He shakes his head. "No. I'm a vegetarian."

That surprises the hell out of me, to be honest. Everything about Malice reminds me so much of a predator that I can easily imagine him as a lion or something, stalking some poor antelope before devouring it whole. I always figured he was the kind of guy who ordered his steaks and hamburgers rare and dripping with blood.

It’s just a reminder that there’s so much I don’t know about this man, so many things I can’t predict about him.

“Oh,” I murmur lamely, not sure what else to say. “Have you always been a vegetarian?”

“No.” His one-word answer is curt, and at first, I don’t think he’ll say anything else. But then he adds, “A while ago, I had a lot of choices taken away from me. This is one choice I get to make for myself.”

His answer is cryptic, and I find myself wanting to know more, but I bite back the questions, focusing instead on the rest of my food. I don’t quite manage to finish it all, but I get pretty close by the time Malice finishes his burrito and jerks his chin at me.

“You done?” he asks.

I nod. “Yeah.”

He grunts in response, scraping his chair back and throwing the containers away before leading me out of the restaurant.

We drive the rest of the way back to my place in silence, and I cling to the bag of money that he made my mom give me. Malice’s hands are tight on the steering wheel, and I can almost sense some new agitation brewing in him, although I have no idea what caused it this time.

When we reach my apartment building, he rolls to a stop by the curb, staring out the front windshield. I hesitate for a second, anxious to get back to the safety of my apartment and away from the storm that seems to be brewing inside this car. But I can’t seem to make myself move.

Turning toward him, I take a breath, then whisper the words that have been hovering on my lips ever since we left my mom’s place.

“Thank you.”

It leaves my mouth in a whisper that still somehow sounds loud in the car.

Malice’s head whips toward me, something flashing in his eyes. He doesn’t say anything in response, just shoves his door open and gets out. Before I can react to that, he’s yanking open the passenger door and hauling me out too.

Everything about him has turned cold and brutal again, any sign of the kindness from before completely gone.

He presses me up against the side of his car, his expression hard. He narrows his eyes, and his voice is edged with something harsh when he speaks.

“Don’t thank me. And don’t go thinking I’m a good man, *Solnyshka*. Spinning some kind of fucking fairy tale in your head.”

His hands are tight on my arms as he glares at me. I don’t understand why what I said made him so angry. It’s not the same kind of anger that radiated from him when he confronted my mother, but it’s just as overwhelming. His nostrils flare, and he leans in even closer, looming over me and pinning me between the car and the hard lines of his body.

One of his legs is between mine, and I can’t help the shiver that rushes through me as my clit grazes against his thigh. My body reacts involuntarily, my blood heating and my pulse racing.

Malice freezes, breathing hard.

His jaw tightens, and he leans in more with that leg, grinding his thigh purposefully against my clit. The friction makes me gasp softly, and he grips my jaw, forcing me to look him in the eye.

“You want to know what I really am?” he breathes, his face just inches from mine. “I’m not a fucking hero.”

His words are harsh, but he doesn’t stop leaning into me as he speaks. He shifts his position slightly, wedging his thigh higher between my legs so that it puts friction right where I’m most sensitive, and I whimper softly, biting down on my lip.

My hips roll a little, riding his thigh, and I don’t think I could stop the movement if I wanted to. Jolts of electric heat are lancing through my body, and my face flames from the fact that I’m so close to coming apart, just from his leg pressed against my clit.

Malice doesn’t let up. He keeps grinding against me, those strong fingers still pressed to my jaw.

“I’m nobody’s savior,” he bites out, his voice strained. “I’m a monster. And if you cross me, you’ll find out just what that means.”

I can feel the tide of pleasure growing and growing, and I don’t know if it’s from the movement of his leg or the situation or some fucked up combination of the two. Either way, when I come, it’s with a sharp gasp, my mouth open as I press my hands against the warm metal of the car behind me.

I forget how to breathe for a second, shaking and trembling through the sensations, and Malice watches the entire thing.

His eyes never stray from my face, and he doesn’t move away, making me ride it out against his leg.

As my muscles finally go lax, the tension of the orgasm draining from them, he drops his head, burying his face in my hair as he murmurs something in what sounds like Russian.

"*Ty izdayesh' samyye krasivyye zvuki, kogda konchayesh'*."

He's breathing hard when he pulls back, his pupils blown wide and his eyes even darker than usual. He doesn't say anything else, just steps away from me so fast that I nearly fall over, then walks around the car and gets in. I have just enough time to shove myself away from his sleek vehicle before he revs the engine and drives off.

I stand on the curb, staring after the car long after it's driven off.

My knees are weak, and my clit is throbbing. I can feel the aftershocks of my orgasm coursing through me, and I'm still panting, so breathless from what just happened.

My head is spinning, and if I thought I was confused when Malice bought me lunch, that's nothing compared to how I feel now.

WILLOW

THE BANK BAG my mom gave me is lying on the ground at my feet, dropped there when Malice pinned me against the car. Somehow, I manage to rouse myself enough to grab it, then stumble inside my building and make my way up to my apartment. I barely notice the walk up the stairs, and my fingers fumble with my keys for a second before I let myself in.

My mind and body both feel like they've been put through a blender, and the apartment seems to spin around me as I glance at the boxes I won't be needing anymore.

I don't know what the hell is going on with these men, but I'm realizing more and more that I'm in over my head.

What is happening?

Why am I so attracted to them?

So *drawn* to them?

I've never slept with a guy before, never even climaxed from a man's touch. But I just did with Malice. And not even from his touch, but from the thick, muscled hardness of his thigh wedged between mine. He never even really touched me, never kissed me.

He just invaded my senses, and the overwhelming feel of him made me come.

I can still smell him on my skin, the heady, smoky scent that's not quite like anything else I've ever smelled before. I shiver just from the lingering fragrance on me, and then wrap my arms around myself, like I'm trying to hold together all the pieces I feel like I'm fragmenting into.

I can barely remember when my life wasn't consumed by these men, even though it wasn't that long ago. Now I spend my days wondering what

they might do next, where they might show up, and how they might shake my existence up even more.

"No. I can't keep doing this," I say out loud, even though there's no one to hear it but me.

Malice was right, and I need to take his warning seriously. After he stood up for me to my mother and admitted he knows what it's like to be used by someone who claims to love you, I started to feel a connection to him. Started to feel like maybe I knew him or understood him, in a way.

But the truth is, I don't.

He's a mystery to me, and everything about that mystery is shrouded in darkness and violence.

I can't stop the Voronin brothers from doing whatever they want—that much has become abundantly clear—but I need to get my head on straight. I need to force them out of my mind and put up higher walls around myself. Because no matter how hard I've been trying to keep them out, they keep worming their way into my thoughts.

And that's beyond dangerous.

WEIRDLY ENOUGH, life goes back to normal for the next several days. After depositing the remainder of the money my mom stole into my bank account, I go back to school and fall into my usual routine.

I was packing up to leave my apartment when Malice burst in, since I couldn't afford the rent with no job and no money thanks to my mom, but after dropping off a check to my landlord, I don't have to worry about that anymore.

Things are going smoothly again. Or at least, as smoothly as possible.

I haven't heard from my mom since Malice and I left her house, and that hurts, in a way. I know I'm never going to get an apology from her for stealing or for lying to me about the money being gone, but I wish she would say something.

I know she's pissed at me, even though she was the one who stole from me in the first place. In the back of my mind, I can acknowledge that maybe this is for the best, all things considered. Maybe it will be good if this causes a rift between us that can't be repaired.

I've been putting up with my mom's bullshit for so long. Too long. But she was the only person I had for a long time. The person who adopted a scarred, scrawny toddler and took her home.

Instead of dwelling on that or thinking about the guys, I throw myself into my school work. More than ever, I want to do well, to get my degree and position myself for a better life than the one my mom has tried to suck me into time and time again.

Focusing on the future I want and how I'm going to get it is the perfect way to get my head back on straight.

I have just enough time to make sure I do well on my next English Lit paper, so I stay late one night, claiming a table in one of the study areas in the library while I pour over the books I have checked out.

Unfortunately, I don't have as much peace and quiet as I'd like. April and her usual group are at a table nearby, laughing and talking.

"It's going to be wild, I heard," one of them says, sounding excited.

"What does that mean?" another one asks. "Someone's springing for a keg?"

"More than that," April chimes in. "It's going to be the party of the semester. Anyone who's anyone is going to be there. Chi Delta Psi doesn't throw parties that aren't legendary."

I shake my head, trying to tune them out, but out of the corner of my eye, I see Colin come over to talk to them.

"You ladies are going to be there, right?" he asks.

April laughs, batting her eyelashes at him and tossing her flame-red hair over her shoulder. "Of course we are. We wouldn't miss it."

He grins and then looks over, catching sight of me listening to them from my table nearby. Before I can look away, he strides over, resting his hip against the table with his arms folded, looking casually handsome.

"You're coming too, right, Willow?"

I blink in surprise. Before, I would have said no immediately. Parties aren't really my thing, and there's not really going to be anyone I know there. I haven't taken the time to make friends on campus, and Colin is one of the only people who really talks to me.

But this is what people do, right? They go to frat parties and hang out on the weekends and get to know their classmates. Now that I'm not working at the club every night, I actually do have the free time to go to a party if I want to.

So I make a snap decision, blurting out the words before I can stop myself.

"Yeah, sure," I tell him. "It sounds fun. I'll be there."

He grins broadly. "You just made my night."

He raps his knuckles on the table once before returning to his friends, who are waiting to leave the library.

"Can you believe that?" April mutters once he's gone, dropping her voice down to a whisper. "He asked her?"

One of her friends whispers something back, and judging from the look on her face, it's not something flattering about me.

I roll my eyes and go back to my work, making notes for my paper.

By the time I'm finished, April and her friends are long gone. Finishing my paper took me longer than I expected it to, so the campus is nearly deserted as I head for the bus stop, hustling a little so I can hopefully catch the bus that leaves every hour.

I can see it trundling up to the stop as I approach the road that runs along the edge of campus, and I run for it, waving my hand to flag down the driver. I'm just about a hundred feet away when the man behind the wheel locks eyes with me… and then drives off.

"You have got to be kidding me!" I pant, staggering to a stop and resting my hands on my knees. "Fucker."

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, resigning myself to waiting for the next bus in the dim light from the street lamp a little way away.

As I walk toward it, I chew on my lower lip. *Maybe I should just spring for a cab*.

With the money Malice managed to get back from my mom, I'm doing okay. But I still don't have a job, and I won't be able to keep dipping into my savings to pay rent forever, so my impulse is to save money where I can.

As I'm debating my options, movement in the shadows nearby catches my attention. I glance over out of the corner of my eye, half expecting it to be Malice or Ransom, or maybe the usually elusive Victor for once. But it's not any of them. It's just some other man.

A flash of relief fills me at the thought that they're not following me around, but nervousness follows on its heels.

There's something strange about the way the man is standing, away from the light of the streetlamp, half hidden in darkness.

I can’t make out his features very well—just enough to know that he’s not one of the brothers—but he’s bigger than me and dressed in dark colors that blend with the shadows.

A spike of fear makes my heart speed up a little bit, and I suddenly want to be anywhere but here.

Digging out my phone and trying not to draw attention to myself, I pull up the ride share app on my screen. All of a sudden, the expense of not having to wait for the bus seems totally worth it.

The closest driver is ten minutes away, and I clench my jaw as I order the ride. I stare down at my screen, alternating between silently urging the driver to go faster and glancing over at the man hidden in the shadows.

When he steps forward, my adrenaline spikes. I try to keep breathing, telling myself that he probably just got tired of the bus and is going to walk. But when I glance over at him, I realize he’s walking right toward me, his strides long and purposeful.

Fuck.

My body jolts into motion instinctively, and I start hustling down the street in the opposite direction, digging into my bag again for my knife. Footsteps ring out behind me, and my skin chills. I have to work to keep my brain from racing ahead of itself, spinning horrible scenarios of what this man might want.

I start walking faster, ducking down an alley to try to lose whoever the hell this is, but he keeps following me.

Now I’m panicking, and I break into a full run, darting around dumpsters and stumbling over small bits of trash scattered over the ground. I can hear his feet pounding on the pavement behind me over the galloping of my heart, and it spurs me to run even faster, clutching the knife in one hand and my phone in the other.

When I burst out of the alley and onto another street, I turn left without pausing, my breath coming in choppy gasps as I scan my surroundings. Up ahead, a cab pulls to a stop at an intersection, and I practically scream at it to wait.

I run toward it, yanking the door open and practically throwing myself into the seat before the driver can pull away.

“What the—” The guy behind the wheel looks up in surprise as I slam the door shut behind me.

“Go, go!”

The urgency in my voice gets him moving, and he pulls away from the curb as I turn to peer out the window, catching sight of the man in the distance as we start to drive down the street. I shove the knife back into my bag, fear twisting in my stomach. I have no idea who was following me, or why.

Was it random? Just some asshole looking to prey on a woman alone at night? But then why follow me for so long?

It was almost like he was waiting for me at the bus stop. Like he was… targeting me.

I have a sudden vivid memory of asking Ransom how long it would take for him and his brothers to be satisfied that no one is probing into Nikolai's death, and the way he basically confirmed that that day might never come.

So was my pursuer poking around, looking for information? Did he somehow manage to figure out I was at the whorehouse the night Nikolai died?

Ever since the first night I met them, the Voronin brothers have terrified me. They've loomed over my life like shadows, leaving me constantly looking over my shoulders. But for the first time, it occurs to me that maybe there's someone out there I should be more afraid of than the three of them.

"You okay, lady?"

The cab driver cranes his neck to look at me, his thick brows scrunched together.

"Yeah," I mutter, glancing out the back window of the car again.

"Where to?"

I hesitate for a second, then give him the names of the cross streets I remember seeing near the large building Ransom went into the day I followed him. The idea of going home right now terrifies me, and if there really is someone following me in connection with Nikolai's death, the brothers are the only ones who can help.

Soft music plays from the speaker, and the driver doesn't make any attempt to chat me up as he navigates his way down Detroit's darkened streets. He probably didn't believe me when I said I was okay, and he's clearly decided to leave me alone.

We pull to a stop at the curb after a while, and as soon as I get out, the cabbie drives away, leaving me alone on the street in front of the building.

My heart is still beating faster than normal, and a voice in my head is screaming at me that this is crazy. It's late in the evening, and I shouldn't be going to these men for protection when they've already threatened to kill me. I shouldn't be going to them for anything at all.

But I don't know where else to go.

So I square my shoulders and walk up to the building, finding a door with no windows in it. There's no doorbell that I can see, and when I knock lightly on the heavy wood, the door swings open a crack.

I frown, reaching down to test the knob. It's locked, but the door must not have been fully latched because when I give it a little push, it swings open easily.

Beckoning me inside.

WILLOW

I CREEP INSIDE, still not quite sure what kind of place this is. What do the brothers even do here? My mind can fill in all kinds of blanks for that, from the mundane to the terrifying, but I shove it all back, glancing around before I let my imagination run away with me.

The more I see of the space around me, the more it just looks like the place where they live. As I creep forward through the shadowy, darkened space, I pass by a kitchen with a large table and chairs in the middle, and when I hear a sound coming from a room up ahead, I move to follow it.

My heart is pounding, and it sounds so loud in my head that I'm almost sure someone else has to be able to hear it too. Like it's giving me away before I even get to wherever the guys are. If they're even here.

I shouldn't be here.

I keep telling myself that over and over again in my head. I should just turn around and leave. But memories of being chased down by that strange man keep resurfacing in my mind, and fear of that overrides my fear of disturbing the brothers.

A deep grunt catches my attention, followed by a muffled voice and a rhythmic thudding noise, and I hurry down the hall toward where the sounds are coming from. Light spills into the darkened hallway from a living room up ahead, and I'm about to step into the room when I freeze, realizing in a rush what I'm looking at.

It's Malice.

And he's not alone.

There's a woman bent over the couch, her face mashed against the cushions. Her ass is cherry red from how hard Malice is pounding into her,

his hips slapping against her body.

He's fucking her hard and savagely, his face twisted into a primal expression as he drives into her body again and again. He has one hand on her back, keeping her face down and ass up, while his other hand grips her hip tightly.

They're both completely naked, and I realize for the first time how many tattoos Malice has. He's covered in them, not just on his arms but across his back and shoulders, and even down his legs, black ink mixed with a few splashes of color.

My breath catches, and my stomach clenches hard as I shrink back into the shadows of the hallway.

I should be disgusted and horrified, but the shock of what I'm seeing mixes with an undeniable pulse of arousal low in my belly. My feet are rooted to the floor, and I can't look away from the sight in front of me.

It's just… so much. Intense and violent and raw.

Clearly, Malice fucks the same way he does everything else, and now that I know that, I can never unknow it.

Oh my god, Willow. You shouldn't be here. You have to go.

My brain finally kicks into gear as that thought flits through my head, and I blink, about to turn around and flee back down the hallway.

But before I can move, something brushes against the back of my neck. A warm gust of air almost like… breath. I stiffen, stifling a yelp as I realize I'm no longer alone in the hallway.

"You shouldn't be creeping in here like a little mouse," a male voice whispers from behind me, barely audible. "You might get eaten by lions."

I recognize the voice as Victor's, but that doesn't give me any relief.

He's the one I've interacted with the least of the three brothers, and what I remember of him isn't comforting in any way. There's no telling what he might do now that I've been caught sneaking into their home.

My chest heaves as I breathe through my nose, panic flaring. I brace myself for him to grab me and drag me down the hall, or to call out to Malice to let him know I've been spying on him. But he doesn't move at all. Instead, warm breath cascades over my skin as he whispers low in my ear again.

"Do you like watching this?"

Shock ripples through me at the question, and my stomach flips over.

Licking my lips, I glance over at Malice and the woman again. His broad back is mostly to me, so I can see his ass flex every time he drives into her. The muscles of his biceps and forearms stand out as he holds her steady, keeping her right where he wants her. He's dominating her in every way possible, his large body literally *conquering* hers, splitting her open with each thrust.

My stomach flips over itself again, my skin prickling as I stare at the raw, primal sight in front of me.

No. I don't like this. Do I?

I shake my head in answer to Victor's question, not daring to open my mouth.

"That's a lie," he breathes. "I can see your pulse in your neck. It's faster than normal. The average resting heart rate for a woman your age is sixty to one hundred beats per minute. Yours is at least twice that."

I swallow hard, trying to slow my racing pulse, as if that will somehow prove Victor wrong.

But my heart keeps crashing against my ribs, thumping so hard that it almost matches the rough slapping sound of Malice fucking the woman over the couch. He's holding on to her with both hands now, his thick fingers tight on her hips, and I wince in sympathy, because she's definitely going to have bruises and maybe even divots from his nails from how hard he's digging into her flesh.

She doesn't really seem to care, though.

She cries out when he slams into her with force, and he grunts at her to shut up.

My body reacts viscerally to the sound of his deep, guttural voice, and Victor makes a quiet noise behind me.

"You liked that too," he whispers. "The blood is rushing through your veins, and your body is releasing hormones. Oxytocin, dopamine, and serotonin. You can feel that, can't you?"

His breath is warm against my neck, and although we're not touching at all, I can *feel* his proximity. His body heat radiates into me, leaving me feeling uncomfortably warm and making it impossible to bring down the thundering pace of my heart. I know he's watching everything happening in the living room just like I am, and I wonder how many times Malice has done this here, and if Victor cares.

Clearly, he cares right now.

Because he’s watching me watch his brother.

“You’re breathing harder,” Victor notes, his low voice like the whisper of a devil in my ear. “Are you wet? Your core is probably getting slick and swollen, so it could stretch around a cock. So it could take getting split open like that. Just like her.”

It’s like I can *feel* everything he’s saying. His words aren’t even particularly dirty, more clinical and analytical than anything else, but the way he’s describing every bit of the reaction in my body is just making me even more uncomfortably aware of how turned on I am.

God, this is so wrong.

Fear and embarrassment and arousal swirl through me, an overwhelming and confusing mixture, but I know which one is winning in the moment. I don’t think I’ve ever been this turned on in my life.

My body aches, desperate for some relief, and I squeeze my legs together just enough to put some friction on my clit. A burst of pleasure shoots through me, more intense than I’ve ever felt before, and a tiny whimper falls from my lips.

It’s involuntary, slipping out before I can stop it…

But that doesn’t matter.

Malice’s head snaps up, his gaze landing on me as he turns to look toward the hallway.

Our eyes lock, and I have no idea if he’s surprised to see me or if he already knew I was standing here. But regardless, he doesn’t look away. There’s heat and fire and something wild in his dark eyes, and he holds my gaze captive as he slams into the woman beneath him over and over again.

Each thrust is more punishing than the last, and the moans the woman makes sound like they’re being punched out of her, like she can’t breathe around them.

Somehow, I can tell when Malice is about to come. His face goes tight, and his body tenses, and he buries himself deep inside the woman, gripping her hips so hard that the muscles in his forearms stand out like ropes.

With a low growl, he finishes inside her, his upper body bowing forward a little. The woman is right on his heels, screaming into the couch cushion as she writhes and jerks.

When Malice pulls out of her, she goes limp, collapsing in a heap, half of her body on the couch and the other half on the floor. If it weren’t for the

way her body heaves as she sucks in air, I might have thought she died from the pleasure of it all.

Malice reaches down, and I watch him slide the condom off his dick, tying it off so he can throw it out. I can't help the way my gaze follows the movement, and I notice that his cock is…

Holy shit. Is it *tattooed*?

I can't be sure in the low light, and the moment I realize I'm staring at his barely softened erection, I wrench my gaze away from the sight to find Malice still watching me.

He doesn't look away for a second, and his voice is low and gravelly when he says, "Get out."

I flinch, about to turn and flee into the night, not even caring at this point that the guy who was chasing me before is still out there somewhere. But Victor shifts his weight to one side a little, cutting off my path of escape.

"I said get out."

Malice repeats the command, glancing down at the woman this time, and I realize he's talking to her, not me.

She looks completely wrecked, her eyes still glazed over from her orgasm as she stumbles to her feet and nearly falls over on wobbly legs. She blinks when she notices Victor and me standing in the living room doorway, and her cheeks flush with color.

She doesn't argue with Malice's curt order to get out, just starts quickly gathering her things and getting dressed enough to leave. As soon as her clothes are on, she slips her feet into a pair of very high heels, glances at Malice, and then walks tentatively toward the hallway. Unlike the way he moved to cut me off, Victor steps to one side to let her go, and she squeezes past us to dart down the corridor.

Malice doesn't pay attention to any of it. It's like the woman stopped existing to him once he was finished fucking her.

There's a soft thud in the distance as the door I came through when I first got here closes behind the woman. As if the sound has jerked him out of some kind of stasis, Malice narrows his eyes at me and then strides toward the shadowy doorway where Victor and I are standing.

He's still completely naked, and his cock bobs in front of him with each heavy footstep, wet with the remnants of his cum from the condom. I feel like I'm being stalked by some wild, feral animal, like I've left the city of

Detroit behind and am in a dangerous jungle somewhere. If Victor thought my pulse was quick before, it feels almost dangerously fast now, as if my poor heart might beat so hard it simply gives out.

I want to run, but Victor is still standing behind me, keeping me boxed in as Malice approaches.

Malice doesn't stop walking until he's barely more than a foot away from me, and the feeling of being encased between the two brothers, trapped between their large bodies, makes my head swim.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Malice glares down at me, his eyes narrowed.

I open my mouth to answer, but I can't. I can't say anything, can't find my voice. I feel lightheaded and dizzy, aroused and flustered in a way I can't quite process.

That's not good enough for Malice, of course. His hand comes up, and he grips my jaw, tilting my face up.

Heat still blazes in his eyes, something just as raw and primal as when he was fucking that woman. He's so close to me that I can almost feel the tip of his cock brushing against my stomach, and it makes something low down in my body clench hard.

"Why are you here, *Solnyshka*?" he asks, using that same word he's called me several times now. "How the fuck did you know where we live?"

I swallow hard, my legs shaking as I'm flooded with the absolute certainty that I should not have come here. Malice already warned me that he—and the rest of them—are not heroes. Even if the man who was following me earlier planned to hurt me, these men can't save me.

They won't save me.

And now Malice is pissed.

I open my mouth again, trying to force my tongue to work, but before I can say anything, another voice cuts in.

"What the fuck is going on in here?"

WILLOW

A LIGHT FLICKS ON, flooding the hallway with illumination. Malice glances up, and I whirl around to see Ransom standing in the hallway behind Victor.

He cocks his head, and I can only imagine what this must look like to him. I'm sandwiched between his brothers, the two of them looming in close on either side of me. One of them is naked, and I'm sure my cheeks are red as hell.

"Huh." Ransom purses his lips, his eyebrows rising a little. "Looks like I missed the party."

His words seem to snap the unspoken tension in the air, and Malice and Victor both step away from me at the same time. I nearly fall over from the suddenness of the movement, feeling almost adrift after being locked in place between them. Ransom comes to stand shoulder to shoulder with Victor as all three of the men gaze at me.

I wrap my arms around myself as if that can somehow keep me safe, finally managing to find my voice.

"The door was open," I squeak out. "I didn't mean to intrude."

Malice narrows his eyes, but Victor speaks before he can.

"The woman you invited over probably didn't close it right," he tells his brother, his voice quiet and even. "You need to be more careful. Neither of us care about you having girls here, but you should at least make sure they don't leave the door wide open."

"Fucking hell." Malice glares down the hall in the direction of the entryway. Then he shakes his head, shifting his focus back to me. Suspicion passes over his harsh features as he adds, "That doesn't explain how the fuck this one knew where we live."

There's no point in hiding it, now that I'm here in the lion's den. If I try to lie, I'm pretty sure it'll just make things worse, so I decide to stick with the truth.

"I followed Ransom once," I admit in a whisper. "After he visited me at school one day."

Ransom huffs a surprised breath, but he looks a little bit impressed. Victor's expression is coolly thoughtful, and Malice just looks even more suspicious.

"Why did you do that?" he demands.

"I don't know," I say, the words spilling out of me in a rush. "I don't know why. I just wanted to find out where you all went when you weren't watching me. You know everything about me, and I just wanted to know one thing about you."

All three of the brothers react to that, but I can't read their expressions well enough to tell if my explanation has made them more or less angry.

"Fine," Malice growls, clearly in charge of this little interrogation. "So why did you come here now?"

Memories flicker through my head, and I shift my weight from one foot to the other as I remember running down that alley, ducking around dumpsters and pieces of trash as the unknown man pursued me.

"There was a man," I tell them, twisting my hands together. "I was waiting for the bus home from school, and he was there. Sort of hanging back in the shadows. It creeped me out, so I decided to call for a ride instead. But before the car arrived, he started coming toward me. I ran, and then… then he started following me. Chasing me down the street."

"What the *fuck*?" Malice explodes. He lashes out, slamming his fist into the wall so hard it makes me jump. "You could have led him right to us."

"Hey. Chill out, Mal," Ransom cuts in.

"No, I didn't. I got away from him before I came here," I promise, glancing between the two of them.

"See?" Ransom holds out a hand as if to say *told you so*. "And anyway, we don't know for sure if it was anything to do with Nikolai. Plus, she came right to us to tell us what happened." He looks at me and gives me a little nod, the corner of his mouth pulling up into a smile. "You did good, angel."

Malice huffs, and he still looks like he wants to hit something—or someone—but he backs off.

“Find out what she knows,” he mutters to Victor, then stalks back into the living room to grab his pants and tug them back on.

Victor and Ransom usher me into the living room too, and I give Victor my full attention, turning my back to where Malice is getting dressed. It feels like a bad idea, like turning your back to an apex predator or a monster that might eat you, but it’s somehow safer than watching him.

“Where were you when you noticed this guy?” Victor asks.

His voice is quiet and even, almost as low as it was when he was whispering to me in the hallway, but his controlled demeanor makes it easier to focus on his words and organize my thoughts as I start to answer.

“I was at the bus stop on the south side of campus,” I say, giving him the nearest cross streets.

He asks me several questions in rapid-fire, and I answer every single one, giving him as much information as I remember. When I finally finish speaking, he nods.

“I’ll hack the security footage from the area and figure out who this man is,” he tells me. “We need to find out if it’s a random occurrence, or if someone is tailing you for a specific reason.”

“Okay,” I say, plucking nervously at a loose thread on my shirt.

I have a sudden stab of fear that now that I’ve told them someone might be after me, they won’t let me leave their home, but then Malice walks back into view.

“We’ll let you know what we find out,” he grunts.

“I’ll take you home,” Ransom offers.

I’m not sure I want to take him up on that. The last time I got into a car with one of them it ended… confusingly. But it’s late, and I don’t know if someone else is waiting to stalk me or chase me through the streets, so I also don’t want to say no.

Malice glares at me once more and then stalks off, heading for another part of this strange, large building they live in. He never put a shirt on, and it’s hard not to notice his naked, tattooed back on display as he goes, but I wrench my eyes away.

Victor doesn’t even look at me again as he starts toward the stairs that lead from the living room to an upper floor, probably planning to get to work on hunting down whoever was following me.

That leaves me and Ransom alone, and I glance nervously at the handsome man with the tousled brown hair and the easy smile.

“Come on,” he says, gesturing for me to follow him.

He leads me out of the living room and into a darkened garage, flipping on a light and striding confidently toward…

Oh fuck.

I swallow hard. It’s a motorcycle.

My footsteps slow, and Ransom chuckles as he notices, turning to look back at me over his shoulder. “Have you ever ridden one before?”

I shake my head in answer. “No. Never.”

He grins, and there’s something sexy and almost flirtatious about it. “Don’t worry, angel. I’ll take good care of you.”

My stomach does a weird little flutter at the warm promise in his voice, and I try shake off my reaction. My entire body has been on edge since I walked in and saw Malice doing… everything he did to the woman bent over the couch, and I feel like I’m still trying to get my equilibrium back.

Ransom gets on the bike, throwing his leg over it with practiced ease before gesturing me over with a jerk of his chin. “Climb on behind me.”

It takes a second for me to get myself moving, but I do it, clambering awkwardly onto the large bike behind him. There’s enough room for us both on the seat, but it’s a very intimate position, the front of my body smushed against the back of his. I stiffen a little, trying to keep a bit of space between us.

With the push of a button, he opens the garage door. Then he cranks up the bike and revs the engine. I can feel its powerful vibrations under me, so much more immediate and intense than being in a car.

“Hang on tight,” Ransom tells me as he rolls out of the garage. The door closes behind us as we turn onto the dimly lit street.

As soon as we start to pick up speed, I forget all about how I wanted to keep some distance between us. I do as he told me to, clinging to his large body as tightly as I can, my arms wrapped around his waist and my hands clasped against his muscled abs.

He speeds through the streets of Detroit like he owns them, and my hair whips around my face as we speed past businesses that are shuttered for the night. Adrenaline pours through me, but as it becomes clear what a confident, skilled rider Ransom is, I start to relax a bit.

I feel… *free*, in a way, and almost high on it.

I’ve never done anything like this before, and it feels kind of good.

He heads in the direction of my apartment, but instead of taking me straight back there, he pulls up in front of a little hole in the wall diner about a mile away from my place.

“Are you hungry?” he asks, twisting around a little to look down at me.

A bemused smile tugs at my lips before I can stop it. For some reason, these men keep trying to feed me.

Ransom cocks his pierced eyebrow, grinning as he takes in my expression. “What?”

“Nothing.” I shake my head, glancing toward the diner. “Yeah, I could eat.”

“Good. Come with me,” he says, and we get off the bike and go inside.

The diner is almost entirely empty when we walk in, and it has a worn down but somehow cozy feel to it. We settle in a booth near the back, and I pick up the menu on the table and flip through it idly—as much to give myself something to do with my hands as because I’m trying to decide what to eat.

A bored looking waitress comes over to take our order, although looking at Ransom makes her perk up a little bit. He orders a burger with cheese fries and a milkshake, and I order the same thing.

The waitress takes our menus and leaves, and I start fiddling with the piece of paper wrapped around the silverware on our table as I glance at Ransom.

“So you’re not a vegetarian like Malice, huh?”

He chuckles. “Nah. Me and Vic both eat meat. I get why Malice made the choice he did, but I like burgers too much to ever give them up.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“So, has your mom left you alone?” Ransom asks. “She hasn’t tried to steal from you again, has she?”

I blink, taken aback by the question. But I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. These guys are all super close. They’re brothers, and they apparently do everything as a team, so of course Malice would’ve told him about what happened with my mom.

“No, she hasn’t. I haven’t talked to her since then,” I tell him. “But my money hasn’t been touched again.” I swallow, picking at a hole in the Formica table top. “It’s not the first time she’s stolen from me, although this was the biggest sum, I guess. It was hard growing up with her.”

“Yeah? How so?”

Ransom is watching me, his arms folded on the table in front of him. That same light of curiosity I thought I saw in his eyes the day he came to visit me on campus is back, but burning brighter now.

I think about the strange men who came to our house at random hours of the day and night, about the looks some of them gave me, and the ones who asked my mom if I was available for a little fun too… and about the man who decided not to ask her at all. But I don't want to get into any of that with Ransom, so I don't mention it.

"I missed a lot of school when I was younger," I say instead. "Because Mom needed help paying the bills. So I'd get a job and work, but then she'd spend the money on stupid things. Stuff she didn't even need. Drugs or booze or clothes to make herself feel better. So then we'd still be behind on the bills. When I turned eighteen and moved out, I told myself that I wouldn't have to deal with her anymore, but…"

I sigh, shaking my head.

"But what?" Ransom prompts, leaning forward a little more.

"I don't know. Part of me feels like I owe her a lot. She adopted me when I was a little kid, barely two years old, and that's something not a lot of people would have done. I've always felt like I owe her because of that, but I know she uses that against me sometimes. It's just another thing for her to manipulate me with." I stop picking at the table, tracing a swirl on the pocked surface with my finger instead. "I don't know. It's complicated."

Ransom makes a quiet noise in the back of his throat.

"I know what it's like to have a shitty parent," he says. "Our mom was a fucking saint, but our dad? He was a complete piece of shit. He—" He breaks off, huffing a breath through his nose. "Let's just say I know what it's like to have someone who should be on your side treat you like shit and manipulate you."

I stare at him from across the table, surprised he told me any of that. It reminds me a little of what Malice said to me in the car that day we went to my mom's house. About how love can be weaponized against you.

I'm starting to get a clearer picture of these men, a better understanding of where they came from, and I'm surprised that I feel myself actually relating to them and understanding them.

The waitress comes back and drops off our food, and we both take a few bites of our burgers, sitting in a surprisingly comfortable silence for a

moment before I set down my food and murmur, “That man you killed that night… he really killed your mom?”

I glance up in time to see something pass through Ransom’s eyes, a flash of pain seems to darken the bright blue-green of his irises. His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows, and he nods.

“Yeah. He did.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“Thanks.” He blows out a breath, puffing out his cheeks a little. “I’m sorry you had to see what we did to him, but he fucking deserved it. And if that’s the kind of clientele that brothel served, I’m not sorry it burned to the ground either. Had you worked there long?”

A flush creeps up my cheeks. “No. It… it was my first time. Not just my first time getting paid, but my first time *ever*. Or it would’ve been if you all hadn’t come in and…”

Ransom’s face darkens, his brows pulling together. “Well then, I’m even more glad we killed that son of a bitch. Your first time shouldn’t be with a man like that.”

My heart lurches. There was something almost… protective about the way he said those words, like he really means them. I’m not sure what to say in response, or even how to feel about the protective note in his voice, so I don’t say anything, and silence falls for a moment as we continue to eat.

Maybe Ransom can sense that the conversation has gotten too heavy for me, or maybe he wants to change the subject for himself, but when he speaks again, his tone is lighter, a grin tugging at his full lips.

“So, how did you like your first motorcycle ride?”

I smile, relieved by the change of topic. “I liked it. More than I thought I would.”

He chuckles, the sound deep and warm. “You’ve got a wild side, I see.”

I snort softly. “I don’t know about that. It was the first time I’ve ever done anything like that before.”

“Me, I’m an adrenaline junkie,” he admits. “I love going fast and riding the edge. There are some mountains north of here that have these crazy narrow roads, and you can go a hundred miles an hour easy.”

“That sounds terrifying.”

He grins wider, biting into a fry. “And fun as hell. Those are the rides that get your heart racing. But then you have the longer, smoother ones that

are just you and a stretch of flat road, and that has its own kind of thrill."

We spend the rest of the meal talking easily, and when we finally finish eating, Ransom pays the check. Then we head outside and climb back on his bike so he can take me home.

This time, it's a little less terrifying than it was before.

A few minutes later, we roar up to my building, and when he cuts the engine, we both get off the bike. A look falls over Ransom's face as we stand on the sidewalk under a streetlamp, and he takes a step closer to me.

"Hey, I gotta ask… what happened with you and Mal and Vic before I came back tonight?"

Oh my god.

This has been such a long night that it's hard to believe how much has happened in the space of several hours. It feels like days ago that I was in the library finishing up my paper, and the parts of the evening where I was chased down the street, saw Malice fucking a woman, and then ate a late night burger with Ransom all seem like they exist in completely separate dimensions, as if they couldn't possibly have all happened to the same person.

"Nothing," I whisper, shrugging evasively. "I walked in and saw Malice with a woman, and then Victor came up behind me."

Even as the words are coming out of my mouth, I know they're not exactly true. It wasn't *nothing*.

I clear my throat, my body seeming to flush all over at the memory of Victor speaking low in my ear. I'll never forget the way he sounded, analyzing and describing the physiological response I was having to the sight of Malice brutally fucking that woman in the living room.

Ransom studies me for a moment in the flickering light of the streetlamp, like he's trying to gauge how close to the truth my answer was. Then he nods, taking a step closer to me as he reaches up to brush his fingertips over my cheek.

"Good," he murmurs. "Because I have to admit, when I came home and saw you standing there between the two of them, I was jealous as hell."

He drops his head toward mine as he finishes speaking, and my pulse skyrockets. "What are you doing?" I whisper breathlessly.

His blue-green eyes bounce between mine as he captures my chin between his thumb and fingers.

“I’ve been staring at your lips all night. I have to know if they taste as sweet as they look.”

When he leans down and kisses me, I almost stop breathing. His mouth is hot on mine, and when he flicks his tongue against my lips, I can feel warm metal from a piercing I didn’t realize he had until now.

An exhale shudders out of me, and I tilt my head up a little, kissing him back. It’s slow at first, almost exploratory, but then it starts to deepen. His pierced tongue slides against mine as his hands fall to my waist, and he uses the light grip to tug me a little closer to him, making me hyper aware of every single place our bodies are touching.

It feels like there’s a fire burning between the two of us, and every stroke of our tongues fans the flame. It doesn’t make any logical sense, but I can’t fight it.

All I can do is take little snatches of air in the moments when our lips part, every cell in my body focused on the way his mouth feels against mine. It’s like I’m on fire and melting at the same time, and when a little moan spills out of my lips, I can’t even feel embarrassed about it. My head is spinning, and I feel like I’m floating, like I might drift away if he wasn’t holding me down.

I lose track of where we are for a bit, and it’s not until I feel Ransom’s hand slipping under my shirt that my brain kicks in again. The light brush of his fingertips against my stomach snaps me out of the daze I was in immediately, and I pull away, not wanting him to touch my scars and be grossed out.

I never let anyone touch them—not that anyone has ever really wanted to.

Part of me is braced for him to get angry that I pushed him away, but he just grins at me and tugs on a lock of my hair, wrapping it lightly around his fingers. Heat still burns in his eyes, and the metal of his eyebrow ring glints in the low light from the streetlamps outside my building.

“I knew you had a wild side,” he murmurs. “I like it. Have a good night, angel. Get some rest.”

He gets back on his motorcycle but doesn’t leave, watching as I make my way toward my building on unsteady legs.

It’s only once I’m inside, the door closing behind me, that I hear the roar of his bike as he pulls away.

VICTOR

I'M IN MY BEDROOM, frowning at one of the screens in front of me, when Ransom comes back from dropping the girl off at her place. He taps on the doorframe and sticks his head into the room.

"How's the search going?" he asks. "Any luck?"

"I'm working on it," I reply, not looking away from my screen. "I'll let you know."

"We sure are lucky we've got a nerd on our side," he jokes, fondness in his tone.

I roll my eyes, feeling a smile tugging at my lips. I've never been too fazed by Ransom's teasing. That's just how he shows affection.

"Anyway, keep us posted," he says.

"I will. I always do."

With that, Ransom shuffles off, and I go back to scrubbing through security footage to try to track down the unknown man who was following Willow.

I work backward from the bus stop, trying to figure out where he came from before she saw him hiding in the shadows. If I can get a good enough image of his face, I can do a facial recognition search and figure out who the fuck he is.

Most likely, it has nothing to do with Nikolai, and he's just some run-of-the-mill pervert who wanted to take advantage of a woman who was alone at night.

But we can't take the chance. And either way, we have to know who he is.

It’s soothing work, combing through footage, looking at anyone who matches Willow’s—admittedly vague—description of the guy who chased her down the street. There’s a flow to it, a procedure that I follow, and it’s easy to sink into that, letting one thing lead to another in the logical way that they should.

Once I manage to get a clear shot of the man’s face, I run the image through some programs I set up to scan databases for hits that might be a match. My fingers move across the keys with a speed born from muscle memory, but for some reason, I can’t clear my head as completely as I usually do when I work.

I can’t seem to get Willow out of my mind.

It makes sense, since I’m doing this because of her, but I’m not thinking about her being followed.

I’m thinking about her in our home. Standing in the shadows of the hallway, watching Malice as he fucked that woman in the living room.

I’m thinking about the heat I could feel coming off her small, delicate body, and the way I could see her pulse point flickering with every beat of her heart.

It makes my cock harden in my pants just picturing it.

I’ve never slept with a woman before. Never wanted to. I can deal with my body’s needs just fine on my own. There’s something simple and uncomplicated about jerking off, following the motions and doing the things I know for sure work for me. I can make myself orgasm easily enough, and there’s nothing random or illogical about my process.

I’ve never desired a woman before. Never craved one. Malice brings random women home often, and Ransom always has ladies staring at him with lustful expressions on their faces. But I’ve been content to stick to my routines, never feeling like I’m missing out on anything.

Until now.

Willow makes me want something that no one else ever has before.

Giving in to a sudden urge, I switch away from the images of the possible stalker on my main screen, cutting over to the camera feed from Willow’s apartment. There’s a burning need under my skin to see her, and I let that impulse take over for a moment, flipping through the different feeds until I find her.

It’s dark in her apartment, and she’s in bed, asleep. I toggle the right camera to zoom in on her face, taking in the way her eyelashes flutter

against her cheeks, the way her lips are slightly parted.

She looks soft and comfortable, her sleep unbothered by nightmares or unsettling dreams, despite the night she had.

I click to zoom in even more, but I'm already at the limits of the camera. Frustration rises inside me, because it's not enough. I can see her just fine, but it's not close enough. It's not *real* enough.

I want to be there in person, to see her face and smell her light, floral scent. I want to hear the little sighs she makes as she breathes. All those little things that the camera can't pick up.

For a moment, I sit still, my hands clenched into fists, trying to ride it out. But the compulsion has a hold of me, and now that I've fixated on wanting to see her, I can't get it out of my head.

The camera in the living room needs to be adjusted, I think. *Or I need to add another one*.

When Willow started to pack up her apartment into boxes, I didn't notice them at first because of the angle of the camera I placed in the living room. If I had seen them, maybe we would've realized earlier that there was something wrong, some upheaval in Willow's life.

It's a flimsy excuse, but it satisfies the logical part of my brain. Decision made, I get up from the desk and go to my closet, grabbing a small bag of tools. Then I pad downstairs to the garage and slide into my car, pulling out and navigating the streets with quick efficiency until I reach Willow's apartment.

I haven't been here since I installed the cameras that first night—not in person, anyway—but the routine is the same as it was then. Her lock clicks open under my tools, and the familiar sound soothes something in my brain.

I creep into her apartment, closing the door behind me, and scan the living room, searching for the perfect place to put another camera. I finally settle on hiding one near the corner by the TV, which will give me a more complete view of the room. With my task complete, I could leave… but instead, I follow the path I know by heart to her room.

She's sleeping deeply, the bedroom quiet except for the soft sighs of her exhales. Clearly, she's gotten hot in her long-sleeved shirt and pants because she's kicked the covers off of her in her sleep. Her shirt is riding up, showing off a stretch of her skin.

I take in the sight of that stretch with an odd sort of hunger, devouring it with my eyes. She's pale and pretty, and there's a little freckle right where

her waistband meets her stomach.

On one side, there's a stretch of scar tissue, and I lean in closer to get a better look at the marks. They're deep and old, healed already, but the kind of scars that will never go away. I study them for a bit, trying to create some sense of order out of them. Trying to find a pattern in them that will explain their origin or why they're there.

But there's nothing.

No matter how many times I run my eyes over the marks, they stay the same. Purely chaotic. Just like this girl.

So why do I like them?

Why do I like *her*?

Chaos sets my teeth on edge. It makes me feel like there's a swarm of angry wasps rattling around in my head. Usually, the only thing for that kind of feeling is to start counting or to find some routine that takes my mind off whatever kicked my world off its axis.

But right now, I just want *more* of that chaos, and it's an odd feeling.

I jerk my eyes away from her body and step away from her bed altogether, looking around the room.

It's a cluttered mess, with clothes on the floor and a bag overflowing with textbooks slung across a chair. I make a low noise of distaste at the mess, stepping over a pile as I examine her books.

She's diligent with school, always there unless something else is going on in her life that makes her have to miss it. The clothes on the floor are all like the ones she wears to bed. Long sleeves and long pants or skirts. Meant to cover things up, probably.

I pick up a notebook and flip through it, noting her neat handwriting for her notes. I scan the pages a bit, but it's all stuff from her classes. A few dates are written in the margins, and some of them are crossed out, but when I track down those dates, they're just about projects or assignments for classes.

I tuck the notebook back into her bag where it belongs, ignoring the itch under my skin that makes me want to clean and organize her entire bedroom. She'd notice that when she wakes up and realize I'd been here.

Finally, I cross her room to the small, beat up dresser that's pressed against one wall. It seems to barely hold all of her things, which is probably why she has clothes on the floor. It's old and scuffed, and it looks like something that someone set on the curb to be taken out with the trash.

Honestly, that's probably where she got it, considering her financial situation before we stepped in.

Of course, there's no order here either. Her clothes are folded chaotically or not at all. If there's a system, it's impossible to find, and it makes more sense that there just isn't one.

I close a drawer full of shirts and some pants and quietly tug open another one, finding it full of her underwear.

My head tells me to shut the drawer, turn away from the dresser, and get out of here. But my hands itch to touch, to take, and after waging an internal battle with myself, I finally give in to that urge. I rifle through her panties until I find a pair that's dark purple, with a small bit of lace around the waist band. They aren't sexy like some of the panties Malice's conquests have left around the warehouse, but I can picture her in them.

My fingers curl around the fabric, and before I can talk myself out of it, I'm stuffing them into my pocket.

In my pants, my cock is fully hard again, just from being around this girl. Just from touching her things. Irritation curls inside me, and I huff a silent breath.

Usually, I can control my reactions to things. It's rare for me to be affected by something in a way I can't deal with.

None of us ever got into drugs for this exact reason. We saw a lot of kids in our shitty neighborhood get fucked up when we were younger. They got a taste from someone, and that was enough to get them addicted and then broken. My brothers and I always wanted more for ourselves than that, so we stayed out of that shit.

But this? Willow?

She feels like a drug.

Like something that's going to wreck us all.

I grit my teeth and drag in a deep breath, forcing myself to walk out of the room. I ease her bedroom door closed the way it was before, and then leave her apartment, locking the front door behind me.

