

# BREAKING LOVE

A woman with vibrant red, wavy hair is shown from the back, looking slightly to the right. She is wearing a black lace top with a complex, swirling pattern. The background is a light grey, textured surface, possibly concrete or stone, with some subtle shadows and highlights.

ALL VILLAINS ARE BAD  
BUT NOT EVERY BAD GIRL  
**IS A VILLAIN**

BROKEN LOVE SERIES

**B.B. REID**

BREAKING  
LOVE  
Broken Love Series  
BOOK FOUR

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BREAKING LOVE

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# DEDICATION

To everyone who took a chance at love, failed at love, and found the courage to try again.

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*“Guys have a level of insecurity and vulnerability that’s exponentially bigger than you think. With the primal urge to be alpha comes extreme heartbreak. The harder we fight, the harder we fall.”*

**John Krasinski**

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# CHAPTER ONE

## DASH

I WORE SUITS like a power play. Whether it was for pussy or for money, the suit spoke volumes so I didn't have to. They were always tailored and designed by the most expensive hands in the fashion industry, and though it meant nothing to me, to the world it was everything.

It was money.

It was power.

It was an opportunity.

My walk through the expansive lobby of the high-rise Chambers M&A Holdings owned turned heads as it always did. My presence commanded attention. This was once my father's and now it was mine. My father, at the age of fifty-five, decided to retire early, believing I was more than capable of taking over entirely.

I should have been.

He'd been grooming me since I was twelve.

I walked into my suite, located on the very top floor, with the same air of confidence. This floor was reserved for my office only and was accompanied by my assistant. Because of my long hours, I had a bedroom built into the suite as a second home.

"Good morning, Mr. Chambers." She handed me a fresh cup of coffee on my way past her desk, and in return, I offered a curt greeting.



“Celesha.” I closed my door, which gave her strict instructions not to bother me for the next hour while I started my day by catching up on the abundance of emails that likely accumulated during the few hours of sleep afforded to me nightly.

Celesha was the second assistant I had hired after returning to the States two weeks ago and firing the first, who I had hired while in Germany, and had proved severely incompetent at assisting me with anything other than sex. For my personal needs, I indulged her, but when her pussy became boring, along with her constant need for more, I showed her the street.

This time, I made sure to hire someone who was married so I wouldn't head down that road again. I was beginning to wonder what the point was in fucking if it never left me satisfied or wanting more beyond my basic urges.

I experienced what it was like to be addicted, and strange enough, I had become addicted to the addiction. There was only one person who could feed my addiction. One girl who I craved more than success or breathing.

I can still remember the sound of her clipped moans and the way her pussy yielded to my cock each and every time. Her curvaceous body hadn't been made for just any man. She had been made for me.

I was her first and after all these years, I wondered if I was her only.

I could feel myself tumbling down a dark pit of rage. I angrily opened the first email and denied a request for a business meeting without reading the email thoroughly. It didn't matter. I recognized the company as one I'd denied before. The owner was someone who was older and had been in the business for over twenty years. His arrogant behavior and shifty eyes were the reasons I denied his many requests for a merger. He thought he would be doing me a favor by gaining a controlling interest of the company my father had sacrificed his family and morals to build.

Two hours later, I was unsuccessfully trying to relieve the tense muscles in my back and shoulders when my office door opened and Celesha's head peeked through.

"I have some mail for you." She walked in, clutching a royal blue envelope. Its shape and size were untraditional to a regular piece of mail, not to mention the color. "It's from your sister," she offered unnecessarily.

"Thanks." I plucked the decorated envelope from her hand and set it down, showing little interest in the contents when, in fact, a nervous twitch started in my fingers.

"Before you go, I need you to fax these papers and then call to make eight o'clock reservations with Amifika's."

"Oooh, fancy. Date tonight?"

"Something like that." I shot her pointed look and then watched her scurry away on her small gray pumps. I didn't want to be a complete dick, but I was still warming up to her and feeling her out. Her married status ensured that I would keep from bending her over my desk, but it didn't mean she had such reservations.

My dinner tonight was to ensure my father's final approval and, hopefully, get him off my back once and for all. This business deal would be one that would affect the rest of my life, and it wasn't entirely voluntary.

I could hardly wait.

\* \* \*

"Mr. Chambers. Always a pleasure to have you. Your table for two is ready and your guest is already seated."

Mindlessly, I followed the maître d' through the restaurant to the secluded table where she sat perusing the wine menu, no doubt seeking out the most expensive bottle.

I don't have an issue with spending money.

I have an issue with people who don't respect it.

Not everything worth time came with a high price. In fact, it was the other way around. However, the expensive

brunette waiting would never understand. She lived her life as a socialite, living off of daddy's money until the day she'd become some other schmuck's burden.

I was about to become that schmuck.

"Dash!" she greeted a little too exuberantly. She crooked her finger as if she really had the power to beckon me. I blatantly lowered myself to my chair, leaving her shocked and appearing more than a little played.

"How are you, Rosalyn?" I didn't care either way. My tone made it obvious, but of course, she chose to ignore it for appearances.

"I'm fine now that you are here. I knew you'd come to your senses."

"Don't push me. Since you know why we are here, then I can skip the formalities, yeah? Something tells me you don't care much for it either."

"I'm not sure what kind of girl you take me for," she pouted, "but I am a girl, and I'm afraid that means I am a bit of a romantic, too." She batted her eyelashes, and I fought the urge not to roll my eyes.

"For fuck sake, I'm not getting on one knee. You and I both know you'll accept regardless because you have as little choice as I do."

"That's not true. I want this, Dash, and I know you want me." Her eyes shone with confidence, and the only thing missing from her statement was *'How could I not?'*

"You act so sure of yourself, but in reality, you've got to be pretty insecure to not only go through with this but to be happy about it."

"How so?" I didn't miss the bite in her tone.

"You're settling for a marriage that was primarily arranged. A part of you must be afraid that you wouldn't find someone to marry you otherwise. It's just another way you can use Daddy's money."

Our waiter chose that moment to take our orders, and just as I initially thought, Rosalyn ordered the most

expensive bottle of wine. I knew she wasn't familiar with it given the idiotic way she pronounced the name.

Rosalyn managed to remain silent while we waited for our food and I took a few calls, one from my dad and the other from Keiran, who called to inform me that he made it back home from Hawaii but would only be home for a short while since Lake's classes started next week.

Keiran had been my best friend for as long as I could remember. I barely remember life without him in it, though he didn't come to Six Forks until he was eight. He had been this scary and standoffish kid that wore anger as if it were normal. No one wanted to deal with him because he was so cold and thought violence was the answer to everything. I still remember the day I met him as if it happened just yesterday...