Although I drive with my usual careful precision, the drive back home seems to pass in a blur.

Luckily, Ransom and Malice are nowhere to be seen when I get back home. The large, open space of the warehouse is dark as I climb the stairs and go to my room, closing and locking the door. It's not one of the days that I normally jack off, but my body is throbbing angrily, demanding some

kind of relief. It makes the buzzing feeling under my skin even worse, as if I might fracture into pieces.

Willow's panties feel like a weight in my pocket. My hand trembles slightly as I draw them out, rubbing the soft material between my fingers.

My cock pulses in response, and I curse under my breath, undoing my fly so my dick isn't pressed right up against it.

"One, two, three…"

I start to count slowly, something that usually helps me regain my equilibrium and control, but even as I recite the numbers, my free hand is shoving my pants and underwear down enough to free my aching cock.

"Four, five, six, seven…"

It springs free, jutting out from my crotch, swollen and flushed and desperate for attention. My head is full of thoughts of Willow. The way she looked in bed, her lips parted, her hair spilling over the pillow.

"Eight, nine…"

That stretch of skin that was bared by her shirt riding up. The scars that were just as much a mess as everything else about her.

"Ten…"

Her panties are still in my hand, and running on instinct, I wrap them around my cock. The material is warm from being in my pocket on the way home, and it feels so fucking good.

Usually, I don't use anything when I get myself off. Just some lube and my hand. But the feeling of Willow's panties against my heated flesh makes my cock weep, sticky beads of precum spilling from my tip and sliding down. I push my hips forward, letting the material drag against my sensitive skin. It's like nothing I've ever felt before, and my eyes fall closed while I breathe through it.

My hand moves slowly at first, as if I'm trying to hold on to some semblance of control, even though I'm breaking my carefully established rules.

But that doesn't last long.

I've stopped counting, and before I know it, I'm fucking hard into my hand. Working my cock faster and faster, chasing the burning heat that builds in my stomach and spreads outward like an inferno. My breathing is heavy, and every other exhale comes out as either a curse or a moan. I can't help it, and I fist my cock hard, my fingers tight around the panties that I'm using like a toy.

I think about Willow standing in our home, about the way she reacted to everything I said. How she tried not to move but couldn't quite control herself. She was watching Malice, but I was the one who was right there with her. I was the one with my voice in her ear, describing her reactions as she danced on a knife's edge of desire.

In my head, I imagine the way her face must've looked as arousal stirred inside her, and that's enough to have me tensing up. Pleasure and heat slam into me, undeniable and unavoidable. I groan as I come hard, pulling the panties back enough that they're not wrapped around my dick when I empty myself in hot, wet spurts.

I smear the mess of cum into the crotch of her panties, staring at it for a long moment. My chest heaves as I pant for breath, and some of the tension bleeds out of my body as I come down from the high of my climax.

After a second or two, I shake myself and ball the panties up into a wad, stashing them in my closet where I keep things I don't want anyone to mess with.

"Fuck," I whisper, curling my hands into fists and pressing them against my forehead. The tension in my body has let up somewhat, but the mess in my head is even worse than it was before.

I shouldn't have done that.

Stripping out of my clothes, I place each article in the designated basket for washing later. Then I grab fresh clothes and walk naked down the hall to the bathroom we all share.

While the water heats up, I tap my fingers against my thigh. Seven times on one side, and then seven times on the other. I count each number, careful to make sure I don't miss one. I start near my knees and then work my way up in neat rows, picturing them in my mind. Even and perfect.

Once steam billows out of the shower, I get in, making sure the knob for the water is adjusted the way I like it. Not exactly in the middle, but a little to the right, lining up with one of the grout lines in the tile.

I wash my body thoroughly, scrubbing with my loofah, making sure not to miss any spots. Under my breath, I repeat the ingredients for the body wash I use, the sound of it drowned out by the crash of the shower water hitting the tub.

When I feel clean enough, I wash my hair once, then again, and then once more, completing a sequence in my brain.

Some of the buzzing under my skin and in my head lessens as I start piecing together the armor of my control again. After ejaculating in Willow's panties, I felt adrift. Off center. Like my equilibrium was fucked up.

Going through my routines helps with the feeling of spinning out of control, and when I step out of the shower to dry off, I feel more like myself.

Enough that I can get shit done again, anyway.

After tugging on my clothes in the right order, I run a hand through my damp hair and head back to my room, stepping inside just in time to hear a soft ping from my computer.

Good. It's done.

I cross to the desk and pull up the program I left running before I went out to see Willow. It's a relief to refocus on the task at hand, shutting down my emotions and putting my mind to work on a problem I can tangibly solve.

Finding a random man in a city with a population of over three million people, using the hacking skills and software at my disposal, makes sense to me. It's logical and orderly. It soothes me, and I sit down in my chair, clicking through the program to see what it's found.

Satisfaction fills me as I note that there's a solid match for the mystery man who followed Willow.

Gotcha, motherfucker.

WILLOW

THE NEXT DAY, I walk across campus, shooting glances from side to side as I go. I've been on edge all day, worried that whoever I saw last night is still here, waiting to find me again and attack me.

But I don't see any signs of him, and there's no one lurking around, waiting to hurt me.

I head into the science building a little after noon, walking to my next class. It's in one of the bigger lecture halls, and I take a seat in the back, pulling out my notebook and pens, ready to take notes.

The room fills up slowly, students trickling in, laughing and talking as they settle into their seats, and then the professor comes in as well, taking his place at the front.

"We'll be watching a film today," he intones, then sweeps us all with a warning look. "And before you start thinking this might be an excellent time for a post-lunch nap, I should tell you—there will be a quiz on this later, so be sure to pay attention."

He starts up the projector, gesturing for a student near the front of the room to dim the lights.

As the film starts to play, the door at the back of the lecture hall opens. I hear quiet footsteps, and then someone walks down the row where I'm sitting and settles into the seat beside me.

Without even looking over, I know who it is. I've learned to recognize his scent by now, as well as the way his very presence seems to disturb the atoms in the air, making every room he's in seem to shrink.

Malice.

He’s sitting right next to me, but he seems almost too big and intimidating to be in this setting. It’s hard to imagine him taking notes or answering questions from Professor Holborn, and I swallow hard before glancing over at him. Even though this campus is ‘my turf,’ so to speak, I know that doesn’t mean anything. I feel just as intimidated as always when it comes to Malice.

“What are you doing here?” I whisper, trying not to draw attention to us.

“Vic looked into that guy who was following you,” he tells me, his voice low. “He doesn’t have anything to do with that night. He was just a fucking creep.”

I glance over at him in the shadowy lecture hall. “What do you mean, a creep?”

“The asshole had two sexual assault charges on his record, a domestic abuse charge, and a restraining order against him. He wasn’t trying to get info from you. He just wanted something else.”

My stomach clenches, tightening into a knot. So my pursuer didn’t want to ask me about the guys or Nikolai… he just wanted to attack me or rape me. I swallow hard, replaying everything that happened last night in my mind.

What would have happened if I hadn’t gotten away from that guy? And what might happen if he decides to come after me again?

Malice’s eyes are on me, and as if he can read my thoughts, he shrugs.

“Ransom and I took care of him.”

He says it with the same casual bluntness that he might say ‘Ransom and I went to buy milk,’ but his words send a shiver down my spine. I might not know these men well, but I’ve learned a lot more about them than I ever expected to, and I already know they’re intimately acquainted with violence.

Did they kill the man who tried to attack me?

I can’t decide if that thought is terrifying or reassuring.

“I’m glad it wasn’t anything to do with the secret I’m keeping,” I murmur to Malice, deciding not to ask for clarification about exactly how they took care of him.

“You’re *lucky* it wasn’t anything to do with that,” Malice shoots back, and I know what he means. He’s made it perfectly clear that his ruthlessness will extend to me if I betray him or his brothers.

“If I’d known it was just a random guy, I wouldn’t have bothered you with it,” I whisper. “I’m sorry I barged into your place last night.”

Malice snorts, and I shoot him a glance out of the corner of my eye.

“*Are* you sorry?” he asks, raising a dark brow.

I don’t know what he means at first, and I frown in confusion.

“I saw the way your pupils got all blown out,” he whispers. “How long were you standing there watching?”

My shoulders stiffen, and I nearly choke on my next inhale. Except for that brief moment at the end of the night when he asked about what he’d walked in on, Ransom mostly let me pretend it hadn’t happened. I was sort of hoping *all* the brothers would do the same, but I should’ve known better than to expect that from Malice.

“I know you were turned on,” Malice continues, leaning toward me as he speaks in a low voice that trickles down my spine. “You liked watching it, didn’t you? Me fucking the shit out of some girl. You enjoyed it. Have you got a voyeurism kink under that innocent little face?”

I don’t answer him, but my cheeks feel like they’re on fire. I should be pissed off at him for saying stuff like that to me, but instead, I can feel my body reacting. Arousal surges through me at the memory of Malice pressing that woman down on the couch, taking what he wanted from her. My heartbeat feels loud in my head, and every nerve ending feels charged and ready to respond to the slightest touch.

As if Malice can sense it, he reaches over and rests a hand on my thigh.

“Oh…”

The word slips out of me, half gasp and half sigh, and I hold myself rigid in my seat. My notebook is open on the fold out desk in front of me, a pen grasped in my hand and poised over the paper, but I haven’t taken a single note. The video plays on the large screen at the front of the lecture hall, but all I’m aware of is the heat of Malice’s palm on my leg.

“Should I find out?” he murmurs. “Should I see if thinking about me fucking her makes you wet?”

He trails his hand up higher, just barely teasing the place between my thighs with his fingertips. I drop the pen and grip the edge of the desk, my hips jerking forward involuntarily as sparks shoot through my limbs, radiating out from my clit.

“Tell me to stop.” Malice’s voice is a low burn in my ear. “If you don’t tell me to stop, *Solnyshka,* I’m going to find out the answer to that

question.”

Oh my god. There’s no way he’s going to… Not in class.

But he is. He *does*.

When I don’t answer or even shake my head, his hand works its way under the waistband of my pants, slipping beneath my panties to find my clit. I bite down hard on my lip as he circles that sensitive bud with the pad of one rough finger.

“Yeah,” he muses. “I was right. If I wasn’t, you wouldn’t be so fucking soaked right now.”

His voice is so quiet that only I can hear it, but it seems designed to go right to my core.

I squeeze my legs together, terrified that someone is going to look over and see, but Malice doesn’t seem bothered by that possibility at all as he works his hand a little lower, dipping two fingers into me shallowly.

He slides them out and brings them to my clit again, pressing and rubbing against it in a way that sends jolt after jolt of hot, intense pleasure through me.

I keep trying to force it down, to breathe through it and keep my face impassive. But Malice’s willpower is a terrifying thing, and it’s clear he’s not going to let up until he gets what he wants.

And what he wants seems to be for me to fall apart right here and now.

Oh god. Oh fuck. I dig my teeth into my lower lip and close my eyes, trying to fight against the tide of it. That proves to be a mistake, because with my eyes closed, I can vividly picture the glimpse of Malice’s cock I got last night, and my brain fills in how intense it would feel to have that inside me.

A whimper builds in my throat, and I swallow it back, my eyes snapping open. I make the mistake of looking over at Malice, and he’s looking right back at me.

His dark eyes burn with heat as he stares at me, half a glower, half… something else. In the dim light of the classroom, he looks even more like a shadowy god than usual.

“Look around you,” he whispers, leaning in even closer so that his lips almost touch my ear. “No one in this room knows that you’re about to come. No one but you and me. They don’t know how fucking slick you are, or how you’re grinding against my hand. They don’t know how fucking greedy you are.”

I shake my head, but I don’t really know what I’m objecting to. Maybe this whole thing. But I don’t tell him to stop.

He traps my clit between two fingers, pinching it lightly, and it sends a jolt of sensation through me so intense that it almost takes my breath away. I bite down harder on my lip, a second away from putting my hand over my mouth to keep from making noise.

The heat in me builds and builds, getting sharper and more intense. And then, all of a sudden, it’s too much. I can’t stop it, and Malice seems to know that. He moves his fingers faster, sending me hurtling over the edge.

When my orgasm hits me, it feels like I’m having a seizure or something. It takes over my whole body, white hot and electric, making me shudder from head to toe. I cling to him, my fingers digging into his muscled forearm as I try desperately to be quiet so that no one will look over at us.

As the waves of sensation finally start to ebb away, I’m panting for breath, my nostrils flaring as I struggle to keep my desperate inhalations from getting too loud.

Malice works his hand free, dragging it out from my jeans.

Holding my gaze, he licks his fingers clean one by one, his tongue practically caressing each digit. Then he drags two fingers over my cheek, a little of his saliva and my arousal smearing on my skin.

“If you see anyone else following you, let us know,” he says, his tone turning hard and businesslike again.

Without another word, he gets up and walks out of the classroom as the movie continues to play.

Once the door closes quietly behind him, I slump in my chair, my heart still racing and my entire body burning up like I have a fever.

The rest of the lecture passes by in a haze, and I have no idea how I manage to pack up my things and file out of the building with everyone else when it ends. My legs feel shaky, and every so often, there’s a phantom pulse between my thighs, as if the aftershocks of my orgasm are still coursing through me.

I blink in the sunlight as I step outside the building, and as my eyes adjust to the brightness after the darkened classroom, I notice Colin heading up the pathway in my direction.

He waves, jogging up to me. “Hey, Willow. How’s it going?”

It takes me a second to unstick my tongue from the roof of my mouth and remember how to talk to a normal person. *Like* a normal person.

“Oh, um, I’m fine,” I finally say. “How are you?”

“Not bad. Got an A on my business administration paper, so I’m feeling good.” He peers at me a little closer, a look of concern flashing over his face. “Are you okay? You look a little flushed. You’re not getting sick, are you?”

“N-no, I’m just hot,” I tell him. “It was really hot in my last class. Maybe the air conditioner is broken.”

Embarrassment rises inside me, and I’m sure it’s making me look even more flushed. I hate how turned on I am by what Malice did to me. He’s not even here anymore, and I’m still feeling it.

I just want to be *normal*. I want to like normal things. I want safety and security and all the things that go along with that.

None of those things are things the three brothers represent. It freaks me out that I’m drawn to them the way I am, like a moth pulled toward the flame that will end up destroying it.

Oblivious to the turmoil churning in my gut, Colin grins at me.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” he says. “You’re still coming to the party on Thursday, right?”

I nod, trying to get my mind off of Malice and the others. Parties are normal. College students go to parties and hang out with their friends, and that’s what I’m going to do.

“Of course. I’ll be there,” I promise.

WILLOW

On Thursday evening, I dig through my wardrobe, trying to find something that will work for the party. I've never really been to something like this before, so I have no idea what people wear.

"Something nice, but not too fancy?" I mutter to myself, holding up a skirt and then ultimately rejecting it, tossing it on the bed.

I sort through my underwear drawer, looking for a pair that will make me feel confident, even though no one's going to see them.

"That's weird. I thought I washed that purple pair…"

They aren't in the dresser drawer or my laundry basket, and I sigh and shrug internally. That's the thing with communal laundry rooms. Sometimes something gets left behind and then you never see it again.

I pull on a pair of black panties instead and a matching bra, posing in front of the mirror and then rolling my eyes at myself. The outfit I pick is slightly dressy, with a nice skirt and a long-sleeved shirt that clings to my curves a little more than most of my other shirts. It covers my scars, but I think I still look nice.

It should be good enough that for one night I can pretend I'm just a regular college student and forget that I'm from a fucked up home with a hooker for an adoptive mother, scars on my body, and now three dangerous men who move in and out of my life like deadly shadows.

I just want to forget all of that for a little while.

I give myself a once-over in the mirror, brushing my hair until it looks a little wavy from the product I put in it, then fixing my makeup. I'm not some stunning supermodel, but I think I look pretty good.

The skirt swishes around my ankles when I walk, and the shirt is low cut enough to show off a little cleavage and none of my scars. I smile at my reflection, take a deep breath, and then head out to go catch the bus to take me to the party.

Colin said it was going to be held at one of the frat houses right off campus. I have to walk a little from the bus stop to get there, and I would be worried about walking alone at night, but I can hear the music from the party from a full three or four blocks away.

It would be impossible to miss this party or get the wrong house. All the doors and windows are open, music blasting, and colored lights flashing randomly. People spill out of the house onto the lawn, laughing and drinking. Even from the outside, it's clear the house is packed with people, and when the music changes to one of the popular pop songs that plays on the radio all the time, a huge cheer goes up from everyone inside.

It's overwhelming, and I take a second to breathe and steady myself before I walk up the lawn to the door.

"You can do this," I mutter to myself under my breath. "This is what people do."

I don't want to leave without at least seeing what it's like. I've never been a big partier, especially since I don't actually have many friends at school to invite me to parties.

So I'm determined to make the best of this one.

For a little while, I wander through the large house by myself, moving in and out of crowds of people. There seem to be little pockets of activity, everyone having a good time in their own way. Some people are dancing, some are playing cards around a table in the kitchen. Two guys in nothing but shorts streak past me, chasing a girl in a soaking wet t-shirt while they hold water guns and they all laugh.

It's a sensory overload, and I move to where a table is set up, piled high with drinks and snacks. I'm not really sure about most of the liquor on the table, so I grab a cup and fill it with beer, alternating between sipping at it and eating pretzels.

Someone bumps into me from behind, and I turn to see one of April's friends.

The queen bitch herself is right behind the girl who bumped me, and April and I lock eyes. A look of surprise crosses her sharp features for a second before it melts into disgust.

“Ugh, I can’t believe you actually showed up tonight.” The disdain in her voice is clear even over the loud music. “Unless you just came for the free food. Couldn’t afford to go grocery shopping this week?”

Her friends all laugh at that, looking at me like I’m dog shit someone tracked in on their shoes or something.

Before I can toss out a comeback, someone slings an arm around my shoulder, pulling me in close. I catch the smell of beer and warm cologne, and turn my head to see Colin standing there.

“Come on, April,” he chastises. “Don’t be like that. We’re all just here to have a good time, right?”

April huffs and rolls her eyes before turning on her heel and leaving with her group.

“Sorry about her,” Colin says, lifting his arm from my shoulder and turning to face me more fully. “I was hoping I’d see you here tonight.”

“Well, I said I’d make it,” I tell him, trying for a smile. “And don’t worry about April. It’s not your job to teach her how to be a decent person.”

He tosses his head back with a laugh. “Damn, I’m so glad you came. I feel like I haven’t seen you in forever. We used to bump into each other more on campus, but it feels like you’re barely around these days.”

A flash of guilt shoots through me when he says that. I’ve been so distracted lately with all the other stuff going on in my life that I haven’t had the presence of mind to say more than a couple of words to Colin here and there.

“I’ve just been really busy,” I say evasively. “Job hunting and trying to make sure I have time for homework and all.”

It’s a lie, of course, but there’s no way I can tell him about the guys and the chaos they’ve brought into my life.

“No worries,” Colin says. He smiles, and it makes his whole face light up. “You’re a serious girl. You take care of business, you know? I like that about you.”

My cheeks go a bit warm, and I reach up, awkwardly tucking a stray lock of hair behind my ear. “Thanks. I feel like it just makes me boring.”

“Boring?” he counters, shaking his head. “No way. You’re like… mysterious. You’re always so focused and intent on whatever you’re doing. It makes me want to know what’s going on in that head of yours.”

“Nothing very interesting, I promise.”

“No way. I don’t believe that for a second.” He winks at me, then glances at the table behind me. “Let me get you a drink.”

I still have one in my hand, but I’m not going to turn him down. I finish the shitty beer as Colin mixes some cocktails for us, feeling the sour taste of it at the back of my throat. By the time I find somewhere to put the plastic cup down, he turns back to me with another drink in his hand. This one tastes a whole lot better than the beer, fizzy and sweet, with only a slight burn from the alcohol.

A friend of Colin’s nods to him in greeting as he passes by, and although Colin nods back, he makes no move to leave my side. The rest of the party is loud and chaotic, but it feels like the two of us have our own little corner of it to ourselves, tucked away from it all.

We bop our heads to the music, and either the alcohol or the atmosphere loosens me up enough that I’m not so on edge anymore. Colin brings me another drink when I finish the first, chatting me up easily about everything from my favorite song to my favorite food.

“Spaghetti,” I tell him. “Or just pasta and sauce, I guess. It’s versatile and makes good leftovers.”

“Sure, I can see that,” he agrees. “There’s this great Italian place downtown that makes these massive stuffed shells. Angelina’s Kitchen. Have you been there?”

I shake my head, knowing full well that a place like that is probably way out of my price range. It’s clear from how Colin dresses and carries himself that he’s never had to worry about money in his life.

“Maybe I’ll take you one day,” he says, grinning at me again. “I bet you’d love it.”

“I’d like that,” I reply, smiling shyly.

I finish my third drink, and he leads me to the center of the room where a bunch of people are dancing. While I’m not a good dancer at all, I don’t let that stop me for once, just moving to the beat in a way that feels good. Colin twirls me around, and I find myself laughing giddily.

My head is spinning a little, half from the twirling and half from the alcohol. I don’t drink very often, so those three drinks hit me harder than they probably would for someone else. I stumble a little when he pulls me out of a spin, and he steadies me, tugging me in a little closer to his body.

“Do you want to get out of here?” he asks after a bit. He has to lean in close so I can hear him over the music, and I can feel his breath against my

ear.

"Yeah!" I call back, nodding.

That's what people do, right? They go to quiet places with guys they like? The party turned out to be more fun than I expected, and for as long as I can, I want to keep riding the high of feeling carefree and weightless. Of pretending that life is really this easy.

We leave the frat house, stepping out onto the lawn. It's scattered with cups and trash and people, but Colin doesn't pay them any attention. It's like he only has eyes for me. He keeps an arm around me as we walk down the road, and I'm not afraid of the darkened street, because he's there and the buzz of the alcohol feels so good.

After a few minutes, we step onto what looks like a golf course. The lawns are well-manicured and the lights are pretty, and there's no one around.

After the loud chaos of the party, it's nice to be here in the quiet.

"This is beautiful," I murmur, glancing around.

"Yeah, it is. It's the kind of place I like to come to when I want to clear my head, you know? There's never anyone here after dark."

"Must be nice to have it all to yourself."

He grins. "Well, now I'm sharing it with you. You know, Willow… I've been into you for a while."

I blush when he says that, surprised to hear it. He's always been friendly and maybe a little flirty, but I just figured he was that way with a lot of people. I wait for a bubble of excitement to swell in my chest or for butterflies to start flapping in my stomach at his admission, but they never come.

Colin is good looking, and he's definitely one of the more popular guys on campus, but my body doesn't react to his presence the way it reacts to Ransom, or Malice, or even Victor.

No. Not them.

Thinking about the Voronin brothers makes me irritated, and I shove them out of my thoughts, not wanting them there.

I want *this*. I want normal. I want the handsome, clean-cut guy who's standing here and telling me he likes me.

So when Colin leans in and kisses me, I let him.

His mouth is warm and sure against mine, but still, there's no spark. No electric pulse of desire. I close my eyes and try to get into it, kissing him

back, leaning into him more. He makes a low noise against my lips, and when I feel the tip of his tongue pressing insistently, I let it in.

And that's… okay. It feels nice, in a wet sort of way. I can't tell if Colin is a good kisser or not, but then his hands start roaming, rubbing up and down my back before grabbing my ass hard.

I jerk with surprise, and he pulls me in even closer, grinding against me a little. His mouth is more insistent on mine, and he's practically shoving his tongue down my throat.

That makes my heart race, but not in a good way. He drags my skirt up, slipping his hand beneath the fabric, and I push on his chest.

"No," I gasp. "I'm sorry. I don't want—"

"Come on, baby," he murmurs, not stopping. "Just a little more. I've been thinking about this all night."

His searching hand delves between my legs, and I shove harder at his chest, finally breaking away from him. He blinks at me for a second, looking stunned that I pulled away. Then he frowns.

"What the hell, Willow?" he snaps. "You can't lead me on all night and then back out at the last fucking second."

"W-what?" I stammer, stunned.

"I heard a rumor that you're a virgin," he says, tugging me back toward him and wrapping his arms around me as he presses sloppy kisses to my neck. "I've never fucked a virgin before, and I want to know if it's as good as everyone says it is. Come on, baby. It's a win-win. You let me have this, and I can make you more popular than April."

I jerk back as if he's slapped me, a sick feeling churning in my stomach. "Y-you—"

"You should be fucking *begging* me to fuck you," he continues, his breath hot on my skin. "Not fighting me off. Trust me, sweetheart. I mean this in the nicest way, but you're never gonna get a better offer."

My heart squeezes tightly, tears prickling behind my eyes.

So that's it.

That's why he's paid attention to me all this time. Because he wanted a *virgin*, and he thought I was pathetic enough to be that desperate for him.

He tries to kiss my mouth, but I turn my head so that his lips land on the side of my face. He rolls with that, dragging his tongue up my cheek. His hands tug at my clothes, trying to get them off or get under them, and I fight harder, fear and anger rising up in me in equal measure.

“No!” I grunt. “Leave me alone!”

“Shut the fuck up,” Colin mumbles. “You’ll like this. I promise. I could’ve left that party with any girl I wanted, and I chose you. Don’t be ungrateful.”

He’s bigger than me, and although I manage to wriggle out of his hold enough to turn around and take a half step away, he yanks me back against him again, pinning me to his body as we tumble awkwardly to the ground. He pulls me up onto my knees, and I can feel him pressed up behind me, grinding against my ass.

“There you go,” he mumbles. “Now you’re getting the idea.”

Panic floods me, and I rear back as he goes to kiss my neck, twisting and elbowing him hard in the face.

I feel the hard crunch of bone on bone as my elbow collides with his nose, and he lets out a harsh yell. I scramble away while he’s dazed, tripping over my skirt as I try to get up, but he grabs for me again, keeping me from getting to my feet. When I look back, there’s blood on his face and rage in his eyes.

“What the fuck? You cunt!”

He tugs me down again, and I slip on the wet grass, falling onto my back. I feel my head bounce off something hard, and pain explodes behind my eyes. For a second, everything goes dark, nausea roiling my stomach.

When I blink my vision back, Colin is standing over me. His face is bloody and his clothes are stained from the grass. He draws back and kicks me in the side, and then spits right on the grass next to my head.

“Stupid whore,” he mutters. “You’re not fucking worth this much effort.”

He glances around furtively, like he’s afraid someone might’ve heard our fight and come to investigate. Then he glares down at me once more before striding off quickly, leaving me sprawled out on the grass of the golf course.

I try to push myself to my feet, but the whole world seems to tilt to one side, a wave of dizziness crashing into me so hard that I moan. My head aches, and my side hurts from where he kicked me.

I can feel every single one of those drinks I had earlier, and it’s all too much. They mix with the pain in my head, making dark spots dance in my vision every time I blink. Everything spins when I open my eyes, so I press

them tightly closed, curling up in a ball and swallowing down the acidic taste at the back of my throat.

I know I need to get up, but I’m too tired. My body feels too heavy.

Consciousness starts to slip in and out, and I have no idea how much time passes. At one point, I’m vaguely aware of a hissing sound that springs up around me, and of something wet splashing over my face and body, but after a while, numbness sweeps through me and I can barely feel it anymore.

Then a gruff voice curses above me, and suddenly, I’m lifted into strong arms.

MALICE

I LIFT Willow into my arms, feeling the dampness from her clothes seeping into mine.

She feels so small and fragile tucked against me, like I could fucking snap her in half if I breathed too hard while carrying her. She curls into me, clinging to me like a lifeline, and something in my chest tightens.

She's totally out of it, barely conscious. If she knew who I was in this moment, she wouldn't be doing that.

And she *shouldn't* be doing it either way. She shouldn't be turning to me for comfort. That's not the kind of shit I do.

I grit my teeth, fighting with the anger inside myself as I stride away across the lawn. The grass is wet and slippery, but I make it to my car without busting my ass or anything.

It was just a lucky coincidence that Victor heard her talking to herself in her apartment about this fucking frat party. From there, it was easy to find the place she was going to be at. And like we often do, I went to check up on her.

She wasn't at the frat house when I arrived, and Vic managed to use the cameras in the area to track her down to the golf course.

And now look at her.

I glance down, noticing a small cut by her right eye and dark circles under both of them from being too cold. The sprinklers came on while she was passed out on the golf course, and they fucking soaked her.

What the hell happened?

The pallor of her skin makes the circles under her eyes stand out even more, and it makes fury rise inside me as I yank the car door open,

depositing her inside.

Once she's buckled in, I slide into the driver's seat and rev the engine, heading back to her apartment.

I have to fumble in a small pocket in her skirt to find her keys, but I manage to get her up the stairs and to the door of her place.

She wakes up a little on the way, blinking blearily and glancing around as if she's trying to figure out where she is. By the time I get us inside, she more fully awake.

She's shivering hard, and her skin feels cold and clammy against mine. So I move to fix that, striding right into her bathroom, then dumping her in the shower and turning the water on. I wait for it to hit the right temperature before I aim the shower head at her.

Her body jerks a little in surprise, her arms wrapping around her midsection as she stands under the spray like a wet kitten, staring straight ahead at the tiles. She looks like she's in fucking shock or something, but her shivers stop after a bit, and I let her get warmed up before turning the water off.

With a soft grunt, I pluck her out of the shower and start stripping her out of her dirty, torn clothes.

The shivering starts again when she's naked in front of me, and she tries to cover herself, turning away from me. As she does, I notice that a good chunk of her body is covered in thick scars. Burn marks, maybe, or possibly some kind of abrasion.

Her cheeks flush when she sees me looking, and I roll my eyes at her.

"Get the fuck over it," I mutter, still fucking pissed. At her, at the world. At everything. "How's your head?"

The delicate muscles of her throat shift as she swallows, and she reaches up to touch the back of her head, and then the cut by her eye. "Okay. It hurts, but… not as bad as before. And things aren't spinning anymore."

"Good."

Snatching a threadbare towel from the rack nearby, I run it roughly up and down her body, drying her off. Again, she doesn't fight me, which tells me she's definitely in a bit of shock from whatever happened to her.

Once she's mostly dry, I wrap the towel around her and wait to see if she'll move. When she doesn't, I curse under my breath and scoop her up again, carrying her into the bedroom and setting her on the bed.

I tug the blankets over her, and as she nestles beneath them, her shivers slow and then stop altogether. Her eyes lose some of that hazy look, and she glances at me. Now that they're clearer, I can see something like shame and fear in her expression.

"How did you find me?" she whispers.

I don't answer that, letting her come to her own conclusions.

"What the fuck happened?" I demand.

Willow shakes her head, drawing the covers more tightly around her.

Goddammit. She's always so fucking stubborn, and it pisses me off. My hands curl into fists, and I glare down at her, half wanting to shake her to get some answers out.

"Fucking tell me, Willow. Why the hell did I find you passed out on a golf course in the middle of the goddamned night?"

"I don't want to talk about it," she whispers.

"And I don't give a flying fuck what you want to talk about," I snap. "You're going to tell me, *Solnyshka*, and if I have to ask again, you'll regret it."

Either she actually believes my threat or she's too tired to argue, because she closes her eyes and finally gives me what I want.

"Someone attacked me. Some guy from school wanted some 'virgin pussy,' and he thought I'd be happy to give it up."

Her tone is bitter when she says it, and a tear leaks out of the corner of one of her eyes.

"Who?" I bite out from between gritted teeth. "I want a fucking name. Who hurt you?"

"Malice, just leave it alone." She turns her head away. "It's not that serious."

I grip her chin between my thumb and forefinger, tilting her head back toward me as I loom over her. "You don't think this is serious? You could've died of hypothermia."

Willow's eyes pop open, more tears swimming in their soft brown depths.

"Why does it matter?" she whispers. "The guy who did this wasn't someone who has anything to do with Nikolai, so it's not your problem. It's none of your business."

"It *is* my fucking business. Because *you're* my business."

That brings her up short, her mouth falling open a little in surprise. Then she shakes her head again, something raw and vulnerable in her expression.

"No, I'm not," she says quietly. "I'm no one. I'm nobody's business."

I can tell she means it. That she's used to being used and overlooked. Used to not mattering.

Something about that vulnerability in her calls to something in me.

I don't know what it is, but it makes my jaw clench so hard that my teeth grind together. It makes the violent beast that lives inside my chest scratch against the walls of my ribcage, snarling to be let out. Reaching up, I press my fingers just beneath the cut near her eye.

"You're wrong about that," I murmur gruffly. "This right here? That's my business." My hand moves to another small bruise on her neck, a dark pink spot that could've come from a finger or a thumb digging into her skin. "This? My business." I drag my fingers lower, to a spot on her chest just above where the towel is wrapped around her. "So is this."

She drags in a breath, her chest rising toward my fingers, and I lower my face a little, my eyes bouncing between hers as my voice turns even harder.

"Someone hurts you? Someone touches you? That's my fucking business."

A quiet noise comes from Willow's throat, her lips parting. The beast inside me roars at the sight, hungry for sex, violence, or both. She lifts her head off the pillow a little, bringing her face closer to mine, and something between us snaps.

Our lips meet, and I kiss her hard, fury and pent up desire raging inside me. A small gasp escapes her, and I swallow it up, instinct taking over as I balance myself on one hand, letting the other roam over her body. I drag my palm over her chest, grabbing roughly at her tits through the towel, groaning against her mouth when I feel the hard nubs of her nipples getting stiffer.

Willow moans for me, the sound soft and breathy. Her back arches, pressing her even closer, and I'm drowning in the scent of her arousal and her own natural fragrance.

It's light and floral, edged with something sharper, darker. Her *need*.

It's impossible to ignore.

Fuck, I need to know what she tastes like.

Ever since the day I stopped by to see her in her classroom, I haven't been able to get the fucking taste of her out of my head. I need to know what it's like when it's not tinged with the taste of my own skin as I lick her off my fingers. It's like a drug, and I want the purest version of it.

When I pull back with a growl, Willow gasps. Her cheeks are flushed red and her lips are kiss bruised. She looks like she's been wrecked already, and I just got started.

Following the call of the savage instinct that urges me on, I move down her body, grabbing her ankles and pulling her down the bed until her legs are hanging over the edge, bent at the knees. I get her right where I want her, then I yank off the towel I just wrapped her in, throwing it on the floor.

Willow gasps, and I'm glad I didn't bother trying to wrangle her into panties before.

It makes it easier to see her pussy, pretty and pink and already starting to get wet.

She makes a motion like she's going to try to cover herself, but I move before she can, grabbing her thighs and wrenching them open. That makes her breath catch, and I glance up at her as I kneel between her legs.

"Did he touch you here, *Solnyshka*?"

She bites her lip, her chest heaving as she stares at me down the line of her naked body. "No. A little. He tried, but…"

Her words are like gasoline poured on the flame of my rage, and a cascade of violent, brutal thoughts rush through my head. My voice is like sandpaper when I speak again.

"He'll pay for that. He shouldn't have done it. Do you want me to kiss you and make it better?"

The sound that comes from her as she registers my question goes straight to my cock, making it jerk against the tight constraints of my pants. I can *see* the way her pussy clenches, see the little gush of wetness that squeezes from her tight hole.

She doesn't answer with words, but when I shift my gaze back to her face, her chin dips downward once, her bottom lip trapped tightly between her teeth. That's enough to break the chain holding back my beast.

Keeping a firm grip on her thighs, I bury my face between her legs and start going down on her. I go slow at first, dragging my tongue along her folds from her clit down to her entrance.

But that's not good enough.

My fingers dig into her thighs, holding her open as I start to lick her faster. The rough texture of her scars feels different beneath my fingertips, and I run my thumbs over them, wondering if she can feel it more intensely in those patches or not at all.

I hope she can feel it. I want her to feel fucking everything.

I feel like I'm starving, so fucking hungry for her. The taste of her pussy fills my mouth, and her scent is thick in the back of my throat, but it's still not good enough. I fucking need this. Need *more*.

I spear my tongue into her pussy, lapping at her wetness. She writhes against my face, and I hold her tighter, pinning her down and making her take it.

"That's right, *Solnyshka*," I mutter, my voice muffled. "Scream for me."

Each pass of my tongue makes her cry out, and those cries get louder and louder as I keep going, moving between fucking her with my tongue and licking at her clit.

It sates something primal inside me, having my head between her legs like this. I haven't fucked anyone since the night she came to our place, and it had been way longer than usual before that time too. But I haven't wanted anyone. All I can picture whenever I'm with a woman these days is a head of soft blonde hair, a petite face with delicate features, large eyes, and full lips.

Even her scars make her fucking gorgeous, like no one I've ever seen before.

"Malice," Willow chokes out, bucking hard on the bed.

Something about hearing her say my name like that, desperate and needy, makes me feel wild. I'm almost fucking feral from the desire that beats through my body.

I go to town on her pussy, hard and fast, and it doesn't take long before she's shaking, a chorus of pleas falling from those soft lips.

"Oh god. Oh god, please! I'm—"

I don't stop until she's falling apart, her high cries reaching a crescendo that signals her orgasm. She bucks against my tight grip, and I hold her down as she rides the wave of it, never letting up on her clit. When she starts trying in earnest to get away from me, I finally let up, releasing my hold on her and leaning over the bed to hover above her.

My cock is aching in my pants, pressed tight against the fly, desperate to be freed. I'm dying to bury myself in that wet heat I was just eating like my

last meal. I want to fuck her into the mattress until she's begging for more.

But I don't do it.

Instead, I grip her chin and stare down into her eyes.

"Give me the fucking name, Willow," I say, going back to our previous discussion as if nothing interrupted us.

She looks dazed and strung out, but in a much different way than before. Her pupils are huge, and instead of being deathly pale, her cheeks are flushed now. It seems to take a second for her brain to catch up to the sudden shift of gears, and before it can, the words slip past her lips.

"Colin," she whispers. "It was Colin DeVry."

Colin DeVry.

Without a word, I push away from the bed and stalk toward the door, leaving Willow sprawled out on the bed. Her taste is still on my tongue, her scent invading my senses, but I tell myself it doesn't mean anything. The only reason I went down on her was to break down her resistance and get her to tell me the truth.

But even as I leave her apartment, I know that's a lie.

WILLOW

I LIE IN BED, completely naked as my lower body hangs off the edge of the mattress. My pussy is still clenching, my clit still throbbing.

The front door slams shut as Malice leaves, and I scoot back up on the mattress, burrow under the blankets, and curl onto my side, my emotions in an uproar. My head is starting to pound a little, and I feel exhausted all the way down to my bones.

I don't know what he's going to do, and part of me feels like I should stop him from doing whatever he's thinking of. But I can't seem to make myself move, all the exhaustion from the night finally catching up to me.

He's impossible to understand. His mood swings are powerful enough to give me whiplash, like being in a shower that switches from hot to cold water on a dime. Malice always seems to hate me. He's threatened to kill me more than once, but he and his brothers have protected me so many times now.

Why does he do that?

And why do I let him past my walls? Why does my body seem to crave him so much? Crave them all?

Maybe… maybe I'm as twisted and fucked up as I always wanted to avoid being. Maybe I'm not normal, not a person who's attracted to normal guys.

Instead, I crave monsters.

Colin was a monster too, a voice in the back of my head whispers. *He just tried to hide it. At least these three men are monsters who don't bother disguising who they are.*

IT TAKES me forever to fall asleep after Malice leaves, and since the party was on a Thursday night, I have classes the next morning. My alarm goes off at its usual time, and I drag myself out of bed, feeling hungover not just from the booze but from *everything*.

My face is puffy from the lack of rest, and I have the beginnings of a black eye and a bump on the back of my head, but I'm not staying home. I refuse to let what Colin did put me behind in classes.

After spending a good amount of time in front of the mirror applying coverup to the bruises and some concealer under my puffy eyes, I tug my hair into a messy ponytail and scramble to catch the bus on time. All I have to do is keep my head down and try to get through the day, and hopefully I won't even see him.

As I head to my first class, I pass by a group of students standing in a tight cluster, talking in hushed voices. I don't think anything of it until I hear Colin's name, and my heart lurches as I slow my footsteps so that I can listen.

"Yeah, it's fucked up," one of them says, shaking his head. "He got jumped last night. He's in the hospital."

"What happened?" a girl asks, sounding horrified.

"Somebody mugged him, I guess?" the first guy replies. "Kicked his ass real good. I heard every finger on both hands was broken."

My stomach twists when he says that… because I know what happened to him. I know who did that, and it wasn't just some random mugger.

I've basically slowed to a complete stop as I eavesdrop, and one of the girls in the group turns and sees me standing nearby. I recognize her as one of April's cronies, and she gives me an unfriendly look.

"Hey, Willow. Didn't you leave the party last night with Colin?" she asks.

My heart pounds at the implication. I don't think anyone saw us on the golf course together, so no one knows what went down—either then or afterward—but all the students around her turn to look at me with interest as they wait for an answer.

"Um, yeah," I reply, nodding. "But we separated before too long. I have no idea where he went after that."

The girl seems suspicious, and the whole group of them look at me like I'm something foul. If possible, it seems like they dislike me even more now, as if they suspect I had something to do with Colin getting jumped.

I try to ignore them, turning away and continuing on toward my first class, but I feel sick inside. Especially when I think back to last night, when Malice left and I didn't even try to stop him.

Is this what some part of me hoped would happen? Is this who I am? Someone who wants violent retribution to fall on anyone who hurts me?

But at the same time, just like the guy who almost raped me when he followed me from the bus stop, Colin is a man who would have taken whatever he could from me if he got the chance. Should I really feel sorry for either of them?

The pounding in my head starts to fade by the end of my second class, and by the time I leave my third class, I feel mostly human again. As I'm walking across campus, someone falls into step with me.

Just like before when Malice came to my classroom, I know who it is before he even speaks, just from the way he feels.

I turn to look, and sure enough, it's Ransom.

He slides his hands into his pockets and glances over at me, taking in the bruising on my face.

"How're you holding up?" he asks. "After last night."

So he knows, then.

"I'm fine," I tell him. "My head hurt a little this morning, but it's better now." I glance around to make sure no one is close enough to overhear. They aren't, but I lower my voice anyway. "Malice shouldn't have gotten involved."

Ransom shakes his head, the bronze highlights in his hair glinting in the sunlight. "Of course he should have."

"Why?"

He looks at me, and something passes over his face that I can't quite decipher. "Because you're our responsibility. And we don't let people hurt what's ours."

It reminds me of what Malice said last night as he touched the bruises and cuts on my skin.

Our business.

Our responsibility.

Ours.

As much as being threatened and blackmailed sucked, I at least understood that. I understood people trying to use me for their own ends, seeing me as a tool to be manipulated or discarded as needed. But I don't understand any of this. And that makes it almost more frightening than when Malice put a gun to my head.

Before I can get my mouth to work, Ransom brushes his fingers over my bruised cheek, presses a kiss there, and then takes a step back.

"Take care of yourself, alright, angel?"

He gives me a little nod before turning and striding away.

I stare after him, my brows pinched together so hard that the space between them aches. He rounds a corner in the pathway that cuts across campus, probably heading toward where he left his bike, and as he disappears from sight, I open my mouth as if I'm going to call after him.

But I don't.

Instead, I sneeze.

WILLOW

I SPEND the rest of Friday and all of Saturday into Sunday in bed, sick with a cold after spending all that time lying on the ground at the golf course, wet and freezing.

On Sunday, I'm still curled up in bed, surrounded by the mess that comes from being sick. There are tissues scattered around the room where I tossed them, some of them missing the trash can. I was too worn down to get up and fix it, so they're just littering the floor.

I'm feeling a lot better by now, the cold starting to fade, but I still don't want to get out of bed.

My mind is still reeling from Malice's actions and Ransom's words.

How did this happen?

What does it even mean?

I knew I was in deep when they started stalking me after what I saw at the whorehouse. But this is something else entirely, and I'm so confused. I don't understand their obsession with me.

Why me?

Just like I told Malice before, I'm no one special.

I flop back against the pillows, sighing softly. It feels weird to think that my life was easier back when I was working at a strip club almost every night and struggling to stay afloat as I juggled bills and school work, but it was. At least my head was never as full of as many complicated feelings as it is these days.

Curling up under the blankets, I tug them over my head to block out the late afternoon light, snuggling deeper into the little nest I've made. I'm just starting to doze off again when I hear a quiet sound out in the living room.

It sounds like someone opening the door to my apartment, and I sit up with a jolt, my heart racing.

Footsteps cross the living room, and then Victor appears in my bedroom doorway, looking around my room with an expression of disgust.

“What the fuck?” I yelp, scrambling back in the bed until I’m pressed against the wall.

I’m already on edge from everything that’s been going on with these men, and I have no idea why he’s here or what he’s going to do. Malice is unreadable on a good day, but Victor is something else entirely. I can’t predict him, and the last time I saw him, he stood behind me and whispered things in my ear as we both watched his brother fuck some woman.

I wait for one tense, breathless second, waiting for him to say something or do something. But when he finally moves, he surprises the fuck out of me.

Striding inside my room, he starts… cleaning.

There’s a garbage bag in his hands, and he opens it, snapping it a few times before he starts gathering up the mess of tissues and things from the floor.

“Um,” I manage to choke out, blinking at him. “What are you doing?”

“Cleaning,” he says shortly, like it should be obvious. And I guess it is, but that doesn’t change any of the shock I’m feeling in this moment.

“Okay…” I drag out the word, watching as he takes the plastic grocery bag out of my little trash can and throws it into the big bag in his hands. He makes a face at the little metal wastebasket and mutters something I can’t hear under his breath.

When it doesn’t seem like he’s going to explain any more, I sigh and prod a little. “Victor, why are you cleaning my room?”

“Because I’m tired of looking at it. It’s always been a mess, but this is too much.”

He steps over a pile of dirty clothes on the floor, and for a second, I worry he’s going to grab those and throw them away too. Then the full meaning of his words hits me, and I sit up straighter.

“Wait,” I blurt. “What do you mean you’re tired of looking at it?”

Malice has barged his way into my apartment twice now, but Victor’s never been here before.

At least… I didn’t think he had.

Which can only mean that somehow, he's been watching me while I'm here, not just when I'm out and about.

I already knew he and his brothers were stalking me, but something about the idea of Victor watching me in my home freaks me out. My heart is racing as I stare at him, waiting for him to say something. When he doesn't, I snap a little.

"You've been spying on me, haven't you?" I demand, my voice turning thready.

He just looks over at me, his blue eyes cool and impassive. But he doesn't deny it, and that's all the confirmation I need. My stomach twists, although somehow, this new revelation doesn't surprise me as much as it probably should. If anything, it explains a lot about how these guys seem to know so much about me. Like how Malice knew where to find me on Thursday night, to say the least.

That gets me out of bed, and I sniffle, wiping my nose as I glare at Victor.

"What is it? Cameras? You're the one who's good with computers, right? Malice said you could hack into security footage to find that guy who came after me the other night. You clearly know a lot about surveillance. So show me where they are."

We stare at each other for a long moment in a silent standoff. Then he lifts one shoulder in a half shrug.

"Fine." He walks over to the window and points to a spot along the outer edge of the sill. "There's one here." Then he steps out into the hall, gesturing to a framed art print I've got hanging on the wall. "And here."

From there, we go around the apartment, stopping in every room but the bathroom as he points out cameras and I take them down from the little spaces he tucked them into.

"I should break every single one of these," I mutter, clenching the tiny cameras in my fists.

"No." Victor shakes his head. "Don't do that. They're expensive."

He holds out a hand. I hesitate, but then shove the cameras into his palm. He picks up a bag from the couch and starts tucking them away in there, slipping them each into their own little compartment in the bag. I watch him work, worrying my lower lip between my teeth as my mind churns. Part of me can't believe I got away with getting rid of the cameras

so easily, and for a second, I wonder why he agreed to show me where they are at all.

But it hits me in a rush why he's so nonchalant about it.

Because they're no longer hiding the fact that they're stalking me.

Victor is inside my apartment right now, and he got in without a key. Malice was here just a few nights ago, and I saw Ransom on campus on Friday. What do they need cameras for, when they can barge into my life whenever they want?

I sneeze again, and a look of distaste crosses Victor's face. He hands me a tissue from the box on the beat up coffee table, and I blow my nose into it.

"Throw that away," he says firmly. "In the actual trash, not on the floor."

I roll my eyes, but make a show of walking into the kitchen and throwing the tissue into the trash.

He rummages in his bag for a second and then pulls out a spray bottle and a neatly folded cloth. As I watch, he moves around the small space, spraying something from the bottle onto the surfaces in my living room before wiping them down.

The scent of sanitizer tickles my nose, and I tilt my head to one side from where I'm hovering in the bedroom doorway.

"What's the deal?" I ask him after a moment. "It's not like I'm a slob, and your blackmail agreement definitely didn't include housecleaning services. So why do you need my apartment to be so clean?"

Victor stiffens, but he doesn't answer the question. I notice the fingers of one hand tapping against his thigh, one finger after the other, in a neat row. What's that about?

Instead of answering any of my questions, he puts the cleaner away and picks up an empty Styrofoam cup from the table, making a face when he reads the side of it. It's the cup of noodles I ate last night, when I managed to drag myself out of bed to eat something.

"What is this?" he asks.

"More trash, I know." I step forward to try to grab it from him, a little annoyed. "But I didn't ask you to barge in here—"

"No," he says, cutting me off. "I mean, is this all you've been eating?"

I shrug and wrap my arms around myself, feeling self-conscious. "It's not like I had the energy to cook. I'm sick."

“This kind of shit isn’t good for someone with a cold,” he says. He drops the container into the garbage and then strides into the kitchen.

I follow him in, watching with a sort of stunned curiosity as he starts opening cabinets and the fridge, pulling things out and muttering under his breath.

“What are you doing now?” I ask, feeling like a broken record at this point.

“You’re not giving your body what it needs to get better.”

“So you’re… going to cook for me?”

He shoots me a look that either means ‘obviously’ or is his way of telling me to shut up. But it’s so hard to get a read on him that I have no idea what he’s trying to convey.

“I bet you eat the same thing every day,” I mutter. “You seem like the type.”

Again, his shoulders go a bit stiff, but he doesn’t reply.

Just as methodically as he’s done everything else, he starts working on the food. He finds a can of chicken broth in the cabinet and pours it into a pot, setting it to simmer. Then he hunts down knives and a cutting board, scratched up and discolored from use. He starts cutting up the few carrots that were in my fridge, the ones not too wilted to use.

I watch as he strips the meat from a leftover rotisserie chicken I bought because it was on sale at the grocery store and adds that to the pot.

Soon enough, the kitchen starts to fill with the scent of savory, warm soup.

He seems to be totally absorbed in his task, and I take a seat at the rickety table that’s set against one wall, unable to resist this opportunity to study him without him looking back at me. The first night I met the Voronin brothers, I was struck by the fact that Victor and Malice looked so similar, but now I can see more of the ways in which their features differ from one another. They both have sharp jawlines and thick, dark eyelashes, but Malice’s face is a bit wider, his cheekbones and nose a bit more broad, as if the lines of his face were drawn with a heavier pen than Victor’s. Their hair is almost the exact same color, and they both keep it fairly short, but not a single strand on Victor’s head is out of place, whereas Malice’s hair always looks like he’s had his fingers in it, mussing things up.

There’s something enigmatic about Victor, as if he only allows a small fraction of the things he’s thinking or feeling to show on his face, keeping

the rest hidden from view.

Once the soup is done, he turns back to me, and I tear my gaze away from him and pretend I've been studying the table the entire time. He carefully ladles the broth, veggies, and chicken into a bowl and brings it to the table, setting it down in front of me.

"Eat."

I half expect him to leave now that he's accomplished this odd task he gave himself, but instead, he sits down across from me, staring at me with an expectant look until I pick up the spoon and start eating.

My stomach growls, so any idea of rebelling against doing what he says goes out the window. Besides, the soup is hot and tastes surprisingly good.

His gaze never leaves me as I slowly sip at the broth, studying me as intently as I studied him while he cooked. It's disconcerting to be the focus of all of someone's attention, so I find myself searching for something to say just to fill the loaded silence.

"I can't believe this came out of my kitchen," I comment, taking another bite of the savory chicken soup. "I've never cooked anything this good. I wouldn't have even thought I had the ingredients to pull it off."

He shrugs. "It's not that hard. Once you know the principles of cooking, you can adapt them to just about any ingredients."

"Where did you learn to cook?"

"At home. I taught myself when I was younger. Malice and Ransom both hate to cook, so if I want them to eat something besides takeout all the time, I have to make it from scratch."

"Are you the oldest?" I ask, curious in spite of myself. "Is that why you look out for them?"

He purses his lips. "In a way, I guess. Malice and I are twins. Ransom is the youngest."

"Twins?" I murmur, the spoon hovering halfway to my mouth.

I was just thinking to myself how similar Malice and Victor look, but I had no idea they were twins. It's surprising, in a way. They're both dark-haired and intense, where Ransom has lighter hair and seems more charming and easy going. But the physical resemblance between them is where the similarities between Malice and Victor end.

"Yes." Victor nods. "You couldn't tell?"

"I don't know." I set my spoon down in the bowl. "You're so… different. Malice is like an inferno or something. He's always burning hot.

Ready to explode. You seem like the opposite of that."

At the mention of Malice, I can't help thinking about what happened the last time he was here. My body tingles at the memory of him between my legs, kneeling at the foot of my bed as he spread my thighs open and…

My face flushes, a burst of embarrassment rushing through me as a new thought occurs to me.

Does Victor know about that?

I don't really know how the cameras he had set up worked, but it seems possible that he could have seen everything that happened that night through the camera that was hidden in my room.

I glance up at him, and although his face is impassive, something about the way he looks makes me sure I'm right.

Oh my god. He does know.

VICTOR

I WATCH Willow duck her head, a flush creeping up her cheeks.

In my mind, I can see her like she was a few days ago, when Malice was here. I remember his head between her legs, and the way she writhed and thrashed on the bed, losing herself in the pleasure he was giving her.

I hate that I can remember every single detail of it—and that the thought still makes my cock twitch.

Willow seems to desperately want to move on, and I let her, not wanting to talk about it either. I'd rather pretend it never happened. She eats the rest of her soup in silence, her face still red. When she finishes, she puts the spoon down and finally looks at me again.

"Are you going to leave now?" she asks, and it's clear she wants me to.

"No."

She presses her plush lips together in frustration. "Why not? I'm not an exciting person. Unless you want to do more random housekeeping, you're wasting your time."

"You've been sick all weekend," I point out. "If you don't eat well and take care of yourself, you'll slow down your recovery."

"I'm already feeling a lot better," she insists.

"Good. Then the soup is working."

She stares at me for a bit, as if she's trying to come up with some argument that will convince me to go. But I know she won't, because I've already decided to spend the rest of the day here, blocking off that time in my head. Maybe she realizes that there's nothing she can say to change my mind, because she finally gives up and pushes back from the table, padding into the living room.

I can hear her muttering under her breath as I clean up the dishes and cookware, and then the TV comes on. When I finish up and follow her into the small living room, there's some home improvement show on, and she's watching the screen intently.

I brush off the couch cushion to make sure there aren't any tissues or crumbs lurking on the worn fabric, then sit down next to her.

For a while, we watch in silence. The show is terrible, full of people who are trying to live outside their means and making awful design choices along the way. A woman with overdone makeup and an attitude problem starts acting like her kitchen backsplash is the most important thing in the world to her, and I frown, glancing over at Willow.

"Why do you like this so much?" I ask. "It's not good."

She hesitates for a second, then shrugs a shoulder.

"I don't know, I just like seeing people turn their lives around. I like watching them make their home beautiful and create something better for themselves. Like this lady. Her house was half destroyed by a storm, and now they're coming in and fixing it up for her, exactly how she wants it. Everything was shitty, and now she's getting a second chance. I just think that's… nice."

I narrow my eyes, first at her and then at the screen. The lady she talks about so fondly is currently making the interior designer's life hell by not being able to choose a tile for the all-important backsplash.

I don't really get it. The show is crap, and the people are doing everything wrong with their decorating choices. The tile the woman chooses is a terrible color, and it's going to clash with her counters in the worst way.

But there's something fascinating about the way Willow watches the show. It makes me stare at the TV more intently, trying to figure out what it is about it that speaks to her so much.

When that episode ends, another one comes on, this one aimed at helping two newlyweds repair the wife's grandmother's old house so they can live in it. Willow is just as invested in this new episode, and I find myself glancing over at her often, soaking up her reactions as if they're pieces of treasure.

The latest episode wraps up, and when I look over at her again, she's asleep, her head lolling to one side as she breathes softly and evenly.

I can’t help but watch her, my gaze tracking over her features. The bruises are fading, having turned from purple to a soft yellowish green, although there’s still a dark mark under one of her eyes. My cock starts to harden as I focus on her lips, pink and probably petal soft.

No.

I drag in a deep breath and then another, tapping my fingers against my thigh in an even rhythm while I count in my head so that I can get myself under control. I’ve already caved once and broken my usual routine for her. I can’t let that become a habit.

She shifts a little on the couch, her shoulder nearly brushing against mine, and I stiffen, torn between staying where I am and moving to avoid the contact. Before I can decide, there’s a knock on the door, and I glance toward it sharply. It’s late for visitors, already dark out, and I know Willow never has people over.

She jerks awake at the sound when whoever it is knocks again, blinking and glancing over at me. I move on silent feet to the door and look out the peephole, making a face when I recognize her old boss from the strip club. Carl, I think his name is.

What the fuck is he doing here?

“It’s the man you used to work for,” I whisper after striding back over to where Willow is standing in front of the couch. “Let him in.”

Her eyes widen, and then she nods, moving to the door to do what I said.

I grab my bag and duck into her bedroom, pulling my gun out and gripping it loosely in my hand as I wait. I listen, peering through a small crack between the door and the frame as she unlocks her front door and then pulls it open.

“Carl?” she asks, surprise and wariness in her tone. “What is it?”

As soon as the door is open wide enough to allow entry, he strides into her apartment and starts pacing, his lanky body radiating nervous energy.

“What are you doing here?” Willow prompts again.

He turns to her, running a hand through stringy hair that’s thinning a little in the front. “Someone came to see me tonight. He was asking about the brothel and the night it burned down. Wanted to know if any of my girls were there when it happened.”

“Oh.” Willow’s voice is quiet.

“I told him none of mine were there when it happened.” His gaze snaps to her, a shrewd look on his face. “That’s what you told me. And it’s true, isn’t it?”

There’s something in his tone that makes it pretty clear he knows it isn’t. Somehow, he’s figured out that Willow wasn’t being completely honest with him when she said she was no longer there when the fire started. Or he’s just guessing.

She shakes her head, also picking up on what he’s implying. “I wasn’t there, Carl,” she insists. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He takes a step closer to her, and my hand tightens around my gun.

“I know you’re hiding something,” he growls. “I don’t know what’s going on, but if you’ve got a secret, you’re gonna have to make it worth my while to keep it for you.”

Willow takes a step back, but he keeps advancing, staring right at her.

“I told the guy that none of my girls were there that night. I didn’t tell him about you. But that could change, you know what I’m saying?”

His threat is clear, and Willow blanches, her brown eyes wide.

“I already told you everything,” she insists, licking her lips. “I’m not hiding anything.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Carl snorts. “That’s what they all say. I’m telling you, you have two options. You give me what I want and all of this stays quiet. Or I go find that guy and give him what *he* wants.”

Willow’s gaze flicks toward the bedroom where I’m hiding, then back to Carl. “So what do you want?”

He shrugs. “What the fuck do you think? Money. You told me you had to leave Sapphire because you needed something that would pay you better, so I figure you should be able to buy my silence.”

She swallows. “How much?”

“Twenty thousand.”

“What?” Her jaw drops. “Carl, I can’t—”

He snorts, derision clear in his face. “Oh, so your attempt to make it big in the world didn’t pay off? I told you they always come crawling back. That’s okay. Since that john Giselle found for you decided not to fuck you after all, I’ll cut you a deal. You bend over and take it like a good little slut, and I’ll cut my price down to ten thousand instead.”

He reaches for her as he speaks, hooking an arm around her waist and yanking her closer, vindictive anger burning in his eyes. There’s not even

any desire there. He just wants to hurt her for fucking him over.

That thought jabs through my brain like a red hot poker, and I wrench the bedroom door open, moving before I even realize it. I charge toward him, grabbing the back of his neck with one hand and yanking him away from Willow.

He doesn't see me coming, and the suddenness of my attack catches him off guard. He lets go of Willow, who scrambles away as Carl spins to face me, lashing out with a wild punch. He clips the side of my cheek, sending my head whipping to the side, but I recover quickly and bum rush him, bringing him down to the floor.

We grapple for my weapon, and I headbutt him, then yank a pillow off the couch and shove it against his chest, pressing the barrel of the gun against it before firing twice.

Carl jerks, then goes still.

Willow claps her hands over her mouth to stifle a scream, her gaze riveted to the pool of blood slowly spreading across the floor beneath the pillow-covered body. I grit my teeth, rising to my feet and looking down at the mess with distaste. The impulse to clean it up is strong, but I grip the back of the couch, forcing myself to ignore it.

Killing Carl was a mistake, and I'm pissed at myself for being so fucking impulsive. I should have tried to disable him instead of outright killing him. Then maybe my brothers and I could've gotten information from him, interrogating him to find out who came to see him asking about the brothel.

Shooting him wasn't the smart or logical thing to do. I lost control and let my emotions take over, and that's never how I like to do things.

Willow is still rooted in place, her luminous eyes wide with shock. She gapes at the body, her face white as a sheet, and I let out a sigh, turning away from the seeping blood and pulling out my phone to call my brothers.

RANSOM

I BOB my head to the music playing over the speakers I set up in the garage, turning a wrench to tighten the part I'm setting into the car I'm working on.

I'm lost in my own little world, the way I usually get when I'm working on something, but I catch the sound of footsteps a second before Malice comes stalking into the garage, looking pissed.

"Hold on, I'm putting you on speaker," he says into the phone at his ear.

I straighten up and wipe my hands on the rag I have tucked into my belt.

"We have… a problem," Vic says over the speaker. "Willow's old boss showed up at her apartment. Someone came to him, asking about if he had sent any girls to the brothel the night we killed Nikolai. Her boss knew Willow was there at some point, and he tried to blackmail her, saying he'd keep her secret if she fucked him. He's dead now."

My eyebrows shoot up.

Fuck.

It's kind of amazing how Vic's voice stayed totally even as he spoke, all the way up to the part where he coolly mentioned that Willow's ex-boss is now dead.

Malice and I look at each other, and I can tell he's thinking the same thing I am: this is bad.

That means someone almost got to Willow. Someone was asking around, following the breadcrumbs that led from the whorehouse to the strip club. Whoever it was clearly didn't know exactly who they were looking for, but they got one step closer.

"Carl lied to this guy?" Malice asks, his eyes narrowed as he stares at the car I was working on—although I don't think he's really seeing it.

“Yes,” Vic replies. “Either to keep himself out of it or just to get leverage over Willow.”

“That’s something, at least,” I mutter.

Malice nods. “That means whoever was poking around doesn’t know she was there, and the only other person who *did* know is now dead.” He pauses, then adds, “I’m assuming you’re the one who killed him.”

Vic huffs a breath. “Yes.”

“We can’t relax just because that fucker is done,” I point out. “The fact that someone was looking at all, pulling on those threads and trying to get answers, means someone is out there trying to find out who killed Nikolai. We were right to worry about someone trying to avenge his death.”

Malice curses, gripping the phone tighter. “We need to get the girl here. Now. She has to be under our watch all the time. It’s the only way we can be sure no one can get to her and use her to find us.”

“Yeah. You’re right.” I nod, tugging the rag out of my belt and tossing it down. Guess I’m done working on this car for the night.

Vic makes an affirmative noise too, although he doesn’t speak.

“We’ll be there soon,” Malice says, then ends the call.

He shoves his phone into his back pocket and jerks his chin at me. Moving quickly, the two of us gather some supplies and then climb into his car and speed off toward Willow’s apartment.

Malice is quiet on the way over, and normally, I would probably talk to fill the silence, but there’s too much running through my mind to worry about that.

Willow’s old boss being dead isn’t great, and we’ll have to make sure we cover Vic’s tracks on that. There’s no way in hell we’ll let him get sent to jail like Malice did.

The bigger issue is the thing that prompted Vic to kill the guy in the first place.

This means we need to keep our guard up. Because someone is coming for us.

We knew there was a chance this might happen when we decided to take out Nikolai, but we all agreed it was worth the risk. Avenging our mother was worth it.

We pull up to Willow’s building a few minutes later and get out, glancing around the darkened street before heading up the stairs to her unit, where Vic lets us in.

“Two gunshots to the chest,” he reports immediately. “Muffled them with the pillow, and the TV was still on, so it’s unlikely anyone heard. As far as I know, the apartment immediately below this one is vacant as well.”

“Good.” I nod, unsurprised that Vic has already gotten to work covering up his tracks.

Like it or not, we’ve had a bit of experience with cleaning up messes and getting rid of bodies, so we spring into action immediately.

“Help me get the body wrapped up,” Malice says, jerking his head to our brother.

Vic already has a roll of black trash bags out, and Malice spreads out the tarp we brought. They roll Carl’s body up in the tarp and then wrap that with trash bags. Vic has some cleaning supplies in his bag, and we brought even more industrial strength stuff, so we start going to work on the blood that’s pooled on the cheap, fake wood floor. Luckily it’s not carpet, so the tacky dark fluid comes up easily.

Once the blood is mostly cleaned up, Malice glances over at me. “Start packing up Willow’s shit. Just a few bags, clothes and whatever else.”

Willow seems like she’s in shock, sitting on the couch and staring into the middle distance. She hasn’t reacted or even moved since we came in and started securing the scene, but when she hears those words, she blinks and shakes herself out of it.

“What do you mean?” she asks, looking past me to Mal. “Why is he packing my stuff?”

“Because you’re coming with us, *Solnyshka*,” he tells her evenly, meeting her gaze.

“What? No!” Willow blurts, surging to her feet. “No. I’m not going anywhere. You can’t do this. I’m not going with you!”

Her voice is high, and she looks freaked out and on edge.

With the night she’s had so far, it makes sense.

“Yes, you are,” Malice shoots back, squaring his shoulders. “I can’t risk anyone tracking down my brothers, so there’s no fucking way I’m leaving you here on your own.”

“No!” She shakes her head, her blond hair flying around her face. “That’s too much. Too far. I have a life, and you can’t just drag me away from all of that. I won’t go!”

I want to step in and reassure her that this is for the best, but before I can do that, Malice has his gun out and drawn on her.

“This is not negotiable.” He narrows his eyes, his voice low. “So you’ve got two options. You come with us, or I kill you right now. That’s it. Those are the only two choices here.”

Something shifts in Willow’s expression as she takes in his words. Her nostrils flare, her soft brown eyes flashing. At first, I think it’s from fear—but then she surprises the fuck out of me by stepping right up to Malice until the barrel of the gun is pressed against her forehead.

My jaw just about drops to the fucking floor, and I can feel Vic stopping what he’s doing beside me as he watches her too.

She looks savage and fierce, almost unstoppable. She’s half Malice’s size, but in this moment, she doesn’t look like it. She looks like a queen.

“Do it then,” she whispers. “Fucking do it if you’re going to. You keep talking about killing me, but you haven’t done it yet. And I don’t think you will.”

The moment stretches and turns heavy as the two of them face off, and I can’t look away from Willow’s gorgeous, brilliant eyes.

I knew she had a tough side to her in there, somewhere under all that sweetness, but I never knew it was this wild. This brave and unbreakable. She’s clearly terrified, but she’s also pissed off, and it’s like the combination of emotions set something off inside her. She’s staring death in the face basically daring Malice to shoot her.

Their stare-down drags on for another long moment, the tension thickening the air in the room. Then Malice curses and pulls the gun away from Willow’s head.

He shoves his gun back in his waistband, his gaze locked on Willow as he steps slowly toward her, closing the distance between them and dropping his head until they’re almost nose to nose.

“This just means you’ve picked option A, *Solnyshka*. You’re coming with us. There’s no fucking way we’re just walking out of here and leaving you on your own. Someone is pissed about Nikolai’s death, and they’re after you. If they get their hands on you, there’s no telling what they’ll do to get you to talk, and I’m not letting that happen.”

Maybe Willow can pick up on the hint of worry in his tone that’s clear as day to me. Or maybe his words are enough to convince her that no matter how much she might hate coming with us, Malice is right that she’ll be safer that way. She stares at him for a long moment, her brows furrowed as a little line forms between them, then her gaze flicks to me and Vic.

She takes a deep breath, closing her eyes. When she opens them again, that flash of wildness is gone, and she just looks tired and scared.

“Fine,” she whispers. “I’ll go with you.”

Malice nods curtly, then shoots me a look.

“On it,” I say, heading into her room to start packing up.

Willow scampers in a moment later, clearly not willing to let me be the one who decides what she takes and what she leaves behind. She drags out a battered suitcase and a duffel bag from the closet, shoving things into them as Victor finishes scrubbing the apartment clean.

She’s just tugging the zipper on the duffel bag closed when Victor pops his head in.

“I’ve done my last checks,” he informs us. “The place is clean. Let’s go. We'll take Carl's car back to our place and chop it.”

“Great.” I grab the duffel bag and suitcase, hefting them in my arms as we make our way back out into the living room. It looks good. You’d never know there was a dead man bleeding out on the floor less than an hour ago.

I take point, making sure there’s no one around to witness as Victor and Malice get the body into the trunk of Carl's car, which is parked halfway down the block. Then I go back up for the bags, shoving them in the trunk of Malice’s car before opening the door to the back seat and gesturing Willow inside.

She’s quiet on the drive back to our place, chewing on her lip and staring out the window. It’s after midnight when we roll into the garage at the warehouse. Malice maneuvers Carl's beat up vehicle into the garage after us, and Vic pulls up alongside us in his car a second later. I grab Willow’s bags and hold the door open for her as she slides over the seat and gets out, then all four of us head inside.

“I’ll handle the body,” Malice says, flipping on a light. “Vic, go back through the security footage around Willow’s apartment, cover our tracks, and make sure no one can find out that the fucker came to her place before he died. Even better, try to create a digital footprint for him somewhere else to throw off anyone who looks into it.”

Vic nods shortly.

“And then we need to start trying to find out who was asking him questions in the first place,” I add.

Willow glances around, still looking a bit shell-shocked and dazed as she crosses her arms over her chest. “Where am I going to stay?”

Malice flicks a look in her direction. “We don’t have an extra bedroom, so you’ll have to sleep in one of our rooms.”

Her eyes go wide, and she shakes her head. “Can’t I just sleep on the couch or something?”

“No, you can’t. We don’t trust you enough to let you have free rein here. You’ll sleep in one of our rooms so we can keep an eye on you,” he snaps. “So choose who you want to stay with, and deal with it.”

Willow glances at each of us in turn, considering. Her eyes linger on me and she ducks her head.

“Ransom,” she finally says.

Victor doesn’t react to her pronouncement. He’s better at keeping his feelings masked than either Malice or I, but I have a feeling he’s relieved not to have been picked. I can only imagine how having her in his living space would fuck up his carefully cultivated routines.

Malice’s jaw tightens, something that looks a lot like jealousy flashing through his eyes before he hardens his expression and nods. “Fine. Ransom it is.”

I can’t help the grin that tugs at the edges of my lips. I probably shouldn’t care one way or the other, but I like that she picked me.

WILLOW

I FEEL like the world is spinning around me. Like I'm on a tilt-a-whirl and can't get off.

Carl is dead, someone knows about what happened at the brothel, and I'm standing in the middle of these three brothers' home, being told I have to stay with one of them.

Is this what shock feels like?

"Come on," Ransom says, grabbing my bags from where he set them on the floor when we stopped to talk. "Let's go upstairs."

Victor walks past us toward the stairs, probably going to do what Malice told him to do—get rid of any sign that Carl came to my apartment and try to figure out who's after the information.

Malice disappears too, heading back out to the garage, and I have a disquieting feeling in my stomach that he's off to get rid of the body somehow. I don't even want to think about what that's going to entail.

Ransom leads me upstairs, his hands filled with two of my bags, and I clutch my school bag to my chest, holding on to it like it's a lifeline. I feel so on edge in this place. I've been here before, but this is different. Now I'm in their living space, moving deeper into their lives.

So much has changed from before I knew these men, and I barely recognize myself or my life anymore. My head is spinning, and when I close my eyes, I can see the look of shock frozen on Carl's face after Victor killed him.

Just earlier today, the biggest thing I was worried about was my cold. I feel a lot better, although I still have a bit of congestion in my nose. It makes my head feel too full, on top of all the thoughts running through it.

“Can I take a shower?” I ask Ransom after we reach the second floor.

“Sure,” he says. He shoots me a sympathetic look. “I know it’s hard at first. Seeing dead bodies and watching people die. I guess Carl and Nikolai were probably the first ones you’ve seen killed. It gets easier, though.”

That’s nowhere near as reassuring as he probably thinks it is, and I can feel my heart rate climbing as I swallow past the lump in my throat. I don’t want death to become a part of my life that gets easier. I don’t want to get used to it.

We head down the hall, and Ransom shows me to the bathroom.

He trades me my duffel for the school bag I’ve been holding, and I grip the handle tightly as I step inside the small room, my skin prickling with awareness. I’m almost worried that he’s going to follow me in, with some line about how they can’t trust me to shower alone or something.

But Ransom just positions himself against the wall of the hallway outside, letting me close the door without a protest.

Thank god.

I feel marginally better with a closed door between me and… everything and everyone else out there, but it’s not enough to chase away the off-balance feeling entirely. Too much has happened tonight for me to feel anything close to comfortable.

It occurs to me to look for a window to climb out of or something, but there isn’t one. And even if there were, trying to run from these men would probably be stupid anyway. They’d just drag me back, and it would be even worse. Besides, they’re the only ones standing between me and whoever’s been tracking down information about the brothel.

With a sigh, I turn the shower on, adjusting the water temperature until it’s as hot as I can stand it. I linger for a second beside the tub, feeling very exposed as I contemplate the idea of undressing in their home.

This is a bathroom that all three of them clearly share, and it’s obvious to see the little touches each one has brought to it. Inside the shower, there are shelves adhered to the wall, and each of the brothers has one. On top, there are small bottles in orderly rows, and that’s all Victor. One of the body washes on the middle shelf smells like the smoky, alluring scent that I associate with Malice. The ones on the bottom have more variety, which seems like Ransom, wanting to try a little bit of everything.

I turn away from their things and quickly strip off my sweatpants and long-sleeved shirt, then step under the spray. As the water slicks my hair to

my skin, I realize that the body wash I brought is in the suitcase Ransom still has, so I grab what's available in the shower and pour a liberal amount into my hand, scrubbing at my skin to try to get the feeling of the splatters of Carl's blood off me.

Even though I can't wash the memories away, I just want to feel clean.

But as I finish up and step out of the shower, I realize this might have been a mistake. Because I replaced the scent and feel of death with the scent and feel of these three brothers.

Now it feels like they're all on my skin, and I don't like that.

It's too intimate.

Too personal.

Too *real*.

Shivering slightly, I rummage through my bag and get dressed in different clothes, pulling out the long-sleeved shirt and long pants I usually sleep in. I feel even more self-conscious about things here, and I want to be covered up.

When I open the door, Ransom is still waiting outside.

His gaze sweeps over me, an appreciative gleam in his eyes. It makes me feel odd, especially since I'm just wearing old grungy clothes. There's nothing sexy about them, but he's looking at me like he likes what he sees.

It unnerves me… almost as much as the way my body responds to his look.

"Feel better?" he asks, raising his pierced brow.

"Yes," I lie.

He leads me down the hall to his bedroom, and I shuffle inside after him, watching as he deposits my things against the wall near the closet. I linger near the door, feeling awkward and uncertain about being in his private space like this—not that I should feel bad about it, since he and his brothers have invaded every aspect of my life with impunity.

There's a bottle of whiskey on his nightstand, and Ransom picks it up, shaking it a little as he holds it out to me like a peace offering.

"It'll take the edge off," he tells me. "Might help you sleep tonight."

I accept the bottle and take a little swig, grimacing as a burning feeling hits the back of my throat. I'm not much of a drinker, but it does help. After one more sip, the burn settles into a tingling warmth that spreads through my belly and out into my limbs.

“It’s good, yeah?” Ransom takes the bottle back and lifts it to his lips, taking a sip himself. “We’ve got a liquor shelf downstairs, but this is my favorite whiskey, so I keep it up here to keep Malice from drinking the whole damn thing.”

He passes it to me again, and this time, when I raise it to my mouth, I’m keenly aware that his mouth was just on it. This feels strangely intimate too, and it makes it hard to not think about the way he kissed me the night he dropped me off at my apartment.

“Come here.”

Ransom sits on the bed, patting the mattress in an invitation for me to sit too. I do, and we pass the whiskey bottle back and forth a couple more times. It’s relaxing and calming in a way I didn’t expect, and some of the tension bleeds out of me. I feel strangely at ease with Ransom, and that makes me nervous.

“What will you do about whoever is poking into Nikolai’s death?” I ask him after a while.

He shrugs. “We’ll figure out how to handle it. Figure out who it is and take care of them.”

I realize that ‘take care of them’ means kill them, and I’m a little horrified at how easily he says it. Like it doesn’t matter one bit that they’re going to take a life. But it also would mean that I’d be free, so there’s a part of me that can’t help but hope they succeed.

“So… what is this place?” I ask, glancing at the bedroom door and raising my hand to indicate everything beyond it. “It looks sort of like a garage, but you live here too?”

He smiles, the whiskey bottle dangling loosely in his hand. His blue-green eyes gleam with good humor as he cocks his head.

“You sure you want me to answer that? Knowing more about us could be dangerous for you.”

I shrug one shoulder. “I saw Vic shoot a man through a pillow tonight. And I saw all three of you kill that Nikolai guy. We’re pretty much past that point anyway, aren’t we?”

“Guess so,” he agrees with a low laugh. “But yeah, we live here and work here. We needed something to do for work, to get money coming in, so we opened a chop shop when Malice got out of prison.”

That last bit catches my attention.

Malice was in prison?

I guess it makes sense, since some of his tattoos look like prison ones. I want to ask what he was put away for, but at the same time, I'm scared to poke too much. Despite what I just told Ransom about it being too late, I'm certain that getting to know these men well would definitely be dangerous.

"Oh." I nod, picking at a loose thread in the blanket on the bed. "I didn't know that."

"You don't seem too surprised by it though," Ransom says with a chuckle. "I guess that makes sense. Malice has a… way about him."

"You could say that," I murmur, thinking back to every time he waved a gun in my face. "How long was he in there?"

"Several years. It was supposed to be longer, but then… well, he got out."

The vague way he ends that statement makes me certain that it wasn't as simple as he's making it sound. Did they break him out somehow? Or did he get out early on good behavior? Somehow, I find that possibility hard to imagine.

"What about you?" Ransom asks, changing the subject before I can decide whether or not to ask anything more about Malice. "We've got our shop. What are you gonna do with your fancy degree once you get it?"

"I'm not sure yet," I admit. "I'm a sophomore, and I haven't declared a major yet. I need to soon though."

The truth is, I have no idea what I want to focus on. I know what my goals are, and I know where I want to end up in life, but I'm not sure how to get there yet, or what degree would be best. And it's not like I have a lot of authority figures in my life to ask for advice. The thought of asking my mom what career path she thinks I should pursue almost makes me want to laugh. Or cry.

Ransom slides the piercing in his tongue between his teeth. "I'm sure you'll pick something good. Have you always lived in Detroit?"

"I thought you guys did your research on me. Don't you already know everything about my past?" I grimace. "And my present."

He shakes his head. "No. We don't know everything about you. Well, Vic probably does, but not me." He grins. "I like to get to know someone the old fashioned way."

There's something in his voice as he says it, a sort of warmth that makes me feel like he doesn't just see me as a pawn in this sprawling, convoluted game they're playing, but like a person.

Like someone he wants to know.

Someone worthwhile.

The alcohol burns in my veins, and I can't seem to tear my gaze away from his gorgeous face. He doesn't ask me any more questions, and I almost wish he would, because the silence between us feels loaded with too many confusing things. Finally, he takes the bottle from me and puts it back on the nightstand.

"You should get some sleep," he says. "You've had a long night."

"Right. Okay."

Pulling back the sheets, I get into bed, feeling awkward as he crawls in beside me. I'm so on edge that all my muscles are tense, my body too aware of him. The warmth of him beside me makes my skin tingle, and I realize I'm practically holding my breath.

I stare at the wall, curled up on my side, not sure how I'll ever fall asleep like this. But exhaustion tugs at me, every single hour of this marathon day dragging me down, and eventually, my eyelids fall shut and stay that way.

WILLOW

CARL IS STANDING in my apartment, leering at me. His gaze is latched on to my body, roaming up and down, and I can feel it like a physical touch.

I shudder hard, trying to back away, but he reaches for me, his arms stretching long, his hands insistent. When I open my mouth to say no, no sound comes out, and I try to run, but there's nowhere to go.

Then he's on me, pinning me to the wall, whispering in my ear that he'll keep his mouth shut if I can make him happy with mine. I feel like I'm going to be sick, and it would serve him right if I threw up all over him.

One minute, I'm trying to fight him off, and the next, he's being ripped away from me.

He makes a grunt of pain, and I look up to see Vic wrestling with Carl, getting him down on the ground.

Something in my head screams at me to look away, saying that I know how this goes and I don't want to see it. But I can't. I'm staring, and I can't look away.

Victor draws his gun and takes aim. This time, he doesn't muffle the shot with a pillow, so I see the moment the bullets pierce Carl's chest, spattering blood all over the place. Several droplets land on me, hot and sticky, and the shaky, nauseated feeling in my stomach grows even stronger.

I turn and run, not wanting to be near the grotesquely sprawled body, desperate to get away from the spreading pool of blood on the floor. I rush down the hall, going for my bedroom, but when I open the door, it doesn't lead to my room.

Instead, I walk into that small room at the brothel.

Nikolai is there, hulking and angry, and he grabs me, throwing me onto the bed before climbing on top of me. I try to fight him off, but he's too big.

"No!" I scream, beating at his chest, trying to push him off. "No, leave me alone!"

Then in a flash, Nikolai goes rigid. Blood splatters my face, soaking into my clothes. I feel like I'm drowning in it.

Malice, Ransom, and Victor stride into the room, already soaked head to toe in blood, grim looks on their faces. They grab Nikolai and force him into the corner.

Once again, I try to look away. I try to hide my eyes, but I can't move. I'm frozen in place on the mattress, watching them torture Nikolai. Watching them kill him.

They don't hold back, either. Every movement is brutal and precise. They want him to suffer, and they make sure he does. They're violent and dark. Dangerous, blood soaked monsters that leave a trail of death behind them.

And yet still, somehow, I feel drawn to them.

Somehow, arousal tightens low in my belly when I look at them.

I want to get off the bed and run… but if I did, I'm not sure whether I would run away or run directly toward them.

The dream shifts again as that question reverberates through my mind, and I'm back in my apartment, standing in front of my mirror and gazing at my own reflection. I expect to see myself as I am, scarred and timid, dressed in long sleeves, my blonde hair tumbling around my face, hiding pieces of myself to try to get by in the world without too many stares or rude comments.

But the woman in front of me isn't covered up. She's wearing a red silk gown that clings to her soft curves. Her eyes are hard, and they flash with something I can't identify. Her hands are filthy and soaked with blood.

Red, red, red.

So much red.

So much blood.

So much death.

It's not just clinging to the brothers. It's all over her too, covering her skin and seeping into her pores, infecting her very soul.

I barely recognize the woman staring back at me from inside the mirror, but as our gazes lock, I realize it's not just the brothers who are monsters.

She’s one too.

My eyes snap open, and I jerk slightly, breathing hard as I wake up suddenly.

For a second, I’m disoriented, staring at an unfamiliar wall across from me and confused about why it’s not one I recognize. There’s a warm body behind me, spooned up close, a heavy arm draped over my side. I nearly panic before everything that happened last night comes crashing back over me again.

I’m in Ransom’s bed, and he clearly moved in the night, because now he’s much closer than he was before.

I can feel the hard lines of his body against mine… and that’s not all that’s hard. His cock is right there, pressing against my ass, and that warm tightening in my belly from my dream returns with a vengeance.

Sucking in a breath, I ignore the sudden flare of arousal, wriggling slowly out from under his arm and trying not to wake him as I slide out of bed. My bags are still set against the wall, and I rummage through one, finding regular clothes to get dressed in for the day.

I change quickly, trying to make no sound at all, but when I turn around as I finish pulling on my shirt, I realize Ransom is awake and watching me.

He must have woken up sometime while I was dressing, and he’s pushed himself up onto one elbow, looking sleep rumpled and handsome. My face flushes immediately at the realization that he saw me changing. Honestly, I’m almost more embarrassed about him seeing my scars than about him seeing me naked. They can’t have looked good from that angle.

I don’t even know why I care, really. Malice has already seen them, and Victor must have seen them too, if he was spying on me in my apartment. He had cameras in my bedroom for fuck’s sake. So it shouldn’t be that big of a deal for Ransom to see them too.

Usually, I try not to worry about what people will think of my scars. They’re a part of me, and it’s not like I can get rid of them, so I just have to deal with them. But the thought of Ransom looking at me with disgust bothers me for some reason.

He’s not, though.

Heat burns in his eyes, and I don’t quite understand it. It’s not like Colin, who looked at me with lust only because he wanted to fuck a virgin and thought I was a sure thing. Ransom looks at me like I’m beautiful, and that makes my stomach drop in a funny way.

“What happened?” he asks softly.

He doesn’t specifically reference my scars, but his gaze darts over the spots where they’re hidden by my clothes, and I know what he’s getting at.

I don’t answer, and I’m not sure if it’s because I don’t want to or because the words are stuck in my throat.

He raises an eyebrow at me when I’m silent for a long moment, his lips tugging up at the corners. “You know I could just get Vic to look it up, right? I’m sure there’s a record of whatever happened to you somewhere.”

I wince at that. I’m not sure there is, honestly, since it happened before my adoption, so it’s not like my current last name would even be on the old medical charts. *If* the charts still exist. I’ve never known exactly what happened to me before I ended up being adopted by Misty, just that there was a fire that left me severely burned and most likely killed my parents.

But the idea of Vic poking around in my past makes my stomach churn. I don’t even like to think about it most of the time, and I don’t want him to find out about the mess of my childhood. The benders my mom went on, the johns who were in and out of our house all the time, the bullying I had to go through at school—when I was allowed to go at all.

There’s just too much pain there, and I want to keep it locked away as much as I can.

I scowl at Ransom, irritated. “What happened to getting to know someone the old fashioned way?”

He blinks for a second, looking like he’s considering my words. Then he nods with a little smile.

“You’re right. That is the best way.” He gets out of bed, stretching languidly before coming over to me. He’s in my personal space, the warmth of his body bleeding into mine, but for once, I don’t feel crowded. “I just want to know more about you,” he admits. “I want to know everything.”

He sounds so sincere, and I swallow hard, not sure how to respond to that. The feeling is mutual, but that’s beyond dangerous. Ransom is a package deal with his brothers, and all of them are hazardous to my mind, heart, and sanity.

His fingers are rough and calloused when he uses them to tilt my chin up, and as I look at him, I feel like I could drown in the oceans of his eyes. He looks a bit softer this morning, more approachable with bed head and small creases on the side of his face from his pillow. I thought he looked

more human and less god-like the night he took me to that diner, but this is so much more than that.

“I’ve never done this before,” I whisper, the admission falling from my lips unbidden. “Slept over at a guy’s place.”

The curve of his lips becomes more pronounced as his smile widens. “Well, you’re doing great so far, angel. I’m glad I get to be your first.”

My stomach flutters. I open my mouth to say something else, but before I can, the bedroom door swings wide. Malice stands in the doorway, his gaze landing on me and Ransom. He takes in the way we’re standing, the proximity between us and the intimacy of our postures, and the already grim look on his face turns even darker.

“If you’re not too busy,” he growls, “we got a match on who went after Carl asking questions.”

MALICE

MY JAW CLENCHES, and irritation buzzes under my skin like a hive of pissed off bees.

Seeing Willow and Ransom gazing at each other like that, their bodies so close together, her face tilted up toward his, makes me want to hit something. Ransom has always been the most easy-going of the three of us, and it figures that he's charmed his way right into Willow's heart. I should probably be glad about that, since it will make her more willing to stay here like we need her to—but instead, it rankles something deep inside me, making me think of all the times she's looked at me with fear or loathing.

"Let's go." I jerk my head down the hallway. "You need to see what Vic found."

Ransom's expression turned serious the moment I mentioned Carl, and he nods. "Coming."

He grips Willow's shoulder lightly, as if he's about to steer her out the bedroom door and bring her with us, but I fold my arms, stopping them both with my glare. That hot, prickling feeling of jealousy fills my stomach again, and I shake my head decisively. Maybe I'm being an asshole and lashing out unfairly, but at the moment, I don't fucking care.

"You stay right where you are," I grit out, jerking my chin at Willow. "You're not our fucking roommate. You're not one of us, and you don't get to sit in on our meetings."

Her eyes flash with surprise and hurt, and she glares at me like she hates me. Her mouth presses into a thin line, and I'm filled with the overwhelming and irrational desire to kiss that goddamned frown off her

face. To toss her down on Ransom's bed and make her scream my name until she can't pretend to hate me anymore.

She's under my skin somehow, and I don't want her there. I fucking hate it.

"It's alright," Ransom reassures her. "Like I said last night, there are some things it's probably safer for you not to know. We'll handle this. Just make yourself at home, okay? I'll be back."

He gestures around his room, and I clench my hands into fists as I catch the grateful look she shoots him. The only time she's ever looked at me like that is after I helped her get that money back from her cunt of an adoptive mother—and of course, I immediately fucked it up by lashing out at her.

Fuck it. It's better this way. The more she hates me, the easier it will be to keep telling myself I hate her too.

With a noise that's barely more than a grunt, I jerk my chin at Ransom. He follows me out of the room, leaving Willow staring after both of us. I can feel him shooting a sidelong glance at me as we walk, but I ignore it. He probably knows what's got me in such a pissy mood, and if he doesn't, there's no way in fucking hell I'm going to tell him.

Vic is waiting for us when we step into his room, parked in his usual spot in front of the bank of screens on his desk, deep in hacker mode.

A lot of the time, he's pretty detached and withdrawn, but he comes alive in a different way when he's dealing with this stuff. It's the only time he's more animated, and some of his tics and little habits fall away when he's on the computer. As if translating his thoughts into ones and zeros helps him relax.

Ransom and I take our usual places behind him, flanking his chair on each side, and Vic glances over his shoulder.

"I was able to get a picture of the guy who's been poking into Nikolai's death," he says. "A newly installed security camera at the laundromat across the street picked him up when he went to Sapphire to see Carl, so we have a face now."

"Just a face?" Ransom asks.

Vic presses a few buttons on his keyboard and brings the picture up. Ransom and I both peer at it, but I can already tell it's not someone we know. The guy looks brutal and menacing, definitely not one of the bottom feeder criminals who fuck around in Detroit. This is someone a lot more powerful than that.

“I don’t know who he is,” my twin admits. “I’ve run him through a few databases I hacked into, but there are no matches.”

I blow out a breath through my nose, stepping away from the desk a little. “So we’ve got half a lead.”

“Better than nothing,” Ransom murmurs. “We still need to figure out who the fuck this guy is, but at least we have a face.”

“And Carl was the last living person who knew that Willow was at the brothel that night,” Victor points out. “Which means that whoever this man is, his lead just dried up. That buys us some time to get more information. I’ll do whatever digging I can.”

“Speaking of Willow…”

Ransom’s voice trails off, and I glare at him, still pissed about what I saw when I walked into his room.

Vic nods, picking up the thread of our brother’s thought. “What do we do about her?”

“We can’t let her go,” I say. “That fucker who’s hunting her is still out there somewhere, and we don’t know how good of a liar this Carl asshole was.” I jerk my head toward the man’s face on the screen. “If whoever that is finds out Willow was there that night…”

I don’t have to finish that sentence for either of them. There’s a good chance she’ll be tortured for information about us, and if the unknown man is as skilled as he looks, he’s probably turned torture into an art form.

“So we just keep her here?” Vic asks. He sounds uneasy, and I can tell he doesn’t like the idea. He’s gotten attached to Willow in his own way, I think, but he was a lot more comfortable watching her from afar than he is with having her right up in our business like this.

That makes fucking two of us.

“If it was up to me, she’d be dead already,” I point out, scowling.

Ransom rolls his eyes. “Give it up, Mal. She straight up called you out on that last night. We haven’t killed her by now, so it’s clearly not an option. We need to stop bringing it up, and you”—he cocks a brow at me—“need to stop waving guns in her face. It scares her.”

“She’s not as fragile as she looks,” I shoot back, remembering the way she stepped right up to the barrel of my gun last night, and the way her eyes flashed as she dared me to pull the trigger.

“That’s beside the point,” Vic cuts in, getting us back on track. “The question is, can we afford to keep her here, living with us indefinitely?

We'll have another job from X at some point. What will we do with her then? Bring her with us? Our lives aren't meant to have someone like her in them."

"What choice do we have, though?" Ransom argues, scrubbing a hand through his messy brown hair. "We're not gonna kill her, and we need to keep her close, so where else can she go?"

Right. That's the main fucking problem, isn't it?

I'm with Vic in that I don't want her here, so deep in our shit. But she has to stay. It's dangerous for her out there, and dangerous for us to let her go free and risk this mystery man tracking her down.

And although I barely allow the thought to form in my mind, there's some part of me that doesn't want to let her go. That wants to keep her here, now that we have her under our roof.

"He's right." I nod sharply. "She's the last link someone could use to connect us to Nikolai's death. We can't risk it."

"Okay. So she stays with us." Ransom looks pleased, and the grin on his face makes my shoulders tighten up.

"We need to lay down some ground rules then," I say.

"Like what?"

"She's a distraction. We've got shit to do, things to be focusing on, and we can't afford to let her throw us off more than she already has. So we have to agree that none of us are going to fuck her."

I say it for all of us, but I look at Ransom as I speak. He's the one with her in his bed, after all. The one she likes best.

Vic turns around in his chair, facing the two of us, his eyes serious. "Agreed."

"Yeah, okay." Ransom shrugs and nods, looking a bit disgruntled.

I nod too, cementing our agreement.

With that settled, we move on to other business. Ransom agrees to take point on our upcoming deal with the Donovan gang, which is where we need to be putting our focus right now. All the shit with Nikolai and whoever's looking for answers aside, we still have to keep our shop running.

But even as I try to focus on what's coming next, looking ahead to the future and laying out plans, my mind is still on the beautiful blonde waif down the hall.

WILLOW

I PACE in Ransom's room, feeling awkward and anxious. I'm not sure I would've wanted to be part of whatever little meeting they're having, especially if it involved talking about killing people. My nerves feel a little too raw right now to handle much more of that.

But still, the way Malice brushed me off made irritation flare in my chest. He can be so hot and cold sometimes, and it makes it hard to get a read on him. I can't tell if he likes me or hates me or wants to… I don't even know what.

And that's the problem.

I don't know.