\* \* \*

## FOURTEEN YEARS AGO

I left the bathroom thinking about the hundred marks I received on my math test and thought about how proud my dad was going to be when I showed him. He never accepted anything below an A, and if my twin sister or I ever brought a grade lower home, we'd spend playtime with a tutor he'd hire until our grades were up to par. My sister brought home a B+ once and spent the rest of the school semester with Mrs. Grandall after school and on weekends.

On my way back to class, I entered the hallway where my classroom was located just in time to see two other boys standing in the hallway. I frowned, wondering why they weren't in class, and then stood frozen when the boy with his back to me punched the other in the shoulder, knocking him down.

“Stand up and fight me.” The angry voice of the kid with the dark hair filled the hallway and sent chills down my back.

“But, I don’t want to fight you. I didn’t do anything,” the little blond boy cried. The next second, the bully moved so swiftly, before I even noticed his foot was on his throat pressing hard.

“Hey!” The shout left my mouth before I could think better of it, and for a second, I’d hoped he wouldn’t hear me, but that died when he turned around.

He assessed me long and hard while never bothering to remove his foot. The little boy was silent now and had gone pale. “Go away.”

“If I go away, I’ll tell a teacher, and then you’ll be in a lot of trouble, so you better stop.” The warning didn’t appear to faze him, but he did remove his foot only to stalk me. I wanted to back away, but somehow, I knew if I showed fear, I would be just like the kid on the ground who had yet to move.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Y-yeah,” I stammered.

“How do I know you won’t tell anyway?”

“I won’t.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want you to get in trouble.” Now that he was facing me, I realized I’d seen him around and recognized him as Keiran Masters. The one everyone feared. He didn’t have friends and the only person he ever talked to was Keenan Masters, his cousin, and even then, he barely spoke. Keenan was the exact opposite of Keiran. He was the class clown and always seen making people laugh though I got the feeling he was a little sad.

“Why do you care?”

I shrugged and met his stare. When I refused to look away, he nodded and walked back over to the boy who, thankfully, now sat up with his hand on his throat.

“Stay away from her,” was the only thing Keiran said before disappearing down the hall. I helped the boy to his feet and watched as he fought to catch his breath.

“Thank you,” he panted. “That was so cool. How did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Make him go away.”

“I don’t know.” It was the truth, at least. I didn’t know why the most feared boy in our school listened to me, but I would soon learn that I would be the only person he would listen to. “Why did he want to hurt you?”

“I—I don’t know. I was just walking to the bathroom and he came out of nowhere. I think he was waiting for me. Do you think he’ll beat me up again?”

“That depends... who’s she?”

“She?”

“The girl he told you to stay away from.”

“I don’t know. I talk to lots of girls. I mean... not like that, ‘cause girls are gross but—”

“I get it. I’ll see you around.”

Without a backward glance, I walked away thinking about Keiran Masters and who this girl was that made him so... violent. My perfect score had been pushed to the back of my mind. All day, I tried to find the answer, and at the end of the day, I did.

Keiran stood in front of a girl who looked like she’d blow over with the slightest wind. She had blonde hair and tears running down her face as Keiran said something to her. I ignored my mother and sister waiting for me and hurried over to the tree, afraid he might do the same to her that he had done to the boy. When I was close enough, I saw him pull what looked like a cookie from his pocket and crush it over her head, sprinkling the crumbs until her blonde locks were covered in them. Some trickled down to her face, mixing with her tears.

“Next time, keep your gross cookies to yourself,” he taunted before walking away. She ran away immediately with her hands covering her eyes and not paying attention to where she was going.

What was that about?

\* \* \*

## PRESENT

“Earth to Dash.” I snapped back from my childhood memories and realized that Rosalyn had been trying to get my attention. By her irritated expression, I could tell she had been trying for a while. Here I was having dinner with the woman I would spend the rest of my life with, yet I sat daydreaming about my best friend. I chuckled under my breath rather than let the grim reality of my future take hold.

“You barely touched your food. Is something wrong?”

“I don’t have an appetite. Proposing to someone you don’t want to marry will do that to you.”

“Oh, Dasher.”

Fuck. I hated when she used my full name. It applied an intimacy that I didn’t want to share with her. Only two people ever called me Dasher. My mom used my full name when she was upset with me, and Willow... she used it whenever my dick was deepest inside her.

“I have some work to do. If you’re free for lunch tomorrow, we can pick out your ring.”

“That’s okay. I already had Daddy buy the ring I wanted.” When she flashed her left hand, I finally noticed the large princess cut diamond resting atop her ring finger.

I stared at her as if she’d grown two heads and again wondered why I agreed to this and at what cost? After all the resisting and defiance on my part, my father had

succeeded in molding me to exactly what he wanted me to be.

“Suit yourself.” I signaled for the check and busied myself with my wallet.

“You know,” she whispered as if telling some important secret. Her tits were on display in the low-cut collared shirt and practically resting on the table when she leaned forward. “I still know how to do that thing you liked with my tongue. If you really want... we can consummate our proposal and our future together in your car.”

I leaned forward across the table until my nose was practically touching hers and said, “I don’t really ‘want.’ I don’t even a little ‘want.’ I haven’t forgotten what you did four years ago. You cost me everything, so don’t think for a second I would touch you... ever.”

“Oh gosh. You’re not talking about that silly little fat girl with the red hair, are you? I mean, come on. She was practically trailer trash.”

My hand was around her neck before the word trash fully left her lips, causing her to squeal the word. I wanted nothing more than to squeeze until her beady little eyeballs fell from her air-filled head.

“I’d rather fuck a silly little fat girl with red hair in a trailer filled with trash than touch you. You disgust me, Rosalyn. You. This will be a marriage in name only. Whatever ideas you have in that shallow head of yours, I suggest you let it go because it won’t happen. Fuck who you wish because you won’t be fucking me.”

I let her go and watched her touch her neck and subtly look around to see if anyone noticed her lesson in humility. When she was satisfied that no one cared, she flipped her hair and stood from the table.

“We’ll just see what our fathers have to say about that.”

“They may control who I marry, but they can’t control who I stick my dick into.”



“Think again, *Dasher*. How else will we give them an heir?”

\* \* \*

In all I'd given up, I never fully realized what I, too, would have to give. Rosalyn was right. My father would want an heir, and he would want one soon, but the thought of touching this bitch made my skin crawl.

I left the restaurant twice as irritated and fled to my empty apartment. It greeted me with silence as it always did as I shed my suit jacket and tie on the way to my bedroom.

I had moved back to Nevada after graduating but then chose to leave Six Forks behind for the city thirty minutes away. My commute to the office was still thirty minutes, which explained why my father stayed away so often.