I feel completely out of my depth in this strange and volatile new world I've been thrust into, and on top of that, I feel more like a prisoner than ever with the way they just left me in this room while they went off to take care of business.

From what I gathered, Malice and Ransom went to meet Vic in his room. I could try to slip out the bedroom door and make a run for it, but just like last night, I decide it's a bad idea.

I'm safe here, at least. And out there, there's a guy who would probably happily torture me for the information he wants. Better to be with the devils I know, since they have a vested interest in keeping me safe and away from whoever was asking Carl questions.

But I'm still stuck.

And as long as I'm here, I'm sure I won't be allowed to go to school.

My stomach churns even harder at the idea of falling behind, especially when I've just been starting to hit my stride and have had time to really

study and do my best. I've been banking so hard on college, putting all my hope into this future I'm trying to build for myself.

As if my thoughts are being broadcast through the universe or something, my phone pings with a message, and when I look at the screen, I realize that it's from April.

APRIL: Professor Walsh is pairing people up for another assignment, and you're in my group again. Meeting on Thursday. Don't be late!!!

I close my eyes with a groan and toss my phone back on the bed, not answering the message.

It's not fair.

She gets to keep going to school, worrying about assignments and her hair and whether her outfit matches her nails, easy and free. And here I am, trapped in this dangerous web of lies and vendettas and death.

I suck in a deep breath and then let it out, wrapping my arms around my torso as I try to calm down.

"It's okay," I whisper to myself. "It's going to be okay."

Looking for a distraction, I stop pacing and glance around the room I'm in, taking it in more thoroughly than I did last night. It's a lot like Ransom himself, casual and comfortable. It's not fancy, just the bed, a dresser, the nightstand, and a desk pushed against one wall, but it feels like a place Ransom has made his own.

I know I probably shouldn't be nosy, but I can't help myself. These men know so much about me, and it makes me ravenous for more information about them, so I start to poke around the room a bit.

He has a large desk set against one wall, and there are diagrams of various vehicles scattered across the wooden surface. On top is a drawing of a motorcycle, with some notes made in neat handwriting. When I pull open the drawer of the desk, I find a few photos. No people are in them, and they vary from a picture of a winding road to the view from off a mountain with the trees and the sky stretching almost endlessly.

I remember Ransom telling me about the rides he's been on, and my brows knit together as I peer at them more closely.

Did he take these himself? Are these all places he's been?

After putting the pictures back, I close the drawer. I turn, about to head for his dresser to poke around in there, when the door opens and Ransom comes back in.

I jerk in surprise, turning to him to try to cover up what I was doing.

“Did you get any useful info about the guy who’s poking around about Nikolai’s death?” I ask.

He shakes his head, a grimace twisting his lips. “We’ve got a lead, but that’s all it is right now. You’re going to have to stay here until we can take care of whoever this is for good.”

I nod, my stomach sinking. I thought I was prepared for this possibility, but it hits me hard anyway, making me feel like the floor has dropped out from beneath me. I may not be a captive in name, but that’s essentially what I’ll be. Stuck here, locked away, until they manage to take out their enemy.

“Hey.” Ransom’s voice is soft, and when I look at him, it’s like he can tell I’m about to have a major internal crisis. “Let’s get something to eat, okay? Want some breakfast?”

I nod, swallowing hard.

He leads me out of his room and down the hall, showing me around their place a little.

Despite my roiling emotions, I can’t help but be impressed with the way they’ve made this unconventional space work for them. The first floor contains a living room, kitchen, and a massive garage with a smaller room attached to it. The upper floor forms their living space, with a bedroom for each of them, stretching out along the hallway, and a bathroom between Vic’s room and Ransom’s room.

We head into the kitchen, and Ransom pokes his head into the freezer for a moment before pulling out a box of frozen waffles.

“They’re blueberry,” he offers, waggling the box enticingly

I chuckle, unable to help myself. “Sure. That sounds great.”

He pops them in the toaster and then hands me a plate, putting butter and syrup on the table as well.

Eating breakfast helps settle my nerves, so I focus on the food, resting my elbows on the table as I devour two waffles in quick succession. Ransom sits down to eat with me, but before he can finish his food, his phone rings.

He glances down at the screen, recognition flashing across his face.

“I’ve gotta take this,” he tells me, rising and heading for the door. “Help yourself to more waffles if you want.”

I do, popping two more into the toaster and waiting for them to heat up before carrying them to my plate. Footsteps ring out on the cement floor as

I sit back down on one of the chairs at the table, and I glance up, expecting to see Ransom.

It's not him, though. It's Victor.

He pauses in the doorway, hesitating, and I almost think that if I hadn't seen him, he might just back up silently and leave. But when our gazes meet, he strides into the kitchen, heading for the cabinet.

The way he came to my apartment and took care of me seems like a long time ago, and it's hard to believe it was just yesterday. But then, it was also just yesterday that he killed a man in front of me like he was a trained assassin or something.

For a few minutes, neither of us speak, even though we're clearly both aware of each other. He goes through the motions of making his coffee, carefully measuring out the grounds and leveling them off with precision, and I keep my attention on the last of my waffles.

"Did Ransom tell you you'll be staying with us?"

His voice breaks the silence, and I look up.

"Yes," I reply, smearing a bit of syrup around with my fork. I hesitate, then add, "Will… will I be able to keep going to school?"

"No." He shakes his head, his expression inscrutable. "That's too much of a risk."

His answer doesn't surprise me, but I still deflate a little when I hear it spoken out loud. All this time, I've been trying to build toward a better future, trying to make sure I wouldn't end up stuck in the same vicious cycle as my mom, and now it feels like it's all slipping from my grasp.

I press my lips together, trying not to let my feelings show too much, even though I feel a little like I want to cry. I don't want Victor to see my vulnerability.

But if the look he gives me is any indication, he picks up on enough of it. I can't quite tell what he's thinking, and his expression hardly changes, but his blue eyes seem to soften a little as he gazes at me.

"School isn't the only way to learn. I didn't go to high school or college," he tells me. "Malice and Ransom didn't go to college either, and we're all plenty smart."

It's hard to be totally reassured by that, since I don't exactly have ambitions of opening a chop shop or becoming a hacker. But still, this is the nicest and most… *human* Victor has ever been around me, and the fact that he's trying to make me feel better does help a little.

“Thanks,” I murmur.

He doesn’t respond, just sets the coffee to brewing and snaps back into business mode.

“I scrubbed the trail of security footage that leads to your apartment,” he tells me. “In case anyone decides to check on your old boss’s whereabouts last night. He’s not married, and he has no kids, so I’m not sure anyone will miss him. But it’s likely that the employees of Sapphire will notice his absence and report it, so I wanted to make sure any evidence that he went to your place is gone. I also modified some traffic cam footage so that there’s evidence of his car passing through an intersection far away from your apartment not long before he died.”

“Wow,” I say, impressed. “That’s a lot.”

He shrugs a shoulder. “I’m good at what I do.”

“That’s how you were able to put all those cameras in my apartment without me knowing,” I murmur, and it’s not really a question. More a statement of fact.

He nods. “Yes. We needed to be able to watch you.”

That’s also more a statement of fact than anything else. He’s not making any apologies for doing it, just telling me why it happened. They needed to keep an eye on me, so he found a way to make that possible.

But it makes embarrassment and anxiety burn under my skin, thinking about how long those cameras might have been there and what Vic might have seen while he was watching me through them. I didn’t ask yesterday about whether he was watching the feed the night Malice brought me home, but now I feel like I *need* to know.

“Did you see… things?” I whisper.

I don’t know how to elaborate more than that, but when Victor’s eyes flash, I can tell he’s picked up on the unspoken meaning of my question.

He nods, his expression shuttered. “Yes.”

My cheeks flush. I can only imagine all the things he might have seen. Me touching myself. Me naked as I came out of the bathroom to get dressed. Me getting eaten out by Malice. He probably watched it all with that cool, perceptive gaze, and just thinking about it makes me want to run from the room and hide. But at the same time, something hot curls deep in my belly.

Vic sees everything.

He notices *everything*.

Nothing gets past him, and knowing he watched me makes me feel…

I wrap my arms around myself, choosing not to follow the thread of that thought.

“I don’t let people see that much of me,” I say quietly. “I don’t let them see the scars.”

Victor looks at me, his eyes sweeping over my body. It’s not the way Ransom looks at me, or even the way Malice stares at me with his intense gaze, but something more analytical and piercing. It’s like he’s stripping away my clothing, the invisible armor I wear… all of it. Like he’s seeing right down to the heart of me.

Then he steps closer, almost like he can’t help himself.

“I’ve seen the way you try to hide them,” he murmurs. “Your scars. You always wear long sleeves, even to bed most nights. You work so hard to keep them out of sight. But I don’t understand why.”

I make a face, wincing. “I just told you why. I don’t let people see them.”

He shakes his head. “No, that isn’t what I mean. I don’t understand why I like them. Your scars are… chaotic. Disorderly. But for some reason…”

He takes another small step closer to me, and his hand stretches out. His fingers never touch me, but they hover over the part of my right side where my scars crawl across my ribs beneath my shirt.

Even though there’s still an inch of space between us, I’m intensely aware of how near he is. The heat from his hand soaks into my skin the same way a physical touch would. My breath hitches, eyes flying up to Victor’s face to find him looking right back at me, more emotions than I’ve ever seen before flashing through his eyes.

Then Ransom comes walking back into the kitchen, shoving his phone back into his pocket as he strides toward us.

I jerk backward, and Victor straightens up, stepping away. My heart is pounding hard, almost as if Ransom walked in on the two of us kissing or something. But he didn’t. We weren’t even touching. It wasn’t even that intimate, it just… felt that way.

Ransom seems to notice the strange vibe that sprang up in the room in his absence, and glances between the two of us, his brows drawing downward. Then he shakes his head and speaks to Victor.

“Well, I’ve got good news.”

“Good. We could use some of that,” Victor replies, carefully not looking at me as he turns to his brother. “What is it?”

“We just got a meeting with Ethan Donovan. We can finally set up this deal with him and his crew.”

RANSOM

A COUPLE DAYS LATER, I'm in the garage, working on my bike. It's the one thing that usually chills me out when there's too much going on, so I take the time to focus on it.

Our meeting with Ethan is happening this evening, and we still haven't gotten any new info on the identity of the guy who was asking around about Nikolai.

There's a lot going on, and a lot that feels unsettled. But somehow, the biggest thing on my mind is the waifish, beautiful girl with scars on her body and eyes like a fucking doe. She's been sleeping in my bed for the past three nights, and every night it gets harder for me to control my reaction to her. We wake up pressed together, and her small body against mine is addictive.

Almost like she's drawn by my thoughts, Willow comes walking into the garage.

"Oh." She wrinkles her forehead as she sees the tools in my hands. "I didn't know you were busy. I'll just—"

She turns to leave, but before she can, I reach out and grab her wrist, tugging her toward me.

"No, don't go," I tell her with a smile. "What did you need?"

She chews on her lip for a second—something I've realized she does when she's thinking—then sighs. "Nothing. It's nothing."

I give her a look because that's clearly not the full truth.

"I just… feel a little untethered, I guess," she admits. "I can't go to school, so there's nothing for me to work toward. There's nothing to do. I'm used to having something to focus on."

A pang of guilt stabs me. I *like* Willow. That was never part of the plan, but it's pretty much undeniable by this point. School is obviously important to her, and because of everything that's going on, she can't go. She hasn't kicked up a fuss about it, but it's still got to be hard.

"Maybe we can find some way for you to keep studying," I tell her. "Figure something out."

She shoots me a grateful look, and the sweet expression on her face draws me to her. I slide my hand up her arm, and she shivers just a little.

Fuck, I like that. Too much.

"Thank you," she murmurs. "I don't want to give up the progress I've already made because of…" She waves a hand. "All of this."

"Yeah, I get that. I'll see what I can do. Maybe Vic will have some ideas."

Willow gives me a look, probably skeptical that Victor will want to help, but maybe he'll understand what she's going through. He's also a person who likes to have some kind of goal or task to complete.

I chuckle. "Trust me, angel. He's the best one at solving problems like this. But no matter what, I'll do my best, okay?"

"Okay." Her expression clears a little, and a soft smile curves her lips. "Thanks."

Our gazes catch and hold, but a buzzing noise breaks into the moment, and she pulls her phone out of her pocket. One glance at the screen has her expression going tight, and instead of answering the call, she presses a button to decline it.

"What's up?" I ask, leaning toward her and peering at her screen.

"It's my mom." She grimaces. "She's been calling again lately, trying to get back into my life, I guess. It's the same old song and dance where she fucks up and then promises to do better so I'll open up again."

Her eyes are sad as she shoves her phone back into her pocket.

I can tell that the shit with her mom is only bringing down her mood on top of everything else. For some reason, that makes me want to cheer her up. She radiates a sort of energy when she's happy, as if she's a tiny sun emitting rays of warm light. Selfishly, I want more of that.

"If you're looking for new stuff to learn, I could show you how to build a car," I offer. "Or strip one in under an hour."

She laughs. "Really?"

"Sure. Here, come look at this."

I walk around to the other side of the bike as I speak. Willow follows, and I show her what I've been working on. This Ducati is my pride and joy, and it feels good to share that with her. She looks at it with interest, an expression like yearning on her face.

"I could teach you how to ride if you want," I say, shooting her a sidelong glance.

"Oh. Um, I don't know about that…"

There's nervousness on her face, but interest gleams in her luminous brown eyes.

"You liked it the last time you were on one, right?" I ask. "Now just imagine how good it would feel to be in control. All that power and speed changing on a dime under your fingertips. Believe me, there's nothing else in the world quite like it. Well, except maybe really good sex."

Her cheeks instantly flush a bright red, and I bite back a chuckle. *Fuck, it's way too much fun making her react*. But my words seem to spark something in her, because she steps closer.

"Okay. Show me."

I have her climb onto the bike, showing her where to put her hands.

"Like I said, it's all about control. The bike has the power, but you tell it how much it can use at a time. You can hit the gas here." I point out the right spot. "Or slow it down here."

She mimics my motions, putting her hands where I tell her.

"How do you even remember all this?" she murmurs, her brows furrowed as she stares down at the controls. "The first time I rode a bicycle as a kid, I mixed up the front and back brakes and went flying over the handlebars."

"Oh yeah, you fuck up a lot when you're learning," I admit. "That's why you start slow. So that when you fuck up, it's not enough to kill you. After a while, it just becomes muscle memory. I could probably ride a bike in my sleep."

Willow nods, looking thoughtful. "I don't think I could ever get that good. I'd always be… at least a little afraid."

"Nah. You're braver than you think," I tell her. "And all it takes is some practice. Get your body used to the bike, used to what you need to do. Your hands will pick it up. Then you have to get your hips into it."

I demonstrate, leaning with my hips the way I would if I were directing the bike on the road.

Willow laughs, shaking her head. “What? No, you’re making that up.”

“I’m not!” I promise, laughing with her. “Remember when you were riding with me? I leaned into turns, and that’s all in the hips.”

Her cheeks flush at the memory, which makes me feel a spark of pleasure, and my cock twitches—both from remembering how she clung onto me back then and how she looks now. Her eyes are bright with interest and excitement, and it’s a damn good look on her.

So good that I can’t bring myself to look away.

“You know, you look so sweet and innocent on the outside,” I say, lowering my voice a bit as I step closer to where she’s perched on the bike. “But I still see that wild streak in you. Maybe you want to be a bad girl. Maybe that’s who you are at heart.”

Her eyes flash up to mine, and she stares at me for a long moment. I can’t quite tell what I’m seeing in their depths, and trying to pick it apart draws me in even more. Her lips part as her tongue darts out to wet them, making me want to chase it back into her mouth with my own tongue.

“I… I don’t think I know who I am inside,” she whispers. “I had a dream that—”

“That what, angel?”

She hesitates, then shakes her head, clearly deciding not to tell me. “Nothing. Thank you for the lesson.”

With that, she clambers off the bike and slips out of the garage, disappearing into the main part of our living space. I stare after her, rubbing a hand over my neck.

What the hell was that about?

I’m half tempted to go after her, curiosity burning through me. But unfortunately, I’ve got work to do. Our meeting with the Donovan gang will be happening tonight, and I need to make sure we’re ready for it.

MALICE, Vic, and I meet up before Ethan Donovan and his crew arrive at our warehouse. There’s a feeling of energy buzzing between the three of us, because this negotiation could bring big things. Working with this gang would bring us into their fold and give us regular work.

That’s some job security we could desperately use while everything else is so fucking chaotic.

“This would be a good deal for us if it goes through, but remember, we’re not gonna let them short change us,” Malice says, his tattooed arms folded across his chest. “We do fucking good work, and they’ll pay for it if they want it.”

Vic nods. “Between the three of us, we can offer a quick turnaround. A few cars a week.”

“To start,” I chime in. “If we get a rhythm going and get the rest of this shit figured out, we could probably take on more.”

“Yeah, and by then we’ll be in good with them, so it should work out,” Mal agrees.

“Should we say four?” I ask him. “To start?”

“Yeah. That sounds good. Usual rates.”

“We could throw them a discount to sweeten the deal,” I suggest.

Vic shakes his head. “No. If we start doing discounts right off the bat, then they’ll expect it.”

Someone knocks on the door, interrupting our last minute huddle, and I nod to my brothers before I go to let Ethan and his men in.

Ethan Donovan is a local gang leader. His crew is fairly small, but they’re scrappy and efficient, so they’ve managed to carve out a spot for themselves in this pocket of Detroit and even expand it somewhat. Ethan has blond hair that’s buzzed close to his head, and the short blond strands glint in the light of the streetlamps as I open the door.

“Right on time,” I say. “Come on in.”

As I greet him, I do a quick count of how many men he’s brought with him. Four. Standard stuff, since he’d have to be stupid to come onto our turf alone. We’ll be outnumbered if something breaks bad, but it *is* our turf, so that gives us a bit of an advantage. And nothing should go wrong. This is just a simple negotiation, and as far as I know, we’re all interested in making sure this deal happens. Like Mal said, they’d be lucky to have us working for them.

I lead them into the living room, and they all settle in.

“Thanks for meeting with us,” I say, falling into my usual role as the one who does most of the talking in situations like these. “We’ve been interested in cutting a deal with you for a while.”

“We’ve been interested too,” Ethan answers. “Just had to make sure you were serious about working with us.”

Malice snorts. “We’re serious about everything we do.”

There’s half a threat in there somewhere, because it’s Malice, and I just grin, smoothing that over a little bit to keep things comfortable and low stress.

“Our track record speaks for itself,” I say. “We work quickly, but it’s never sloppy.”

Ethan nods. He’s the brains here. The other four guys with him are just here for muscle. To make it clear he’s got back-up, in case we decide to try something. And also for the intimidation factor of it all.

“I’ve heard,” he says. “How much do you think you can handle?”

“Four a week,” I say smoothly. “Probably more in time, once we get a rhythm going.”

His eyebrows go up, an impressed look flitting across his face. “Reliably?”

“Yeah, reliably,” Malice replies. “We don’t do cut rate shit.”

As our negotiations continue, Ethan glances toward the stairs, his eyebrows rising as he catches sight of Willow coming down them. Keeping her head down and her gaze averted, she quickly pads down the steps and toward the kitchen.

“That a friend of yours?” Ethan asks, craning his neck a little to check her out as she disappears into the kitchen.

“She’s no one,” Malice replies sharply. “She’s just some chick I brought home. Don’t worry about her.”

A couple of Ethan’s men share a look, but none of them say anything more about Willow. They don’t ask any more questions, and it seems like they’re going to let Malice’s answer stand. *Good*. Negotiations can be tense, but if we’re cool with Ethan bringing four of his guys, none of whom have been vetted by us, he’d damn well better be okay with us having Willow here.

“So,” Ethan says, leaning back on the couch where he’s sitting. “Four a week. How much are you looking to make for that?”

He wants us to name a number first, but I deflect that, putting the ball back in his court. “We know the going rates around here,” I tell him. “For the parts and what other shops are charging. But they don’t work as fast as we do.”

“So short changing us is a stupid idea,” Malice adds.

Ethan and Malice face off for a second, and then Ethan nods. “You’re right. Two grand per.”

“Bullshit,” Malice grunts. “Didn’t you hear what Ransom said? We know how much parts are worth. You’re getting two grand just for the wheels alone. More if they’ve got rims. Add in everything else, and that’s just a fucking insult.”

When Ethan laughs, I breathe a little sigh of relief. Maybe he was just testing to see if we actually know what we’re talking about.

“Four grand,” he says. “If you can salvage everything.”

The three of us look at each other and Vic nods, his one contribution to the meeting. It’s a good price, and he’s the one who’s done all the math on it.

“Deal,” I say, holding out my hand for Ethan to shake.

He does, and Malice gets up and comes back with a bottle of whiskey and several glasses for us to seal the deal.

He pours, and we drink, toasting to the new partnership.

It’s a good thing too. We need the work and the money—plus, working with a gang that’s getting its name out there will give us a leg up in the underworld of Detroit. It’s a win-win, and I’m pretty pleased with the fact that it went through.

Malice, Vic, and I chat with Ethan for a few minutes as the meeting winds down, hammering out a few specifics and asking some questions about their preferred method of chopping. I’m about to respond to something Ethan said when movement out of the corner of my eye catches my attention.

Willow has re-emerged from the kitchen, but instead of slipping back upstairs like she probably planned to, she’s gotten cornered at the bottom of the steps by one of Ethan’s men. He’s boxing her in against the railing that runs up the steps, and as he leans down to murmur something in her ear, one of his hands lands on her waist, sliding down over her hip and then groping her ass.

Vic and I tense immediately, but it’s Malice who reacts first, swift and deadly as always.

He’s across the room in a second, and he grabs the guy, ripping him away from Willow and slamming him violently onto the floor. It doesn’t matter that this guy is bigger than him, Malice is pissed off as fuck, and that

gives him extra momentum. He flips from zero to one hundred in an instant, brutal and fast, fury burning in his dark eyes.

The man hits the cement floor with a dull thud, and Ethan and the rest of his men react instantly, drawing their weapons and pointing them at Malice.

Fuck.

I yank my gun out of the waistband of my pants, and beside me, Vic does the same.

WILLOW

MY STOMACH SEEMS to tie itself into a hundred knots as I watch the gang and the brothers face off. The entire thing happened so fast, weapons being drawn in the space between one heartbeat and the next, and now both sides are pointing guns at each other.

Malice still has the gang member who touched me on the floor, one arm pinned behind his back and a knee pressed down between his shoulder blades.

"What the fuck?" the guy splutters. "You said she was no one."

Malice twists his arm harder, digging his knee down into his back with more force. I can't see the man's face, but I'm sure the torquing motion has to hurt like hell. Anger is practically radiating off Malice in waves, his face twisted into a mask of rage and retribution.

"Anything under this roof is ours," he growls out. "And you don't get to fucking touch what's mine."

A tense silence follows his words, and I grip the railing at the base of the stairs so hard my knuckles ache. The truth and conviction in his words are undeniable, the fury unmistakable.

The gang leader, a man I've heard the guys call Ethan Donovan, steps forward. Vic swings his gun around immediately, aiming it at Ethan's head, but no one shoots. Both sides are locked in a standoff, waiting for someone else to either back down… or make the wrong move.

"Get the fuck off him," Ethan says to Malice, his voice smooth but angry. "Before this shit breaks bad."

"Where's your warning for this motherfucker?" Malice snaps, glaring down at the man beneath him. "Because I always thought when you were

on someone else's fucking turf, you showed them and their shit a little bit of goddamned respect."

Ethan's jaw tightens, and the tension cranks up a notch. I can feel a cold sweat chilling on the back of my neck, my heart crashing wildly against my sternum. Malice doesn't look like he cares one way or another about all the guns aimed at him, and the guy on the floor makes little pained sounds, breathing hard.

"Alright, Mal." Ransom steps forward slowly, lowering his gun in a deliberate movement so that the Donovan gang members can see him doing it. "Get off him. That's enough."

The two brothers glance at each other, and they share one of those looks that I still don't quite understand, the ones where they seem to communicate telepathically. But whatever unspoken understanding passes between them, it works. Malice jerks away from the guy on the floor, letting him go so he can get to his feet.

Some of the dangerous tension in the air evaporates, and it becomes a little easier to breathe.

"See? We're good," Ransom says, turning to Ethan with his hands held out in front of him. "Malice let your guy go. This doesn't have to go any further."

"It should never have happened in the first fucking place," Ethan bites out.

Ransom nods. "No, it shouldn't have. But your guy did decide to get handsy with someone in our home. You know we can't let that shit stand. You'd have done the same in Malice's place."

However mad Ethan might be, he doesn't seem able to deny that. Things were going smoothly until that guy touched me, and I shiver with disgust, remembering the hungry look on his face as he cornered me by the stairs.

"Fine," Ethan snaps, his tone cool. "But you blew your chance to work with us. There's no fucking trust here anymore."

The look that passes over Ransom's face is one of resignation but not surprise. "Yeah, alright. Then I guess this meeting is over. We're done here."

The threat of violence still hangs in the air like a spark ready to ignite, and Ransom ushers Ethan and the rest of his crew to the door, keeping himself between them and Malice until they walk past.

Vic and Malice fall in behind them, watching like hawks as they leave.

I stay in the living room, frozen in place, still trying to get my equilibrium back after what just happened. One minute, I was being felt up by some skeezy gang member, and the next…

The next minute, Malice was defending me.

He said it was because I'm under their roof, so I'm theirs, and it's a basic respect kind of thing, but I don't know how to feel about that. I'm not their property, not something they own—but at the same time, I've somehow become someone they want to protect.

That doesn't make any sense. Malice hates me, doesn't he?

He's never made a secret of that. So why did he defend me just now? Why does he *always* defend me?

From down the hallway, I can hear the door close, and a few moments after it does, Malice's voice echoes into the living room.

"*Fuck*!"

There's a thud as he punches something, and I flinch at the sound. He's angry. I've seen him mad before, so that's not new… but this is a different kind of anger. This is like when he found out what Colin did to me, or when he found out my mom stole from me. But worse, in a way. Maybe because he was here to see it happen this time.

"Calm down," Ransom says, always the voice of reason. Then he makes a frustrated noise. "So much for that deal, I guess. Dammit. We were so close, too."

"This might be worse than just losing their business," Vic points out, and I creep a little closer to the hallway door to hear better. "They won't forget what happened, and we don't need more enemies right now. We have enough on our plates already."

"And it's not like losing the business is something we can just brush off either," Ransom throws in.

"So what the fuck did you want me to do?" Malice demands. "Stand there and take it? Just let them walk all over us? Let them disrespect us on our own turf? That's the kind of thing that makes you look weak and gets you fucking killed. I can't let that kind of shit stand. That would be worse than losing the business or them hating us or whatever the fuck else happens."

Vic doesn't say anything in response, and I can imagine the way he's probably standing there, his mind racing overtime as he tries to calculate all

the possible variables of the fallout from tonight. After a moment of silence, it's Ransom who replies.

"Listen, Mal. I know that's how you survived in prison. Showing weakness got you fucked up, so you made yourself stronger than everyone who might come after you."

"It's not just prison," Malice grunts. "The same shit applies out here. If you let people like Donovan and his gang walk all over you, then they'll think they can always do it. They'll fuck you over, just because they can."

Somebody says something that's too quiet for me to make out, and then Ransom's voice comes again.

"Why don't you just admit you want her? Maybe it'll do us all some good. Maybe it'll keep you from flying off the handle every time someone looks at her in a way you don't like."

I suck in a sharp breath, lifting up a hand to cover my mouth.

Is that true?

My mind races, replaying the moment when Malice leapt to my defense. The look on his face. The way he sounded.

And the thing is… Malice doesn't deny it. He doesn't tell Ransom to go fuck himself, or that he's being delusional.

Instead, he storms off, stalking into the garage and slamming a door. A few moments later, Ransom and Victor come back into the room. Vic's mood is hard to read as usual, but Ransom is easier to figure out. He looks tired and a little on edge, but he doesn't seem mad.

"Is… everything going to be okay?" I whisper, twisting my fingers together.

He chuckles, coming over to stand before me. "Well, 'okay' really isn't the right word for any of the shit we get into. But it's not the end of the world, angel. We'll figure it out the way we always do."

He reaches up to tuck a bit of hair behind my ear as he speaks, and the familiar gesture is soothing, but it isn't enough to calm my racing heart.

Vic shoots me one penetrating look, as if I'm a puzzle he's tried over and over to solve, then goes back upstairs without saying a word. Ransom shakes his head before beginning to clean up in the living room area, gathering the glasses that are still sitting out with unfinished whiskey in them and putting things back where they belong.

It fits with what I've seen of them so far, the way they work together. Victor goes off to consult his computers, Malice is somewhere brooding,

and Ransom is cleaning up the mess. I guess there does have to be someone who can smooth things over, and it's sure not going to be either of the other two.

I stand there for a moment longer, debating between helping Ransom and… going to find Malice.

Ransom is the easiest of the three to talk to, and I can still feel the warmth from where his knuckles brushed my cheek. He seems to care about me, more than just as a pawn in these games they're playing, and every time he touches me, it makes my heart race.

But he's not the one I want to see right now. Not the one who's on my mind.

It would be safer if he was—or as safe as dealing with any of these men can be, which isn't very, but still.

Malice probably doesn't want to even look at me right now, and if I go to find him, I have no idea what he'll do or what will happen. He'll probably blame me for the loss of the deal with the Donovan gang, pissed that my presence made the deal go south, even though he's the one who forced me to come here in the first place.

I know all of that…

And yet, I still want to see him anyway.

Maybe I have a fucking death wish.

Following the direction I heard his heavy footsteps disappear in, I head into the garage and find him sitting in a little room set off from the main space. I haven't really been in here before, but it looks like a sort of all-purpose space, with workout equipment, a desk, and a work bench with a bunch of tattoo equipment on it.

Malice is sitting on one of the benches in the middle of the room, his elbows braced on his knees as he leans over, a glass of whiskey dangling from his fingers.

A lamp on the workbench illuminates the space in dim, warm light, and I close the door behind me with a soft click, leaning my back against it. I can tell he knows I'm here, but he doesn't look up at first. He sips from his glass, and I can just make out the sight of him glaring down at the whiskey like he wants to set it on fire with his gaze.

My mouth feels dry, and I have to speak past the knot in my throat.

"Thank you," I whisper finally.

His lips curl. "I told you not to thank me for shit."

“I know. It’s just…” I swallow. “Men have always treated me badly. Almost every man I’ve ever known. And no one has ever stood up for me before.”

Malice snorts, shaking his head. When he looks up at me, I can see the lingering anger burning in his eyes. There’s a hard expression on his face, and it’s weird how it suits him. It looks at home on his face, bringing out the striking harshness of his cheekbones and those dark gray eyes.

“I also told you not to make me a hero. I’m no different from any of those other men,” he says, and for once, he doesn’t sound completely pissed off. Just tired and a little bitter. “I warned you not to do this, *Solnyshka*. You’re making me out to be some kind of fucking knight, and I’m not. I never will be.”

It’s basically the same thing he said the last time I thanked him, just with a different tone, and now that I have a clearer picture of who he is, I know it’s both true and not true. He’s threatened to kill me so many times, and he takes what he wants without asking.

He’s definitely not a good man, and I can’t really pretend like he is.

He would have killed me in a second the first time we met, if Ransom hadn’t stepped in. If I’d put a toe out of line before, he would have hunted me down and made me pay for my transgression, and he probably wouldn’t have spared a second thought about it.

Malice doesn’t hesitate to do bad things when they need to be done, and he does them fiercely and brutally.

But at the same time, that’s not all there is to him.

I’ve seen little glimpses of who he is under all that brutal anger. Under all the rage. He’s done all these other things to help me and protect me—even at the expense of things he should want more. Like earlier tonight, when he attacked a member of the gang they wanted to make a deal with, just because the guy touched me and said something creepy.

I turn all of that over in my mind for a long moment, silently thinking.

“You’re right. Maybe you’re not a knight,” I whisper finally. “But maybe… maybe I don’t need a white knight. Maybe I need something darker.”

Before that awful frat party, I would have thought Colin was the white knight type. I thought he was clean cut and nice, someone harmless, someone I could trust to not hurt me. And in the end, he was worse than

someone like Malice, who's been up front about who he is from the beginning.

My words have an instant effect, and Malice's head snaps up.

He looks at me sharply, then sets his glass down and rises from the bench in a smooth motion. He stalks toward me, his long, muscled legs eating up the distance between us with powerful strides. I freeze like a statue as he stops less than a foot from me, staring up at him almost helplessly.

Everything about Malice is so raw and carnal, and he fills the space between us with his dominating presence, making it hard to breathe or focus on anything but him and how close he is.

He grips my chin, and I can feel the callouses on his fingers, rough against my skin as he tilts my head up. He's a lot taller than me, but when he drops his head, our faces are so close together that his breath fans over my skin, and I can smell the whiskey on it. I don't move, I barely even breathe, staring up at him as tension grows and fills the tiny space between us.

"Be careful what you wish for, *Solnyshka*," he murmurs. "You say all that shit about wanting a dark knight, but I don't think you really understand what that means. I could break you so easily. I could *destroy* you."

It's definitely not the first time he's threatened me, and it probably won't be the last.

But this… this is different from the other times.

This isn't a threat of him killing me, like it's been in the past. This isn't him telling me what will happen if I step out of line and rat them out or refuse to do what he says.

This is a threat that makes my nipples go hard and my skin tingle.

A threat that sounds like it encompasses something so much deeper, so much more.

A threat of what it would be like if he claimed me.

I can barely breathe, and I feel lightheaded and a bit dizzy. All I'm aware of is the thundering of my heart and the heat coiling low in my belly as he stares down at me and I look back up at him, trapped by his body and his gaze.

He probably *would* destroy me, if he got his hands on me in that way.

But I must want to go up in flames, because I tilt my head up even farther, closing some of the space between our faces. Drawn to him the way I always seem to be.

Malice moves at almost the exact same moment I do. His head drops the rest of the way, his fingers digging into my jaw a little as he kisses me, deep and consuming—like a hurricane unleashed. His mouth is hot and insistent, like he's trying to devour me whole from the inside out. There's nothing gentle about it, and his strong hand holds me in place with a bruising grip.

I'm trapped between him and the door, nowhere to go, nowhere to hide from the feelings that are surging through me.

And this is just a kiss.

What would it be like if it was more than that?

The kiss is soul stealing, and I can't fight what the heated pressure of his lips is doing to me. I get lost in it, kissing him back, our mouths somewhere between clashing and melding together each time we come back for more.

Malice pins me tighter against the door, his body hard against mine. I can feel every point of contact between us like a burning fire, branding me. The searing heat makes my brain scream at me to back away, certain I'm going to be consumed, even while my body is yearning to dive headfirst into those flames.

He bites down on my lower lip, hard enough that it draws blood, but that doesn't slow down the kiss at all. He sucks my lip into his mouth, dragging his tongue against it, and I know he must taste the metallic tang of the blood he drew. The movement of his tongue isn't soothing or tender, just ravenous and consuming, and it sparks more fire in my veins, all of it roaring through me like an inferno.

I hear a broken little moan, and a heartbeat later, I realize it came from me.

Malice just kisses me harder, like he wants me to make more of those sounds so that he can swallow up every single one of them.

Time seems to stand still as we're locked together, and I only realize it's been a while when my lungs start to burn for air. My head is spinning, but I'd gladly suffocate if it means I get to keep doing this. To keep falling into this incredible high.

But then Malice breaks away, panting hard.

He opens up a small space between our bodies, and his eyes glitter as he looks down at me. He holds himself stiff, as if it's taking all of his self-control to keep that distance between us and not lunge back in for more.

His eyes flash dangerously, and there's a twisted look on his face, half anger and half lust. His hands clench into fists, and I hear the knuckles crack, a testament to how hard he's holding himself back.

"Run," he grits out, his voice sounding almost wrecked. "Now. Before I…"

He trails off, and when he looks at me again, there's something in his eyes. Something feral edged with vulnerability, like he's trying to protect me from himself.

Some part of me doesn't want to go. Some part of me wants to stay and find out just what he would do to me if I let him.

But a bigger part is clamoring that I've already gotten too close to the towering flames, and that I should get away now before I'm burned alive. That thought makes my self-preservation instinct kick in, and I nod shakily, reaching behind me for the door handle.

More light spills into the room when I open the door, and I catch a glimpse of Malice's face, backlit by the lamp and half in shadow. It makes him look almost monstrous, but there's something alluringly beautiful about the darkness in his eyes. Something that still calls to me.

But I don't give in. I slip away from him and out of the garage, darting into the living room and then up the stairs.

I practically jog down the hallway on the second floor, then duck into the bathroom and close the door, staring at my flushed face in the mirror. I barely recognize myself with my tangled hair and kiss bruised lips.

I've never looked like this. I've never *felt* like this.

It's like I'm falling, careening down the side of a cliff. Ever since these men crashed into my life, it's like I've been falling down the rabbit hole, and now I've been literally plucked out of my old life. The life I was trying to make for myself.

It terrifies me how far away that old version of myself feels already, like it's not even *me* anymore.

My impulse is to try to catch myself, to do something to stop the fall. I've spent so much of my life just trying to fit in and be 'good,' whatever that even means anymore.

But maybe Ransom was right.

Maybe I’m not as good as I thought I was.

I stand there for a long time, gripping the sides of the sink and dragging in deep breaths. Finally, I splash some cold water on my face and dry off, then step hesitantly back out into the hall and head back to Ransom’s room.

It’s late by now, and he’s in bed already, scrolling on his phone with the bottle of his favorite whiskey sitting on the nightstand beside him. For some reason, the sight of him settles my nerves a little.

He looks up, his eyes tracking over my face as he reads my expression. Then he throws the covers back on the bed and motions for me to join him.

“Come on, pretty girl. Let’s get some sleep.”

I crawl into bed with him, and he turns off the beside lamp, pulling me into his arms once we’re both settled.

Just this once, I go willingly, allowing this man who should frighten me to comfort me instead.

WILLOW

THE BED IS soft and warm, and Ransom is there, a hard line of heat at my back. Something tickles at the back of my neck, and I open my eyes and realize it's his mouth.

He's pressing kisses to my neck, open mouthed and searing, and then he starts traveling, dropping those kisses from my neck to my shoulders as well. Even the places where I can't feel as well because of the scars seem to burn under his mouth, and he never pulls away. Never seems to be disgusted by the feeling of them.

Every kiss adds to the heat building inside me, and a small sound of pleasure spills from my lips.

My eyes flutter closed again, and I lean into it, unable to hold back how good it feels.

Then, all of a sudden, Ransom rolls me onto my stomach, pressing me into the mattress and the pillows. His large body covers mine, pinning me down. Fear surges through me, because he's so much bigger than me and he's not letting me up, but arousal is right on the heels of that fear, for the same reasons.

"Are you wet for me, bad girl?" he murmurs.

He reaches down between my legs and finds my pussy with ease. I'm already soaked, and there's a burning need starting to grow deep inside me, sparking even hotter when I feel the touch of those calloused fingers against my clit and then lower, right at my entrance.

He presses one finger into me, and I gasp sharply, bucking a little bit under him. It's not even to try to get away at this point, but just because everything feels so good that I can't stay still. When he adds another finger,

my body stretches to accommodate them, and even that pressure against my walls makes my head hazy with pleasure.

Slowly, he fucks me with two fingers, not ramming them into me but taking his time, loosening me up. I writhe beneath him, my nerve endings sparking in response each time he drags his fingers out.

I can hear how wet I am from the noises his fingers make as they thrust in and out of me, and all of it leaves me breathless. The heat keeps climbing, and I spread my legs wider, silently begging for more.

"There you go," Ransom murmurs, approval resonating in his deep voice. "So good."

My orgasm is building, and I'm so close to the edge, grinding my hips down to press my clit against the mattress, wanting more. But before I come, the weight at my back disappears, and Ransom flips me over again. He tears off what's left of my clothes, his hands moving with a speed I've never seen before.

Then he's gripping my thighs, spreading my legs roughly.

When I look up, I realize we're not alone in the room.

Malice and Victor are there, watching. Malice's eyes churn like smoke, and he doesn't look away for a second. Even Victor, usually so impassive and cool, has heat in his expression, as if he's entranced by what he sees.

But it's a shock to see them, and I wriggle against Ransom's grasp, opening my mouth on a sharp gasp.

This is wrong.

They can't all be here.

They shouldn't be watching this.

But I don't tell them to go. For some reason, I can't get my mouth to form the words.

"Don't hide from us," Ransom murmurs, dropping his head to mouth at my neck. "You don't ever get to hide from us. We see all of you, angel. We know you. You're ours."

He's right on top of me now, his body between my legs, his hands braced on either side of my head.

I can feel the hardness of his cock, thick and bare, right at my entrance, and he punctuates that promise by driving inside me hard and fast.

My back arches when he slams into me, and my moan feels like it's almost ripped out of me. My whole body feels like it's being burned alive, but it feels… good.

It feels so fucking good.

Malice and Victor are still there, still watching, and they can see everything as Ransom fucks me. Their eyes are hungry, and they look the way I feel.

Desperate for more.

I shiver and shake under Ransom, each thrust sending me closer and closer to my climax. I can feel it, threatening to drag me under, and I don't fight it. I give in to the tide of pleasure that's growing, moaning Ransom's name, clutching at him as he fucks me harder, his body slamming into mine.

My orgasm is right there, so close I can taste it, and—

I jerk awake, breathing hard.

My heart is pounding, and the same heat I was dreaming about pulses through my entire body. It burns between my legs especially, making my clit throb, and I realize with a rush of embarrassment that I'm on the verge of coming.

I squeeze my eyes closed, trying to get my thoughts together and get ahold of myself. I've had sex dreams before, but never any that intense. And never about a man—or rather, *men*—that I know.

I'm still so turned on from it, as if every atom in my body is alive and charged with need. My pussy clenches over and over, echoing the almost frantic beating of my heart, and I take deep breaths, trying to shake it off. But memories of the dream cling to my mind like burrs, flashes of images and sensations making it impossible to tame the arousal flooding my limbs.

At this point, it wouldn't take much to push myself that last bit over the edge, and I slowly start to slide one hand down under the covers, reaching for the ache between my legs.

I'm desperate to relieve some of this tension, to get it out of my system, but before I can touch myself, Ransom's sleep heavy voice rumbles from behind me.

"Someone's being naughty."

I freeze, my eyes flaring wide. *Oh shit.*

I'm suddenly more aware than ever that he's right behind me, his body pressed up against mine. I can feel the heat from his muscled frame blazing against my back, and his breath ghosts over my neck as he scoots even closer.

"What were you dreaming about?" Ransom murmurs, his nose dipping into the hollow between my neck and shoulder.

“I…”

My cheeks flame, and the words stick in my throat. I have no idea how to say, *I was dreaming about you fucking me while your brothers watched*. That’s just… weird. Or it should be. But then I remember how Vic and I watched Malice fuck that girl, and it didn’t seem to faze him at all. So maybe they really are that close.

My head is spinning with thoughts, going around and around in circles. Behind me, Ransom chuckles, clearly not bothered that I haven’t answered him yet.

“It’s kind of cute that you’re feeling all shy about it now,” he says. “It must have been some dream. Was it about me?”

I lick my lips, unable to stop myself from nodding.

“Ah. Now we’re getting somewhere,” he teases. “Was it *just* about me?”

For a split second, I think about lying and saying it was. Somehow, that feels less terrifying than admitting the truth, but before I can stop it, my honest reply slips out.

“No. Not just you.”

Ransom makes a noise in his throat. “Hmm, I see. Malice was there, I’m guessing. There’s all that tension between you two, even though he tries to deny it.”

In my head, I can hear Ransom’s words from last night, telling Malice to just admit that he wants me. It makes my heart pound even harder, real-life memories of the kiss we shared mixing with memories from the dream. That does nothing to cool down the arousal that’s still curling in my belly, and my thighs clench.

“Was Vic there too?” Ransom asks curiously, and I flush deeply as I nod again.

There’s a moment where I wonder if he’s going to be upset that I was dreaming about his brothers too, but then he groans, sounding almost tortured.

“Fuck, pretty girl. You’re making it hard as hell to keep my hands to myself.”

My stomach flips over at that, and when I speak, my voice comes out soft and a little unsure. But I want to know.

“Why *are* you keeping your hands to yourself?” I ask. “Why are any of you keeping your hands off me? You could take what you wanted from me at any time. We all know that.”

I snort, the sound tinged with bitterness.

“What do you mean by that?” There’s a frown in his voice.

“I mean, apparently I’m some kind of trophy at this point. The only men who have ever wanted me just wanted me for my stupid fucking hymen. Nikolai, Colin, Carl. All of them just wanted my virginity, and they were perfectly happy to take it by force if they had to. Carl was only willing to keep my secret if I gave him sex in exchange.”

“Okay.” Ransom’s tone turns hard. “I know you aren’t comparing me to your ex-boss, of all fucking people. That’s an insult. That man was human scum.”

I open my mouth to tell him that wasn’t what I meant, but he keeps talking.

“That’s not how I roll, pretty girl. I’ve never taken a woman by force, and I never will.” His voice changes, turning low and teasing, the sound of it practically snaking up my spine and making me shiver as he adds, “I wouldn’t fuck you unless you wanted it. But I bet I could have you begging for me in minutes.”

I roll over a little in the bed, my heart beating so hard it feels like it’s going to break through my rib cage and flop out onto the mattress. I can’t deny that I’m afraid. I’m scared of what he’s saying, but the promise in his voice calls to me too. He means what he says, and the certainty that he could make me beg for him sends a shiver of desire through me that’s too strong to ignore.

Ransom can see my face now, and his eyes search mine hungrily. He must like what he finds in their depths, because he smiles at me, one corner of his lips lifting crookedly.

“Close your eyes,” he murmurs, and his voice almost seems to caress me when he says it.

My brows draw together, my heart lurching with nerves. “But you said __”

He chuckles. “I’m not gonna fuck you, angel. I’m just gonna help you out. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Then close your eyes.”

Exhaling a soft breath, I let my eyelids fall closed. Ransom puts a gentle hand on my shoulder, rolling me onto my back.

“Think about what you were dreaming of,” he whispers.

I do what he says, and it's not hard. All those images are still right there, close to the surface.

I think about the rough pads of Ransom's fingers and how they found my most sensitive places so easily. As if my dream is manifesting itself in real life, a hand snakes down into my sleep pants, and I hiss out a breath at the visceral sensation.

At first, he just rubs me through my panties, dragging the cotton against the hard nub of my clit. It feels good, but it's not enough to come even close to sating the need inside me. If anything, it just makes the fire burn hotter, and I squirm against him, breathing hard.

"Shh," Ransom murmurs, his voice a little rougher than it was before. "Keep thinking about it. Think about what I was doing to you. I'm definitely thinking about all the things I could do to you right now."

I bite down hard on my lip, my legs spreading a bit wider as if that will tempt him into giving me what I want. But he's clearly got more self-control than I do. He keeps rubbing me through my panties, working me up slowly and deliberately until the need inside me hits a kind of desperation that makes me whine and writhe on the bed.

Ransom chuckles, but he finally gives in. His fingers work their way into my panties, and the first touch of his fingertips on my clit makes me choke out a strangled noise.

It feels just like it did in my dream, but a thousand times more intense because it's not my mind manifesting it. His fingers are rough, but they seem to know just where to touch me. They stroke me slowly, rubbing tight circles around my clit, and I moan, arching up off the bed a little.

"So sensitive," he breathes. "I like that about you. I like that you feel everything so much."

"Please," I gasp out. "Ransom, please."

He groans, working his fingers a little faster. "That's not fair, angel. You say my name like that, and it makes me want to give you everything. Anything you want."

As he speaks, Ransom's fingers work their way down, circling my soaking entrance. Just the feeling of him touching me there makes me cry out, and I bite my lip hard, trying to stifle some of the sounds I'm making.