When I laid my jacket on the foot of the bed, the royal blue corner of the envelope peeked from the pocket, reminding me of the mail Sheldon had sent.

I knew what it would be without opening the invitation.

My sister was getting married... and to one of my best friends.

A best friend who I'd grown to have mixed feelings about over the last four years.

My finger slid slowly through the small opening and tore open the flap.

TOGETHER

Keenan Masters  
and  
Sheldon Chambers

Request the pleasure of your company at  
the ceremony of their marriage.

Saturday, the Twenty-fourth of November at

Five o'clock in the evening.

Chambers Mansion  
476 Cambridge Lane

I read the words over and over, and each time, I debated over my answer even though there was really only one.

My phone rang in my pocket, and without looking, I retrieved it and answered on the second ring. "Yeah?"

"Uncle?"

"Ken?" My heart rate accelerated as I held my breath and waited for trouble to come through the line. It didn't take much anymore to make me worry.

"Hi, uncle!" I breathed a little easier when her voice sounded its usual toddler cheeriness. I checked my phone screen to see Keenan's name. I wasn't surprised that she was able to call me. After her kidnapping, they started to teach her how to call one of us despite her young age. Speed dial became pretty handy when it was clear she couldn't retain all of our numbers.

"Ken, what are you doing with your father's phone?"

"He let me play with it so he could play with mommy."

"Son of a—" Her innocence was truly astounding at times. "Why aren't you in bed?"

"I don't know. I'm not sleepy. What are you doing?"

"Going to bed like you should be."

"Are you sleepy? I not," she boasted.

"I am very sleepy. Did your daddy let you have candy again before bedtime?"

"Uh huh. Don't tell mommy or she'll be very mad and make daddy cry."

“Angel—” My eyes involuntarily shut at the memory of the only other girl I called Angel. “Ken... your father is a phony.”

“My daddy not a phone.”

“I didn’t say—”

“I talk to Uncle Keke now. Bye, Uncle.”

And just like that, the line went dead. I shook my head and finished undressing before entering the expansive master bath. A hot shower was needed to relax the permanent tension I seemed to carry these days. Tomorrow I had an important meeting with an oil company my dad had been looking to buy into for years. If I succeeded, maybe I could convince him that an alliance with the Cordells wasn’t necessary.

I knew it wasn’t entirely about money because we had plenty of it—enough to last for the next generation. My marrying Rosalyn was a failsafe. In case I fucked up, we would have their backing.

My father didn’t believe in me enough to let me make my own decisions for the better of the company and our family. I was now the head, but I felt more like a pawn.

If I landed the deal, I could prove him otherwise. Knowing Rosalyn, she would want a lengthy engagement. Enough time to generate interest from all over the world and possibly grace a few magazines.

I had time.

I just had to make it work for me.

I dried off the hot water from my body and ran my fingers through my dirty blond hair. Over the years, I had been someone every girl wanted to be with. Rosalyn had been the only girl I ever dated though even that had been arranged. It wasn’t long before she began to spread the word that we were engaged. I never really cared what anyone thought, so I ignored the lie and let it spread until the summer when one unorthodox girl changed it all.

She had been a pawn in a game I never should have been a part of, and in the end, I was the one who fell hard. I never expected to want her the way I did, and I never expected for her to give me a run for my money and shut me down at every turn. The worst part was that she chose not to deny me *after* I spent the summer fucking her brains out.

That bitch had done something to me that was irreversible and completely addictive, and once she had, she tossed me back as I'd done to so many other girls.

I slid my naked form inside the expensive sheets and fell asleep dreaming of freckles and wild red hair.

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# CHAPTER TWO

FIVE YEARS AGO

DASH

I CAN'T BELIEVE what he has me doing. From a distance, I observed, the poorly dressed, freckled-face disaster, look around as if lost. I didn't want to be so judgmental, but her clothes were threadbare at best and terribly mismatched. I wondered if the power had been out in her dorm when she dressed this morning. I leaned against a tall oak, watching the show freely behind my shades while trying not to ogle her curves.

Did I even like curves?

On this girl I did, but I didn't know why. There was just something about them... even under the hideous clothing. I told myself it wouldn't matter. If I had to fuck her, she definitely wouldn't be wearing any clothes. Then I could actually see if I liked them.

I sucked in a breath when I noticed her black combat boots.

How, for fuck's sake, would I ever convince this girl that I was actually interested in her long enough to fuck her friend over? Especially, when the campus was alive with potential that fit my taste much better than the colorful sight before me.

Giving her another once over, I wondered how I never noticed her before if we attended the same school? There was no way. The bright colors alone were enough to blind me.

She looked directly at me, and her big green eyes rounded with recognition.

So, she knew me, huh?

She quickly turned around, dismissing me while giving me a full view of her lush ass. My tongue swept across my lips involuntarily, and suddenly, I felt very hungry.

She may not have been my type, but there was no fucking way I hadn't noticed her before.

I pushed away from the tree and stalked after her, determined to learn if my eyes were betraying me or if my dick really wanted a taste.

"Hey," I called when I was within hearing distance. She kept walking, but I could tell she heard me when her pace quickened.

I gritted my teeth when I realized she was running away from me as if I were some creep chasing her down an alleyway.

I wanted to call out again, but I struggled to remember her name. I think she was named after some kind of plant...

Fuck it. I'd play it by ear. My strides increased, doubling her short ones, effortlessly, I caught up with her in time to grab her arm before she could disappear into the crowd.

"Girl."

"Funny." She laughed. "For seventeen years I mistakenly thought I had a name."

It took a minute for me to realize she was talking to me because I'd become completely enraptured by the tiny freckles sprinkling her rosy skin. I counted each one in the space of time it took me to respond.

"Huh?"

Smooth.

"I have a name. One that you apparently don't know, so I'm curious as to why you are talking to me."

"Are you always this much of a bitch?" This was a first. I was never rude, especially to a female, but this one was already breaking my rules and I didn't even know her name. I had to admit it was sexy seeing how much her temper matched her hair—or whatever the rat nest was on top of her head.

"Take your hand off me, Dash."

"So, you do know me?"

She looked caught before she glared. "Of course I do. We go to the same school. Why wouldn't I?"

"Because you walked away without speaking."

"I didn't see you."

"You saw me... right before you gave me a peek at your ass." I couldn't help but grin down at her as I watched her cheeks heat.

"We've been in the same school since grade school. We've even had a few classes together and you never bothered to speak to me. Why the sudden interest?"

"Are you a detective or something? I don't know anyone here. I know you. We can be nice for the summer until this is over."

*Way to charm her, dude.*

"Oh yeah, douchebag?" She snatched her arm away from me and crossed them, bringing my attention to her chest in the tight green top that looked like a corset.

*Fuck me.*

"What's my name?"

"Right. We're back to that." I didn't mean to roll my eyes, but this girl was making a big deal out of nothing. Since when did names matter?

"No, we aren't because I'm leaving."

She turned away again, and I decided to let her go. This was more trouble than it was worth. My phone vibrated in

my jeans, so I fished it out without taking my eyes off her form as she disappeared into the distance. A text message.

What's the status?

Keiran.

He was the reason I was even talking to this girl in the first place. When he told me about his plan to get back at Lake by using her best friend, I refused. I admit what the girl had done was beyond fucked up, but to use someone innocent was out of the question.

Besides, Keiran had taunted and done much worse to her for years. It was about time she grew a backbone even though no one ever expected her to go that far. For years, I thought about asking him his reason for tormenting her, but seeing how violent just the sight of her made him always gave me pause. If he thought I would defend her, he wouldn't hesitate to kill me. I've never actually seen him murder anyone, but the intent was there in his eyes.

I may have been his best friend, but even I wasn't willing to brave the dark to see what lurked inside.

Three years ago, he told me things about his past that gave me nightmares, so I knew something tormented him. I just didn't have a clue what Lake Monroe had to do with it.

I watched the copper haired girl as she stopped to talk to some asshole in a letterman jacket. I saw him watch her, or more likely, her body, as she walked. I could smell a player from a mile away.

He was probably asking for her number right now thinking he would score some fresh ass.

Not fucking likely.

I looked away long enough to type my response:

On it.

\* \* \*

## PRESENT



“Your father is here.” My assistant was in the office bright and early, as always, to greet me. The smug look on her face told me she enjoyed seeing me frazzled.

“Those are not the words I need to hear at eight in the morning.” I looked around the open space but saw no sight of him. “He’s in my office, isn’t he?”

“He showed himself in.”

I took a deep breath and considered walking out to spend a few more hours—or days—in the dark wondering where the hell my life was going.

I was fresh out of college with little experience other than the few months I had spent under my father’s wing in Germany and the years before that he’d spent grooming me. Partying during spring breaks was not something a Chambers heir had time to do.

His words, not mine.

Cale Chambers was a hard man who was persuaded by nothing other than social status, money, and success, but at least he wasn’t cruel.

Taking over, and filling his shoes, wasn’t something I was ready for, a fact he was very much aware of given his frequent impromptu visits. I’d only just officially taken over a couple of weeks ago, and this was my father’s fourth visit.

Becoming the head of a multinational company took years of experience, but my father saw fit to throw me directly into the fire.

The door to my inner office gave way with a little too much force and bounced off the wall. I could hear my assistant’s gasp of surprise, but I couldn’t care less.

“I can’t completely take over this company if you’re here almost every day. It might confuse the employees.”

I didn’t bother with a hello or the warm greeting a person would typically use to greet their parent. The resentment I held for him was far too engraved for trivial manners.

I loved my father, but I hated him at the same time.

"I'm just checking on you," he said while looking through the papers on my desk.

"Me? Or your company?"

That seemed to gain his full attention. He slammed the papers down and glared. I could feel the anger seeping out of him from across the room. "It's not just a company, son. It's an empire. One that I want you to start appreciating. Believe it or not, I didn't just hand it over to you. You earned it."

"But you don't think I'm ready. Isn't that why you're intruding twice a week and monitoring everything I do? By the way, I'm firing your mole as soon as I find him."

"You don't need to find him. Owen James has agreed to keep a close eye on you and step in when necessary."

"James? You got your VP to spy on me?"

"No, I got *your* VP to look after you. He's a good guy. You could learn a lot from him."

"Like how to be a bloodthirsty shark? Yeah, I'll get right on that."

"Don't be disrespectful."

"If you think he's so great, why not make him your successor?"

My father rose from my chair to stand before me.

"Because he's not my son. I built this for you and your sister. I just want you to appreciate it more."

"I appreciate it, Dad. I just don't want it forced down my throat, and if you're going to let me take over, then *let me take over*. I don't need your watchdog sniffing around."

"It's just a precaution."

"That you wouldn't need if you had listened when I said I wasn't ready. I don't have enough experience."

"Nonsense. Some of the greatest empires were built on inexperience, and do you know why? Because they were driven and they were focused. They didn't waste time on trivial pursuits and walking on the wrong side of the law."

I took the seat he'd vacated and leaned back casually though I felt anything but relaxed. "Meaning?"

"Your friendship with Keiran Masters. I want you to end it. "

"Not happening."

"Damn it, Dasher. He's a public relations nightmare waiting to happen, and I don't want you or this empire being caught in the crosshairs."

"No. I've given you enough. I'm not giving any more. He's my best friend and more than that, he needs me."

"He's a grown man and he's trouble. How long before he turns on you? One wrong move or word, and you think he won't hesitate to hurt you or worse, kill you?"

"That wouldn't happen."

When persuasion didn't work, he tried to enforce his authority. "I won't stand for your disobedience."

I laughed at the serious expression he wore, knowing he was completely serious about his demand. "I'm not fifteen anymore. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have an empire to run, remember?"

I smoothed my suit jacket and made my way for the door to show him out. When he continued to stare, I made a gesture for him to exit. He's my father, but these days, there was only so much of him I could handle.

"Dad, I have a meeting with executive management in fifteen."

"I'm not leaving until you see reason."

"There is nothing for me to see. It's non-negotiable."

He stared at me silently, but the tick in his jaw told me he was calculating. "What if I told you if you gave up your friendship with Keiran, you'd be free to marry whomever you wish?"

My hand slipped from the door and my full attention turned to him. "Come again?"

"Keiran or Rosalyn. It's your choice."

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# CHAPTER THREE

## A WEDDING

## THREE MONTHS LATER

## DASH

THERE WERE ONLY two occasions I wore a suit for personal reasons.

Today was one of those days.

Dressed in a black suit, white shirt, and royal blue tie to match the theme of my sister's wedding, I made my way through the mansion I called my home and where she decided to have her wedding.

The house was full of my sister's wedding guests. All of which were busy sipping the expensive champagne and filling their time with casual conversation. I recognized some old classmates from Bainbridge though most of the guests were undoubtedly associates of my father.

It took longer than necessary for me to make my way through the first floor. I was constantly bombarded with the pressing, yet unwanted need for conversation from people whose names I could barely remember.

"Lake, darling, I realize you're her maid of honor, but I am her mother, and I just think we need more flowers."

“Mrs. Chambers, I don’t mean any disrespect, but the place already looks like a greenhouse because you wanted to add every flower known to man.”