Even with my eyes closed, I can *feel* his gaze on me, watching, taking it all in. And even though I know Malice and Victor aren't here, it's as if my

thinking about them too hard has summoned their dream selves to stand against the wall and watch their brother take me apart.

"Oh my god," I moan. "I'm so—Ransom, I can't—"

I can't even get out full sentences anymore, so overcome by the pleasure. It's filling me up, burning in my belly and bleeding outward, overtaking everything else.

"Are you going to come for me?" Ransom asks as his fingers find my swollen clit again.

I nod wildly, too overcome for words.

"Good." His voice is a low burn. "Then open your eyes. Open your eyes and look at me when you come."

My eyes fly open and immediately find his face. His ocean blue irises are dark with desire, and he's staring down at me intently, like he's trying to memorize me.

When I look down my body, I can see his hand shoved beneath the waistband of my pants, and the sight makes it all feel more real. Almost involuntarily, my gaze flicks to the corner of the room, just to make sure the phantom eyes I felt on me were really all in my head.

No one is there, and Ransom flicks my clit lightly, sending a burst of sensation through me and snapping my attention back to him as I fly apart. The orgasm explodes inside me, euphoria shooting through my limbs all the way to my fingers and toes.

"So fucking beautiful," Ransom breathes.

He doesn't look away for a second, drinking in the sight of me as I writhe and shake on the bed, coming undone with gasps and soft cries.

It feels so good, and he works me through it, making the pleasure seem to last longer than it ever has before when I've touched myself. I forget how to breathe for a few long moments, and my vision goes blurry around the edges until I manage to suck in a deep, sharp gasp.

When I finally go limp and flop against the bed, Ransom drags his fingers out of my pants. He licks them one by one, gazing down at me the whole time.

"Mm," he hums, a grin curving his lips. "I knew you would taste as sweet as you look. Tart like cherry pie, and silky like cream. Fucking delicious."

My cheeks go impossibly redder at that, and my heart thuds as I stare up at him, unable to look away.

As another small aftershock quakes through my body, it hits me in a rush that I was wrong before. I’m not just falling down the rabbit hole.

I’m all the way at the bottom of it, already so much deeper than I ever meant to go.

VICTOR

A FEW MORE DAYS GO BY, and Willow is still staying with us.

I've been working on incorporating her into my daily routines and habits, which is… strange. I'm not used to change, and I don't like it. I prefer when things run the way they always have, and I don't have to even think about the maintenance of them because the routine is so locked into place.

But with Willow here, I've been having to make adjustments to the things I've always done because of her.

On top of that, Ethan and his gang are taking out their anger on us by telling their allies not to bring us any stolen cars and to find another chop shop to take them to.

It's a mess, and I knew it would be, but I'm leaving the fallout of that incident for my brothers to deal with.

I'm too busy trying to track down information about the man who was questioning Carl. I'm still searching for some facial recognition match for this guy, and every day that passes without a match, my irritation grows.

I don't like when problems are hard to solve, and I especially don't like when people aren't easy to track down when I need them to be. Everything going on has just left me feeling off balance and out of sorts.

Walking through our home one afternoon, I pass by Ransom and Willow in the garage. He's been teaching her stuff about cars, and she seems interested in it. More interested than I would have expected for someone like her, and I have to wonder if it's the cars she likes or just being around Ransom.

Seeing them like this doesn’t do anything to really answer the question one way or another. The two of them talk easily, their heads bent over a car with the hood pulled up, their shoulders touching. Ransom points to something under the hood, launching into an explanation, and Willow seems hungry for the information, nodding and asking a follow up question that makes my brother grin. He nudges her shoulder with his and then takes her hand, guiding it to the part of the car in question.

Willow doesn’t flinch away or put distance between them. She leans in closer, nodding seriously and seeming completely at ease. There’s something comfortable and intimate about it, both of them taking pleasure in each other’s company, talking like old friends.

What is that like?

I’ve never been good with people, and I guard my personal space intensely. It’s different with my brothers, since I feel comfortable with them and they know me well enough to read my moods. But I don’t spend time with outsiders, and I’ve never wanted to before.

But now, I can’t get that thought out of my head. *What would it be like?*

Willow and I barely talk to each other, so of course she doesn’t have the kind of easy conversation with me that she has with Ransom. But that doesn’t stop me from being fascinated by her, my thoughts always drawn to her.

It was bad before, when I was just watching her through the cameras in her apartment. Now she’s *here*, almost larger than life, taking up space in our home and in my head. She doesn’t come into my room, but I know she’s in the warehouse somewhere at all times. Using our bathroom, leaving strands of soft blonde hair in the drain. Sitting in the living room, watching her home improvement shows on our TV. Spending time with Ransom in the garage, learning about the work we do, integrating herself into our lives in a way that never should have been allowed to happen in the first place.

But it’s too late now.

Throwing her out would put her and us in danger from whoever is looking for information about what happened at that brothel. There’s no getting rid of her, so the only thing I can do is try to regulate my own reactions to her.

I close my eyes for a second, counting out my breaths, my fingers tapping against my thighs.

Inhale, one, two, three, four. Hold, one, two, three, four. Exhale, one, two, three, four.

And then again.

And once more for good measure.

I tap out each count on my thigh, feeling it physically, reassuring myself as I wrestle my emotions back under control.

Once my head is more clear, I take my laptop into the kitchen so I can keep working while I eat lunch. Whenever I feel uncomfortable, I always go back to my computers. They're easy to understand, they do what I tell them to do, and they always follow logic.

While I eat, I bring up the picture of the unknown man again, cross referencing it with databases from the US and a few other countries too, trying to draw any kind of connection between this face and who it could belong to.

I keep my food away from my computer, not wanting to get crumbs on the keyboard, and focus on the screen. One of my scans finishes running, and I let out a frustrated noise when it comes up with nothing.

"Dammit."

Willow walks into the kitchen, glancing my way as she hears me curse under my breath. None of that comfortable camaraderie she shows with Ransom is present when she's around me, and there's none of that combative fire that comes out around Malice either.

But there is… something.

She seems as aware of me as I am of her. When I dart furtive glances in her direction, I often find her already looking at me, as if she likes to study me when I'm not watching.

I can relate to that feeling.

As I focus on getting a new scan set up on my computer, she opens and closes a few cabinets, probably searching for a snack.

"Do you have any peanut butter?" she asks after a moment, her voice soft.

"Top shelf. On the left," I answer, not looking up. Since I keep the kitchen organized, I know exactly where everything is.

"Oh. I saw that, but—" She cuts herself off, and I look up in time to see her make a face. "It's crunchy."

Malice and Ransom are both fans of crunchy peanut butter, which I honestly don't understand. Regular butter doesn't come in a crunchy

variety, so why should peanut butter? Butter is supposed to be smooth.

From the look on her face, Willow feels the same.

“Not a fan?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “No. I mean, it’s fine, I just don’t like crunchy bits in my sandwich.”

My lips twitch into an almost smile at that. “Exactly. Peanut butter should be smooth. If I wanted something crunchy, I would eat a whole peanut.”

She laughs, and I feel a strange flush of pride at having been the one to elicit that sound from her, even if it was about something as mundane as peanut butter.

“I have a secret stash of the creamy kind,” I tell her. “If you want some.”

“Really?” Her elfin face lights up. “Thanks.”

I get up and close the cabinet she was looking in before going to a smaller one off to the side. It’s where I keep all the things that my brothers aren’t allowed to touch, organized and tidy. Malice and Ransom will scoop peanut butter or anything else out of jars with no regard for whether the knife has already touched something else. I’ve even come downstairs a few times to find Ransom eating it right out of the jar on a spoon.

That thought makes me shudder. When I open my personal jar, the top of the peanut butter is as smooth and neat as it was when I bought it.

“I’ll spread it for you,” I tell her.

“Okay.”

I feel more like a freak than I have in a long time, admitting out loud that I need to be the one to do it, but Willow doesn’t seem to judge me. She just brings the bread and a plate over, and I set about making her a sandwich, scraping the knife over the top of the peanut butter just so.

“I feel like a kid again, watching you do that,” she says, resting her elbows on the counter nearby as she watches me. “Having someone else make me a pb&j.” Then she grimaces. “Well, I guess that’s not really true. My mom never made me peanut butter and jelly sandwiches when I was little. She never made me lunch at all. Or even breakfast. If I wanted something, I had to learn how to make it for myself.”

“I’ve seen how you eat,” I tell her flatly. “I guess it makes sense.”

She huffs, rolling her eyes. “I was sick that day you came over, okay? It’s not like I had the energy to make something healthy. I don’t *always* eat

cup-o-noodles."

I think about pointing out that I've been watching her and taking note of what she eats since the night we met her, through the cameras I put in her apartment, but I keep that thought to myself.

"And it's not like anyone taught me how to cook anyway," she adds. "My mom can barely boil water on a good day."

I've done extensive research on Willow, so I know she's adopted, although I was never able to track down information about her earlier origins. All I know is that she entered the foster care system when she was twenty months old, and that a woman named Misty Hayes adopted her not long after that.

"Get me the jelly," I tell her. "Top shelf of that cabinet. And another knife." She does what I ask, and when she comes back and hands them to me, I glance over at her, my curiosity spilling over. "Why do you call your adoptive mother 'mom'?"

Willow blinks at me, her eyebrows darting up toward her hairline. Then she shrugs. "I ended up in the system when I was really little. My parents died, and the only one willing to take me in was Misty. She's the only mother I've ever known, so that has to count for something, right? If I didn't have her, I'd just be… alone in the world."

Her voice sounds wistful and a little sad, and I can't help but think of my father.

I think of him standing over me, a hammer in his hand and that smug fucking look on his face. I think of the way he kept saying it would make me stronger, make me better, as he brought the hammer down and broke each of my fingers in turn. He always said that. Said that it was for my own good, that he was molding me into someone who would be unbreakable one day. Each break he inflicted back then, each time he put me through something terrible… it was supposed to make it that much harder for anything else to break me in the future.

My hands ache, as if remembering the pain has called it back from so long ago, and I set down the knife carefully, then tap my fingers one by one on the counter.

"Sometimes it's better to be alone," I tell her. "When you're alone, no one can hurt you."

I can feel her watching me, feel the curiosity in her gaze. Maybe she's hoping I'll explain what I mean by that, but I can't. Talking about what my

father did to me feels like re-opening old wounds with a razor blade, so I take a step away from Willow, screwing the lid back on the peanut butter and gesturing to the sandwich.

“There you go. It’s done.”

Turning away from her, I put away the peanut butter and jelly and quickly wash the two knives I used. After returning them to the drawer, I pluck my laptop off the counter and escape back to the sanctuary of my room.

But my thoughts are still on Willow as I go upstairs. She’s *everything* that’s on my mind, and I replay our interaction in my head as if I’m going through camera footage—focusing on every expression on her face, wishing I could zoom in to get even more detail.

She makes me want things I’ve never allowed myself to have, never even thought about having before. When I’m around her, I wonder what it would feel like to touch her hair, to feel the softness of it, like spun gold between my fingers. To touch her face, to kiss her. To have her lean into me with careless touches and easy affection the way she does with Ransom.

It seems impossible, unobtainable. Laughable, even. But still, I want it.

Setting my laptop on my bed, I take a seat at my bank of monitors, eager to lose myself in the one thing that always soothes me. I’m about to get back to work running facial recognition scans, but then a soft ping alerts me to an incoming encrypted message.

Dammit. This is bad timing.

It’s from X, and with everything else we’ve got going on, we’ll be stretching ourselves thin trying to complete a job for him too. But telling him we’re too busy isn’t an option, so I get to work decrypting the message to find out what he wants.

It takes several minutes, and by the time I’m done, the unsettled feeling from earlier has vanished—at least until I start to read the message.

My shoulders tense as my gaze tracks over the words on the screen, my brows pinching together.

What the fuck?

MALICE

EVEN WITH ALL THE shit going on with whoever is poking into Nikolai's death, we still have business to do. Since the deal with the Donovan gang fell through, we've had to work double-time to make sure we don't lose the footing we've managed to claw out for ourselves in our particular niche of the criminal underworld of Detroit.

I left Ransom hanging with Willow in the garage when I headed out a while ago to take some parts from the last car we chopped to a buyer we work with sometimes.

Thankfully, he doesn't have a stick up his ass about the lies Ethan is spreading, so he's still happy to do business with us. I sell the parts and take the cash, stuffing it into my back pocket. But as I start to walk back toward my car, I half bump into someone hanging around outside.

"Hey, watch where you're—" The guy's voice breaks off as he turns to look at me, and I realize I know him.

"Darius." I frown.

"Ho-ly shit." The broad-shouldered man chuckles. "You're Alexander Voronin's boy, aren't you? Malice, right? It's been a while."

Just hearing our dad's name is enough to make me bristle, but I bite back the urge to tell him to go fuck himself. Darius Ledger was a friend of our dad's—as much as that asshole *had* friends, I guess. They ran together when our father was trying to build up his criminal empire, and I've met the guy a couple of times because of that.

Darius narrows his eyes, gazing down the street as if he's recalling a memory.

“Goddamn. I remember the way your dad used to talk about you boys. How he was gonna raise you up to help him run his empire. You were gonna be the best of the best, all deadly and skilled.” He lets out a low whistle, shifting his focus back to me. “Too bad you three used those skills to take him out instead.”

My hands curl into fists at my side.

It’s not like it’s some big secret that I was convicted for the murder of our father, but the way Darius is looking at me so smugly sends my hackles up. I don’t like being taunted, especially not by some smug-ass fucker who used to run in the same circles as our piece of shit dad.

“As I recall, you snatched up some of his old business contacts as soon as he was dead, so I guess you should be thanking me for opening up that opportunity,” I say coolly.

Darius ducks his head in acknowledgement of my words, chuckling as he runs a hand over his ash brown hair. “I guess I should.” He clicks his tongue against his teeth, shoving his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket. “Well, I’m glad to see you’re back on the outside now. Maybe we’ll get a chance to do business one day.”

There’s no way in hell my brothers and I will ever do business with this fucker. We work with a lot of lowlifes and criminals, but we draw the line at trash like Darius.

“Yeah, maybe,” I grunt, sidestepping him to continue down the street. He seems like he’d be happy to reminisce about the past all motherfucking day, but I don’t have the time or patience for that shit.

He doesn’t stop me, giving me a nod as he watches me go. I’m about halfway back to my car when my phone rings, so I slide it out of my pocket, check the screen, and answer it.

“Vic. What’s up?”

“Get home. Now,” my twin says, sounding tense as hell. “We need to talk.”

I can tell immediately that something’s up. Darius and his bullshit are forgotten, and I turn away, heading back to my car, forgetting how pissed off I was just a second ago as I focus on the call.

“What’s going on?” I demand.

“We’ll talk about it when you get here.”

“That’s not a lot to fucking go on, Vic.”

My twin’s voice is hard when he answers. “We got a new job from X.”

I frown at the mention of our mysterious benefactor. I fucking hate this arrangement we've gotten locked into, and I hate the way X basically owns us now. He treats us like fucking errand boys, sending us to do whatever dirty work he wants, knowing we can't say no.

And whatever he wants now? It clearly has Vic's hackles up.

"I'm on my way," I say shortly and then end the call, sliding into my car and peeling out.

As much as I hate X and the bullshit he puts us through, I know working for him is probably better than the alternative. Prison was a fucking nightmare.

I grip the wheel so tightly the leather underneath my fingers creaks in protest. None of it was pretty. None of it was anything I ever want to go through again.

I'm not going back there. No matter what I have to do to stay out.

When I get back to our place, I let myself in, slamming the door behind me. Willow is in the living room, and she looks up when I enter from the hallway, but I don't slow my strides as I pass through the room and head for the stairs. Still, even though I barely even glance at her as I walk by, it's like every part of my body is wired to be aware of her. I can feel her eyes on my back, heavy like a touch, even though she hasn't moved from the couch.

Ransom is already in Victor's room when I get up there, and as I step inside, I find my brothers with their heads together, reading the message that Vic has up on his computer screen.

They glance my way in unison, and Ransom looks as tense as Victor sounded on the phone.

"What the fuck is going on?" I demand.

"Shut the door," Vic says.

I do and then come closer, folding my arms.

The message on the screen is from X, and it starts the same way all the messages we get from him do.

"I've got a new job for you, blah blah, fucking blah," I mutter under my breath.

But then my eyes scan down more, and I stare in shock at the picture of Willow that sits beneath the text. It's definitely her, no mistaking it…

And the instructions say that X wants us to deliver her to him.

I quickly scan the rest of the message, trying to block out the sound of blood rushing in my ears as my pulse speeds up. This is the first time one of

X’s little tasks has hit so close to home. Usually, it’s shit we don’t know anything about and don’t want to know about. Random acts of arson, theft, and other dirty work like that.

Now he’s asking for someone we know.

Someone in our fucking *home*.

Anger fills me, bitter and raw. I curl my fingers into fists, glaring at the screen until the image of Willow’s face blurs a bit. Everything in me is screaming no.

No, we won’t do it.

We can’t do it.

Those protective feelings that I’ve been trying to ignore claw up my throat, demanding that we keep her safe. Whatever X wants her for, it can’t be anything good. It can’t be anything she’ll walk away from in one piece or with her sanity intact, and Willow doesn’t deserve to be dragged into this mess.

Not any deeper than she already is, anyway. She’s already at the fucking center of our attempt to cover up what happened at the brothel.

But on the heels of that thought, I remember the vow I made to myself in the car on the way back home.

I can’t go back to prison. I almost fucking died at the hands of a gang that targeted me in there. I had to close down all my empathy and emotion and harden myself until I was barely human just to survive.

Getting soft is a weakness, and this girl makes me soft. How many times have I held a gun to her head, seen the chance to end this all, and not taken it?

Ransom was right when he said that we’re not going to kill her. He was right when he said that I won’t do it. That I *can’t* do it.

And that makes her a weakness. For me, especially.

The silence in Vic’s room is thick, all of us locked in our thoughts for an interminable moment. Then Ransom breaks the stillness, saying what we’re all thinking.

“What the actual fuck?”

Vic sighs, his long fingers tapping on his leg. “My thoughts exactly. We’ve never had a job this… personal before.”

“What the hell does this mean?” I ask, glaring at the screen. “What does he want her for?”

“And beyond that,” Vic murmurs, “what does it mean X knows? Does he know she’s living with us, or is this a random job?”

“No fucking way,” I snarl. “There’s no way this is random. Out of all the girls X could have asked for, why her? He has to know she’s living with us.”

“It’d be a hell of a coincidence otherwise,” Ransom says, then grimaces. “Could this have something to do with Nikolai?”

Vic shakes his head. “It’s very unlikely. We’ve been dealing with X since before we even knew who Nikolai was, and if X knows about what we did and wanted to use it against us, he would have done it already.”

“Yeah, good point. But that just leads back to Malice’s question: what does X want her for?”

Vic’s fingers do their *tap, tap, tap* thing against his legs, and I can tell he’s trying to get his thoughts—and feelings—in order.

“It could be a test,” he says after a moment. “He knows we have her, and he wants to see how deep our loyalty goes. Maybe he doesn’t know the reason why she’s been staying with us, but he clearly assumes that she matters, and he’s trying to see how far we’ll go when he tells us to.”

I scowl at the prospect of that because it makes sense. And I hate it. “We already jump when he says jump. Why the fuck does he need to test us?” I demand.

“Most likely, it serves two purposes,” my twin murmurs thoughtfully. “One, it lets him see just how far we’re really willing to go, and two…”

“What?”

“He probably *does* actually want Willow. She has a certain value.”

My brother doesn’t spell it out, but we all know what he means by that. In our world, the world where bad shit happens to good people, pretty young girls go missing all the time. Especially if they’re untouched. People like Nikolai, disgusting assholes with particular fetishes, pay good money for virgins, so that they can get off on being the ones who pop their cherries and break them.

We’re all thinking it, but Ransom is the one to say it, a look of disgust on his face.

“He wants to sell her. She’s *product*.”

Hearing it out loud makes my jaw clench. It happens all the time in this city, but this is the first time it’s happening to someone I know. Someone I…

I shake my head, caught up in a hurricane of emotions.

Getting rid of Willow, handing her over to X like he's asking—*demanding*—would benefit us in the end. She'd be out of our lives the way I keep saying I want her to be, and not able to rat us out to anyone, including whoever the fuck is poking around about Nikolai's death.

That would be that. We wouldn't have to keep her under our watch anymore, and we could get her out of our lives and get back to the shit we're supposed to be doing.

On top of that, defying X isn't really an option. He has the power to ruin our lives or send me back to prison, and I'm pretty sure he won't give a shit about our track record of jobs done well if we say no to him now.

So the choice should be fucking easy.

Maybe a few weeks ago, it would have been.

But now it's fucking *not*.

Now I've seen too much of this damned girl. I've seen her smile and laugh, seen her defiant and scared. I've seen her vulnerable and hurting, clinging to me like a fucking lifeline. The thought of handing her over to be broken and used by some scumbag lowlife who won't give a shit about her other than what's between her legs pisses me off.

A voice in the back of my head whispers "*soft,*" and it sounds like everyone who's ever treated me like shit in my life, all rolled into one.

But that doesn't change the way I feel.

"So what the fuck are we going to do?" Ransom asks, saying what we're all thinking again.

Only this time, no one has an answer. Vic shakes his head, uncharacteristically at a loss, and I just keep scowling at the computer screen, wishing the message would go away if I glare at it hard enough.

It's pretty fucking telling that none of us are leaping at the idea of handing Willow over to X. With every other job we've ever gotten from him, we've gritted our teeth and done it no matter what it was, because it's not like we've ever had a choice.

But this? None of us want to do this. Not even Vic seems to be able to rationalize a way to make handing her over easier.

So we're left with nothing. No answer. No plan. No fucking idea what to do.

"We have some time," Victor says after a while. "We can… try to come up with something."

Fuck knows what we'll come up with, but it's not like we have another option right now.

I nod tightly, on edge and wound up. My head is a mess, and I keep bouncing back and forth between being pissed the fuck off and so goddamned tired.

There are times when I think maybe it would've been better if I'd died in prison. Then X never would've pulled strings to get me out, and my brothers could've gone on with their lives and built something for themselves in this city without having to sign their goddamn souls away to someone they've never even met. It's not a thought I've ever shared with my brothers, because I know it would piss them off to hear me say that.

They consider the debt we owe X to be worth it, but still… sometimes I wish I could've saved them from getting trapped in this fucking web, even if I'd had to die to do it.

Our little meeting breaks up, and I stalk out of Vic's room, needing to blow off some steam. I consider taking a drive, but getting behind the wheel right now is probably a bad idea. So instead, I go to the work room and pull out my tattoo gun, yanking off my shirt and sitting down on one of the benches to add to the tattoo I've been working on, on my right arm.

It's a skill I picked up in prison, something to pass the time and keep me from going insane, and it helps me clear my head now. Something about the focus I need to keep the lines straight and the gun steady helps center me in a way few other things can—besides a good fuck, and I haven't had one of those in way longer than normal.

I've been adding to this piece on my arm for a while, and it doesn't really have a theme. Just random images, dark lines and chaotic swirls and sharp edges for when I feel too out of control. I take deep breaths, the buzzing of the machine and the bite of the needle keeping me grounded in the moment. I watch as the black ink sinks into my skin, leaving harsh, dark lines as I go.

Every so often, I pause to wipe away the excess ink, checking the new additions against the old shit to make sure it's what I want.

I go at it for a while in silence, getting lost in the sound of the buzz and the biting pain of the needle. Then footsteps catch my attention, and when I look up, Willow is standing in my doorway.

She just stands there, watching me with her large brown eyes, and I go back to my tattooing, trying to ignore her. But it's impossible, the way it

always is. Just by fucking *existing* nearby, she's pushed herself to the forefront of my goddamned brain, and the tension in the room gets thicker by the second.

She tilts her head, her focus sweeping over my skin to look at the other tattoos I have. My shirt is off, so there are a bunch on display, and I can almost feel her gaze like a physical touch.

I'm almost at the point of telling her to either say something or get the fuck out when she finally speaks up.

"Who's Diana?" she asks quietly.

Of all the fucking questions.

The name is tattooed on my arm, and there's a hint of something that sounds almost like jealousy in her voice, like she thinks it's the name of a lover or something. I wait for the irritation to flood me at the idea of her thinking she gets any say in whose name I ink on my body, but instead, there's a little spike of pleasure.

She wants to have some claim over me, however unconsciously, and a part of me likes that.

"Diana was our mom," I finally grunt, answering her question.

"Oh." Her voice is soft, and when I glance up at her, she's chewing her bottom lip. "Vic and Ransom have told me a little about her. She sounds like she was an amazing person. Ransom said she was a saint."

I grit my teeth, irritated at the way Willow makes me feel. I usually have better control than this, but something about this woman talking to me about our mother—another weak spot in my heart—sends my emotions rising faster than I can shove them back down.

"She was," I say, my voice rough. "She was the sweetest woman in the whole goddamned world. And look where that got her."

Willow's brow furrows. She takes a step deeper into the room, her hand still resting on the door frame. "What do you mean?"

"I mean this world takes people who are sweet and good, and it chews them up and spits them out. It takes all the kindness in their hearts and uses it up, giving them nothing but pain to show for it."

"I don't think that's true," Willow whispers. "Or at least, it doesn't have to be."

I switch the tattoo gun off, setting it aside. My hand is usually incredibly steady, even when I'm tattooing myself, but if I keep going right now, I know I'll end up with shitty lines.

“Oh yeah?” I fix Willow with a challenging glare. “Our mother was the best person I’ve ever known, and she ended up with a man who was cruel and abusive. He could have just chilled the fuck out and let her love him. We could have been a real family, but no. He had all these dreams of running his own crime syndicate. Becoming some big name in the criminal underworld. And that made him lose his fucking mind. He treated her like shit. He treated us like shit. He tortured the fuck out of Victor, trying to make him into a perfect little soldier that he could send out to do his fucking dirty work.”

Willow sucks in a sharp breath, one hand coming up to cover her mouth. “Oh my god. I didn’t know…”

She trails off, looking horrified. I should probably stop talking, but I don’t. I *can’t*. I see the same goodness in Willow that I saw in my mother, and part of me wants to terrify her with my words. To warn her. To make her understand how easily the world could break her, despite her strong spirit.

“Dad wanted Vic to be his second in command, so he started ‘training him’ when he was five. Mom tried to get him to see reason. To understand what he was doing was wrong. She thought if she could just get through to him, then maybe he’d change.” I snort, curling my fingers into fists. “Didn’t fucking work. He’d get pissed at her for getting in the way, for not knowing her place.”

That last word hurls its way out of my mouth, full of bitterness and resentment. Willow hears it all, and to my surprise, she doesn’t flinch away from it. Not from my tone or the grim story I’m telling her.

“Why did she stay with him?” she murmurs.

I shake my head, my teeth grinding together. “Because she believed in people. And because she had us. She wanted to protect us from his bullshit, even when he was slapping her around. When we were all little, she’d lie to us and say she fell down at work or there was a patient who was hard to sedate and it was all an accident. But we knew it was him who was hurting her. Then one day, he left.”

“Where did he go?”

“Fuck if I know. He was gone for a while, off building his empire. Trying to make it big in the underworld. He had all these shitty friends who hyped him up and worked with him, but it wasn’t enough. He wasn’t good enough to make it. He was a fucking failure of a human being, so he failed

at that the same way he failed at being a decent father and husband. And he came crawling back with his tail between his legs when Vic and I were fifteen. Everything was worse after that."

It was a long time ago now, but I can still remember the day he came back. I remember that look on his face. He seemed older than he had when he'd left, like failure had added years to him. He had scars in new places, and a haunted look in his eyes. Everything fucking pissed him off.

We walked too loud. We breathed too loud. We weren't good enough.

Not that we ever had been.

"He blamed us for all of it," I bite out. "If we'd supported him more, if we'd been better, if we weren't so fucking useless, then he would've made it. He blamed Mom the most for 'coddling us.' For keeping him from shaping us the way he wanted to. So she got the worst of it. And she kept trying to put herself between him and us, which just made it even worse on top of what she was already getting from him."

I swallow, my jaw working. None of these memories have faded with time. Every one of them is bright and vivid, so viscerally clear in my mind that they might've only happened yesterday.

"But even with all that, even with all the bullshit she was getting from someone who was supposed to love her, she still went and did her job at the hospital. She still had it in her to care about people. She didn't turn her back on anyone. And then one day, we couldn't watch her suffer anymore."

"So you…"

Willow looks like she can't bring herself to say the words, and I look up at her, my chest aching with anger and half buried grief.

"We fucking killed him," I say bluntly. "He deserved it. The only thing I regret about it is not doing it sooner. We made sure he couldn't hurt anyone ever again."

Not that it undid any of the damage he'd already done. Vic's still fucked up from all of it, and our mom…

I blow out a breath through my nose, tearing my gaze away from the look of sadness on Willow's face. "And then, after all that, after she survived our dad and all his shit… Nikolai killed her. And there wasn't a goddamned thing I could do to protect her, because I was locked up for murdering our father. All her sweetness didn't fucking protect her when it mattered. When it came down to it, it was just a weakness that left her vulnerable to the harshness of the world."

My voice is hoarse when I finally stop speaking, rough and wrecked from the emotions inside me. Thinking about what happened to Mom always sets me off, and I slam my fist into the bench beneath me, feeling the jolt of the impact all the way up through my arm.

The new additions to my tattoo throb with fresh pain, and I grit my teeth, waiting for Willow to shrink away from the sight of my raw anger. It's a lot of heavy shit, and women—hell, people in general—would usually rather turn away from it than face it.

Anger, bitterness, loss, grief… they're all ugly emotions. They twist a person into something different, and most people don't want to deal with that. So I wait for Willow to give some trite condolence and then make herself scarce.

But instead, she steps closer, coming fully into the room. I watch her as she approaches, and when she stops in front of me, she reaches out and traces the tattoo on my arm, her fingers following the lines of the letters.

D-I-A-N-A.

"I'm sorry," she whispers as her fingertip trails down the line of the A, and there's nothing trite about it. Her voice is full of emotion, like she not only understands the pain of what I just told her, but wishes she could take it away. "Your mom didn't deserve that. She sounds like she was so good to you. To everyone. And she deserved someone to be as good to her. But at least she had you three. She had people who loved her."

I open my mouth to tell her that wasn't good enough in the end. We *did* love her, we loved her so fucking much—but even that wasn't enough to save her.

Willow isn't done yet, though. With the soft pads of her fingers still resting on my taut bicep, she looks up to meet my gaze.

"You didn't deserve any of that either," she says. "You deserved a dad who loved you and wanted you to be happy."

A shudder moves through me as her quiet words slam right into my chest. I feel like a wild animal barely restraining itself. Half of me wants to shove her away, to tell her I don't need her fucking sympathy and she should save it for herself. I've made it this far without it. But the other half of me craves something, and I realize as I lean into her touch that it's… her.

Everything she's offering. The sympathy, the kindness, the sweet softness. I need it more than I need air right now, and I give in to that part of myself, grabbing her and pulling her roughly into my arms.

I drag her down so she’s perched in my lap, her legs straddling mine and her knees resting on the bench. She lets out a soft yelp of surprise but doesn’t resist as I wrap my arms around her, burying my face in her hair. She smells light and floral, the way she always does, and the scent soothes something in me, even as it makes other parts of me feel even more ragged and raw.

I mutter under my breath in Russian, the words muffled by her blonde hair as I tell her that she’s too good for this. Too sweet to be trapped here with monsters. That she should never have fallen into our lives, but that it doesn’t matter now. It’s too late.

“*Yesli ty uydesh', ya naydu tebya*,” I breathe. “*Ya vyslezhu tebya i vernu tuda, gde ty dolzhna byt’*.”

What I said to the Donovan gang that night rings even more true right now. Everything under our roof is ours.

And that includes Willow.

RANSOM

It's been a shitty as fuck day, mostly due to the message we got from X outlining his latest "job" for us, and even now, I can't get it out of my head. It's late, and I'm lying in bed with Willow in my arms. She's sleeping soundly, curled up against me the way she's started to do easily every night. The separation she tried to keep between us at first is gone, and her face is soft and unbothered in her sleep.

I watch her, taking in the way she breathes, the way her lips part, the little sounds she makes as she shifts closer to me unconsciously.

She's becoming such a fixture in our lives.

I've been teaching her about cars, and the two of us spend hours in the garage together. I love the way her face lights up a little when I show her something new, and how she picks things up so quickly.

I love the way she melts against me as if she trusts me, all that distance and wariness seeming to disappear when we're close. I love having her that close during the day, the two of us bent over a car together, and I love it even more at night, when she's in my arms like this.

The rule my brothers and I agreed to is still in place, and I've been following it. I haven't fucked her. But just making her come on my hand was one of the hottest things I've ever seen.

She was dreaming about me and the others, shifting and moaning in her sleep. The way she sounded had my cock hard immediately. The sound was throaty and low, but somehow still sweet and soft, even though I have a feeling her dream was dirty as hell.

Part of me wishes I'd asked her to describe it, but a bigger part—the smarter part—knows that would have been dangerous. Hearing about it

would have just made it that much harder to keep my hands to myself.

Well… to keep my *dick* to myself, I guess. My hands were pretty involved.

Either way, it was bending the rules a little, making Willow come in my bed, even though we didn't take it any farther than that. She was so unrestrained, losing herself in it and breaking apart for me as she rode my hand. She still seemed shy, but she let herself go, and the memory of her face as she came, staring into my eyes, her soft blonde hair spread out across my pillows…

Fuck. Just thinking about it now makes my cock twitch.

It's one of those images that's going to have a permanent spot in my spank bank, I think. Maybe even the top spot, since I'm not sure I've ever seen anything hotter—unless something even better replaces it.

I grin at that thought. There's a lot we could do and still stay true to the rule of not fucking.

But then I think about X's message, and it's like a bucket of fucking ice water dumped over my head, cooling the heat in my veins instantly. My gut twists, and it's the same way I felt when I walked into Vic's room and saw Willow's face on his computer screen.

X wants her. And if we're right about what he wants her for, then that's even worse. There's so much shit we don't know. So much we're just guessing on, trying to come up with something like a plan for how to handle this.

It pisses me off just thinking about it.

I'm not like Malice, not as brutal and primed for violence at the slightest provocation, but I could fucking kill someone right now. And every time I think about Willow being sold like she's a piece of cattle or something, it just makes it worse.

Eventually, I sigh, realizing lying here isn't going to help me get to sleep. I ease Willow out of my arms and slip out of bed, heading downstairs to the living room.

Malice is already there, and I'm not really surprised to see him. There's a bottle of whiskey on the table and a glass in his hand, already mostly empty. He's shirtless, and I can see that the sprawling tattoo he's been working on for a while has gotten a new addition, so he must be as worked up about this shit as I am. Probably more, knowing Malice. He always seems to feel things in extremes.

Judging from the way he's brooding, glaring off into the distance, he's thinking about the same shit I am.

"You've got the right idea for tonight," I tell him, snagging the whiskey bottle before dropping to sit in one of the chairs across from the couch. I bring it to my lips, taking a long swallow.

"Vic hates when we drink from the bottle," Malice reminds me, but I shrug.

"Yeah, but he's not here."

He holds out a hand for the bottle, and I rise and pass it back to him, watching as he sloshes more of the dark amber liquid into his glass.

"Did you sell those parts earlier?" I ask. It seems like forever ago that Malice went out to make that sale. All of the shit with the Donovan gang and our disrupted business seems like it's very far away right now.

He nods, rubbing his hand over the stubble on his jaw. "Yeah. No issues."

"That's something, I guess."

I take the bottle back and take another long drink, feeling the whiskey burn straight down to my stomach.

We fall into silence again, drinking together without speaking. When I catch sight of Victor out of the corner of my eye, I jump, because I didn't hear him on the stairs.

He gives me a look when he catches me mid sip from the bottle, and Malice snorts dryly.

"Told you," Mal comments.

"It's fine." I gesture to Vic with the bottle. "It's alcohol. Whatever germs I'm leaving behind get killed by the booze."

"It's still disgusting," he says, sitting down on the couch with Mal.

It's no different from a lot of nights the three of us have shared. We're a unit, a family. Whenever there's something big going on, or we need to talk, we fall into this pattern. Sitting up together, hashing shit out.

When Malice was in jail, it felt wrong. Like we were missing something essential, something we *needed* in order to function the way we were supposed to. It's always been the three of us, and we've always faced anything that's come our way head on.

But now, we're all united in dancing around the elephant in the room. The reason none of us are asleep.

“How’s the fallout from you pissing off the Donovans?” Vic asks. That’s *close* to the topic that we’re all skirting around, since Willow is involved in both situations, but not quite it.

She’s involved in everything now, it feels like.

Malice shrugs a shoulder. “Eh. I didn’t want to work with them anyway. Bunch of fucking cunts.”

“Yeah, but we’re going to have to do something,” I put in. “We need to have a good reputation if we want our shop to succeed. Right now, not everyone in Detroit has heard or believed the shit Ethan is spreading about us. But if that changes, we could be fucked.”

“We’ll work it out,” Malice grunts.

We seem to be saying that about a lot more shit than usual these days. *We’ll work it out*. We’ve always managed to do it in the past, but there are so many things up in the air right now. This mess with the Donovan gang, whoever’s poking around asking questions about Nikolai, the message from X…

It feels like it’s all snowballing, one thing feeding into the next, making it impossible to keep up.

I know Vic must be having a hell of a time with it. He’s a problem solver, but he has a specific set of skills. When those skills can’t solve the problem, he gets antsy and irritated. Right now, he’s focused on figuring out who the face he found on that security footage belongs to, but it’s not like he can ignore everything else on top of it.

“I know some guys I can call,” I offer. “They usually try to move whole cars, because they’re idiots, but I can probably convince them there’s more money in chopping.”

“Sure,” Victor agrees. “Do that. It’ll at least get us by until this thing with the Donovan gang blows over.”

We fall silent again, and when Malice pushes the bottle toward Victor, our brother actually looks like he’s considering it for a second before he shakes his head. He doesn’t really drink, ever, so the fact that he looked tempted is a pretty good sign that he’s just as wound up as the rest of us.

Finally, I can’t take it anymore. We all know why we’re up and what we’ve been avoiding bringing up, and I decide to just come out and say it.

“What the fuck are we gonna do?”

My brothers both look at me, and then Malice goes back to glaring at the rug that fills the space between the couch and the chairs.

Vic sighs, tapping his fingers on his knee. “We have a little time before X expects us to deliver her.”

“But he won’t wait forever,” Malice grunts.

Vic and I both nod because we know that. None of us have ever met X, and we don’t know who he is, but he doesn’t strike me as someone with a lot of patience. Power, yeah. Probably in spades if he was able to get Malice out of jail after he took the fall for murdering our dad. Resources, probably. But he likes things done in a certain time frame, and the longer we take to deliver what he wants, the higher the stakes get.

“So what do we do?” Victor asks. He’s usually the one with the plan or an idea of how to come up with one, but now he seems as lost as Malice and I feel.

“I don’t want to give her up,” I say, once again being the first to speak up. “Not knowing what he’s probably going to do to her. Who the fuck knows what would happen if she got sold to some asshole? We all know there are some depraved fucking scumbags in this city, and I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night knowing we just… gave her up to that.” I cross my arms, sitting back in my chair. “That’s where I stand.”

Victor taps his fingers together thoughtfully. “I agree. It’s not her fault that she’s in this mess. And she’s done what we’ve asked of her so far. Handing her over would make our lives easier, but…”

He shakes his head.

We both look to Malice, because he has the most to lose here. He’s also been the most vocal about not wanting Willow around. Mal’s jaw clenches, and he grips the glass in his hand hard enough that I’m worried he’s going to break it. His eyes flash, and they look haunted for a second, like he’s reliving everything that happened to him in prison or something.

Then he takes a deep breath and lets it out, grabbing for the whiskey again.

“We keep her,” he declares. “We don’t give her up.”

He takes a swig from the bottle, and for once, Victor doesn’t even make a comment about it.

“We’ve never disobeyed X before,” I point out, not sure whether to be relieved that we’re all on that same page or worried that we’re about to do something monumentally stupid.

Malice makes a face, his sharp features twisting. “Don’t say it like that. It makes it seem like we’re his fucking lap dogs and he’s our master.”

I grimace. “But you know what I mean, Mal. We’ve always done what he wants. I don’t think he’s going to take it lightly if we ignore his request.”

“Yeah, I know.” He drags a hand through his hair. “But we’ve got two choices here—we either give him Willow, or we don’t. Either he loses, or she does. We’re gonna have to fuck someone over, and I’d rather it be X.”

Vic’s eyebrows climb up his forehead at that, because it’s a pretty big declaration from Malice. Especially considering how desperate he is to stay out of prison now that he knows what it’s like in there.

“He’ll be a powerful enemy if we piss him off,” Vic points out. Then he winces. “We seem to be collecting them now.”

“Donovan and his gang aren’t that powerful,” Malice retorts.

Vic nods in concession. “Fine. But X is. Do we really want someone else up against us? Especially considering how much leverage he has over us?”

Malice sets his glass down on the end table with a thud and cracks his knuckles. His hackles are up, and I don’t blame him for that. He usually tries not to talk about what happened to him when he was locked up. He probably tries not to think about it too much.

But this is so close to home for him, and those feelings and memories are probably right there beneath the surface.

We can’t let him go back to prison. No matter what happens, we’re not giving him up again. When the cops figured out our dad had been murdered, he insisted on taking the fall to protect me and Victor. To keep us from having to face the punishment for something we all did. It would be too much to ask him to do that again.

But even with that threat hanging over his head, my brother still nods decisively.

“We’re keeping her,” he says again. “We’ll just… figure it out. It’s like when we decided to take out Nikolai. We knew there was going to be a risk. We knew people might come after us for it, but we decided it was worth it in the end. I guess we’re deciding this is worth it too.”

“Okay,” I murmur, nodding. “Then that’s the plan.”

“It’s not a plan,” Victor counters. “It’s a rough idea at best.”

Silence falls in the living room for a moment as we all fall into thought, and I rub at my temples as the gears in my brain grind over and over.

We’re trapped in a fucking impossible situation, and no matter what we decide to do, someone will likely get hurt. There are no great options and

no clean way out.

Even with all of Vic's skills at hacking and the resources at his disposal through his computers, we have no idea who X is. We don't know what to expect from him, so it's best to expect the worst and try to figure out some way to minimize the damage—which is definitely easier said than done.

The three of us stay in the living room for a couple more hours, debating on different courses of action and weighing our options, and by the time I head back upstairs, we actually *do* have the beginnings of a plan.

It's risky as fuck, and none of us like it.

But it's all we've got.

WILLOW

SOFT MORNING SUNLIGHT shines through the window as I wake up in Ransom's arms.

It's becoming almost normal to do that, and it's weird that I almost can't remember what it feels like to wake up alone anymore. I did it for so long, blinking awake in the early morning, looking out the window to see what the day looked like, then getting up quickly, not having any reason to lie in bed and just *be*.

But now, it's so different.

Now there are warm arms around me, and I can feel Ransom's steady breaths on my neck. It makes me feel safe. Secure. And more than that, it makes me feel… wanted.

"Morning, angel," he murmurs, leaning in to sleepily nuzzle at the back of my neck.

"Morning," I reply, lifting a hand to smother a yawn.

"Any fun dreams last night?"

My cheeks darken, because I know he's teasing me about the sex dream I had before. He does that from time to time, letting me know he hasn't forgotten.

And I haven't forgotten either. Not the dream or the way he reacted afterward, making me fall apart for him right here in his bed.

I shake my head. "No, not last night. If I did dream, I don't remember what it was about."

He hums, chuckling a little. "Too bad. I was hoping you were going to wake up a squirming mess in my arms again."

"Ransom," I groan, blushing harder.

“What? That’s what happened, and I think we both enjoyed it.”

I want to ask how he enjoyed it when it’s not like he got off. It’s not like he fucked me or even jacked off on me or anything. But maybe he did later. Maybe he touched himself in the shower or in his room while I was doing something else.

Maybe he thought about what he did to me, and that was enough to get him off.

Thinking about it just makes my face flame even hotter, and I make a face. It’s not fair how easily he does this to me. He hasn’t even touched me. Hasn’t done more than tease, and I’m already a mess, my body reacting to his words as if each syllable is a spark to dry grass.

But despite my embarrassment, I can’t deny that this is becoming one of my favorite ways to wake up.

Settling back into his embrace, I yawn and stretch, debating between trying to get more sleep or getting up and starting the day. Without the routine of getting up and going to school every day, there’s not much to keep me on any particular schedule.

I’m thinking about asking Ransom if he has any cars to work on today that I can help with, but before I can say anything, his grip on me tightens, and he rolls me onto my back.

As I blink up at him, he drapes his large, muscled frame over mine, his hips settling between my thighs. There’s something intense in his expression, and I suck in a sharp breath when I feel the hard line of his cock pressing against my core through both layers of our clothes.

The thin barrier doesn’t stop me from feeling how hard he is, and my heart starts to race as my stomach flutters.

He stares down at me, pinning me with his gaze as much as his body. There’s desire on his face, hot and intent, but that’s not all I see in his expression.

Something else burns in his eyes, mixed in with the heat, and it surprises me to realize that I can’t quite read it. Usually, Ransom is the easiest to read of the three brothers, and beyond that, these mornings together have given me a lot of practice at figuring out his expressions and moods. But whatever he’s feeling right now, I can’t decipher it.

I reach up as if I’m going to touch his jaw but stop just before I get there, curling my fingers against my palm, suddenly shy.

“What is it?” I murmur, searching his face for clues. “What’s wrong?”

At my words, some of the tension bleeds from his features. Ransom smiles, shaking his head.

“Nothing’s wrong, angel,” he replies, his voice soft and warm. “I was just thinking.”

“About what?”

“You, what else?” He chuckles. “What else can I think about when you’re here in my bed, under me like this?” He settles his hips a little more firmly against me, lifting one hand from the mattress to trail it down my arm. “You know… none of us expected you. It’s just been the three of us for so long. Just me and my brothers.”

I nod. “I know.”

“We never expected this beautiful girl who crept into our lives,” Ransom continues, bringing his hand up to glide his fingertips over the line of my throat. “That night when we killed Nikolai, I didn’t know what you would mean to us. But maybe I should have. There was so much fire in you. So much strength. You’re not like anyone I’ve ever known.”

My heart skips a beat, then starts galloping in my chest.

I can’t deny things have changed between me and all of these men. They were monsters who stalked me, who violated my privacy and ignored my personal space time and time again. They came into my life soaked in blood and bent on making sure I kept their secret, no matter what it took. Then they became monsters who protected me. Who stood against everyone who tried to hurt or use me. My mom, the guy from the bus stop, Colin. Even when it meant they lost out on work, like with the Donovans.

After all of that, they’re under my skin now.

Now, it’s about more than just survival, if I’m being honest with myself. There’s more to it than that, more of a reason why I’ve stayed here with them.

I think they all feel it too, this shift that’s happened at some point. But none of us have ever admitted it so clearly out loud.

“Ransom, I…”

My voice trails off. I have no idea what I want to say, and even if I did, the words are stuck in my throat. What do you say to a man who came into your life like a deadly shadow but treats you better than most of the people who were already in it?

But he just smiles, his gaze turning warm and affectionate. “I know, pretty girl.”

When he drops his head to kiss me, I'm ready for him, lifting my head off the pillow a little to meet him.

His mouth is hot and soft, his lips gentle against mine, but insistent too. It's not like the hard, searing kiss I shared with Malice the night they met with the Donovan gang, but it makes me shiver all the way down to my toes.