I had heard them before I saw them and entered the kitchen to see my best friend’s girlfriend of four years and my mother both go toe to toe next to a horde of flowers. She wore a simple strapless royal dress with a thin silver chain to encompass the middle. Her feet were adorned with silver strappy heels that made her long legs look even longer. Her hair swept down her back in a tumble of curls. It took a moment to realize I was ogling my best friend’s girl. Lust wasn’t a factor, but I couldn’t deny that she was beautiful. One of the most beautiful women I’d ever seen, in fact. She transformed from a little duckling of a teenager to a graceful woman effortlessly, though she still carried an air of innocence. I could almost understand Keiran’s obsession with her. She was undoubtedly irresistible even to a complete stranger. He had fifteen years to cultivate a connection that he would never be able to shake even if he wanted to.

“Is it wrong to want elegance at my daughter’s wedding?” My mother’s voice brought me back to the situation unraveling.

“No, but there’s a difference between elegance and excessiveness. Adding ten dozen more flower arrangements will turn her wedding into a greenhouse. Someone might think this is a convention to preserve Earth.”

“Young lady, this is *my* daughter’s wedding.”

“Yes, but I don’t see any other maid of honor in the room.”

I took that as my cue to leave and backpedaled from the kitchen before I could be swept up in the shit storm. When I was safe, I turned on my heel only to meet the stormy gaze of my best friend.

Whose calls I haven’t answered in three months.

“They’ve been bitching at each other for the last half hour,” he offered, his stare never wavering.

I fought not to fidget. Guilt constantly ate at me since the day my father delivered his ultimatum. It nearly devoured me now.

I saw the question in his eyes and the anger, but neither of them gave me pause like the glimpse of hurt I witnessed just before he disappeared.

With a few deep breaths, I was able to will my legs to move.

I needed to make it right with him.

But not today.

I had a plan to appease my father and keep my friendship with Keiran, but one that couldn’t involve him because I knew he wouldn’t go the safe or sane route if he knew about my father’s threat.

So, I stayed away.

Soft music floated in through the french doors leading to the garden area where the wedding would be held. I managed to make it to the stairs this time around after everyone had been seated.

I ascended the stairs in search of my sister and found her in her room, dressed in only a blue robe and playing with Kennedy on the floor.

“Shouldn’t you be getting ready?” I said by way of greeting. “Your guests are already seated.”

“Uncle!” Ken screamed when she spotted me. She ran over and caught her balance when she teetered by grabbing my leg tight. Her dark curls were pinned in a ponytail and held with a royal blue bow to match her dress. Innocence showing in her eyes as she looked up at me, the reminder of how we almost lost her still fresh. I felt the need to hold her close, so I picked her up high in the air before settling her against my chest.

“What’s up, troublemaker?”

“I not a trouble,” she pouted.

"Of course not. How could a pretty girl in a pretty dress be trouble?" I asked myself that very question almost every day. Those days I pushed myself the hardest.

"Daddy said I'm a princess."

"Your daddy doesn't know anything. You're *the* princess."

"Where's Lake?" Sheldon cut in. "I need her to help me with my dress."

"She was downstairs arguing with Mom about the flowers. I wanted to see if you needed anything."

"Sure! Could you help me with my hair and makeup?"

"I don't think so."

"It's simple really. Try not to make me look like an overdressed hooker and—"

"I meant, I won't do it."

She let out a dramatic sigh and moved closer to lay her hands on my jacket. "Dash, I love you like a brother—like a *twin* brother—but if you keep your grumpy attitude at my wedding, I won't have any other choice but to cut you. Try to find that infamous charm deep, deep inside and turn it on for my day, okay? Who knows... maybe you'll finally meet someone."

Nervousness crept in when I remembered the other reason I came to find her. "I wanted to talk to you about that. I brought a guest."

"Funny. I don't remember your mention of a plus one a few months ago when the invitations were sent."

"That's because I didn't have one a few months ago."

"Dash," she shrieked and stomped her foot.

"What's the big deal?"

"Nothing, I suppose. Who is it?"

"Rosalyn."

"Come again?"

"You heard me, Sheldon. I brought her with me. Is that going to be a problem?" I didn't mean to sound so cold, but guilt was tough to deal with while keeping a smile.



"Why did you bring her? I thought you were done with her after..." Her voice trailed off and a guilty flush colored her cheeks.

"After what?"

"After Willow," she finished quietly.

"Sheldon, it's been four years. Let it go. She's probably married by now."

"The only way she's getting married this young is if she was knocked up by some—Oh... sorry," she amended at the look on my face.

The thought of her with someone turned me cold, but the thought of her giving someone else what I wanted with her made me want to kill something.

"There's more, but I'm not sure now is the time—"

"If you think you're leaving this room alive without telling me, think again." She plopped her hands on her hips, letting me know she was serious.

"Fuck." I ran my fingers through my hair and instantly regretted it when I remembered the occasion. "Just remember... you wanted to know."

"Dash..."

"Roselyn and I are getting married."

She took a step back in shock. "To separate people?" she asked lamely.

"Come on, Sheldon. Don't make me say it."

"Say it, brother. Let me hear how much you *don't want this*."

"What's the big fucking deal? We say a few words, we're bonded forever, and our families will keep rolling in the dough."

"Except you won't be happy."

"I haven't been happy for years, little sister. What's a few more."

"It's a lifetime," she cried. Tears pooled and rolled down her cheeks, which she carelessly smeared on my jacket.

"And I'm only younger by twelve minutes."

"It's necessary."

"No, it isn't. Dad isn't being fair. He—"

"Hey, hey," I soothed and grabbed the handkerchief in my pocket to clean her tears. "Stop that. It's your wedding day. My problems aren't important today."

I waited patiently for her sniffles to subside, and when she was stable, I let her go. I thought I might make a clean escape before my own emotions rose to the surface, but her trembling voice stopped me.

"Dash?"

"Yeah, sis?"

"I never thanked you."

"For what? I just wanted you to stop slobbering all over my suit," I tried to joke.

"As ugly as you are, the ladies won't mind, I'm sure. I just wanted to thank you for still being my big brother. You say you're fine, but something is changing you. I just hope you won't let whatever it is consume you."

"Come on now... have I ever let you down?"

"I wouldn't have minded you kicking Keenan's ass a few more times." She giggled.

"It would have been my pleasure if I thought it was actually warranted. He has his flaws, but I always knew it would work out. He's open for you. For someone like him who has lost what he's lost, it should have never happened, but it did. He let you in because he trusts you. He trusts you because he loves you. You make him vulnerable, but he relies on you to keep him whole. It's love, and I would never have let him take it away from you."

"So, shouldn't I do the same for you?"

I took a deep breath and released it again. I was beginning to think she might never let the idea of Willow and me go.

Would I?

"It's done." My jaw clenched. I released the tension by adding, "I'm fine with it."

"But won't be happy."

"Has it ever occurred to you that happily-ever-after isn't meant for everyone?"

"Has it ever occurred to you that it can be if you would pull your head out of your ass?"

"Sorry, sis. My head is a permanent part of my ass. Now, if you'll excuse me." I turned for the door, but she stopped again.

"So where is she?"

"Who?"

"Your fiancée," she answered impatiently.

"I had her wait in the car."

Her shriek of laughter pierced my ears. "Could you be any more of a dick?"

"I wanted to make sure of your answer before bringing her inside."

She quirked an eyebrow. "And if I'd said no?"

"I would have sent her away."

"Aww, you would do that for me?"

"Don't be a smartass."

"Sorry, one of us had to be the smart one."

"You know what that means, right?"

"What?"

"It means I got the looks."

I closed the door just in time to miss the missile thrown at my head and made my way downstairs, which was completely empty now. Lake and my mother must have stopped arguing long enough to ensure all the guests were now seated in the garden.

I peeked out one of the windows facing the garden to see a smaller party than I would have guessed for a Chambers. My dad had luckily only invited his closest friends and business partners. After all, it was only his daughter getting married and to someone he didn't approve of. If he had his way, he would have married her off to the son of a partner for a more lucrative deal.

My father wasn't the worst parent, but he wasn't the most supportive, either. I told myself it could have been worse when I caught sight of Keiran standing just inside the french doors.

He could have tried to kill us for money.

"Hey, Keiran. It's nice to see you again." Diana Fulton, the daughter of Keiran's former mentor, turned enemy, sashayed through the doors leading to the garden.

"Di." He nodded his head, but the tight line of his lips told me being cordial was the last thing he wanted. "I trust you've kept my brother in trouble?"

"Oh, you know it, big guy. We've torn the streets of L.A. apart with our whoring and ravishing."

He grunted and then twisted his lips with amusement. "I never said I thought of you that way."

"Then how do you see me?" she grinned and flirted.

"As a nuisance," he replied before walking away.

"Aww, you're just jealous because I gave you a run for your money as best man," she called after him.

I wondered if it was all an act or if she was really that shameless considering her and Lake were somewhat close. No one could have ever predicted how close she and Keenan had become much to Sheldon's displeasure.

She still hated that girl, though no one knew why. Not even Keenan.

When her eyes landed on me, her smile widened lasciviously. "Well... if it isn't the King of the Boardroom, come to grace us with his presence. Or is it the bedroom that you dominate best?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I regarded her carefully as she approached and felt surprised at the spark of my dick awakening. Her chest was on display for me to appreciate so I made no effort to hide my interest. It had been a while since I'd gotten laid, and though her presence affected my dick, I was safe. Her effect on me had no power where it counted.

"I would. So, what do you say we ditch this party and have one of our own?"

"I'd say that is a tempting offer, but one I'd have to decline."

"Oh? At the risk of sounding like a desperate slut, may I ask why? You so obviously like me," she cooed, sneaking a peek my hard-on.

"I like."

"So?" She moved closer until her breasts were pressed against my chest. The low cut bodice allowed me to see more. So much fucking more.

"There simply isn't enough time," I answered smoothly. I caught the surprise before she recovered and licked her lips.

"A quick fuck can be just as pleasurable as a lingering fuck."

"I have no doubt, but as much as I would love to fuck the shit out of you, I'd still have to decline."

"Now I'm really curious."

Because I couldn't help myself, I ran a finger across the bare skin of her breasts. The hitch in her breath and her racing pulse encouraged me, but the sound of footsteps halted me. "My fiancée is waiting," I said simply and left her standing alone.

I had my dick under control by the time I fled through the front doors. Rosalyn was now waiting outside the car, appearing annoyed, but I couldn't care less. She was getting everything she wanted while I was getting none of what I needed. She could be kept waiting a few minutes.

"It's about time. I don't see why I had to wait in the car. It's not as if your sister and I aren't friends. Why wouldn't she want me here?" She fired off before I could speak a word or even reach the car.

"Because it's my sister's wedding, not yours. This isn't about you." I wanted to add that my sister would rather eat her own tongue before calling her a friend but didn't need the headache of the blow up that would follow.

“She said yes, didn’t she?”

I watched her smug attitude spread like a wildfire until it reached her lips and wanted nothing more than to send her away. Her acceptance to the wedding would only further delude her idea that we were meant to be.

However, before I could offer a reply, the sound of an engine roaring and squealing tires shifted my attention the dark van barreling up the long driveway. My heart rate accelerated almost as fast as the van as it sped toward the entrance. Instinct caused me to duck behind the car as did Rosalyn, who was already screaming bloody murder. I waited for the gunshots I was sure would follow, but none came. Instead, the sound of a door as it slid open, followed by a loud thud and shouting, cut through Rosalyn’s screaming. When I was sure the van had retreated, I took my first look around the car. The driver was already out and kneeling over what looked like a person. I ran over and came to a dead halt when I was able to confirm it was not only a body, but it was the body of someone I knew all too well.

“Dash?”

Fuck me.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## WILLOW

MY MISSION WAS clear. How I could ever go through with it was what I didn't understand.

As I looked around the room, I saw a mixture of emotions—surprise, wariness, fear, and anger. I could understand it because each one was warranted. I had not spoken with or laid eyes on any of them in almost four years, and my entrance back into their lives was less than exemplary.

I was just happy to be alive.

I'd deal with the fallout and consequences of that fact later.

"Is anyone going to say anything or should I start?"

"I think it's only fair," Keenan answered slowly. "You were the one who was just thrown out of a moving van."

"Yes, I, um—didn't enjoy that... if you were wondering."

"How about, why?"

"I wanted to crash the wedding. My invitation was lost in the mail, and I didn't want to come empty handed, so I came with entertainment."

"Willow," Keiran warned. It was obvious he hadn't changed much. Threatening was still his tactic of choice. Lake, my best friend of ten years, stood by his side. She stumped me the most because for once there was no

emotion in her blue-green eyes. They were blank but ever watchful.

“Right. The short, less entertaining version is that I hitched a ride and pissed some people off. That will teach me to take rides from strangers.”

“Why would you?” The rough tone of my first and former lover vibrated down my spine sending tingles to every sensitive nerve I possessed. The cold anger in his eyes matched his tone, but the way I responded to it was most frightening. I never expected to lay eyes on him again.

“Why would I...?”

“Take a ride from a stranger.”

“Because I didn’t have a choice.”

That at least wasn’t a lie.

“Why not?”

“Because I didn’t have a ride.”