Ransom braces himself on one hand and threads the other into my hair, tipping my head back so he can kiss me more thoroughly, the piercing in his tongue sliding against my tongue.

Pleasure and need burn through me, making it hard to do anything other than sink into the kiss and the man giving it. I'm falling into him—into all of them—forgetting about my life before I became wrapped up in this bubble with them.

It's scary.

No, it's *terrifying*.

My heart is racing, and it's not just because I'm enjoying the kiss and anticipating what might be coming next. There's still that part of me that wants to fight against losing myself so completely.

But it's a small part, and Ransom soothes those fears with his tongue in my mouth, sliding and teasing against mine.

When he's kissing me like this, it's hard to focus on being afraid. It's hard to focus on anything but him.

His mouth trails down from mine, his lips finding my jaw and then moving lower. He kisses my neck, and my skin heats up, pleasure flaring everywhere his mouth touches.

"You taste…" His teeth scrape my skin. "So…" He drags his tongue over my pulse point. "Fucking delicious."

I gasp for breath, writhing underneath him, and when my hips push up a little, I can feel his cock again, hard and throbbing in his boxers.

Ransom presses his hips down against mine, grinding right against me. I have to close my eyes against the tide of pleasure that sparks in my veins, and my pussy aches for more. I'm so wet, flooding my panties with the need for him to touch me there. To make me come.

"God," I whimper. "That feels…"

Every kiss, every touch, works me up even more, and I hear myself moaning Ransom's name, squirming and trying to somehow get closer to him.

“You have no idea,” he whispers roughly as he pulls back a bit to look at me. His eyes burn, those ocean blue depths as dark as a stormy sea. “You have no damn idea what you do to me, pretty girl.”

“You do the same thing to me,” I breathe.

“Fuck, yes.”

He dives back in, and this time it’s his hands that do the roaming. He lifts up my shirt enough to bare my stomach to his gaze, and I feel his eyes devouring me hungrily. He drops a kiss to my belly that makes me shiver, and then he works my pants and underwear down enough that he can pull them off.

I swallow hard at being so exposed for him. The scars on my side that stretch down to my leg are right there on display, but as always, Ransom doesn’t flinch away. He doesn’t rear back in disgust or throw me out of bed the way I always thought someone would if they got me naked and saw the mess of my tormented skin.

Instead, he drops kisses along the line of burn scars, and even though the feeling is somewhat muted by the scar tissue, it makes me shiver all the same.

“Beautiful,” he whispers. “Fucking gorgeous.”

I moan softly, the last vestiges of fear falling away as desire infuses my whole body. My heart pounds in my chest, keeping time with the throbbing between my legs.

Ransom has a good view of my core now, wet and swollen, and when he reaches down into his boxers to pull out his cock, I gasp softly. It’s thick and hard, and there are a line of piercings running up the bottom of it. The piercings make his shaft look beautiful and monstrous at the same time, and suddenly, I want it inside me so fucking badly. I don’t care if it hurts. I don’t care if it splits me open. I just want to feel him.

But instead of driving into me the way he did in my dream, he presses his cock head gently between my legs, letting the rounded tip bump up against my pussy.

Even that feels amazing, sparking my nerves and sending ripples of pleasure up my spine.

“Ransom,” I moan, barely sounding like myself anymore. I clutch at him, spreading my legs wider in an open invitation.

His cock presses inside a bit, sliding in less than an inch deep. I can feel the stretch of his crown at my entrance, and I hold my breath, waiting for

the rest.

But it doesn't come. He doesn't push in any farther. He just moves his hips in tiny pulses, keeping the tip inside me but not giving me any more. I groan, half from desire and half from frustration. I feel desperate at this point, like I'm grasping for something just out of reach.

"Please," I gasp out, arching my back and clutching at his shoulders. "Ransom, please. I need—"

I break off with another choked moan when he dips in a tiny bit deeper, just enough that it sends a wave of sensation through me that makes my breath catch.

"Goddamn, you're so tight. The way you're squeezing me, trying to pull me inside… I bet you could choke the life out of my dick," he groans.

He seems to be having a hard time holding himself back. His arms shake where he keeps himself poised above me, and his face is screwed up in a look of utter concentration. As though if he lets himself go for a second, he'll shove all the way into me, bottoming out in a single thrust.

But he doesn't let himself go, and he doesn't give in. He doesn't fuck me.

Instead, he thrusts his hips in tiny little pulses, never going any deeper than he's already gone. Every once in a while, he draws out entirely and slides his cock between my folds instead, so that the piercings on the underside of his shaft graze over my soaked flesh.

"The things I want to do to you," he breathes as we both look down to watch the crown of his cock breach my entrance again. "You have no idea all the ways I've imagined fucking you. All the ways I want to make you come. All the ways I want to make you scream."

"I—I—"

I let out a sobbing sort of gasp, and he rests his forehead against mine, his blue-green eyes burning into me. Then he releases a ragged breath and pulls away.

I give a little whine of frustration when I feel the head of his cock slip out of me without ever once pressing all the way inside. It feels like the worst kind of emptiness, and Ransom chuckles deeply, leaning down to nip at my bottom lip.

"You didn't beg me quite enough," he says, a teasing light entering his eyes. "Maybe next time."

I gape at him for a second, my jaw dropping open, and then he's rolling off me and getting out of bed.

"You're the worst," I mumble, feeling like someone just dumped a bucket of cold water on me, leaving me half horny and half dazed.

He laughs again, the sound easy and deep. "Sorry, pretty girl, but we've got things to do. We need to get downstairs." He arches his pierced brow. "Unless you want the others to come looking for us?"

He says it like a joke, but my mind instantly floods with the image of Malice and Victor walking in, seeing me spread out in Ransom's bed with my shirt riding up and my pants on the floor, legs spread, clearly soaking wet and needy. I go still, my bottom lip trapped tightly between my teeth as my chest heaves, and Ransom glances over at me.

"Fucking hell." He tips his head back, groaning. "Now who's teasing who?"

He reaches out and tugs me up from the bed, pulling me into his arms as soon as my feet hit the floor. He kisses me with so much enthusiasm that he bends me backward from the force of it, and somehow, my hands end up in his hair, gripping the strands tightly as his mouth slants over mine.

When we separate this time, my body feels like it's floating, and Ransom looks even more mussed and flushed than before. He chuckles, shaking his head ruefully as he releases me from his hold.

"You're my favorite kind of distraction, you know that?"

He winks, then slaps my ass lightly, nudging me in the direction of my clothes. I pull them on, aware of his gaze on me as I get dressed and surprised how comfortable I feel having him see me like this. I haven't even been here that long, but it's a far cry from the way I dressed so furtively that first morning I woke up in his bed.

Once I'm fully dressed, we leave the room. Ransom heads downstairs to start working on coffee while I head toward the bathroom to pee and brush my teeth, but when I get to the bathroom, I realize it's already occupied.

The door is open and Malice is standing at the sink, washing the new parts of his tattoo.

It's interesting to watch the way he cleans it, rubbing at it with surprisingly gentle fingers, and I stand there for a moment, too absorbed by the sight to realize that I'm staring.

"What?" he asks, sounding gruff but not angry for once.

“Oh. Nothing,” I reply, jerking my gaze back up to his face. “I was just… I needed the bathroom, so I’m waiting.”

There’s no mention of the conversation we had yesterday, or the way he held on to me like I was his lifeline for a moment before finally lifting me off his lap and leaving the room without another word. Watching him now, it almost feels like that was a dream. Or something I imagined.

But he doesn’t tell me to fuck off or close the door in my face. Instead, it almost feels like he’s inviting me to watch as he dries off the tattoo and then grabs a bottle of lotion from under the counter, rubbing it into the new lines.

“Does it still hurt?” I ask, curious.

Malice glances at me and then away. “No. The pain doesn’t stick around. Just the ink.”

He wipes off his hands and puts the lotion away before pushing past me and out of the bathroom. I watch him go, my gaze drawn to the broad strength in his back muscles, obvious even beneath the fabric of his t-shirt.

When I go back down to the kitchen, Malice is nowhere to be seen, but Victor is setting up his laptop on the kitchen table while Ransom digs around in the cabinets for something to eat.

“How do you feel about peanut butter and banana sandwiches?” Ransom asks, directing his question my way.

It doesn’t sound bad at first, but then I remember Ransom’s preference for crunchy peanut butter and shake my head. “Uh, no thanks. I’ll just have toast.”

Vic glances up at me, and our eyes lock. His lips twitch at the corners, almost like he’s going to smile. Then he pushes back from the table and gets up, crossing the kitchen and rifling through his special drawer to come up with the jar of smooth peanut butter.

“I’ll make your sandwich for you,” he tells me.

I can’t stop the grin that spreads across my face—both from Victor’s unexpected offer and from the way Ransom looks so put out that Vic just stole his job. I bite my lower lip to try to hide it, catching Victor’s eye and murmuring, “Thanks.”

Victor doesn’t look at me, but he nods as he gets to work, peeling a banana and cutting it into slices so even that I’m almost surprised he didn’t use a ruler to measure them.

“Clean out the toaster when you’re done,” he comments, glancing over at Ransom as his brother grabs the bread.

“No one cleans out the toaster every time they use it,” Malice declares, joining the conversation midway through as he strides into the kitchen.

“*We* do,” Vic replies, grabbing a knife for the peanut butter. “Do you know how many toasters catch on fire a year because people don’t bother to clean out the crumbs?”

“No, and I don’t care,” Malice shoots back. “It’s a pain in the ass.”

“Yeah, but you know what’s probably a bigger pain in the ass?” Ransom asks, chuckling. “A house fire. We don’t have time to look for a new place to live. I think I’m with Vic on this one. Sorry, Mal.”

Malice rolls his eyes so hard I can almost hear it, although he doesn’t seem pissed off.

I’ve heard the brothers banter like this before, and I’ve always felt a spark of envy at their easy camaraderie. But today, it seems a little forced. I’m not sure if I’m imagining it, but the vibe between the brothers seems different somehow. Something has them tense. Everyone seems a little on edge, but I don’t think their agitation is directed at me. If anything, they seem more relaxed with me than they’ve ever been before.

As I watch Victor finish up my peanut butter and banana sandwich, insisting on making his own pieces of toast for it after Ransom finishes with the toaster, it occurs to me that this strange warehouse/garage/apartment feels more like a home than my mother’s house ever did.

And what’s even more strange? I’m starting to feel at home here.

Ransom is right. This feels so different than what it was initially meant to be. But that doesn’t scare me as much as it used to.

We all settle around the table with our breakfast choices after a few more minutes, eating in silence with the sound of Victor’s keyboard typing for background noise. Ransom takes a sip of his coffee, making a contented sound of pleasure in his throat, and it reminds me so much of the noises he made upstairs that I flush.

He catches my gaze and winks, which only makes the heat creeping up my chest and cheeks burn hotter.

Before I can say something to try to distract myself from the frustrated arousal still smoldering in my veins, Victor straightens up suddenly.

The movement is so sharp that it draws all of our attention, and everyone looks his way

“What is it?” Malice demands.

“I got a match.” Vic’s gaze tracks across the screen. “On the face of the guy who visited Carl.”

“Fuck,” Ransom leans across the table, excitement glinting in his eyes. “We got a name?”

“I think so. Give me a second.”

Vic’s fingers fly across the keyboard, typing faster than I’ve ever seen anyone type. His brow is furrowed, and I can’t help but watch him at work. Something changes in his expression when he’s on his computer, some of the tight control leaving his features as he gets absorbed in his task.

No one interrupts him while he does his digging, and the second half of my peanut butter sandwich sits untouched on my plate as I wait with anxious anticipation. I’m just as invested as the brothers are in finding out who this mystery man is.

“Okay,” Victor says after a few more moments. He blinks, like he’s coming out of an information fugue state, and shakes out his fingers. “Fuck.”

“What?” Malice makes an impatient gesture. “What did you find out?”

“This isn’t some random guy looking to stir up shit,” Victor says quietly. He turns his laptop around so we can see the picture of the man on the screen.

I shiver at the sight of him. He looks harsh and brutal, like Malice, but scarier somehow. There’s something dark and haunting about him, even in the slightly blurry image on the screen.

“This is Ilya Petrov,” Vic informs us all. “Nikolai’s brother.”

“Fuck.” Malice and Ransom both curse at the same time.

I look between the three of them, but I don’t really need anyone to spell out for me why this is worse than someone random doing the snooping. The proof of what brothers are willing to do for each other is right here in front of me. These men have lied, blackmailed, and even killed for each other.

“Makes sense for him to want to get to the bottom of things,” Ransom says. “He must be pissed about Nikolai dying. Maybe they were close.”

Malice shrugs a shoulder. “Even if they weren’t, it’s not like he can just let the fact that someone killed his brother go. He probably wants revenge. At the very least, he likely wants to make sure he’s not next.”

“Now that we know who he is, I can work on tracking him down,” Vic says. “If we work fast, hopefully we can deal with him before he figures out

who killed his brother."

"What else do we know about him?" Malice asks. "Anything else?"

Victor holds up a finger and then spins his laptop back around. He types a bit more, his eyes bouncing back and forth as he scans through whatever site or database he's searching.

"He has ties to the Russian mafia," he says after a few beats. "So he's either ex or current. There's not much else about him here. He's almost as much of a ghost as Nikolai was."

"Probably just as skilled," Malice mutters. "Or close to it."

"We'll need to be careful," Ransom puts in. "If he's still trying to track down who killed his brother, we have a small window right now where we can act. He doesn't know who we are yet, and we need to make use of that. Act quickly."

My stomach flutters as I process his words.

Act quickly.

If they move on this new information fast, then that means this could be over soon. I won't need to stay here with them any longer. If they take out Nikolai's brother, then it'll be safe for me to go home.

I've wanted that ever since the night they first brought me here. To be free of being a pseudo-prisoner, to be able to go back to my regular life and everything that entails. April stopped texting me about that group project for Walsh's class days ago, but I could try to double down and catch up on all the school work I've missed so far. It'll be hard, but since I don't have to work late nights anymore, I can do it. I can manage to scrape by this semester and then really throw myself into the next one.

All the things I've been working toward so hard are still right there, and I could go back to focusing on them and not all the unnerving things that happen around these men.

I should be excited about that. It's what I've wanted since the night they crashed through that door and shot Nikolai: to just go back to being normal.

And some part of me *is* excited, already thinking about the future and my life course correcting. But another part of me is less happy. That part feels strangely… heartbroken to think that this might be over soon.

I don't want to think too hard about why that is.

WILLOW

ARMED with the new information Victor has uncovered, the Voronin brothers leap into action.

Breakfast is officially over as Victor takes his computer upstairs and practically barricades himself in his room to do research, trying to hunt down as much as he can about Ilya Petrov.

Malice and Ransom don't have the resources that he does, or the neurotic aptitude to use them, so they do their recon by more conventional means, sifting through rumors and calling in a few favors to see if there's anything they can learn on the street about this guy without drawing attention to themselves.

They spend the rest of the day on that, and I make myself scarce, not wanting to get into the middle of it and risk interrupting any of them.

As conflicted as I feel about leaving and this all possibly being over soon, I know it's important for them to do this and do it right. Because if Ilya comes for them before they can get to him, then it could be ugly. There are three of them, and I'm sure they fight well together… but still.

I don't want to see any of them hurt.

For my part, I try not to think too much. I hang out in Ransom's room for a while, playing on my phone, then I spend a bit of time hunting down the pieces of clothing and things that have ended up scattered throughout the warehouse.

I take a shower in their bathroom later in the afternoon, running my fingers over their products on the shelves, taking in the little things that stand out for each of them, as if I'm trying to make sure the memories stay in my head. All of this has been so chaotic and strange, and I can't deny that

a part of me is worried that I'll go back to my regular life and realize this was all a dream or something.

Before, it would have felt like a blessing to discover this was all some nightmare that I could wake up from as if it had never happened. But now…

Now, I think I might miss them. Miss this.

I'm dressed and dry, sitting cross legged on Ransom's bed when he pokes his head into the room. It's early evening by now, and my stomach growls, reminding me that after my banana and peanut butter sandwich, I only had an apple for lunch since I didn't want to disturb Malice and Ransom, who were working in the kitchen for a good chunk of the day.

Ransom grins at the sound, cocking an eyebrow as he glances at my belly.

"Hey, look at that. Perfect timing," he says. "We ordered a bunch of food to celebrate."

"What are we celebrating?" I ask, getting up to follow him downstairs.

"We have a name to go with the face, and we're working on a plan to take Ilya out," he answers. "That's reason enough."

We walk into the kitchen, and the smell of the food makes my stomach growl even louder. There's a huge spread laid out on the countertops, and I can tell just from the various scents that they've gotten dishes from my favorite Indian place.

There's a big platter of samosas, containers of tikka masala, korma, and butter chicken, and a plate that's full of nothing but garlic naan. It makes my mouth water just looking at it all, and I shoot Victor a glance, knowing it had to have been him who picked this.

He's the one who knows everything about me, and he probably saw me order from this place when he was watching me on the cameras. The last time I had it was the night I finally decided to start spending their money, and I can remember rationalizing to myself that I deserved a treat after everything these men had put me through.

It seems fitting in a weird way that we're having it now.

For some reason, I'm not even really freaked out or pissed off by the idea that Victor used his spying to find out what food I like. It's almost… sweet, in an odd way.

In a very Victor way, I guess.

“Don’t just stare at it,” Malice grumbles, kicking a chair out from the kitchen table for me. “Eat it. It’s gonna get cold.”

“Okay,” I say, smiling and taking my seat.

Victor passes out plates, and we all load them up with everything, scooping rice from the big container in the center of the counter, then adding the different kinds of curry and grabbing naan.

Everything smells amazing, and I tuck into the food happily, making a soft noise of enjoyment at the spicy, savory flavor.

As we eat, I find myself glancing around the table, watching each of the men as they talk easily amongst themselves. I can clearly picture the three of them having meals like this before. Maybe not this food specifically, but ordering pizza or something, passing the box around and filling their plates.

Like a unit.

Like a *family*.

Vic said it’s better to be alone than to be with someone who would hurt you, and after hearing Malice’s story about their dad, I understand why. But the truth is, I don’t think he’ll ever have to be alone—not as long as the two men sitting across the table from him are still alive. They’ll have his back no matter what, and that’s not something a lot of people can say.

The brothers are each so different, but those differences only seem to bind them closer together, rather than forcing them apart.

I watch Victor make neat little quadrants on his plate, keeping all of the curries separate, using the naan to keep from getting anything on his fingers. Ransom just piles it all on, not seeming to care if the korma touches the tikka masala. Malice has a samosa in his hand, and he dips it in what I know is the spiciest sauce, biting into it and not flinching.

Ransom goes back for more butter chicken, and some of the sauce drips between his plate and the container on the table.

“Must you?” Vic grimaces, chewing and swallowing his own neat bite.

“Yup. I must,” Ransom replies, but he cleans up the mess with a smile. “You know I’m always the messy one.”

“No you’re not,” Vic counters. “That’s Malice.”

“Fuck off,” Malice grunts, but there’s no heat in it.

“He *is*, you know. The messy one, I mean,” Ransom says, glancing over at me with amusement dancing in his ocean blue eyes. “There used to be this picture of him in our house growing up. It was Mom’s favorite.”

“Shut the fuck up, Ransom.”

But of course, Ransom doesn't shut the fuck up. He just grins innocently at his brother. "It's of him with pudding on his face and hands. Like he just stuck his hands into the bowl and decided to smear it all over his cheeks."

He mimes the motion, dipping his hands into an invisible bowl of pudding and then rubbing them on his face.

I can't help the laugh that bubbles out of me at that. It's so hard to picture with the way Malice is now, and I can only imagine how cute it must have been.

Even Vic smiles a little, just the slight upturn of the corners of his mouth.

"He was very into pudding back then," he says quietly, glancing at me.

"So? That shit's good." Malice shrugs. "But if we wanna talk about embarrassing shit, ask Ransom about his first date."

The gleeful look on Ransom's face falls a little, and he shakes his head. "Nah. We don't have to talk about that."

"Oh, I think we do," Malice counters, grinning sharply. "Since you wanna drag shit up. Vic, you do the honors."

I half expect Victor to decline, but instead, he launches right in.

"Ransom was twelve," he begins.

"I was thirteen!" Ransom interjects.

Victor shoots him a look. "Ransom was twelve," he says again, and out of the two of them, I definitely trust Victor to remember the exact age better. "And he was in love. Her name was Niccola, and she had hair like a satin pillowcase."

"Oh my god." Ransom groans. "You make one comparison, and it haunts you for your whole fucking life." He throws up his hands defensively. "That was the softest thing in our house, okay? I had no idea what else to compare it to."

I laugh, reaching over to pat his shoulder. "It's very poetic."

Vic tells the rest of the story, painting a picture of how Ransom asked this girl to go to the movies with him but didn't think to secure a ride, so they ended up walking for four miles in the rain and missed the movie entirely.

"Her dad picked her up from the theater and definitely did not offer Ransom a ride home," he finishes.

After a few more stories, the food is mostly gone, and we're all full and content.

Ransom gets out the whiskey and we pass it around as we keep talking. It burns going down, making me feel a little fuzzy headed from just a few sips, but it also feels good.

I've never done anything like this before, just sitting around, telling stories and drinking. The closest thing was that frat party I went to, and I don't even want to think about how that ended up.

After everything gets cleaned up to Victor's satisfaction, we move out of the kitchen and settle in the living room. The whiskey made it out with us, and we keep passing it around, drinking right from the bottle. Even Victor has a couple of sips, although he does make a face and wipe off the mouth of the bottle every time it comes to him.

With each sip I take, I get a little warmer, a little more buzzy. I can feel myself getting tipsy, although it's not just the alcohol making me feel this way. It's the atmosphere in the room. It's the way Ransom leans a little closer than he needs to when he hands me the bottle, his fingers brushing mine and making sparks dance up my arm. It's the way Malice's deep voice rumbles in his chest as he talks, and the way it sounds when he laughs. It's the way Victor watches me, glancing my way whenever I bring the bottle to my lips, drinking up the sight just like I'm drinking the whiskey.

When the guys finally move on from telling embarrassing stories about each other, the conversation turns to tattoos.

"Remember Malice's first one?" Ransom asks.

"The shitty little stick and poke he did in his bedroom?" Vic snorts. "How could I forget? We were so sure it was going to get infected. It was red and ugly for days before it finally started to heal."

Malice grunts. "It wasn't that bad. I was just shit at tattooing back then. But it worked out."

"And you got better," I say, the words slipping out of my mouth before I can think better of it.

They all turn to look at me, and my face flushes a bit, but I don't know if it's from embarrassment or the booze. Either way, I'm right. I remember watching Malice work on his tattoo the other day, how steady his hand was and the way he didn't even flinch from the pain.

"Yeah," he agrees finally. "I did."

“Now he’s fucking covered in them,” Ransom says. “I mean we all have some, but not like Mal.”

I’ve seen Malice naked before, and I remember the flash of the tattoos that covered his arms and spread across his back, chest, and legs. I’ve seen some of Ransom’s since then too, but none of Victor’s.

“How many do each of you have?” I ask, sitting up in my chair.

Ransom stands up and takes his shirt off, smiling at me as he does. I’ve seen him shirtless before since we’re sharing a room, but I take full advantage of the fact that now I’m allowed to openly study him, leaning forward to get a better look.

His tattoos are all in black, except for one on the inside of his arm that’s done in splashes of green and white. It’s a flower, and when I look closer, I can tell it’s a kind of lily. Vines trail from it, wrapping around his arm and down to his wrist, circling it. When I look closer, I can see that there are thorns in the vines that don’t touch the flower, leaving the flower itself seeming untouched and almost pristine.

“Our mom’s favorite flower,” he explains, his voice soft.

My heart aches at the love and pain in his voice, and I rise from the chair to come closer to him.

The rest of his tattoos have less purpose and form. Like Malice, he has some that are just lines and patterns, not quite tribal, but blackwork designs that circle his other bicep and forearm. A larger piece spreads across his back, and it looks like the arching branches of a tree, with flowers woven into and through them.

They’re oddly beautiful for being harsh black lines inked into his skin, and I reach out, trailing my fingers over them softly. Ransom shivers, and when he looks at me, his blue-green eyes almost seem to burn.

“What do you think, angel?”

“They’re beautiful,” I whisper.

A grin curves his lips, making him look boyish and almost a little shy. “Thanks. I’m glad you like them.”

“Your turn, Malice,” Victor says.

Malice stands up next, peeling off his shirt. I suck in a breath, and even though I’ve seen him naked before, this feels… different. We were different then, the two of us, and the situation was different. He was naked for some other woman then, and now he’s taking his shirt off for me.

It’s a silly thought, since he’s only taking his shirt off to show me his tattoos, but I can’t help but think it all the same.

Malice’s entire upper body is littered with various tattoos. I already know the one he got for their mother, her name and the date of her death on his arm, but the rest are more of a mystery.

I peer at the one he was working on when I found him the other day, and I notice that it’s not really anything. Just images and shapes, swirls and lines, a kind of almost organized chaos that seems to fit with how Malice is most of the time. The lines are sharp and cutting, but there are some gentle curves in there, little moments that break up all the darkness.

It’s interesting to see the growth in his abilities as a tattoo artist, from the ones that are older and more crude, a little or a lot faded with age depending on their quality, to the newer ones that look more clear. Some of them dip down, trailing over his hip bones and the front of his stomach, to disappear into the waistband of his pants, and my face flushes a bit when I remember that his dick is tattooed too, unless I’m mistaken.

“So many,” I finally breathe, and unlike with Ransom, I don’t reach out to touch Malice.

“I like tattoos,” he says simply, lifting one muscled shoulder in a shrug.

That makes me smile. “I see why. They kind of suit you in a weird way.”

I don’t know how to describe it, but something about them just fits with his whole… everything.

He catches my gaze, and although he doesn’t look boyish like Ransom did, something hot and sort of possessive glints in his gray eyes—as if my approval means something to him. Then he looks away from me, lifting a chin at Victor.

“Now you.”

I half expect Victor to decline, even though he was the one who suggested Malice take a turn. But to my surprise, he stands up and peels off his shirt. Unlike how Malice and Ransom just took theirs off and tossed them onto the couch, he does it with much more precision, tugging his dark Henley off with one hand and then folding it and setting it down on the couch.

When he straightens back up, I find myself gaping at him.

I’ve never seen him anything less than fully dressed before, and now that I’m finally seeing him shirtless, I’m amazed by how ripped he is. It’s

nowhere close to how jacked and intimidating Malice looks, but he has a whole lot more muscles than I expected. For all that time in front of a computer, he's not soft at all, and it's clear that when it comes to a physical fight, Victor could definitely hold his own.

A memory flashes through my mind of him taking down Carl in my apartment, and I realize I've seen firsthand how that ruthless, almost robotic precision of his can combine with his physical strength to be deadly.

Almost unconsciously, I step closer to Victor, curiosity burning inside me. He has some newer tattoos, but a lot of them look old and very rough. They're a totally different style than the newer ones he has, and I tip my head to one side, glancing between him and Malice as I make the comparison.

"Malice didn't do these," I finally say. "Did he?"

"No," he acknowledges. "He didn't."

I reach out like I'm going to touch one of the older ones, but then stop with my hand hovering near his upper arm. He's never touched me, and I've never touched him. I'm not entirely sure whether that was purposeful on his part or just coincidental, but I'm vividly aware that it's a line we haven't crossed. So instead of trailing my fingers over faded ink, I just look at it.

It was maybe once a cross or some kind of symbol, but now it looks like a faded bruise, almost, dark and splotchy against Victor's skin. It was definitely done by an amateur, not a professional tattoo artist.

"Did *you* do these ones?" I ask quietly, tilting my head up to look at Vic.

He gazes down at me for a second, then shakes his head.

"My father gave them to me," he says. "A long time ago."

There's no emotion in his voice, but I can sense the heaviness in the words anyway. Everything that has to do with their dad seems steeped in hurt and violence.

Malice told me that their dad was trying to shape Victor into a perfect warrior—his second in command—and that he basically tortured him to make him strong enough for it. I know there's more to the story than that, things that probably only Victor could tell me about what he experienced at his father's hands.

I'm not sure he ever will though.

All I've gotten from him is the vague sense that someone he loved hurt him, and I wonder what the tattoos were supposed to symbolize. Were they

used to cause more pain? To brand him so that he couldn't forget who he belonged to and was supposed to be working for?

I don't know, but I suddenly hate this man I've never met, and I find myself viciously glad that the brothers killed him. Malice was right. He did deserve it.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, holding Victor's gaze.

I'm not sure if he knows what Malice told me, and I almost feel bad that I know this thing about him that he didn't tell me himself, but then I remember that he knows a lot about me that I didn't tell him either. So maybe it doesn't matter.

He nods, his face unreadable as his eyes cut away from me.

"Our dad left his mark in a lot of ways," Ransom says, breaking the heavy silence. "Maybe that's why we all got tattoos for our mom. To try to make sure she'd left her mark too."

He looks down at the flower on his arm, and I smile at the idea of that. It's clear she did leave her mark on them, with the way they wanted to avenge her death so fiercely, and Malice being willing to go to jail for killing their father to make sure she didn't have to deal with him anymore.

"When did you start tattooing?" I ask, settling back on the couch and glancing over at Malice.

"Not seriously until I was in prison," he replies. "I fucked around as a kid since other kids were doing it, but that was different. Most of these"—he lifts the arm that doesn't have the growing tattoo on it—"I got when I was locked up. Either from other people or when I was learning to do them myself."

"What about you?" Ransom arches a brow at me. "Do you have any ink you're not showing us?"

I glance at Victor, because I know with his cameras in my apartment, he's seen me naked. Hell, Ransom has probably seen enough of me at this point to know that I don't have anything I'm trying to hide, and Malice has too. Just the scars, and those are nothing like the ink each of these men wear.

"No." I shake my head. "You know I don't. I've never really considered getting one before. And even if I had, I'm not sure I would've been brave enough to do it."

Malice makes a noise in his throat, and when my gaze darts to him, he's looking at me with something gleaming in his stormy eyes. Without saying

a word, he walks out of the room, heading toward the garage. When he comes back, he has his tattoo gun and the equipment to go with it.

My eyes widen, my heart starting to race. “What’s that for?”

Malice strides across the living room, coming to a stop in front of the couch where I’m sitting. He puts rough fingers under my chin, tipping my face up so I’m looking right at him. There’s a dark look in his eyes, possessive and dominant and hungry.

“I want to mark you,” he says, his voice low. “I want to put a tattoo on you.”

My stomach flips over.

I wasn’t kidding about not thinking I was brave enough. The good girl that I spent so long trying to be would say no. She wouldn’t have guts to get a tattoo, let alone to have this man do it.

But… I don’t want to say no.

I want what he’s offering. I want him to mark me, and I want to feel the pain and intensity of it.

The same thought that’s been sitting in the back of my mind all day whispers through my head now. *All of this will be ending soon*. I’ll go back to my life, and they’ll go back to theirs. So for now… just for tonight, I can be a little bolder than I usually would. I can let myself have this one thing. This small reminder of them.

I breathe in, out, then nod once. “Okay.”

The hunger in Malice’s eyes flares even brighter, and his voice is almost a growl when he speaks. “Take off your shirt.”

I can feel Ransom and Victor watching as I do, pulling the soft long-sleeved shirt over my head. Their gazes feel hungry, and my skin prickles under their undivided focus.

My scars are on display, the whole ugly mess of them, but for some reason, the urge to cover them up isn’t as intense as it usually is. None of the guys seem to be turned off by them, and when Malice runs his gaze over my body, he doesn’t flinch away from the sight of them or make a face.

Kneeling before me, he peels down the straps of my bra. Goosebumps race across my skin as his fingertips brush my shoulders, and then he reaches around and expertly unclasps the hooks at the back.

My breath catches, my nipples hardening as he slides the straps down my arms and tosses the bra away. I’m completely bare from the waist up, with nothing left to hide behind. They can see so much of me now, and I’m

acutely aware of that fact as Malice's gaze sweeps over my body. There's heat in his eyes, but also something contemplative, like he's an artist considering his canvas.

"Where are you going to put it?" I ask, anticipation brewing inside me.

I expect him to say my arm or something, probably the one that's not as heavily scarred as the other. But instead, he lifts the tattoo gun and brings it right to my chest.

A soft gasp spills from my lips when Malice turns it on, the droning buzz of it filling my ears and making my pulse race.

It's almost like the heavy thud of my heart serves as a beacon for him, because he lines the tattoo gun up over my left breast, right over my heart, and starts to work.

"Oh…"

The word leaves my mouth on a soft hiss as my muscles tense up.

It hurts, but not like I expected. The sensation is both better and worse than I imagined. I thought it would be a sharp, stabbing pain, since it *is* a needle being forced into my flesh over and over again. But it's more like a long, prickling burn, like a million little bee stings.

I grip the couch cushions, reminding myself to breathe, trying to ride out the pain as it bursts through me.

Malice pulls the gun away for a bit, using a cloth to wipe away the excess ink, and I pant for breath through my nose, biting my lip hard.

It's just a small break though, and when he gets back to it, the pain flares up again.

The cushion next to me shifts after a moment, and I glance over to see Ransom settling in beside me.

"The first time is always the roughest," he says, smiling softly. "I'll help you through it."

I half expect him to hold my hand or something, but he goes for my pants instead, undoing the fly and sliding his hand into them. I gasp for a completely different reason when that hand finds its way into my underwear, and the first touch of his fingers against my clit makes me jump.

Malice makes a discontented noise, not looking away from his work, and I try harder not to squirm.

"Sorry," I breathe, and it already sounds needy.

Ransom works my clit in slow circles, and the more he touches me, the wetter I get. The pleasure builds right alongside the pain, and it's such a

curious combination. They both burn in their own way, both too intense to ignore. Ransom's fingers play me like an instrument, or like I'm a car part that he knows the ins and outs of so intimately, and he keeps stroking me, pressing down on my clit and alternating between fast circles and slow ones that drive me nuts.

The pain and the pleasure mingle together, blurring the lines between them until I can't tell them apart anymore. Everything Ransom is doing, and the pain Malice is causing with the tattoo gun go right to my head, and I find myself moaning softly, spreading my legs wider.

I like it.

I like the way it feels.

It feels like every part of me is alive, and it's been so, so long since I've felt this way. I'm not even sure I ever have before.

Victor's eyes are on me, and I'm aware of him watching in that carefully observant way he has about him. He sees everything, documenting it for later use, and I wonder if he'll keep this memory. If he'll replay it later in his mind.

It has to be a sight. I'm topless, my breasts on display for all of them. Malice is kneeling between my spread legs, tattooing me, and Ransom has his hand shoved obscenely in my pants.

Ransom's nimble fingers keep working me, and I suppress a shudder as a spike of pleasure hits me hard. My breath comes out in short pants, and there are soft whimpers mixed in as I get closer and closer to falling apart.

I've been trying to stay still, trying to keep from thrashing and writhing on the couch from what Ransom is doing to me, but it gets to be too hard. My hips buck up, and Malice takes the gun away from my skin for a second to glare at both of us.

"You're making her move too much," he says. "I'm almost done."

"Sorry," Ransom replies, sounding anything but.

"Here." Vic rises from his spot on a nearby chair, coming over to join us and sitting on the other side of me on the couch. "I'll help."

My breath hitches when he puts his hands on me. One goes to my thigh, holding it down with a surprising amount of force, while the other hand grips my shoulder, keeping my back pressed against the back of the couch.

He's not touching me the same way Ransom is, but it's the first time he's *ever* touched me, and that's enough to kick my pulse into overdrive.

Between Ransom working me up with his hand and Victor holding me in place, I have so much more to focus on besides just the painful press of the tattoo gun against my chest. Nerve endings I didn't even know I had flare to life, and I feel like I might burst out of my skin from the overwhelming rush of it all. Like my body isn't big enough to contain all the things I'm feeling.

It goes on for several minutes, the sharp buzz of pain mixing with the slow burn of pleasure, and I feel almost like I might float away if Victor weren't here to hold me down.

I'm going to come, I realize. I'm going to fall apart right here on the couch, surrounded by all three of the brothers. The sensations inside me are building to a crescendo, pushing me closer and closer to the top of a dizzyingly high peak.

"Almost done."

Malice's eyes narrow as he puts a few finishing touches on the tattoo, going over the lines and making sure they're perfect. The pain from the gun being dragged over already sensitive areas makes me whine softly, and my clit throbs in response.

"You're doing so well," Ransom murmurs in my ear, his breath warm. "You're so close."

"I am," I gasp out. "I'm so—"

Malice takes the gun away and switches it off, finished with the tattoo, and that's the exact moment that my orgasm finally crests. The absence of the pain makes all the pleasure inside me feel even more intense, and I come hard, writhing in Vic's grasp as it hits me like a freight train.

It seems to keep going and going, wave after wave of pleasure cascading over me, keeping me locked in its grip until every last drop is wrung out of me.

When it finally subsides, I go a little limp on the couch, breathing hard. Victor lets me go and moves back to his chair, and Malice gets to his feet, stepping back.

They all look at me, taking in the sight I must make, and Ransom grins.

"Holy shit. That was fucking beautiful," he says. His fingers are still in my pants, and he gives my clit a few teasing strokes, making me shiver all over again.

I'm so sensitive, every part of me still buzzing and alive with sensation.

Still working to catch my breath, I look down at my chest, trying to make out the tattoo Malice gave me. It's a small, stylized image with the numbers 2 and 4 winding around each other, done in Malice's signature brand of beautiful and chaotic artwork. I don't know what made him choose this design, but I like it.

When I glance up at the dark-haired man, I find him staring right back at me.

"What does it mean?" I ask.

He just keeps staring down at me, an inscrutable little smile on his face. "It means you have a tattoo now," he says. "Just like us."

Before I can roll my eyes and press him for a more clear answer than that, Ransom pulls his hand out of my pants, teasing me a little more as his fingers drag against my clit on the way out.

I drag in a breath and turn to look at him.

His fingers are wet with the evidence of my arousal, and his eyes sparkle with heat and amusement as he holds them out to me.

"We had dinner, but not dessert," he murmurs. "You're so sweet, pretty girl. You should taste yourself and see how fucking delicious it is."

My heart skips a beat as he moves them toward my mouth, and I part my lips, letting him slide two fingers against my tongue. The sweet tang of my own arousal bursts in my mouth, and I whimper softly, licking his fingers the way I saw him do after he made me come in his bed. I don't look away from him while I do it, and his blue-green eyes glitter like a sun drenched ocean as he watches me.

When he finally slides his fingers out of my mouth, he kisses me, tangling his tongue with mine like he's trying to chase the taste of everything I just lapped up.

It leaves me even more breathless, and I feel dazed in the best way as I grab on to his shirt with one hand to steady myself.

When he pulls back, he tilts my head up to look at him, gazing at me with a serious expression.

"Hey, angel. Remember that dream you had about us?" he murmurs.

My stomach flutters. His words are quiet, but they seem to fill the space, making me more aware than ever that Malice and Victor are in the room, both of them watching me. Watching *us*. But I nod all the same.

"Yes."

Ransom's answering smile is sinful. "Tell us what you dreamed about."

WILLOW

MY STOMACH CHURNS WITH NERVES, surprise shooting through me as Ransom's words echo in my head.

Tell us what you dreamed about.

The memory of the sex dream I had about all of them is still fresh in my mind, and it hits me how similar this situation is to the dream. Ransom touching me, making me come, and the other two watching, their gazes hungry and unwavering.

My clit pulses as I think about it—both about the dream and about what Ransom did to me when I woke up. Saying any of it out loud feels embarrassing and wrong, but as the gorgeous man in front of me watches me expectantly, I find myself wanting to give him what he asked for. My body and mind are buzzing from the booze I drank and the endorphins from the tattoo and the orgasm, and it makes me feel braver than I've ever been in my life.

I've already done so many things that the old Willow never would have considered. What's stopping me from doing this too?

Just this once.

This could all be over soon.

I lick my lips as I nod, my mouth suddenly very dry. All three of the brothers are watching me intently, waiting. It takes me a few tries to find my voice, and when I do, it comes out soft and timid.

"I was… asleep. Not just in real life, but in the dream too," I start. "In Ransom's bed. And he was… he was there with me. Kissing me. I could feel his mouth on me, kissing the back of my neck and down to my shoulders. It was like his mouth was everywhere."

Malice makes a noise in his throat, and that little reminder that he and Victor are here, sitting on chairs angled toward the couch where Ransom and I are settled, sends butterflies cascading around in my belly.

“Then he… flipped me over onto my stomach,” I continue. “And I remember thinking about how he was so much bigger than me. How he was pinning me down.”

“Did you like that?” Ransom asks.

My skin feels like it might combust from the heat of my blush, but I nod. For some reason, I *did* like it. I felt helpless and tiny, but the feeling of being totally overwhelmed by him made me wetter.

“Then he—you—started touching me. I spread my legs, and you touched my…” I stall out, my face flaming. “You touched me.”

“Where did he touch you?” Malice demands, his voice gruff.

“Between my legs.” My answer is barely a whisper as embarrassment and nerves win out.

“Through your clothes?”

I shake my head.

Beside me on the couch, Ransom grins, dragging his fingers down the line of my jaw. “We want the details, angel. Every single one of them. Where was I touching you?”

My tongue seems to tie itself in a knot at the thought of using the words I know they want to hear, describing the details they’re asking for. It’s nothing I haven’t heard before. Hell, I grew up hearing johns talk dirty to my mom when they came to see her, and I heard plenty of filthy catcalls at Sapphire as the clientele watched the dancers. But I’ve never just… come out and said those things myself.

“You were touching my… my clit,” I tell Ransom, my gaze locking with his. “And then, um, you pushed your fingers into me.”

“Into what?” Malice prompts.

I shoot him a frustrated look, but he doesn’t back down. He’s settled comfortably in his plush easy chair, his legs spread a little and a distinct bulge growing inside his pants. When I glare at him, he just folds his arms and looks right back at me, a challenging expression on his face.

“Did he push them into your mouth?” Vic asks, surprising me by speaking up. The question sounds neutral and matter-of-fact, even though I know what he’s doing.

“*No*,” I shoot back. “You know what I mean.”

“How are we supposed to know if you don’t tell us?” Ransom chuckles, leaning over to press a kiss to my neck. “Come on, pretty girl. It’s okay. You can say it.”

I take a deep breath and let it out again, allowing the brush of his lips to settle my nerves and stir the heat in my belly that’s urging me onward. “He pushed his fingers into my… p—”

I get as far as the first syllable before my face heats again.

Malice’s lips curve in a leonine smile as he leans forward. “Into your pussy? Is that what you’re too scared to say?”

“I’m not scared!” I blurt defensively.

“Then say it,” he counters. “Say the word, *Solnyshka*. Pussy.”

I swallow hard, but something about the way he’s looking at me makes me want to rise to his challenge. Makes me want to prove him wrong if he thinks I’m too delicate or fragile. So I hold his gaze, straightening my shoulders and speaking firmly.

“Pussy.” I drag the word out a little, lingering on every syllable. “He pushed his fingers into my pussy.”

Malice grins, an expression almost like pride passing over his harsh features. He sits back and nods. “Better.”

It’s as if getting over that hurdle makes the rest of it come more easily. I take another deep breath and go back to the dream, picturing it in my mind as I speak. Heat prickles through my veins, and my eyelids droop a little as I get lost in the memories.

“Ransom fucked me with his fingers. It wasn’t gentle, but not hard either. He worked me up and worked me open, and by the time he was done, I was so… I wanted him so bad.”

“Did he make you come like that?” Vic asks, his low voice breaking into my thoughts.

“No. I was close, though. But then he stopped and pulled away, and I remember wanting him to come back. To finish what he started. He ripped the rest of my clothes off and flipped me onto my back. His hands were so rough on my legs as he pulled them open, getting me ready for him. And then…”

My face is on fire, but my body hums with the arousal that comes from remembering the dream and recounting every bit of it. “And then I realized we weren’t alone. I looked up, and you two were there.” I glance between

Malice and Victor. “You were just watching, not saying anything. Not touching me.”

“Did you want us to?” Malice asks, his eyes glittering.

My thighs clench, and all I can do is nod.

The more I talk, the more turned on I get. I can feel my body throbbing, my pussy aching for something I can barely even name, despite the fact that I already came so hard tonight that it felt like an out-of-body experience.

But at least I’m not alone. The brothers all seem to be as affected by the story as I am. They’re all hard in their pants, very obviously so, and something about that knowledge makes my own arousal spark higher.

I did that.

They’re hard from listening to me.

From thinking about *me*.

“Ransom fucked me,” I say, my voice getting stronger as I go on. The more turned on I get, the less embarrassment I feel, as if it’s being burned away by the heat of my arousal. “It felt so good, and he just kept going. And you two kept watching, and that added to it. I could feel your eyes on me, feel you watching me like you’re doing now. It felt so wrong for you to see it, but that just made it even better somehow. Like I *wanted* you to see it, even though I shouldn’t. All of it was so much, and just when I was about to come, I woke up.”

The silence that settles in the living room when I finish speaking is so complete that I can hear the honking of a car several blocks away. Malice and Ransom are palming their cocks through their pants, and even though Victor has more control than that, I can see something that looks a lot like desire in his expression.

The tension in the air climbs even higher as the silence drags out for several long beats, and it feels like my words are still hovering between us. I don’t move, I barely even breathe, waiting to see what will happen.

Malice is the one who finally breaks the tension, shattering the quiet.

He’s settled in the large arm chair across from the couch, looking almost like a king on a throne, and he lifts his chin.

“Come here.”

His tone isn’t as harsh as it usually is, but it’s still an order, and my body is moving before I’m even aware of telling my limbs to do it.

I get up off the couch and take a step toward him, but Malice shakes his head, his storm cloud eyes glittering.

“No,” he says in a low voice. “Crawl to me.”

My stomach clenches, and my heart skips a beat as my whole body reacts viscerally to his words. I hesitate in place, not sure how to respond. I’m embarrassed by the command, and I should probably be angry about it. I’m not a dog for him to order to come to him on all fours.

But at the same time, I can’t deny I’m turned on by it too. My pussy clenches, wetness seeping into my already damp panties as my clit throbs hard, and a burst of heat shoots through my limbs.

I don’t understand why the filthier these men are, the more I like it.

Malice just waits, showing more patience than I expected from him. The air crackles with the same kind of energy that I felt once when I walked too close to a downed electrical line, and I get the feeling that if I tell him no, he won’t make me. But I also think that if I say no, this will stop. It will be the end of this strangely charged moment that’s formed between all of us.

And I don’t want that.

So I slowly follow his command, dropping down onto my hands and knees and crawling over to where he sits. My pants are still undone and hanging open, and I can feel the way the fabric shifts over my sensitive skin with every movement, my small breasts swaying slightly as I move my arms.

When I reach him, Malice leans down and grabs a handful of my hair at the roots, tangling his fingers into it. It’s just tight enough to sting a little as he tilts my head up, making me look at him. His gray eyes burn as he searches my face, and then he smiles—an expression that’s both comforting and terrifying on his harsh, feral features.

“That dream of yours was pretty tame, all things considered,” he murmurs. “It was nothing compared to what it would be like if we shared you in real life.”

I swallow hard, my fingers digging into the cool floor. “I know. I just… didn’t know what it would really be like.”

Malice tugs harder on my hair, drawing me in even closer.

“Do you want to, *Solnyshka*?” His voice is a deep burn. “Do you wanna know what it would really be like?”

Just that firm grip on my hair and the way he’s using it to control the movement of my head has me buzzing with arousal. He’s so powerful, so casually dominant, and everything about it is cranking up the desire inside me higher and higher. My pussy throbs in time with the beat of my heart,

and between that and the ache on my chest from the tattoo, I've never been more acutely aware of my body.

He's watching me carefully, his gray eyes studying every tiny movement of my face. So even though my nod is just a tiny jerk of my head, I know he sees it.

Malice's eyes glitter with something dark and enticing. "Good girl."

He lets go of my hair, and I fall back a little, sitting back on my heels as I look up at him. He undoes his pants, shoving them down enough to get them out of the way as he utters a single command.

"Then you can start by sucking my dick."

WILLOW

I STARE UP AT MALICE, shocked and turned on.

He looks down at me with that harsh, dominant look on his face that I'm becoming accustomed to. One eyebrow lifts slightly, like he's challenging me to back out now. To say no.

I swallow hard again, my head spinning. The old Willow would say no. She would shake her head and run from the room. But then again, the old Willow wouldn't be in this position in the first place. She wouldn't have crawled to him, and she definitely wouldn't be so wet it's starting to soak through her panties.

It's safe to say the old Willow has no place here at all.

So I don't say no. I don't back down.

Kneeling on the floor in front of Malice, I fumble with the opening of his pants, tugging it open even wider and pushing his boxers down as I take his dick out.

Oh. Oh my god.

I got a glimpse of it before, when he was fucking that woman, but that was nothing like having it in my hand. I can barely get all my fingers around it, and it's hard and thick, pulsing against my palm.

My stomach flutters at the way that feels and looks, and I can't stop staring at it. It's flushed a darker color than the rest of his skin, and the dark ink of his tattoos work their way around his shaft. My eyes widen slightly as I get a good look at them for the first time and realize I was right about what I thought I saw the night I walked in on him. I almost thought I must have imagined it.

I glance up at Malice, who hasn't stopped watching me this entire time. His face is all harsh angles, his eyes burning with an intense heat. The usual dark gray color of them has turned almost black, and I swallow before opening my mouth and easing it over the head of his cock. The taste of his skin hits my tongue, clean and warm. It fills my mouth, settling on my taste buds, and I lick the underside of his shaft experimentally.

I can feel Malice shiver, and the muscles of his thighs tense up.

"Have you ever done this before?" he murmurs gruffly.

Yes, but never willingly.

That seems like too much to go into right now, and besides, I can't even speak around the mouthful of his dick, so I just shake my head. I haven't. Not in any way that counts. Aside from that awful experience with Nikolai, I've only done this once before, with a john of my mom's. That memory isn't a good one, so I push back the thoughts of how he tried to assault me before he got turned off by the sight of my scars.

I want this moment to supersede those memories. I want it to be the one that I'll remember.

Because I chose this. I asked for this.

I crawled on my hands and knees for this.

And I want to make it good, even though I don't exactly know what I'm doing.

Paying close attention to Malice's reactions, I bob my head up and down slowly, sliding my lips over the first few inches of his thick shaft. There's no way I'm going to be able to fit the whole thing in my mouth, so I take my time, paying attention to the head first, my hand still wrapped around the base.

The salty leak of his precum changes the taste of him, and it makes me remember something I heard one of the dancers talking about at Sapphire once. As saliva begins to slide down his cock, I swirl my tongue around the smooth head, dipping the tip of my tongue into the little slit at the top where the beads of precum gather.

"Fuck," he hisses.

The quiet, strained sound goes straight to my head, inspiring me to work harder. I try to take more of him, sliding my lips down his shaft, letting drool spill from my mouth a bit to slick the way enough that it won't be uncomfortable. The parts I can't reach with my mouth, I tease with my hand, gliding it up and down slowly.

It feels a little awkward trying to get the right rhythm between my mouth and my hand, but I keep working at it, and surprisingly, it turns me on as well.

I never thought I'd enjoy something like this—being on my knees with a man's cock in my mouth—but there's something about it that makes my breasts ache and my clit throb.

"Use your tongue more," Malice instructs after a moment.

My eyes dart up to look at his face. His brows are drawn tight, and his irises are a little hazy from pleasure, which makes pride flare in my chest. At least I'm doing something right.

I pull back enough that I can start licking the underside of his cock more, following the line of a heavy vein that cuts along his thick shaft.

Malice nods, his hips bucking up toward my face as his hands curl into fists on the armrests.

"Good," he praises. "Just like that. You're doing so fucking good."

Every word that spills from his lips goes to my head, making me throw myself into it even more. I take him deeper until the head of his cock hits the back of my throat, making me choke a little.

I splutter around his dick but don't pull off, breathing through it until I can get back to work, bobbing my head, careful of my teeth.

"Fuck," Malice curses again. "I should've known you'd have a good mouth on you. And you learn quick. Take me deeper. Fit as much in as you can."

It's a daunting task with how big he is, and I'm worried about gagging again, but I do as he says.

I start slow, pulling back until just the head of him is still between my lips. Then I work my way down, letting more and more of that hard thickness fill my mouth and slide against my tongue.

I remember what he said about using my tongue more, so I do that, rubbing it along the pulsing vein, lapping at him while I take him as deep as I can.

My body heaves a bit when he hits the back of my throat, but I don't choke this time. My nostrils flare with the urge to breathe, but I fight through it, holding Malice there as deep as I can before I slowly start to pull back up.

"Jesus, she's a fucking natural." Ransom's voice floats up from behind me. "You're driving him crazy, angel. Hell, you're driving *me* crazy."

My eyelids droop, my jaw starting to ache as I work my way up and down Malice's cock, challenging myself to go deeper every time. Every time I slide up to the very tip of Malice's length, I hear a quiet chorus of noises from the men, deep grunts and muffled sounds of approval.

Malice lets me follow my own impulses for a while, allowing me to experiment with the rhythm and tempo. When he speaks again, his voice is rough and strained.

"Take your pants off," he growls out. "Let Ransom and Vic see your pretty pink pussy. Let them see how fucking wet you are."

I whimper around his cock, and judging from the hiss he gives in response, he likes the way the vibrations of the sound feel.

"Go on," he grunts. "Let them see what a fucking slut you are, and how much this turns you on."

My pussy clenches in response, my clit pulsing so hard it makes me shiver. My nipples go rock hard as his filthy words wrap around me, dragging me into a sea of arousal.

For a second, it's hard to remember there are other parts of my body besides my mouth and the hand that's wrapped around Malice's dick. I've been so focused on this task that adding anything else to the mix seems like a tall order. But I manage to get my brain to kick into gear, and I work my pants and underwear down, kicking them off and away along with my shoes.

All it takes is the feeling of air on my most intimate flesh for me to know that Malice is right. I truly am soaked from all of this. I can feel wetness seeping from me, trailing down my inner thighs, and judging by the groan Ransom gives from behind me, he and Victor can *see* it.

"Touch yourself," Malice commands, staring down at me with hooded eyes. "I want to see you get yourself off like this."

When I don't immediately move to follow that order, his hand shoots out, tangling in my hair again. He pulls me off of his cock, and there's a wet pop as my lips leave his shaft.

I gasp at the sting of pain and the sudden burst of oxygen in my lungs, meeting his eyes as he leans down toward me a little.

"I said, touch yourself," he rumbles. "Make yourself come while your mouth is wrapped around my dick. While my brothers watch. While you're on your fucking knees for me, sucking on my cock like it's the best fucking thing you've ever tasted."

My whole body feels like it’s on fire. Just like in the dream I had about the brothers, this feels wrong but so fucking good. The touch of shame and embarrassment that burn through me when he talks to me that way only serve to heighten the arousal I’m feeling, making my head spin.

My chest heaves as I draw in a lungful of air and then slide a hand between my legs, slipping my fingers against the soaking wet folds of my pussy. I find my clit, giving in to the desire for friction there, and I moan out loud from how good it feels.

Malice watches me for a second then nods, satisfied. “That’s good. Keep it up,” he says. “Now go back to making your mouth useful.”

He releases his grip on my hair, and I don’t even need the command. As soon as I can move freely again, I lunge for his dick again, getting my mouth around it once more. The fresh pleasure coursing through me goes right to my head, and I start sucking his cock in earnest. One hand is buried between my legs, stroking my clit in fast, tight circles, and the other wraps around Malice’s cock again, holding it steady while I lick and suck at it. It’s harder to keep my balance with only my knees on the floor, both of my hands occupied with other tasks, but I manage.

I drag my tongue up the whole length of him, leaving a trail of my own spit behind. That makes it slick when I start pumping him with my hand, my mouth laving and sucking at the head and the few inches beyond it that I can take comfortably.

It starts to get messier, wetness dripping down his cock and coating my hand as I bob my head faster, working myself in time with how I’m sucking Malice off.

My head is empty of anything other than the need to come, and I push myself harder, my fingers flying over my clit and dipping into my pussy just enough to send sparking ripples of pleasure shooting down my spine.

I’m wrapped up in it, so turned on I can barely breathe, and the feeling of his brothers watching us heightens every little thing. From where Victor and Ransom are sitting, I know they can see it all—both the way I’m touching myself and the way my lips are wrapped around Malice.

It’s just like my dream, even though I’m the one getting myself off instead of Ransom, and I give a soft, muffled cry around Malice’s cock as the pleasure starts to hit me full force.

“Are you gonna fall apart for us?” he rasps, bucking his hips up toward my mouth a little. “Are you close?”

Yes.

I don’t pull back enough to answer with words, but I make a muffled noise around his shaft, nodding as much as I’m able. My fingers are sticky and wet now, but I don’t let up. I rub my clit hard and fast, chasing the growing burn of sensation that builds and builds like a spark turning into an inferno.

“Keep my dick in your mouth when you come,” Malice commands, his hand threading through my hair again. “Don’t fucking stop.”

When my orgasm hits, it slams into me like a wrecking ball. I shake like a leaf where I’m kneeling on the floor, rubbing myself through the waves of intense pleasure and moaning around Malice’s thick length. He hisses a breath out through his teeth, and I squirm in place, my body tense and tight as the orgasm works its way through me.

“Fuck. *Shit*,” Malice grunts.

His cock pulses in my mouth, getting impossibly harder, as if he’s right there on the brink himself, and something in me is hungry for that. To feel and see him lose it, to have him come on my tongue and fill my mouth up with the evidence of his pleasure.

But just as I start to suck harder, he pulls me off his cock again, leaving me gasping for breath.

I make a soft noise of disappointment, and Malice smiles down at me, his expression almost tender, softening the harsh lines of his face.

“Look at you. We’re turning you into a little cock slut already,” he murmurs, his voice low and rough. His thumb drags over my bottom lip, wiping away a little of my saliva and his precum. “Don’t worry, *Solnyshka*. You’ll get what you need.”

Gripping my arms, he pulls me up and turns me around so that I’m facing out toward the rest of room. Then he tugs me down onto his lap, my back pressed to his chest. I feel so small like this, perched against the massive bulk of his body. Even though I just came, my heart is still racing, and that low hum of arousal in my veins hasn’t died down yet. If anything, it’s burning even hotter now.

I can feel Malice’s cock between my ass cheeks, hard and throbbing, and it makes a fresh gush of wetness seep from me.

Malice spreads his legs, and since my legs are draped over the outsides of his, it has the effect of spreading mine too—forcing my thighs open and showing off my pussy to his brothers.

As if they haven’t already seen plenty of it.

Now I can *see* Ransom and Victor watching me, though, and it makes my cheeks burn with heat.

Ransom has his pants open and his cock out, and he strokes himself slowly, like he’s not trying to get carried away just yet. The metal balls of the ladder piercing in his dick catch the light, and I’m transfixed for a bit, watching him touch himself.

In contrast, Victor doesn’t even have his pants undone. He’s gripping the armrests of the chair where he sits, his gaze locked on me and his jaw so tight that the muscles stand out from his face.

Malice wraps one arm around my waist, dragging me in closer. His body is like a furnace, giving off an incredible heat that sinks into my skin and turns me on even more. He dips his head, nipping at my earlobe, and when he speaks, the deep rumble of his voice makes me moan softly.

“They’ve been watching you this whole time, you know. Now you get to watch them. Tell Ransom what you see,” he murmurs. “Tell him what you’re staring at so hard.”

“I…” I swallow, trembling as my stomach flutters. “I see his cock.” The word comes out of my mouth a whole lot more easily than it did earlier when I was describing my dream. “He has a piercing. Lots of them. He’s touching himself. Jerking off.”

“I bet he’s thinking about having you touch him instead,” Malice rumbles. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

I nod, because there’s no point in denying now. I stopped denying what I want the minute I got down on my knees and crawled across the floor to Malice.

“Tell him,” the man beneath me commands. “Tell Ransom how much you want him.”

“I do,” I breathe. “I want you so bad. Every time you touch me, every time you kiss me, I just want *more*.”

And it’s true. I’m not just parroting back what Malice tells me to say. My body pulses with the truth of it, and my pussy clenches around nothing, wanting to be filled so incredibly badly.

I don’t care if it hurts, don’t care that it’s my first time. My virginity has never brought me anything but heartache, coveted by men who wanted me for only one thing. I was never trying to keep it, never trying to hold on to

some antiquated idea of ‘purity.’ I just hadn’t found anyone I wanted to give it to.

But now?

Now I have.

“Holy hell, angel.” Ransom groans, fisting his cock a little harder, tightening his grip around the base like he’s trying to avoid coming too soon. “You’re killing me.”

Malice snorts, but he doesn’t make a move to lift me off his lap, keeping me right where I am. His large hands come up to play with my breasts, palming and squeezing them and tugging at my nipples.

“Pull harder.”

The voice from my left shocks me, and I whip my head over to lock eyes with Victor. He’s still gripping the arms of his chair, his gaze glued to me. Malice hums behind me, pinching my nipples and tugging them roughly away from my body, and my back arches as jolts of pleasure shoot through me. My head falls back against Malice’s shoulder, and I writhe on his lap, pressing against his thighs in an effort to squeeze my legs together as my clit starts screaming for friction all over again.

Victor lets out a sharp breath, his Adam’s apple sliding up and down as he swallows.

He knew.

I don’t know exactly what he saw on all those cameras in my apartment, but something he saw made him certain I would like this. My heart thumps heavily as I process that fact, but I can’t focus on it very well. Malice, clearly pleased with the result of following Vic’s advice, is rolling and pinching and tugging on my nipples, torturing them in a way that’s turning me into a panting, whimpering mess.

“You want Ransom so much, *Solnyshka*?” he asks, his breath gusting over the shell of my ear. “Then beg him. Beg him to let you have his cock.”

“Please.” There’s no hesitation. The words pour out of me immediately, interspersed with breathless, inarticulate sounds. “Please, I want your cock, Ransom. Please give it to me.”

“*Umnitsa*.” Malice says something in Russian, and although I don’t know what it means, the way he says it makes my toes curl. “You did such a good job begging. So he’s going to fuck you.”

WILLOW

I GO STILL, blinking in surprise at the certainty in Malice's tone. I've been talking to Ransom, but Malice is the one who has me on his lap, completely naked and draped over him—and yet he's telling me that his brother is the one who's going to fuck me.

Turning my head, I crane my neck a little to look at him. He hasn't come yet, and I can feel how hard he still is, his massive cock a hot line under my ass.

"I thought…"

I bite my lip, trailing off, but he gets my meaning. He chuckles darkly, sending another vibration though me.

"You picked Ransom as the first one to fuck you in your dream," he says, and there's a bit of possessive jealousy in his voice. "So that's how it'll be in real life."

His hand grips my thigh hard and then works its way up to my pussy. He pushes two fingers into me, not bothering to be gentle, and even with how wet I am, the intrusion is overwhelming and unexpected enough to take my breath away.

"Besides," he murmurs. "If I took you first, I'd break you. I don't fuck gentle."

My heart slams against my ribs like it's trying to break free. I remember watching him fuck that woman, the way he slammed into her, taking her hard and fast right here in this room. There was definitely nothing gentle about it.

Malice works his fingers a little deeper into me, and when he adds a third one, I arch against him, my body leaning into the stretch of it. It burns

a bit, but it’s like when he was tattooing me. The pain blends with the pleasure, and it’s a heady cocktail that makes me lightheaded and even more needy than I already was.

When he has me writhing on his lap, twisting and gasping, Malice pulls his fingers free. He lifts me up and sets me on my feet, and I manage not to fall, even though my legs are wobbly and my knees feel like they’re made of jelly.

“Go on,” he says, jerking his chin toward his brother.

Slowly, I walk across the room to where Ransom is sitting on the couch. He grins at me, and it’s such a contrast from Malice’s dark brand of teasing. He reaches out a hand, and I take it, letting him pull me down onto his lap, straddling him.

Between the two of us, we get his pants the rest of the way down, and then his cock is right there, standing up hard and thick. It slides right against my pussy as we roll our hips together, and I whimper softly, my body giving a pulse of need.

The nerves of my first time are still there, though, and even though Ransom isn’t quite as big as Malice is, his cock is still pretty fucking huge… and it’s going to have to fit inside me somehow.

“Hey.” Ransom slides a hand to the back of my neck, resting there, warm and sure. “Look at me.”

I do, finding his eyes and peering into those ocean blue depths. His lips quirk up in a smile, and he pulls me down into a warm kiss.

This is familiar, and I go with it, melting against him. If he was trying to get me to relax, it’s working, and some of the anxiety around losing my virginity fades away to the background, drowned out by the warm undercurrent of how much I want this.

When we pull away, I’m breathing hard again, and Ransom’s eyes are darker. He keeps his hand at my nape, sliding his fingers through the wispy hairs there.

“Are you on anything?” he asks.

I know what he means, and I nod. “I’ve got an implant.”

It’s something I started pretty much as soon as I got my first period, back when I lived with my mom, and I’ve gotten it replaced every three years like clockwork. After I was almost raped at her house, I didn’t want to take any chances.

A devastating smile pulls at his lips. “Good. Because I want to fuck you raw. Nothing between us. I’m clean.”

My heart stutters, and I nod. Bracing my knees on the couch, I rise up a little, and Ransom finds my slick opening with the head of his cock.

“Take a deep breath for me,” he murmurs, and I do. He nods in satisfaction, his thumb rubbing gently over the back of my neck. “Good. One more.”

I do that too, and then gasp softly when I feel him start to work himself into me. It’s like when we were in his bed, and he was teasing me with just the tip. Then, I wanted so desperately for him to push all the way in, but now that he’s doing it, I wonder how this is even going to work.

He feels so much bigger inside me than he looked, and the stretch burns and aches. Inch by inch, he works his way in, up until he meets a firm resistance that stops him. His face is tight, and he exhales on a muttered curse. But he’s still gentle for the first bit, giving me a chance to catch my breath and get used to the feeling of being partially impaled by his cock.

Then he catches my gaze, and I can see the hunger clear on his face.

“Are you ready?” he murmurs, his voice so low that I know it’s meant only for me.

I nod before I have time to overthink it, and Ransom’s hips surge upward. He punches the rest of the way into me, breaking through the resistance and seating himself fully inside me.

I cry out because it does hurt a little, but more than anything it feels… overwhelming. His cock is a hot, throbbing line inside me, and I can feel the metal of his piercings against my inner walls, rubbing insistently as he moves.

The pace is steady at first, but Ransom doesn’t hold back. It’s like he’s making up for all the waiting he’s had to do by pushing into me again and again, getting my body used to the feeling of being fucked like this. One of his hands is still at the back of my neck, and the other grips my hip, helping to guide my movements as our bodies sync up.

My head is already spinning, and I hold on to Ransom to steady myself. I wasn’t prepared for how this would feel. I never thought that losing my virginity would feel like a monumental thing.

But it does.

The friction is incredible, hot and impossible to ignore, and every time Ransom moves inside me, my body kicks off a tumbling cascade of

pleasure, sending sparks flying through my veins and making me moan.

“Fuck,” he curses. His fingers dig into the flesh of my hips as he pulls me down onto him over and over. “Fuck, I knew it was going to be like this. You’re so fucking tight. You take me so well, angel.”

“What does she feel like?” Victor asks.

“Incredible.” Ransom groans, sounding breathless. “So fucking good. Hot and slick and so wet she’s dripping all over me. She’s squeezing around me like she doesn’t want to let go.”

I moan as I listen to him describe me to his brothers. Although I don’t get the impression that Ransom has fucked as many women as Malice, I’m sure he’s been with plenty of them before. And yet, he talks about fucking me like it’s a revelation. Like it’s something special, something that’s new for him too.

“How does it feel for you, *Solnyshka*?” Malice asks, drawing my attention back to him.

When I glance over my shoulder, he’s leaning forward in his chair, taking it all in. His cock is still hard, but he’s not even touching himself, just watching us intently.

It takes a long moment for me to be able to find my voice, and I use that time to take stock of how I feel to answer his question. The soreness from Ransom’s first hard thrust is fading, and something else is creeping in to take its place. His cock drags against my sensitive inner walls, and the piercings add even more friction. Every time he buries himself balls deep in me again, I get a jolt of sensation so strong it almost takes my breath away.

I’ve slid a hand between my legs plenty of times before drifting off to sleep or in the bath, and I’ve always been able to get myself off easily enough when I wanted to, but it’s nothing compared to this. Nothing compared to the feeling of being impaled on Ransom’s cock, and the stretching, sliding slickness of him fucking me.

Malice laughs when I don’t answer for a long moment.

“You fucked the words out of her head,” he notes. “I knew she was a perfect little slut, deep down. All that good girl shit was just a ruse.”

I shake my head, because it wasn’t, but Malice just smirks when I look at him.

“It will be when we’re finished with you,” he promises.

It’s a dark vow, and it sends a little thrill through me.

I should be afraid of it. I shouldn’t want everything he’s promising so badly. But I do.

My heart pounds, and I feel almost high from the endorphins and adrenaline flooding my system. I can feel myself getting closer to falling apart, every thrust of Ransom’s cock pushing me toward the drop off into pure pleasure. I bounce on his lap, breathing hard, trying to tether myself to him so that I don’t spin off into the ether or something.

Ransom’s hands on my hips are almost bruisingly tight, and I focus on those, and the points where we’re connected. I look down my body to see where his cock is disappearing into me, catching the glimpses of it, shiny with my arousal, slick with the mess we’re making.

“Fuck!” I gasp, and three deep voices groan all around me. “Fuck, Ransom, please, I—”

“Come on, angel,” Ransom pants. “Come on. I want to see how fucking gorgeous you’re going to be coming on my cock. Let me see it. Let all of us see it.”

I nod eagerly, and the steady, measured pace of his thrusts falls away. He starts bucking up, slamming his cock into me in hard, deep bursts. Every time it hits the deepest spot inside of me, I get that much closer, and when it’s finally too much, I gasp out a strangled sounding cry, coming harder than I ever have in my life.

Everything shudders and trembles with the pleasure, and my vision goes white and blurry around the edges. It takes me two or three tries to get a deep enough breath to fill my lungs, and while I’m trying to hold on, Ransom keeps pumping into me.

He finally finishes with a low groan, burying his face against my chest as he comes inside me, flooding me with the hot spurts of his release.

I feel like I’m floating for a little while as my body slowly starts to relax. My head is a buzzing, hazy mess, and my skin is almost too sensitive. It’s been so much all at once. So many feelings, so much pleasure.

Ransom reaches up and cups my face, and I blink owlishly for a moment, finally managing to focus on him.

“You still with us?” he asks, smiling at me.

I nod. “Y-yeah. That was just… a lot.”

His smile widens, and he pulls me down into a kiss. It’s hot, almost impossibly so, but there’s a sort of tender edge to it. A sweetness that’s different from everything that came before it.

When we break apart, he pulls back enough that he can look at me, his eyes tracking over my face.

“That was incredible,” he tells me. “You did so good. Damn, pretty girl, I’ve wanted to do that for a long fucking time.”

That makes my heart beat faster, and I swallow before whispering, “So have I.”

With one more kiss, he lifts me up and off his lap, and I flop down onto the couch. My limbs feel heavy and wobbly, and my head is still spinning a bit.

“You know one difference between your dream and real life?” Ransom asks, reaching over to trail his fingers up the side of my thigh.

“What?”

“In real life, Malice doesn’t just like to watch.” His palm comes to rest on my hip. “What do you think? Can you take more?”

My stomach flips over, fear and desire warring inside me. I know for a fact that sex with Malice isn’t going to be the same as sex with Ransom was. He’s not going to be gentle, and he’s going to take what he wants. My body has already been through a lot, and there’s a lingering soreness between my legs from being fucked for the first time.

But I’m already nodding.

The word, “yes,” is already falling from my lips.

And as if all Malice was waiting for was that single word, he’s up and out of his chair, stalking toward me. Victor is still sitting on the other chair, so there’s nothing and no one between Malice and me as he comes over, his pants hanging off his hips and his cock jutting out like a tattooed monster. He doesn’t pause when he reaches me, just grabs my ankles and drags me to the end of the couch.

I yelp as I’m pulled across the cushions, but I don’t put up any resistance as he props my ass up on the arm of the couch, spreading me wide open.

Heat burns in my cheeks, and the shyness I felt earlier resurfaces for long enough to make me try to close my legs. That voice in the back of my head is whispering that this is too much, too *wrong*, that I shouldn’t be enjoying it as much as I am, and I squirm in place, breathing hard.

I don’t see Malice draw his hand back, but I do feel the sting when he slaps my inner thigh lightly, the sound ringing out in the living room.

“Don’t hide from me,” he says. “I want to see you. *All* of you.”

I swallow hard, heat pooling low in my belly as I slowly spread my legs open, holding his gaze the entire time.

He nods in approval as he watches, sliding one hand over my stomach.

"I saw how you looked that night," he murmurs. "When I was fucking that girl on this couch. You were standing in the shadows of the hallway, looking like a deer in headlights, but I could see the fire in your eyes too. How turned on you were. You wanted to be in her place, didn't you?"

"I…" The words stick in my throat, my head suddenly full of the memory. Malice fucked her like he *owned* every bit of her pleasure, and my body hummed with a desire I was terrified to admit existed.

"Say it," Malice demands. "Tell me the truth, *Solnyshka*. Did you want to be the one I fucked? Did you soak your panties watching her take my cock?"

He grips a handful of my ass in his strong fingers as he says it, and I cry out, shaking in his hold.

Liquid fire burns through me as I think of the way my body reacted, almost against my will. It seems like it was a long time ago, even though it wasn't. But I was a different person then, as if living with these men has fundamentally altered my DNA.

"I—I wanted it," I finally manage to get out, and it's barely audible. I swallow and try again, staring up at him as I breathe hard. "I wanted it. I wanted to be her."

Malice grins, predatory and possessive.

"I'll fuck you better than her," he promises. "I'll make you feel so good you'll get addicted to my cock. I'll give you every fucking thing you want."

There's a second where I'm stunned by his words, but then he's pushing his cock into me, and everything else flies right out of my head.

As soon as his crown presses past my entrance, he drives into me hard and fast, and I feel like all the breath is punched out of me. He's so, *so* fucking big, and before now, I wouldn't have thought my body could even stretch enough to take him.

But it can. It does, giving way to let him inside, and it hurts and feels good in equal measure. Pain and pleasure blur until they become a single thing, spearing through me and making it hard to breathe.

I open my mouth, but no sound comes out. All I can do is gape up at Malice, trying to remember how to draw oxygen into my lungs as he

pistons his hips. It's brutal and intense, and he doesn't let up. Each thrust slams into me with a hard finish, his cock slamming in as deep as it can go.

His face is a mask of savage strength, his jaw clenched, his lips pressed together so hard they're almost white.

It's everything I've been wanting from him. Everything I've thought of but couldn't admit I craved—ever since the first time he touched me, and especially since that moment we shared in the darkened work room when he said he'd destroy me if I let him.

He wasn't lying. If I wasn't already opened up from coming several times and having Ransom inside me, he probably would have broken me.

Even still, it's almost too much. Almost more than I can take.

Malice's body slaps against mine, and I can feel his balls hitting my sensitive flesh every time he drives himself into me. His fingers are wrapped around my hips, leaving marks on top of where Ransom already left his. I'm going to be so fucking sore tomorrow, but I don't even care about that. I'm anchored right here in this moment, where I'm being split open and ripped apart with the pleasure of Malice's punishing thrusts.

"Look at you," he growls hoarsely. He stares down at me, his pupils huge and dark in his gray eyes. "Look at you fucking taking it. So perfect. This is what you wanted, isn't it? This is what you needed."

I nod, opening my mouth to say something back, but there's no way any coherent words are coming out of me right now. Not when I can barely breathe.

It feels like his cock is filling up every part of me. Like if he fucked into me hard enough, deep enough, I would feel it everywhere. I'm losing my mind slowly, any thought that's not about the feel of him leaking out of my ears and blowing away on the wind.

I can't even focus on the feeling of Ransom and Victor watching this, because my head is too full. Or empty. Too *something*.

I feel used up and wrung out, but beneath all of that, there's a burn of pleasure, and I can tell when Malice is getting closer to coming apart himself because his thrusts slow down a bit, turning even deeper.

"I want you to come for me," he growls. "I want you to lose it on my cock."

I shake my head, because I don't think I can. The pleasure is there, but I just feel so worn out. Malice's eyes glitter as he leans forward a bit, pinning me with a heavy stare.

“You fucking heard me,” he murmurs. “You’re gonna come for me. Let go. I know you can do it.”

The fingers of one hand find their way between my legs, and he starts rubbing at my clit with firm, purposeful touches. He strokes me there and slams his cock into me, and I feel like I’m going to fracture into pieces. I gasp, writhing on the couch, clawing at the cushions for something to hold on to.

When the pleasure of the growing orgasm hits me, it’s edged with pain. But it hurts so good, just like Malice’s cock.

He doesn’t stop, doesn’t let up until I’m bucking on the couch, the fourth orgasm of the night being ripped out of me as if it’s coming from the depths of my very soul. I give a broken sounding wail as I come apart, my body jerking and going tense.

Malice doesn’t let up for a second. He keeps driving into me as I clench around his cock, pushing his way in even as I tighten around him, shortening up his strokes as he bares his teeth. Then he buries himself inside me, a harsh cry spilling from his lips. His cock throbs, jerking a few times as he grinds his hips against mine before finally going still.

When he pulls out of me, I feel so empty, and traces of his cum and Ransom’s trickle out down my thighs. Without Malice holding me up, I slide back down onto the couch, worn out and wrecked.

“Look at you,” Ransom murmurs. He brushes a hand through my hair from where he sits on the cushions near my head, leaning over me so that his face appears upside down in my field of vision. “You look so gorgeous. Did we wear you out?”

I nod, staring up at him as I try to remember how to use my limbs.

“Vic doesn’t fuck,” Ransom continues. “He’s never been with a woman. But you can watch him. Do you want to watch him like he watched you?”

I nod again, more emphatically this time. I’m still too exhausted to sit up, but I turn my head, gazing over at where Victor is seated on the chair nearby

He still hasn’t taken his cock out, but as I watch, he undoes the button and tugs the zipper down, shoving his boxer briefs out of the way. He licks his palm and then wraps his hand around his cock, letting out a shaky breath as he starts to jerk it with the same precise movements he uses to do everything.

I stare, transfixed. It's the first time I've ever seen him do something like this. The first time I've watched him have a physical reaction to something. He moves with practiced ease, clearly used to doing this himself, and I wonder if he's ever had a woman so much as put her mouth on him, or her hand.

My tongue darts out to lick my lips, and I don't look away for a second, greedy for more of him. Malice and Ransom were more vocal as they came apart, but the only sign that Vic is close is the subtle, sharp inhale and the way his eyes go a little unfocused with pleasure.

His fingers tighten around his cock, and some of that measured control falls away. His strokes become more erratic, less precise, and he hunches forward a bit, jutting his hips out, jerking his cock faster and harder as he hits his peak. His breathing goes ragged, and I savor those sounds and the fact that he's coming undone like this for me.

Because of me.

When he comes, it's with a low, shuddering breath, and the hot, sticky jets of his cum spurt out to coat his hand.

The room goes quiet, filled only with the sound of all of our breathing, and it's only now that I realize how *loud* it's been. How loud I was as Ransom and Malice fucked me. Victor's hand is still wrapped around his length, and he keeps gripping himself as he rises from his chair and steps closer to me, his gaze tracking over me as if he's trying to memorize every detail.

"Why don't you give him a little taste of your mouth?" Ransom murmurs as Victor nears us. "Show him what he's missing."

My heart stutters in my chest, and I somehow find the energy to sit up. Vic is standing close enough by now that when I lean forward, I can dart my tongue out to lick the tip of his shaft, tasting his cum in my mouth.

Vic hisses a breath, grabbing a handful of my hair and pulling me away from his cock. When I look up at him, his eyes are wide and his jaw is tight, his nostrils flaring with sharp inhales.

We stare at each other for a moment, then he lets me go, stepping back.

"Look at yourself, *Solnyshka*."

Malice is still standing at the end of the couch, and the command in his voice draws my attention.

I look at my body, my gaze moving downward from where I can see my newly tattooed chest shake with the force of my heartbeats. There are

fingerprints on my hips, and white, frothy cum is smeared between my legs, tinted pink from the slight bit of blood that must've come from Ransom taking my virginity.

I'm a mess. I look filthy and wrong. I've never been so sticky before, never had anyone's cum on me. *In* me.

But I feel… good.

As if something inside me has cracked open, leaving me a different person.

Ransom leans in closer to me as his brothers loom above us, running his fingers through my hair gently. He tilts my face up to meet his, his eyes warm and bright. When he leans in to kiss me upside down, I meet him halfway, savoring the softness of the gesture after everything that's happened tonight.

"You did good, pretty girl," he whispers against my lips. "So fucking good."

WILLOW

I WAKE up the next morning with Ransom's arm thrown over me, his body tucked in behind mine in the bed.

Everything feels warm and hazy, and I drift in the comfortable space between sleep and waking, letting my eyes stay closed as I breathe deeply.

It takes a few minutes for my brain to fully switch on, and I blink as the events of last night come flooding back to me. All of it plays out in my head in vivid color and sound, and I feel my cheeks flushing just from the memories.

The food, the teasing, the tattoo talk. And then… everything else.

It almost feels like a dream, like something that happened to someone else. But I know it was me. I have the headache from too much booze and not enough water to show for it, and my chest is sore from where Malice tattooed me. And that's not the only place that's sore.

When I stretch in the bed, my pussy aches lightly, tender and swollen from the pounding it took last night. I shift a little and hiss in pain, my body protesting the movement. It's a quiet noise, but it's enough to disturb my bed partner all the same. He yawns and stretches, and when his arm moves from where it was thrown over me, I feel a little pang of disappointment, missing his touch already.

Ransom rolls me onto my back, going up on one elbow so that he can look down at me. He's always so handsome like this, with sleep ruffled hair and lines on his cheek from the pillow, and there's already a smile tucked into the corner of his mouth.

"Are you okay?" he asks, looking me over.

I nod. "Yeah. Just a little tender from… you know."

His smile grows, and he reaches down, sliding his hand beneath the oversized shirt I'm wearing to cup his palm over the mound of my pussy. He massages it gently, working the outside of it while his middle finger slips between my folds and finds my clit with ease.

He's not trying to work me up, but the feeling of his hand sliding against me makes my body react immediately, my core getting wet and my nipples going hard and tight.

I take a deep breath, letting the feeling wash over me, and it does do something to ease the achiness a little, even if I am still sore.

"Is that any better?" he asks.

"A little bit. I think it's just going to take some time. It was…" I blush, glancing away from him. "It was the first time I've ever done anything like that."

Ransom chuckles, dropping his head a bit to skim his nose over my temple. "Honestly, pretty girl? I would never have guessed that if I hadn't already known. You're a natural, and you're fucking stunning when you let yourself go."

The praise goes to my head, just like it did last night, and I find myself smiling back at Ransom, a giddy feeling expanding inside my chest.

He withdraws his hand from between my legs and brushes my hair back from my face. The strands are still a bit wild and messy from last night, since I haven't showered. I cleaned up with a wash cloth afterward, but I was too tired to do anything else.

"You know, when you first came to stay with us, we all agreed we weren't going to fuck you," he says, running his fingers through a small tangle in my hair.

"Why?" I ask, biting my lower lip.

"We didn't want to complicate things. We were supposed to be focusing on finding out who was asking questions about Nikolai's death and keeping you out of that person's hands. If we'd fucked you, you would have gotten under our skin."

"I would have been a distraction," I murmur.

Ransom nods. "Yeah. And you know how we are," he teases, tugging gently at the lock of my hair. "Very business oriented."

I snort, but then something occurs to me. "So… why did you and Malice fuck me last night, then? What changed?"

Ransom's eyes gleam in the early morning light that trickles into the room. "I guess we just realized it was too late for all that. You're already under our skin. There's no hiding it anymore. No denying it."

My heart skips a beat. Hearing him say that does something to me. I have no idea what's going to happen now, but it's nice to know that I'm not the only one who feels… changed. That I'm not the only one who feels like I've been infected by the others. I've affected them too, and that's something I never expected.

When I first met them, they seemed so larger than life. Like angry gods that strode out of the darkness to wreak havoc and then returned to the shadows. Invulnerable. Untouchable. As if nothing could break through their armor.

But I did.

The three of them may have turned my whole world upside down, but I've left my mark here too.

"I'm glad you broke your rule," I whisper.

Ransom chuckles warmly. "Me too."

He drops his head to press a kiss to my forehead, then gets up out of bed. He stretches, and I watch shamelessly, enjoying the way the morning light plays over his skin. If he's getting up, I guess I should too, so I drag myself out of bed, wincing a little when my body complains about the movement. I walk gingerly, and Ransom notices.

He considers me for a moment, then strides over, scooping me up into his arms.

I yelp in surprise, throwing my arms around his neck and holding on automatically. "What are you doing?"

"I have an idea. Come on."

He carries me down the hall to the bathroom, kicks the door closed, and sets me down on the counter. Then he turns the taps on and starts to fill the tub, drawing a bath for me.

"Oh," I breathe as the warm water sends steam curling through the air.

"This should help," Ransom tells me, glancing over his shoulder as he kneels down to test the temperature.

Once the tub is full, I slide off the counter and get undressed. I was so wiped out last night that I didn't even put on my usual pajamas. Ransom gave me one of his shirts to wear, so I went to sleep in that.

Now I peel it off, leaving it on the floor in a heap.

Ransom watches me, his blue-green eyes locked on my body. Some of that old self-consciousness flares as his gaze tracks over my scars, but it's nowhere near as bad as it used to be. I don't feel the need to cover myself up and hide them away, and when Ransom reaches out to help me into the bathtub, I don't flinch at his touch.

I settle into the water, and for a second, it's too hot. But then my body gets used to the temperature, and I let out a soft, contented sigh. The heat feels good on my sore muscles, soaking into my skin and easing the aches that were causing me pain.

"This is really nice," I murmur, and Ransom smiles.

"Can I join you?"

I glance around at the tub. "Yeah, if there's enough room."

"There's always enough room for a bath with a pretty girl."

He winks, then strips out of his boxers to get into the tub with me. It's a tight fit, but we manage to make it work. I scoot forward a little, and he gets in behind me, tucking me between his legs and pulling me back against his chest.

I lean against him, closing my eyes for a moment as steam rises around us, feeling more at peace than I would have thought possible.

For a while, we just soak in silence. There's the occasional splash of water as one of us shifts position a little, and Ransom starts trailing his wet fingers up and down my arm. It's the one with the most scar tissue, so the feeling is a little muted, but even with the dulled sensation, I shiver at his touch.

He grabs a washcloth and some body wash from the shelf behind us and lathers the cloth up, dragging it over my skin as he starts to wash me up.

After everything that happened last night, I should feel absolutely filthy, but there's no frantic need to get clean. Ransom is washing dried sweat and cum and whatever else from my skin, but I don't want to wash it from my memories. The reality of what happened last night will linger even after this bath is over.

And I'm glad about that.

"I know I already asked you about these," Ransom says after a while, breaking the silence as he traces the edge of one of my scars. "And if you don't want to talk about them, you don't have to. But will you tell me what happened? I want to know."

I hesitate, the way I usually do when this subject comes up, but none of the usual defensiveness flares. Ransom doesn't sound disgusted or horrified, just curious, and I relax against him, nodding.

"They're from burns," I say, my voice soft. "I got them when I was really little. I was in a fire."

He lets out a low whistle, running the cloth down my arm and over the worst of the scarring. "Do you remember any of it?"

I shake my head.

"No." Then I consider it for a moment and add, "Maybe. I dream about fire sometimes. About being trapped in a place filled with heat and smoke. I can never see anything, and I can't even really breathe or scream for help. But I don't know if that's a real memory from when I was little or just something my brain cooked up from thinking about it so much and wondering what happened."

"Maybe a bit of both," Ransom suggests.

"Maybe," I reply with a shrug. "But I'll never know either way. I don't know much at all about my life before whatever this accident was. I wish I did. I wish I knew who my real family was, at least. I assume they died, and that's how I ended up in the system. But I have no real idea what happened."

I run my fingers along the scarring on my thigh, trailing them through the soapy water.

"It's weird," I continue quietly. "To miss people I never knew. But sometimes I get this pang in my chest." I draw one wet hand up and touch my chest, right above where Malice tattooed me. Right where I can feel my heart beating. "Sometimes I feel this… sadness. This kind of longing. And I know it means I miss them, even though I don't really know who they were."

Ransom is quiet for a beat, then he wraps an arm around me. "I get that."

I turn a little in his arms, looking up at him curiously. "But didn't you know your parents?"

He nods. "Yeah, of course I did. I just mean I know what it's like to miss someone who isn't here anymore. I miss my mom."

From the way all the brothers talk about Diana, it makes sense that they still miss her to this day. But it feels like there's something else Ransom isn't telling me. There's something behind his eyes that flickers and fades

when I peer at him, but I don’t push it. There are probably hundreds on hundreds of secrets the three of them have, and even if they started telling them to me for some reason, I’d probably never know all of them.

Besides, there’s still an end date on our time together—a moment in the not too distant future when they’ll go back to their lives and I’ll go back to mine, when the forces that pushed us together in the first place will fade away. And even though I know that will be for the best, it makes me want to savor the last bit of time I have with the brothers.

So it’s easy to settle back into Ransom’s arms and let the heat of the water keep soothing my aches. It probably *shouldn’t* be easy, considering who he is, but ‘shouldn’t’ stopped mattering a while ago.

All of this is something I shouldn’t be doing.

And yet, I feel so relaxed and happy in his embrace. For the first time in a long time, maybe in my whole life, I feel cared about.

I just want to soak that up a little more.

RANSOM

I SING along under my breath to the music I have playing in the shop, tightening a nut before stepping back to give the whole thing a once-over.

"Looks good," I mutter to myself, reaching for the rag tucked through my belt loop and wiping grease off my hands.

It's good to be working again.

Business has been a bit light since we pissed off Ethan Donovan and his gang. Well… since *Malice* pissed them off. But that's the thing about being a family. A unit. We're all in this shit together, and Vic and I have his back no matter what. Besides, he did exactly what all of us wanted to do in that moment, when we saw Donovan's lackey pawing at her.

Still, we're gonna have to figure out what the fuck to do about Donovan scaring potential customers away, and we need to do it soon. It's probably too late to fix things enough to make a deal with Ethan, and I can't even picture Malice going along with that anyway. It's not like he's going to apologize, and realistically, he shouldn't have to.

They're the ones who fucked up first.

That means we're going to have to hunt down other business.

And if Ethan decides to fuck with us more, we'll have to take him on more aggressively. Malice did have a point when he said we can't afford to show weakness. Looking weak invites people to go right for the fucking jugular.

So that's on the list of shit we need to take care of too. Sometimes it seems like as soon as we cross one thing off, another thing gets added, but that's just how it is. We handle shit as it comes to us and try to get ahead of it when we can.

I toss my rag into the pile in the corner, making a mental note to get those washed before Vic comes down and has a fucking conniption about the mess.

I head out of the garage and into the part of the warehouse we live in, smiling a little as I think about how I started this day.

Willow was so warm and pliable this morning in bed, and then so open and soft in that bath we took. She felt so damn perfect in my arms, and if she hadn't been so sore, I would have fucked her right there in the bathtub.

Now that I've been inside her, I want to fuck her over and over again. I can tell I'm getting addicted already, but I don't think anyone could blame me for that. Not even Malice and Vic could, considering they're as deep in this as I am. I wasn't lying when I told her that my brothers and I have already been wrecked by her.

When I walk into the kitchen, Willow is there, sitting at the table peeling an orange. I just spent a good bit of the morning soaking with her in the bath, but I smile at her like I haven't seen her in weeks, then lean down to kiss the top of her head, lingering for a bit.

It's a possessive gesture, kissing her like this because I can. Because I want to, and I know she likes it.

"Hey." She looks up at me with those radiant brown eyes when I pull back.

"Hey, yourself."

She offers me a segment of her orange, and I take it, biting into the sweet citrus with a grin. Then I lean in and kiss her on the lips, tasting the orange on her mouth.

"Mm, tastes better like that," I tease. "Oranges are alright, but *you're* my favorite flavor."

Her cheeks flush a pretty shade of pink, and she fumbles with the next segment of the orange, popping it into her mouth and looking away from me.

I chuckle, finding her shyness fucking adorable—especially after everything we did last night. She was shy then too, although it was definitely a lot more than a kiss and some teasing then. But that's one of the appealing things about Willow. Even after all that, and every other thing that's happened to her, she hasn't lost her sweet innocence. Maybe she never will.

Heavy footfalls announce Malice's arrival before he strides into the kitchen, and he stops short when he sees Willow. She glances up at him, their gazes locking, and I swear I almost expect a bolt of lightning to crack through the kitchen. Clearly fucking her last night didn't get her out of his system, and I'd guess the same is true for Willow.

Hell, I can relate to that.

"How do you feel?" he asks gruffly.

"I'm okay," she murmurs, the flush on her cheeks that was beginning to fade deepening instead. "Just, you know, sore."

He nods, his eyes narrowing a little as he sweeps his gaze over her, as if searching for any signs that she's lying to him. I watch them in silence, a little amused to see the hint of concern in his gaze. I doubt he ever asked any of the dozens of women he's brought home over the years if they were okay afterward—probably didn't even speak more than two words to them once he finished fucking them.

But none of them were Willow.

"It'll wear off," he tells her, that same gruff tone in his voice. Clearly satisfied that she's alright, he crosses the kitchen to open the fridge, pulling out stuff to start making a sandwich.

"You must be used to pain." Willow chews on her full bottom lip, her eyes flicking over him. "With all the tattoos you have and everything."

He shrugs a shoulder. "Yeah. If you spend your life being afraid of pain, you'll never do shit."

Willow hesitates, and it looks like there's something else she wants to ask him. When she speaks again, the next words come out in a rush. "When you got your cock tattooed, did it hurt?"

I smirk, both at the question and the fact that she rushed out the word 'cock' like that. Last night, she was begging for it, but that was a very different vibe than right now in the kitchen.

"Yeah, it did," Malice answers. "It was one of the most painful things I've ever been through. And that's saying something."

"Then why did you get it?" Willow furrows her brows. "If it hurt so bad?"

He turns to look at her, the butter knife he was using to spread mustard on his bread in his hand. "To prove I could."

She blinks. "That's it? You just… wanted to prove something?"

“I wanted to know how much pain I could handle,” he grunts. “Plus, it sends a message.”

“What kind of message?”

“It shows anyone who wants to fuck with me how strong I am. That’s important. They have to know you’re not some fucking weakling, or they’ll figure out where you hurt the most and try to take advantage of it.”

Willow looks like she’s considering that. Then something wicked glints in her rich chocolate eyes, and she tilts her head to one side.

“So… do you just whip your dick out anytime you’re negotiating with an enemy? So they can see your tattoo and realize how badass you are?” Her lips tug to one side. “Huh. That’s an interesting intimidation tactic.”

Malice’s expression darkens, and I choke on a laugh.