That was a lie.

What none of them knew was for four years, every other month, on the third Saturday of each month, I visited my mother. It was a lie we managed and a secret we kept until today.

I just didn’t have all the answers.

“And you couldn’t call someone?”

“Sorry... new phone.”

“You’re lying,” Dash growled.

“I forgot how much of an expert you were at that.

Figures you would be able to tell.”

“What about your mother? Your brother?”

“Unreachable.”

“How convenient.”

“Look, I’m sorry I ruined this happy moment, but it’s none of your business.”

“I beg to fucking differ. You ruined my bride’s wedding day. If you don’t start talking, I’m going to make you scream the truth.”



Keenan was out of his seat and across the room before anyone could move. The violence in his eyes was unmistakable and I was taken aback by it all. I'd never known him to do anything but supply an endless run of jokes and come-ons.

His anger reminded me that I didn't know these people anymore.

They weren't my friends.

He kept coming, but I stood my ground even though every muscle quaked with unease. Dash moved forward to stand in front of me, but I wouldn't mistake it as the need to protect.

Sheldon, who still had not spoken a word, managed to intercept him. Keiran and Lake also moved forward, but their concern was also for Keenan.

I needed out so I could regroup.

When I unbounded the plane this afternoon, I didn't expect any of this. I was thrown into a lion's den, but at this point, I couldn't tell which were the culprits and which the lions.

I was alone and would be forever if I didn't do what I was told. I wasn't the one at stake. My mother and brother were.

"Maybe I should go." Because I wasn't the bitch they all believed me to be, I met Sheldon's stare and searched for the right words. Once upon a time, she was a best friend, and I ruined what would have been the best day of her life. "Sheldon, I'm—"

"What's going on in here?" The Chambers burst through the library door, followed by a little girl with dark hair. I knew exactly who she was and who she belonged to. The resemblance was uncanny. "Your guests are worried."

"Mommy, daddy, I throw flowers now." The little girl held up her baskets of flowers, practically vibrating with excitement and innocence.

“Kennedy.” I hadn’t realized I’d spoken her name until she, along with everyone else, turned their attention to me once more. I knew Sheldon had gotten pregnant the night of prom, but I had never set eyes on her. I remembered Sheldon had favored the name Kennedy and only assumed she had gone through with it.

“Hi,” she cheerfully greeted. Her arm shot out and at the end of it was a hand full of orange flower petals.

“Oh—um... thank you.” I felt out of place and every bit the intruder, and though I never asked for any of this, I felt responsible.

I couldn’t allow guilt to overrule my judgment. I was without a choice, which also meant I was without a conscience.

“I’m sorry. Who are you?” the man I recognized as Dash’s father questioned.

“Dad, you remember Willow. She was Sheldon’s friend,” Dash offered.

Was.

As in not anymore.

Damn, that hurt.

What also hurt was the disregard he had not only for me but our previous relationship and the fact that once upon a time I was his friend, too.

And much more than that—I loved him.

Loving him, in fact, was never the issue. Being with him meant sacrificing more than I was sure I had to give. It meant taking a chance and believing that one day, he might not believe I was a mistake.

“Ah, yes,” he responded pleasantly, but the look in his eyes made it clear that he didn’t approve of my presence or remember me in the least. And why should he? I had been Dash’s dirty little secret and always would have been had I stuck around to fall for his lies as well as him.

“The wedding should have begun twenty minutes ago. Why are you all in here, and Sheldon, why aren’t you

dressed?”

“There was a small hiccup that we are trying to straighten out.”

“Well, what is it?” their mother question while casting side glances of disapproval my way. It was clear to them that I was the culprit.

“Nothing for you to worry about. Make some excuse for the guests.”

“Oh, God. This isn’t one of Keenan’s *problems*, is it? What is it? Does she want money?”

“Mom, enough. This is nothing like that. Now, please give us some privacy.”

Their mother looked ready to protest, and since I couldn’t handle any more slights at my character, I decided to intervene. “It’s okay, really. I’m leaving anyway. I’m sorry to have intruded.”

I was able to escape the room without being stopped and made for the nearest exit as quickly as possible. Being thrown out of a moving van left me with aching muscles, but I ignored the pain and concentrated on getting out of dodge.

In the distance, I heard my name being called, and as his voice closed in, I moved faster.

“No,” he said simply as his hand closed around my arm. “If you’re leaving, I’m taking you wherever you need to go.”

“Thanks, but I don’t need your help. I can manage.”

“Clearly,” he snarled sarcastically. I didn’t get a chance to say anything further because he dragged me out behind him. This was all happening so fast that my head literally spun. There were two of him now, and I couldn’t figure out which one to plead to. My head pounded and my steps slowed until he really was all but dragging me.

“Dash. Wait.”

He seemed to notice my reluctance when worried eyes landed on me. The stress of being kidnapped and blackmailed along with seeing friends I had abandoned and

the one person I couldn't allow myself to love all at once was too much.

I collapsed right there with only the pavement under me and him to catch my fall.

\* \* \*

"I sent the guests home. Do you think we should take her to the hospital?"

"Dr. Carson is on his way to check her over."

"What happened?" Sheldon demanded.

"I'm not sure." Dash sighed. "I offered her a ride and she collapsed." I could hear the stress in his voice, and if I opened my eyes, I was sure I would see the matching lines on his forehead. It was just like him to worry so much over problems other than his own. He lived for others rather than for himself.

"Are you sure you only offered or did you demand that you give her a ride?" If I weren't pretending to be asleep, I would have laughed. Sheldon was never afraid to interrogate when she felt the need arise.

"Does it matter?" His frustration was evident by his tone and growing by the second. "I didn't expect her to faint."

"Maybe she hit her head when she fell. She could have a concussion. Shouldn't we wake her?"

Dash didn't respond, but the next moment, I felt his lips on my ear, whispering. "But you're already awake, aren't you?"

My eyes popped open against my will, and sure enough, Dash was leaning over me. One hand rested on the far side of my head caging me in while the other fingered my hair as if he had the right.

I wanted to escape, but his body hovering over me prevented me from going anywhere, and he must have known judging by the smugness tugging at his thick lips.

"I need to get out of here."

“Oh, for fuck sake, you’re okay!” Sheldon squealed, breaking the connection. Thankfully, she shoved Dash out of the way and hugged me, which caught me by surprise. I would have never expected her to speak to me much less hug me as if we were friends.

“I need to get out of here.”

I couldn’t handle it. Not the guilt.

I pulled away rather than push her away, but it didn’t mask my intent as I had hoped. Her eyes grieved our lost friendship.

She cleared her throat and looked away. I knew my absence hurt her, but my rejection would have stung even worse.