She’s bold, I’ll give her that. Not many people would have the balls to tease Mal behind his back, let alone to his face. But this beautiful, bright girl doesn’t seem afraid of him at all in this moment. There was a time where she barely spoke in his presence, when him slamming doors and being all… him would have had her flinching and trying to find a place to hide from his mood. But not anymore.

A hell of a lot has changed since the night she first got here.

“Yeah, Mal,” I drawl, crossing my arms over my chest. “Maybe you should’ve tried that when Ethan and his boys came over to negotiate. It could’ve really turned things around for us.”

He jabs the butter knife in my direction, scowling. “Fuck you.”

Willow makes a little noise like she’s holding back a laugh, and I smirk at her as Malice turns back to making his sandwich. A moment later, she gets up from the chair she’s perched on and pads over to the counter, putting half her orange onto the plate Malice got out. He looks down at it and then back up at her, lifting an eyebrow.

“It’s a peace offering,” she says, biting her lower lip and actually managing to look contrite.

“I don’t want your fucking orange.”

Her face falls a little. “Oh.”

With a swift yank, Malice tugs her closer to him. His large hand frames her jaw as he angles her head and presses his lips to hers in a hard kiss. She whimpers, her body arching against his as he devours her mouth for a long moment. When they break apart, she wobbles a little, looking like she might collapse.

"*That's* a peace offering," Mal tells her, his voice dropping. "And I accept."

Leaving her blinking dazedly in the middle of the kitchen, Malice takes his plate over to the table, jerks out a chair, and drops into it, tearing into his food.

A moment later, Vic comes walking in. He glances around at all of us in the kitchen, and although his expression is shuttered, the vibe in the room changes yet again. When he briefly locks eyes with Willow, I know he's got to be thinking about last night, just like the rest of us are.

It was a big fucking deal for him, and I'm not sure I should've pushed him like that at the end, even though it needed to happen. As far as I know, Vic hasn't ever really done anything with a woman before, but I'm glad he was there last night.

It needed to be all of us.

My older brother pulls his gaze away from Willow after a moment, and I can practically see him snap back into business mode.

"I've got a lead," he says. "On where Ilya is. It's a possible spot where he's been staying."

"How possible?" Malice asks, leaning forward.

"Very. He's been seen there multiple times, coming and going. He's likely using it as a base or a hideout while he gathers information."

"That's good enough for me," I say. "I can go try to take him out."

"I'm going with you," Malice tells me shortly, then lifts his chin at Vic. "We'll handle that. You've got other shit to take care of today, yeah?"

Vic nods. "I do. I'll start working on that this afternoon."

Willow's eyes widen. "You're going after Ilya *today*?"

"We have to." Malice shoves back from the table, picking up his plate. "We can't afford to waste time."

"He's… dangerous, right?"

"If he's anything like his brother, and everything seems to suggest that he is, then yes," Victor replies matter-of-factly.

She glances between the three of us, worry clear on her face.

It feels good knowing she cares what happens to us, that she's worried about me and Malice going into a dangerous situation. Something in me warms at that, and I pull her into my arms, nuzzling against her neck.

"Hey, don't worry," I tell her. "We're going to be fine. I know this is new to you, but this isn't our first rodeo."

“I know, I just…” Willow trails off, shaking her head. She doesn’t seem to have the words to say how she feels, and I don’t push her to find them.

Instead, I pull her into a kiss, lingering a bit and then dipping in to steal another one.

When I pull away, I catch Malice watching us.

Things have mellowed between him and Willow, and the attraction between them is clearly off the fucking charts, but he doesn’t have the same ease with her that I do. Hell, he doesn’t have that ease with *anyone* other than me and Victor, and that’s just because he’s known us for our whole lives.

He shoves the last of his sandwich into his mouth and snaps into business mode, taking point the way he does.

“Vic, send us the details,” he says. “Ransom, let’s go. We need to move now, while we have the chance.”

I nod, letting go of Willow and straightening up.

“Be careful,” she says, looking at me and then to Malice. He holds her gaze for a second, then he dips his head in a little nod of acknowledgement and sweeps out of the room to go get armed up.

“That’s his way of saying we will,” I tell her, then follow him out.

We take Malice’s car, the coordinates Vic sent us punched into the GPS. It looks like it’s nothing more than a hotel on the outskirts of the city, random and low profile.

“The kind of place someone stays when they’ve got something to hide,” I point out as we drive over.

Malice nods in agreement. “Yeah. Too bad he’s not as good at hiding as Vic is at finding shit.”

He slows the car as we get close, and we park a few blocks away and then walk over, not wanting to draw attention to ourselves as we check the place out from across the street. The hotel is small, just two floors, and only a half dozen rooms or so on each floor. The outside is run-down and shitty, with chipped paint and cracked brick. Every so often, someone comes out of the front door, either to smoke a cigarette or head to their car and drive off.

For the most part, it’s quiet, far enough away from most things that there’s not a lot of traffic on the road, and judging from the number of cars in the spots, it’s not a very full house this afternoon.

“We’re in luck,” I murmur to Malice.

My brother grunts, narrowing his eyes as he stares at the building. “If he’s here.”

It’s impossible to pick out which car or room might be Ilya’s, and Vic’s digging didn’t turn up a room number. All he could give us was what he’d picked up on the nearby cameras, that Ilya usually comes and goes around the same time, leaving in the morning and coming back in the evening.

We’re a little ahead of the window in which he might be returning, and the two of us are prepared to wait as long as it takes.

“We need to find a good position,” I say, eyeing the area around the hotel. “Our best bet is to ambush him when he gets back.”

Malice grunts in agreement, and we cross the street, keeping our eyes peeled. Eventually, we find a little brick alcove around the side of the building where the dumpster is tucked away. It smells like ass, but it has a perfect view of both the front and back of the hotel, and if we duck down behind the half wall that blocks off the dumpster, we can’t be seen from either area.

“You think this is close enough?” I murmur to Malice.

He leans out, checking the distance. We’re a little farther away than I’d like from some of the rooms at the far end, but it’s more important to not be seen.

“I can make it,” he says, nodding. “And he’s a big fucker. It’s not like we’re gonna miss him.”

I snort at that. “Let’s hope you’re right. I don’t want to fuck this up.”

He nods, his brow furrowed and his jaw tight.

We spend the next couple hours trying not to breathe too deeply as we wait for Ilya to return. I do my best not to let my thoughts wander to Willow, knowing I’ll get too fucking distracted if I do, but it’s hard. All my mind wants to do is replay last night on an endless fucking loop.

Finally, an elbow digging into my side snaps me out of my thoughts, and I glance at Malice to see him nodding across the way.

I follow the path of his gaze and catch a glimpse of Nikolai’s brother walking across the parking lot.

Go time.

Wordlessly, the two of us draw our weapons. Malice nods and slides forward a bit, still well hidden but with a better view to aim.

He takes a breath, lines up his gun, then fires.

It’s a clean shot, and it should hit the mark. But a fraction of a second before he pulls the trigger, a car backfires on a street nearby. Ilya tenses, glancing over his shoulder—and that movement is enough to bring his head out of the path of the bullet. It grazes his temple, and he grunts, whipping his head back.

With a speed born from years of training, he recovers from his shock in an instant, yanking a gun from the inside of his jacket and firing back in the direction the bullet came from.

“Fuck!” Malice curses, firing blindly around the edge of the building as another of Ilya’s shots hits the dumpster with a metallic ping. “Shit, we gotta go. Go, go!”

He fires again, then shoves me backward. We lunge out of our hiding spot and take off running down the alley behind the hotel, moving as fast as we can to keep our distance.

Behind us, I can hear furious feet pounding on the pavement, and the sound of Ilya swearing in Russian as he chases after us.

We can’t let him see our faces. If he finds out who’s after him, we’re fucked.

We dash down the alley and then turn into another, jumping over a small chain-link gate that blocks off part of the alley for delivery trucks or something. Malice vaults it, and I follow, and we tear down the side street, sprinting back to where we left our car.

A bullet whizzes past my head, and I grit my teeth as I put on an extra bit of speed. We vault another gate, and I hiss a curse as a sharp bit of metal stabs into my thigh when I come down on the other side. The cut burns, but there’s no time to stop and make sure it’s okay.

We burst out onto the street where we left the car, racing toward it and leaping inside. Malice revs the engine and peels out, and I glance back behind us. Just as we turn the corner onto a cross street, I catch a glimpse of Ilya running out onto the road we were just on.

“Fuck!” Malice snarls the word as his hand balls up into a fist, slamming against the steering wheel. “God fucking dammit.”

I grit my teeth, because I feel the same fucking way. We were so close. If that shot had hit its mark, we would be done with this shit. We’d have Ilya down, and the only person who seems to be interested in coming after us for killing Nikolai would be dead.

But instead, we now have another problem.

“Did he see us?” Malice glances into the rearview mirror. “Did he get a good look at the car?”

“I don’t think so.” I play it all back in my mind, trying to be sure. “I don’t think he saw our faces either. So he shouldn’t be able to figure out who we are.”

Malice mutters a curse in Russian, a muscle in his jaw jumping. “Yeah, but now he knows someone’s after him. His guard is up, and we lost the element of surprise.”

I nod, frustration filling me. He’s right. We had a golden moment, a perfect chance, and it fell through our fingers. Now it’s going to be harder to get to Ilya next time. He was already being careful to cover his tracks, and now he’ll be even more wary. People like him don’t usually survive long unless they’re paranoid and powerful, after all.

“He probably has a lot of enemies,” I say, trying to find some silver lining on this pile of shit. “Maybe he won’t put two and two together that this attack was about Nikolai.”

Malice doesn’t seem to share my forced optimism. He scowls at the road ahead of us, shaking his head. “Maybe, but I think he’s just gonna assume it’s related. His brother dies, and then a few weeks later, someone tries to take him out too? That shit’s a little too coincidental.”

He has a point there, and I sigh, slumping down in the passenger seat. My thigh hurts from where the metal bit into it, and there’s a rip in my pants, blood already seeping into the fabric.

“We’ll still get him,” Malice says, and it’s the voice he uses when he means fucking business. “We’ll still find a way to kill him. I don’t care if we have to stake out every goddamned hotel in Detroit, we’ll find a way to end this. We can close this goddamned chapter once and for all.”

I nod, holding back my worries, since there’s no reason to speak them out loud. As nice as it would be to put a cap on this whole thing and close the chapter on our revenge for our mother’s death, it feels like shit is spiraling out of control.

Every move we make ends up getting fucked somehow, and there are too many enemies piling up and crawling out of the woodwork.

Eventually, it might be too much.

WILLOW

IT FEELS like it's been forever since Malice and Ransom left.

Victor has himself barricaded in his room, and I don't think he'd be happy if I knocked on his door and asked him to keep me company until his brothers return home, so instead, I end up pacing in the living room, jumping every time I hear a car go by the warehouse. Each time it's not them, it puts me in a worse mood, and I bite my lip, dragging it between my teeth.

It's odd, caring so much what happens to them.

When this whole thing started, I wouldn't have cared one way or the other if some bigger, badder criminal took out the Voronin brothers. It would've meant they'd be out of my hair, and as long as he didn't come for me, then I would have been fine with it.

But now I'm worried sick about them.

They made it sound like it would be so easy. They have the element of surprise, and Ilya's guard shouldn't be up yet. They'll go right to his hotel and take him out, and the problem will be solved.

Easy. Simple. Right?

But as it gets later and later, those words get harder to believe.

It's dark outside by the time the door finally opens. Heavy footsteps come down the hallway, and Malice strides into the living room first, with Ransom right behind him, limping a little bit. All it takes is one look at their faces to know that something went wrong.

"What happened?" I ask, glancing between them.

"He got away," Malice bites out, yanking a gun out of the waistband of his pants and slamming it down on the end table by the couch.

“Mal had a good shot on him,” Ransom adds. “It should’ve worked. But he flinched at the last fucking second, and we got into a shoot-out. Shit got dicey, and we had to get out of there before he got a good look at us.”

He steps forward as he speaks, still limping, and I realize his jeans are soaked with blood.

“Oh my god. Ransom!” My jaw drops as I rush over to him. “What happened?”

He shakes his head, sinking down onto the couch. “It’s fine. Just a scratch I got while we were running.”

“You need to deal with it, though,” Malice tells him. “Let me see it.”

Ransom rolls his eyes, but he unzips his pants and peels them down enough to reveal a nasty looking gash on the side of his leg, just a few inches up from his knee. The edges of it are ragged and dark with blood, and I suck in a breath, the sight making my stomach flip over.

Malice takes a quick look at it, his gaze practiced and assessing. Then he leaves and comes back a moment later with a first aid kit and a bottle of whiskey. He sets them both on the couch before crouching down in front of Ransom to poke and prod at his wound.

Ransom grabs the bottle and takes a deep swig from it, wincing either from the burn of the booze or from whatever Malice is doing to his cut.

“This needs a couple stitches,” Malice says. “It’s too deep.”

Ransom makes a face. Then he reaches for me, snagging me around the waist with one arm and pulling me down onto the couch beside him. His hand sneaks under my shirt, brushing across the skin of my belly, and I shiver at the touch before pinning him with a look.

“What?” he says, looking back at me with wide, innocent eyes that don’t fool anyone for even half a second. “I need this to help ease the pain. Weren’t you just concerned about me a second ago?”

I roll my eyes at that, but don’t protest. Instead, I settle in against his side and let him touch me, watching as Malice soaks a gauze in some disinfectant and starts cleaning blood away from Ransom’s wound.

He hisses in pain, and I stare down as more of the wound is revealed under all that blood. I’ve seen two dead bodies now, and it was horrifying both times. But there’s something about seeing one of these men hurt that makes me realize all over again how dangerous their lives are.

They’re not gods.

They’re breakable.

They're *killable*.

Even though they came out of the encounter with Nikolai and the one with Carl unscathed, there's no telling if that will always be the case. They work well together as a team, and all of them are quick on their feet and skilled enough with weapons that they've survived until now, but…

Seeing Ransom hurt makes concern twist in my gut.

It feels odd to realize how much I care, but I can't deny that I do. I was worried before they left to go kill Ilya, feeling like there was a chance something could go wrong. And I was right.

Sure, it wasn't anything terrible, and a cut that needs a few stitches is probably par for the course for men like this. But still. Maybe the next time they go after him, it'll be worse. Maybe they'll get hurt worse. Maybe…

Victor steps into the room, and I jump, because I was so busy thinking that I didn't even hear him on the stairs.

He looks at the scene in the room and doesn't even need to ask, just the way I didn't. If they'd managed to take out Ilya, the atmosphere would be very different.

"You didn't get him."

"No," Ransom agrees, shaking his head. "He got away, but so did we. And he still doesn't know who we are."

Vic curses under his breath, but nods. "That's something, I suppose. It could have been much worse. What happened to your leg?"

They tell the story of running away from Ilya, keeping ahead of him enough that he couldn't get a look at them, and Ransom getting cut on a gate. It's not as horrifying as it could have been, but that doesn't do much to settle my mind.

Malice finishes stitching Ransom up, gathering bloody gauze and stuffing it into a bag to throw out.

"We need a new plan," he says. "And we need one fast."

"Now that he's spooked, he's probably going to move locations," Ransom points out. "I wouldn't stay someplace I'd just gotten shot at, even if it is a good spot to hide out."

Malice cracks his knuckles, looking irritated. "He seems like the type to work alone, which is at least one thing in our favor. We shouldn't have to deal with any bodyguards or paid goons, no matter how spooked he gets."

"That's an assumption, though," Vic counters. "And one we don't have nearly enough information to make. He could have an army backing him

up. Or some chunk of the Russian mafia that he'll call in now that he's realized he's being targeted. We don't know enough. *Still*."

It's easy to tell that he's as irritated with their lack of information as Malice is by their failure tonight.

I listen to them go back and forth, throwing ideas out and shooting them down or agreeing with each other. It seems like this is their process, something they do all the time, and I wonder for a moment if they've forgotten I'm even here, considering how openly they're talking and planning in front of me. But then I realize Ransom is still touching me idly, and I'm still tucked against him.

There's no way he's not doing that intentionally.

So they have to know I'm listening, and they're just… fine with it.

It's just another reminder of how much has changed between us. It wasn't all that long ago that Malice made a point of telling me I wasn't allowed to sit in on their meetings, and now I'm sitting right here while they hash things out.

"We can track his movements," Vic says. "And it's probably reasonable to think that he's going to be keeping an even lower profile now that he knows someone is after him. I'll try to find out where he goes, and we can move from there. If we work quickly enough, then he won't have time to shore up his defenses, and we can take advantage of him being caught off guard. Hopefully."

"And next time, he's not walking away from it. Next time, he dies," Malice grunts firmly.

Ransom nods. "We need to take care of this before it can bite us in the ass. We have enough shit doing that already." He reaches for the bottle of whiskey that's still on the coffee table, takes a couple swigs, then rolls his neck and shoulders with a groan. "I've gotta get to bed. Today took it out of me."

He keeps his arm hooked around me, keeping me close as he stands up. I go along with him, not fighting his hold. The two of us head up the stairs toward the second floor, and although I can feel Malice and Victor watching our ascent, neither of them makes a move to stop us.

Once we reach his bedroom, Ransom closes the door and then takes a step closer until he's right in front of me. He reaches up, pushing my hair back behind my ear before cupping my face in both hands.

When he leans in to kiss me, warm and soft, I melt against him, heat moving through my body. It's a slow trickle at first, like molasses being poured, but it's undeniable. I put my arms around his strong waist and lean into his kiss, humming against his mouth, my eyes falling closed. His hands move, and one of them skims down my back, stopping just before he gets to the curve of my ass and resting there almost possessively.

It makes my heart beat faster, and when we part for breath, I can taste him on my lips.

I think again about the feeling of Malice's and Vic's eyes on us as we left, and I wonder how they feel about us being up here together. Now that the ban on fucking me has been lifted, they have to know what was on Ransom's mind when he brought me up here, the same way I did.

It makes me nervous to ask, but I really want to know. So I screw up my courage and whisper, "Have you three… ever shared women before? Like you did last night?"

Ransom smiles, not seeming bothered by the question at all. "Yeah, we have. Malice and I have fucked the same girl before. Not Vic, though."

I nod, biting my lip a little. I'm not sure how that answer makes me feel. It's good to know they won't be jealous of each other, but at the same time…

Ransom seems to read the thoughts that are bouncing around in my head, and he tips my face up with fingers under my chin.

"Nothing and no one has ever been like you, angel," he says. "We've shared before, but no one else has ever gotten to us the way you do."

The way he says that, so sincere and earnest, goes right to my head. A quiet, hungry noise spills from my lips, and he grins, pulling me into another kiss. There's nothing soft about this one. It's deep and searing, and when he plunges his tongue into my mouth, I can feel his piercing rubbing against my tongue, working me up.

I moan against his lips, wrapping my arms tightly around him, and when he presses a thigh between my legs, I can't help but grind against it.

All thoughts of what happened earlier tonight fly out of my head. There are plenty of things to worry about, but right now, I'm so focused on the way Ransom's mouth feels on mine that I can't think about anything else.

When his hands start wandering, I arch against him, practically begging him to touch me more. I'm still sore in places, but I don't care about that.

My body burns with heat and desire, and it's as if now that I've had a taste of what it feels like to get fucked by these men, I can't have enough of it.

Maybe Ransom feels the same way, because when he breaks away again, his eyes have gone dark and hot. He scoops me up and brings me over to the bed, laying me down gently before climbing up to loom over me.

"You're so beautiful," he murmurs, and I flush warmly as he starts kissing at my neck.

He leaves a searing line of open-mouthed kisses along my pulse point, all the way to my collarbones, and I find myself writhing and panting underneath him.

"Please," I gasp out, dragging a hand down the front of his shirt. "Please, Ransom."

"What do you want, pretty girl?" he murmurs. "Tell me what you need."

"You," I pant. "Please. Touch me. I want your hands on me."

He smirks and sits back a bit, grabbing the hem of my shirt to drag it up and over my head. His eyes rake over my skin, and the usual prickle of self-consciousness about my scars barely registers at all as he slips a hand behind me to unhook my bra.

"Fucking beautiful," he says again, lowering his head to continue pressing kisses everywhere he can reach as he tugs my bra off and tosses it on the floor.

When he takes one of my nipples into his mouth, I arch up with a sharp cry, twisting the fingers of one hand into the bedsheets. Ransom hums, alternating between laving at the sensitive peak with his tongue and sucking it between his lips. He twists and teases my other nipple with his fingers, and I can feel myself getting wetter and wetter for him.

I moan out loud, the sound filling the quiet space of his bedroom, and he nips at my breast in response, careful to avoid my fresh tattoo. He kisses his way down my stomach and then makes quick work of getting my pants and panties out of the way, leaving me spread out naked on the bed for him.

"You look so damn good like this. Like a feast," he says, flashing a grin up at me.

"Ransom," I whimper. "Please…"

He spreads my legs with his hands, pushing them open wide enough that he can settle between them. He drags two fingers down along my folds,

and I shudder at the sensation. My flesh is still battered and sensitive, a little swollen from everything that happened last night, and as blood rushes down between my legs, it only heightens those feelings.

“Poor thing,” he murmurs. “You’re still so sore down here, aren’t you?”

I am, but I don’t care. I want him.

He doesn’t wait for me to answer, just keeps going, sliding his fingers back up to tease at my clit. “We really did a number on this tight little hole of yours, didn’t we?”

“Y-yeah,” I gasp out. “Oh, fuck.”

The last word comes out on a sharp cry as Ransom dips his head and starts licking the same line his fingers just followed.

I writhe under him, feeling the pleasure building already as he eats me out.

He’s worked me up before with his hand, but it feels different this time. I don’t know if it’s the lingering soreness from getting fucked or what, but everything feels more sensitive now.

Ransom circles my clit with his tongue and then drags it back down to my hole. He licks around the entrance for a bit and then stiffens his tongue and thrusts it inside me. I can feel his piercing in a whole new way like this, and I squirm, moaning his name and reaching one hand down to tangle in his thick hair.

“Oh god,” I breathe. “Ransom, your mouth. Fuck.”

He chuckles, and the sound is half muffled against my swollen flesh. When he lifts his head a bit, I can see that his lips are slick from my arousal, and he makes a show of licking them slowly, dragging his tongue along the bottom one and then the top, catching my attention.

“You love this, don’t you?” he teases. “Being a bad girl. Giving in to the things you feel and not holding back.”

I whine softly, my core mourning the loss of the heat of his mouth. His fingers replace his lips and tongue a moment later, and I arch my back, the heat in my body climbing.

“You look so good like this,” he continues. “Letting yourself go. Taking what you want. You’re a damn siren, you know that?”

His mouth joins his fingers again, and he keeps licking at my pussy, working me up with his tongue as he pumps one finger slowly in and out of me. When he adds a second finger, I cry out breathlessly. The stretch is

there just like it was last night, but it doesn't burn as much as it did before. Maybe I'm getting used to it.

The soreness is fading, and I don't know if that's because Ransom really is kissing it better or because the endorphins surging through me are making everything warm and gooey with pleasure so that I don't register any pain at all.

Either way, I start climbing toward my orgasm, breathing harder and shaking under Ransom's ministrations.

I breathe out a little plea, right on the cusp of falling apart, and he doubles down, thrusting his tongue into me as deeply as he can, his face absolutely buried between my legs.

"Come for me, pretty girl," he murmurs, his voice muffled. "Come on my face."

Stars burst in front of my eyes as my hips buck upward, and he moves with me, keeping his tongue pressed right where I want it as he licks me through my orgasm, leaving me a panting, flushed mess on the bed.

"God, I fucking love the sounds you make."

Ransom presses one more kiss to my clit, then crawls his way back up so we're face to face. When his mouth finds me, I can taste the sweet tang of my own release on his lips and tongue. It's addicting, getting these little hints of what I taste like to him, and I find myself kissing him deeper, seeking out more of it.

When he finally pulls away, his breathing is ragged, and I can see the thick bulge of his cock in his pants. He pulls back enough that he can undress himself, and then he's back on top of me again almost immediately, as if he's drawn to me like a magnet.

"What about your stitches?" I ask, wincing as I glance down at the side of his leg.

He chuckles, the head of his cock grazing my opening. "They'll be fine. If I pop 'em, I'll have Malice redo them tomorrow. But nothing could keep me from wanting to be inside you right now."

Worry still twists inside my gut, but as he starts to press his thick length into me, it becomes harder and harder to focus on anything else. It's still a lot to take, and my body has to work to adjust to it, but it feels more natural than it did last night. His piercings rub against my walls, and I gasp softly at the sensation.

Somehow, without the haze of alcohol and endorphins from the tattoo and the intensity of the other two brothers watching, it's like I can feel *more*.

I can focus on Ransom and the way he pumps into me, slowly at first, but quickly picking up the pace.

"Fuck," he groans, dipping his head to rest in the hollow between my neck and shoulder. "You're so fucking tight, angel. I can feel your pretty little hole gripping my cock like it doesn't want to let go. Goddamn, you feel so good."

My cheeks flush darker at that, and I don't know how to respond. So I just start moving my hips a little, lifting up to meet Ransom halfway into the thrusts. The room fills with the sounds of sex—our harsh, ragged breathing, Ransom's grunts of pleasure, the soft noises that spill out of me as he starts pounding into me deeper—and I lose myself in all of it.

I can hear his skin slapping against mine, and even though he's not fucking into me with the brutal need that Malice did, it's still so much. It still feels like he's lancing through me with his cock, keeping me split open and impaled.

And I love it.

I love the friction and the heat, and the way he kisses me every so often, grounding me in the moment. I cling to him like a life line, my hands gripping at his shoulders, as all of the feelings colliding in my chest threaten to overwhelm me.

Is it always going to be this much? Or does it feel this way because I'm still so new to all of this? I don't know, and I can't keep my mind focused on that question. All I can do is try to weather the sensations, trying to stay afloat in the waves of pleasure and the torrents of emotion that race through me.

The warm aftershocks of my first orgasm start to grow and build toward a second climax, and I moan Ransom's name, my nails digging into his shoulders as I hold on for dear life.

"I'm so—" I manage to get out.

"I've got you. Fuck, I'm close too. Can you wait for me, baby? I want to feel you clench around me when I come."

Honestly, I don't know if I *can* wait. I wasn't sure if my overstimulated body could work up another orgasm, but now that it's close, it seems to be barreling down on me like a runaway train. Ransom keeps rocking into me,

the base of his cock grinding against my clit every time he bottoms out, pushing me closer and closer to the looming abyss of pleasure.

“Ransom! Ah!”

My pussy goes tight around him as I fall apart, trying to focus on remembering how to breathe.

He isn’t far behind me, and he pumps into me a few more times, swearing under his breath as his forehead rests against mine.

“Fuuuuck,” he groans, finally collapsing on top of me as the pulses of his cock start to slow.

We lie there together for a long time, our bodies pressed together, sweaty and breathing hard. It takes several minutes for my heart rate to slow down and everything to stop tingling, but eventually, the sleepy warmth of the afterglow settles in, and I stifle a yawn.

Ransom notices it and laughs, nuzzling against me.

“We should clean up or something, but I can’t be fucked right now,” he mumbles. “Too tired.” He nips at my neck. “Besides, I like the idea of you falling asleep with my cum in you.”

I don’t think that’s very hygienic, if I remember a few conversations I overheard back at Sapphire correctly, but I can’t bring myself to care all that much right now. I’m too comfortable, and some part of me wants to stay marked up like this, sticky and content. So when he rolls off me, I just nestle into his arms, letting his release trickle down over my thigh.

“How are your stitches?” I murmur sleepily.

“Can’t feel them at all. You’re magic, pretty girl. The best kind of medicine.”

He presses a kiss to my hair, tucking my head under his chin as he pulls me closer against his body. Less than five minutes later, I’m asleep.

WILLOW

I WAKE up in the middle of the night, feeling sore but cozy. Ransom is tucked up close behind me, and I don't want to move at all. But I kind of need to pee, and I really don't want a UTI, so after debating for a short moment, I manage to wriggle out of his hold.

He's a heavy sleeper, and the combination of the long night and the booze he drank while Malice stitched him up seem to have him out like a light.

A smile tugs at my lips as I watch him sleep in the darkened room, then I throw on a shirt and slip out of the room as quietly as I can, moving down the hall to the bathroom so I can pee.

I sigh with relief as I empty my bladder, then wash my hands quickly and leave the bathroom, ready to crawl back into bed and go back to sleep. But as I start to head down the hall, I notice a light flickering from Victor's room.

It has to be so late it's early by now, probably sometime around three a.m., and usually Victor has his door closed, so I'm surprised he's still awake.

Instead of heading back to Ransom's bedroom, I move down the hallway to Vic's room to poke my head in. Honestly, I'm kind of glad he's still up. I've been wanting to talk to him after everything that happened the other night. He didn't participate as directly as his brothers did, but he was still there. It still changed things between us, and I want to clear the air.

It's impossible to ignore the way I'm so drawn to him, and I think he feels something for me too, despite the fact that he can be so closed off sometimes. I've been learning so much more about him lately in the small

little moments we've shared, and if I'm being honest with myself, I want more of that.

The more I piece together of his story, the more I'm starting to understand him.

He's broken in some ways, because of what their dad did to him. Because he spent so much of his childhood being groomed to be some kind of brutal solider instead of just getting to be a little boy, so now it's hard for him to tap back into his own humanity sometimes. It calls to something in me—maybe the part of me that feels like I was never loved and cared for the way a person should be, just used and treated like a burden.

I stick my head into his room, about to whisper his name, when I realize that I was wrong.

He's not awake after all. He's stretched out on his bed, sleeping soundly, his face smooth and more relaxed than usual.

My eyes dart from him to one of the computer screens on the large L-shaped desk set against the walls, and I realize the flickering light wasn't coming from him working on the computer, but something playing on the screen. It's a video of some kind, and I frown, stepping farther into the room as the images flash across the screen.

I tiptoe across the space, squinting a little in the darkness to see it better. Then I clap a hand over my mouth to muffle a gasp of shock.

This isn't just some random video.

It's images of *me*.

There's footage of me in my apartment, oblivious to the fact that I'm being watched. There's a shot of me in the bathtub, my eyes closed as I touch myself. The sound is muted, but when my mouth moves, I know I'm moaning, and my face flushes at the memory even as my blood runs cold with shock.

There's a clip of me on my bed, spread open and flushed, with Malice's head between my legs as he eats me out. I watch as I thrash around, bucking and arching against him, clearly losing myself to the pleasure.

There's even blurry footage from the golf course where Colin attacked me and tried to rape me. In the clip, I can see him kissing me and groping me. It doesn't show me trying to fight him off, and the angle and image is so bad that it looks like I'm leaning into him. Like I want it. The two of us end up on the ground with him on top of me, and then the setting changes again.

This time, it’s a living room with a couch and two chairs, and four people occupying the space.

I recognize it immediately, and ice crawls through my veins.

This is from the other night.

It’s a wide shot, the camera probably hidden somewhere near the base of the stairs. I’m on my knees in front of one of the chairs, sucking Malice’s cock, taking as much of him as I can into my mouth. At a certain point, I look up. My eyes are glassy and wide, and even without the sound on, it’s obvious that I’m begging him for something.

After another few seconds, it cuts to me riding Ransom’s cock, his hands gripping my hips, my head thrown back as I take it. Then to Malice, hunched over me, fucking me hard and viciously. Using me like a rag doll. Then there I am sprawled out on the couch, already a filthy mess, looking fucked out and wrecked. Victor comes over, his cum spattered hand gripping his shaft, and I lean up, licking his dick like I’m starving for it.

My stomach clenches, a wave of nausea rushing through me. I feel like I’m going to be sick.

What the fuck? What the fuck is this?

The fact that there’s footage of me from my bathroom means that Victor *did* have a camera in there after all. When we went through all the ones in my apartment, he never said anything about that one, and I know it’s not because he forgot about it. He never forgets anything, and he was watching me in there. Watching me do things. He just never told me. He lied.

He has to be the one who hunted down footage from the golf course after finding out what happened to me. For what? I’d already told Malice who was responsible, and they went after Colin, so why would he need the video?

On top of that, they taped everything that happened the other night. That’s what hits me like a punch in the gut.

They recorded it. They made a fucking *sex tape*.

My stomach is in knots, and I chew on my lip, staring blankly at the screen as the video footage starts to play all over again, as if it’s set on a loop. I glance over my shoulder to make sure Victor is still asleep, and he hasn’t moved from the first time I looked at him.

Leaning down, I move his mouse, clicking on something else on the screen.

A message pops up, and it looks like it’s meant to go with the videos.

It’s clearly Victor who wrote it, from the detached and almost formal tone of the writing. My eyes skim the text quickly, and then I have to go back to the top and read it all over again, feeling sick.

The words are harsh and cruel, and just like the video, they’re about me. It’s so much worse than I ever thought Victor could be, even back when he didn’t seem to like me very much.

She’s a whore, just like her mother, the message reads. *She’s filthy trash who’s perfectly happy to spread her legs for anyone, as you can see. She’s already been well used, and on top of that, she’s damaged. I can assure you, she’s worthless*.

Tears blur my vision, and I keep reading that last line over and over again.

She’s worthless.

Bile rises to my throat, and I take a step back, as if that can distance me from the words on the screen.

I have no idea who they’re sending this message to, or if they’ve posted it online, or what. But I guess at the end of the day, it doesn’t even matter.

Whatever this is for, it’s horrifying and violating. It’s a confirmation of every awful thing I’ve ever believed about myself, right there in full color on the screen. With the videos to prove it.

Worthless.

Damaged.

Trash.

On top of that, it’s also confirmation that all the things that turn me on, the things I’ve tried to deny and hide from, really do make me some kind of freak. And that’s all I ever was to these men.

A hole for them to fuck.

A virgin for them to ruin.

An easy lay.

I thought they were different. I thought that at least they weren’t going to use me and hurt me. They’ve done plenty of bad things, but they never tried to force me. They stood up for me. Malice protected me.

And for what? So I’d lower my guard, and he could turn around and have Vic do this? Was it Malice’s idea?

Does it even matter now?

My mind is suddenly full of the memory of what Ransom said earlier tonight. About how he and Malice have shared before, but I’m different.

I remember how that made me feel special and warm, and I want to kick myself for believing any of it.

God, how could I be so blind? I bet he says that shit to every fucking girl who comes through here. I bet he flashes those gorgeous ocean eyes at them and tucks their hair back, using all that charm to make them fall into a false sense of security.

And I was dumb enough to fall for it. Or maybe desperate enough. Desperate enough to believe I meant something to them, when I should've been trying to keep them at arm's length all along.

I was just one more in a long line. A piece of trash they decided to pass back and forth between them. And when they get tired of me, then what? Are they planning to throw me back out onto the street? Kill me because I know too much?

My chest tightens, and it gets hard to breathe for a second.

I feel so fucking stupid.

Everything I wanted—the stability, the better life, the college education and real job—all the things I gave up when I came to live with these men? I gave them up for nothing.

So they could have fun with me before humiliating me and casting me out. Just a part of whatever sick game this is.

For a while, I felt like I had finally found a place to belong. Like I was with people who understood what it feels like to be broken and lost. I sat there, listening to their meetings and their plans, eating my favorite foods with them and thinking that it meant something.

But it was as flimsy as a house of cards, and now those cards are scattering in the wind.

As furious and hurt as I am with them, I only have myself to blame. I ate it up, so desperate to feel like it was true that I probably ignored all the signs that it wasn't. I believed their pretty words and their lies, and let myself get swept up in all of it, thinking this was going to be something I would miss when it was all over.

Suddenly, it feels like the walls are closing in on me. The screen is too much to look at, and when my eyes land on Victor's sleeping form again, that's too much too. My stomach twists and heaves, and my eyes fill with tears.

I back out of the room, tiptoeing as quietly as I can.

For a minute, I stand in the hallway, feeling lost and confused. It's almost like having emotional whiplash, and it seems impossible that less than twenty minutes ago, I was curled up in bed with Ransom, comfortable and warm and content.

Now I just feel cold and hurt, but when the tears well up again, I blink them away.

Crying isn't going to solve anything. Neither is standing around in the hallway feeling sorry for myself. I already gave these men their chance to hurt me, and they took it and stabbed me in the fucking heart. I can't do that again.

Determination fills my chest, starting a little shaky, but getting firmer as I remember those images and what they did to me.

No more.

I have to get out of here.

I won't be a pawn in their games.

I put up with this shit from my mom for too long, letting her use me and manipulate me because I was too afraid of being alone to stand up to her and cut her off. I kept giving her the benefit of the doubt when I shouldn't have, when all the evidence said she didn't deserve it. When she betrayed every single chance I gave her in bigger and shittier ways every time.

I can't let myself make the same mistake with these men.

Staying here would make me a pathetic fool, and believing they won't hurt me again would make it even worse.

"Then go, Willow," I whisper to myself.

It's been a while since I've had to self soothe, since I've needed to talk myself out of a panic or stress. But I guess at the end of the day, the only person I can truly depend on is myself.

That decides it.

I pad down the hall silently, slipping into Ransom's room. He's still sound asleep, and he hasn't moved from the spot he was in when I left.

Thinking about how fond I felt toward him just a short while ago makes acid burn in my throat, and I turn away from him, grabbing some clothes and a few other things from my bags. I dress in the hallway to lower the chances of waking him, my mind racing as I tug down the hem of my shirt.

I need a plan.

If I go back to my apartment and my old life, they'll just come find me. Who knows how many more cameras Victor has in places that he lied

about.

The only thing I can think to do is just… get away. Get far away. Maybe somewhere that they'll never be able to find me if I get a big enough head start. They're all asleep now, and it's late enough that I should be able to get some distance before they wake up and realize I'm gone.

I slip down the stairs, being as quiet as possible, and then make my way into the room where I found Malice tattooing himself that one night. I noticed then that it seemed almost like a multipurpose room, a gym and an office all in one. Maybe what I need will be in here.

I rummage around in the desk set against one wall, opening and closing drawers until I find an envelope with a small stack of bills in it. Without letting myself hesitate or waver, I grab the stack and close the drawer again.

This should be enough to get me a bus ticket. Or a plane ticket, even. To somewhere else. *Anywhere* else.

The Voronin brothers can go up against Ilya on their own. I'm done with this, and I'm done with them. It doesn't have anything to do with me. It never did. From the very beginning, I was just somewhere I shouldn't have been, and I got swept up in their shit.

Not anymore.

I take the money and my small bag and leave the warehouse, creeping quietly out the front door. It's still pitch black outside as I hurry away from their home, heading off down the street. Since it's imperative that they not be able to find me, I do my best to keep out of sight of any security cameras, so Victor can't use his hacking skills to figure out where I've gone. That means sticking to back alleys and cutting through people's backyards.

I climb over fences and sneak past houses, moving as quickly as I can.

All the while, I keep my jaw clenched, trying to hold back my emotions. There's a part of me that just wants to curl up somewhere and cry, that wants to give in to how hurt I am and mourn the loss of the things I thought I'd found.

It was just yesterday that I was worried about them. Just the other night that I felt like I'd found somewhere I belonged.

I was facing things that scared me, doing things I never thought I'd do. I think about the tattoo Malice put on my chest, and my fingers curl, wishing I could claw it off my skin.

Even then, even when he was putting it there, he had to know that they were just using me. And he marked me up anyway.

“Don’t think about it, Willow,” I whisper. “They’re not worth it.”

Eventually, I’m going to have to let myself feel all of this pain, but hopefully I’ll be far away by then—somewhere they can’t get to me and make things even worse. So I drag in a deep breath and keep moving. The faster I move, the lower the odds are that they’ll manage to find me.

Usually, I would be afraid to be out alone this late at night in these parts of Detroit, but my mind is focused on only one thought.

Get away.

It’s like a mantra inside my head, and any time I start to think of something else or a memory of the guys pops up, I shake myself and reorient to that one thought.

Get away.

It takes a while for me to stop jumping at every sound I hear, but by the time I’ve walked several miles away from the brothers’ warehouse, I start to feel a little more confident that they didn’t see me sneak out and follow me. I’ve never been outside Detroit before, but I know where the Greyhound bus station is, so I start heading in that direction, debating about where I should buy a ticket to.

I’m passing a row of shuttered businesses with faded signs above them when the hairs on the back of my neck suddenly prickle. I start to whirl around to look behind me—

But I never get the chance.

Strong arms wrap around me from behind, pulling me tight against a broad body. A choked noise bursts from my lips as all the air is forced out of my lungs, leaving me gasping for breath.

For a second, I’m certain it’s one of the brothers. That they’ve caught me after all and are going to drag me back to their warehouse. But then an unfamiliar voice speaks low in my ear.

“Don’t scream. I don’t want to have to hurt you.”

My eyes widen, because that’s definitely not Malice’s voice, or Victor’s or Ransom’s either. I don’t know who the fuck it is, and that realization makes panic explode in my chest. I start struggling hard, fighting against his hold, trying desperately to get away from my unknown attacker and put some distance between us so I can run.

But his arms are like iron, and before I can break free or even loosen his grip, a cloth comes up to press over my mouth and nose.

A sharp, acrid scent fills my nostrils, and the world around me blurs as my eyelids droop. My limbs turn heavy and clumsy even as my mind continues to scream at me, repeating a single phrase over and over.

Get away.

Get away.

Get a—

VICTOR

MY ALARM GOES off the way it does every single day at six thirty in the morning. My eyes snap open, and I reach for my phone, shutting off the sound before it can wake one of the others.

I take a second to order the routine of the day in my head, going down my mental checklist of things that need to be done.

There's the Ilya mess to deal with, of course, and I spare a thought to how that spiraled out of control pretty quickly. It seems like everything is doing that these days. We'll have a plan in place, and before we can make sure it goes off without a hitch, something comes along to fuck it up.

It never used to be like that. We used to work like a well-oiled machine. My hacking skills gave us the advantage we needed, and we executed most of our plans without fail.

Things used to be simple, and now…

Now everything is complicated.

I shake my head and slide out of bed at six thirty-five on the dot, moving to change into new clothes for the day.

As always, I showered last night, and I take off the clothes I wear to sleep in, dropping them into the hamper in my closet. I select a new outfit and put that on, pulling the shirt over my head. It's early enough that my brothers are still asleep, and that's one of the reasons I set my alarm so early. There's something peaceful about having the morning to myself.

I go into the bathroom and take my time washing my face and brushing my teeth, timing out the two minutes that I spend moving my toothbrush around to each quadrant of my mouth down to the second. I run a comb

through my hair and then wipe down the counters, cleaning up any toothpaste splatter or bits of soap.

The kitchen is also blessedly empty when I head down, putting the coffee on for myself. I always have one cup in the morning, before the others get up, and then another when we all sit down to breakfast together.

It's a concession between hiding in my room all day and doing all of my little human things where no one can see them and spending time with my family, the way Ransom is always on my case to do.

Besides, we use meal time to strategize sometimes, even now that Willow's here with us, so it works out well enough.

I finish the coffee in the kitchen, wash the mug and put it in the drying rack, and then head back upstairs, checking the time on my phone as I do.

Seven fifteen. Not bad.

My computer is asleep, and I jiggle the mouse to wake it up as I settle in at my desk, checking the progress of the things I left running last night.

The message to X has finally been encrypted and sent, and I check to make sure that both the video and the message went through. They did, and although there's a sense of satisfaction that it's done now, it doesn't feel as good as it usually does to cross an item off my to-do list.

The footage I compiled of Willow is still up on the screen, and I let it play through, even though I've already seen it plenty of times.

But like everything that has to do with this woman, I can't look away. I'm so drawn to her, to everything about her. I've never wanted to be that close to anyone before, but as I stare at the images of her touching herself in her bathroom and Malice eating her out on her bed, my fingers tingle slightly with the urge to reach out.

When the footage from Malice and Ransom fucking her in the living room comes up, I hold my breath, watching it play through. She might have been a virgin before, but she looks like a natural on her knees, crawling to Malice, taking his cock in her mouth. The look on her face and the way she throws herself into it makes my blood heat, and I let out a ragged breath as arousal stirs in me.

I watch her ride Ransom and then get fucked by Malice, wincing in sympathy as he pounds into her. She must have been sore after that. Then I see myself step up, my cock gripped in my fist, and my heart rate speeds up, my stomach clenching.

I stop the video before it can get to the part where she leans in to lick me, not sure if I could handle seeing it again. It was almost more than I could take, even in the moment, but when my brothers and I decided to do this, we agreed it would be all of us.

Working together as a unit, like we always do.

Leaving the video frozen where I paused it, I click over to the message that I sent with the footage.

It's cold, even for me, and I scowl as I read through it. I don't like it.

Something about talking about Willow that way doesn't sit right with me, even though I know it's not true. None of it is true. I haven't met her adoptive mother, but I've heard enough from Willow and Malice to know that Willow is nothing like her. And calling her worthless made my fingers ache as I typed, memories of my father screaming those words at my face filtering through my mind.

But it had to be done.

I open the message from X that started all of this shit, reading it again with narrowed eyes. His messages are always curt and to the point, as detailed as they need to be to make sure we can carry out his instructions, but no more than that. This latest one from him is no exception.

I've got a new job for you. A delivery. I want you to bring me this girl—Willow Hayes. (photo attached)

Because the nature of this drop will be more complicated than others, send me an encrypted message when you have her subdued and ready for hand-off. At that point, I'll arrange the drop site and let you know where to bring her.

Note: It's imperative that she be untouched. She's useless to me if she's been defiled.

We're playing a dangerous game, defying X without openly refusing to carry out his orders. He said she would be useless to him if she was defiled, so we made sure he would see her that way. Our hope is that this will lessen his interest in her, and that he'll move on to something else that will be more lucrative for him. And since we never declined the job outright, he can't claim that we're going back on our deal and reneging on our debt.

None of us are sure it will work, but it was the only option we could come up with. The only way to protect Willow and keep Malice out of prison. We're walking a tightrope, hoping not to lean too far to either side, and we won't know if it worked until we hear back from X.

Tapping my fingers against the desk, I check for a message in response to mine, but there's no reply yet.

It only got sent a few hours ago, I remind myself. *He'll respond soon. The only thing we can do now is wait*.

Needing to keep my mind occupied, I move on to the next pressing item on my mental list, which is tracking down Ilya Petrov's whereabouts.

The work of that is soothing at least, and I start in the logical order. The hotel itself doesn't have any security cameras, but there are a few buildings nearby that pick up parts of it with their cameras. I already downloaded the security footage from around the time of Malice and Ransom's attack on Ilya, deleting it from the servers afterward, and now I scan through new footage to see if I can pick up Ilya's trail.

It's easy to let everything else fall away while I do this. My brain gets into a kind of zone, latching on to the rhythm of this work and pushing the outside world away.

My fingers fly across the keyboard as I move from camera to camera, tracing a line from the hotel to a nearby street to the next location, trying not to lose sight of Ilya's large frame as I go through the footage.

"Fuck!"

The curse cuts into my concentration, and I frown, looking up from my computer.

It's not rare for Malice to wake up in a bad mood, but that was definitely Ransom's voice, and he sounds pissed.

I'm about to get up to see what's going on when he steps into the doorway of my room. His pants are hanging off his hips, and he's tugging on a t-shirt, his hair still messy from sleep.

"Wake Malice," he says in a tight voice. "Something is wrong."

"What?" I ask. "What happened?"

He meets my gaze, worry gleaming in his eyes.

"Willow is gone."

Beautiful Devils, book two in the *Filthy Wicked Psychos* series, is on Amazon HERE.

Want to get a little insight into what was going on in Malice's head the night he tattooed Willow? Click HERE to join my newsletter and claim your free bonus scene, or copy and paste this link into your browser: https://BookHip.com/ZGARPGG

Looking for a complete series to binge? Try my dark enemies-to-lovers reverse harem romance, *Dirty Broken Savages*. If you liked this book, I think you'll love that series. It's set in the same world as this one, and the Voronin brothers make an appearance too!

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