“H—how are you?” she stammered. She hadn’t fully gained her composure, and one look at Dash told me he noticed. He looked ready to rip my head off.

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

My attention followed the sound of the extra voice to the far corner of the room where Lake leaned against the wall wearing the same blank mask from before.

“Well, I am.”

“Hm,” she grunted.

What the fuck was her problem?

*Oh, right, Willow. You left.*

But not before she left me.

To be with *him*.

I’d never hated anyone in my life, but after she walked away from me, I truly couldn’t fathom any other thought or feeling.

A part of me wanted him dead even though I knew it was a little harsh. Lake and I were best friends, but they were in love. Unfortunately, the girl who believed in that sort of thing had been replaced by someone who wanted him to suffer, and after four years, the opportunity finally arose.

I reached for my jacket and realized I was no longer wearing it. My panic resulted in my scrambling. "Where's my jacket?"

"Calm down before you faint again. It's right here." Dash lifted my jacket from a nearby chair and tossed it to me. I caught it in midair and shoved my arms into the sleeves.

"Where are you off to in a hurry?"

"Away from here." My hand was on the doorknob, turning, when I heard, "The least you could do before you run away again is apologize to my sister for ruining her wedding. I'm not sure if you noticed, but she didn't get married today."

"No, Dash. It's okay. Really."

"The hell it is. She won't even offer an explanation of how she got here in the first place."

"I told you—"

"A *real* explanation."

"We said our goodbyes a long time ago, Dash. I don't owe *you* anything." I faced Sheldon and ignored the suspicious stare from Lake. "I really am sorry, Sheldon. I never wanted this."

I didn't wait around for acceptance because I didn't deserve it.

\* \* \*

I ran as far and fast as I could. No matter how far I got, it never felt safe enough. I still felt Dash's gaze watching, accusing and assessing. Before I knew it, I was halfway home. There were at least five or six miles between Dash's parents and mine. My lungs screamed from overuse and my legs burned with ache, but I couldn't recognize it. I only wanted to feel safe again.

*There's no place like home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home.*

I walked the remaining two or three miles until I finally made it home. My mother's beat up car with the faded brown paint sat in the driveway

"Where have you been? I went to the bus stop, but you weren't there. What happened to your clothes?"

My mom had followed me from the front door, up the stairs, to my old bedroom with her usual rant of questions, never letting me get a word in. Charles had offered a curt greeting but didn't bother to move from his perch in front of the television, as usual.

"I fell, Mom."

"But where were you?"

"Where were *you*?" I snapped. My tone was harsh and unforgiving. Over and over since running from the Chambers Mansion, I thought if she had for once put us first, I never would have laid eyes on Dash or the rest of them again.

"Well, if you were going to stay out this late in the day, you shouldn't have come at all. What if Charles had been asleep while you come in here with all your ruckus? You know he has trouble sleeping once he's awake."

"Come again?"

"You should have just stayed wherever you were instead of bothering us with your nonsense."

I gritted my teeth and blew out my anger through my nose while praying for patience. "You are the one who insisted I come, remember?"

"Well, what kind of daughter would not visit her parents during the holidays? I don't know what kind of life you're leading—only God knows what you're into these days—but I will not be disrespected."

"Yes, Mother." I falsely admitted defeat. I learned early on not to go round for round with my mother.

"Sis?" The deep and now manly voice of my little brother, who was no longer a pimple faced squirt, drifted down from the top of the stairs. I hadn't seen him in six

months, and if possible, he had grown even bigger. His dirty blond locks gave him a boyish appeal, but the rest of him had grown into an adult.

“Buddy, hi!” I ignored my mom and moved up the stairs to give my brother a hug. He enveloped me with his large arms and spun me around.

“You’ve been here for sixty seconds and you’re already at war with Mom.”

“Yeah, I’m looking to break records. What are you still doing here? I thought you would have high tailed it back to school by now.” Buddy’s visits were usually as short as mine were. Our mother was unbearable on a good day, and neither one of us had ever been close to Charles.

“Mom said you were coming, and I couldn’t say no to seeing my little big sister.” He ruffled my hair playfully, and I fought to get away.

“That’s sweet. So the girls aren’t back on campus yet, huh?”

“Not any who are attractive. I’m out of here tomorrow, but speaking of unattractive girls, what happened to you?”

I punched his arm and grumbled, “I fell.”

“How? You look terrible.”

“It’s not important. Why don’t you catch me up on school and your latest conquests?”



# CHAPTER FIVE

DASH

I SHOULDN'T HAVE let her go. The thought stayed on constant replay in my head, and I haven't been able to stop thinking about her since she walked away last night.

I wanted her with fierceness, and it wasn't until a few hours ago that I decided I would have her.

First, I had to find her.

I stared out the window at the city below and wondered where she'd been all these years. The real head scratcher was why she suddenly resurfaced. I could only assume she had been visiting her parents who had claimed to not be in contact with her either.

Either that was a lie, or they were in for the shock of their life as well, because it wasn't long ago that I began to entertain the thought of her being dead though my heart wouldn't allow me to mourn her.

The phone in my home office rang and a quick glance showed it was the line reserved for my father's security detail who was now employed by me.

"Go."

"It didn't take much," Fisher, my head of security, began immediately. "We tracked her to her mother's house as you expected. She has just left now."

"She's going to the airport, isn't she?"

“We’ll know soon. She’s still on the move, but we’re on her tail. Should we stop her?”

“No. Wherever she’s going, I want you to follow. Find out what flight she’s boarding and report back to me.”

“Roger.”

After almost four years, I would finally find out where she had run to and where she had been hiding from me. I pressed the speed dial for my assistant who picked up immediately despite it being Sunday. “Celesha, I want the jet fueled and piloted. You have thirty minutes.”

By the time I had reached the airport with my security team, I had a change of heart and canceled the jet. I could barely restrain myself as I ripped off the seat belt and tore from the car.

She wasn’t going anywhere.

I managed to arrive right on the heels of her arrival and made a mental note to give my assistant a raise.

I charged for the airport, and it was a wonder the pavement didn’t crack under the forceful pounding of my footsteps. I was running by the time I reached the main entrance. I wanted my face to be the first thing she saw the moment she realized she *almost* escaped again.

My men by now were already guarding every entrance. I made it to the departure gate where a large crowd of people shuffled about or waited for a passenger to board. It wasn’t long before I spotted her copper colored hair, only it wasn’t styled in its usual mass of craziness. Instead, she had it pulled back into a tight bun, and as the crowd parted, I caught sight of her clothing.

Crisp lines and dull colors covered her luscious frame. I couldn’t believe my eyes as I took in the tight cream, knee-length skirt, and sheer white blouse cut low to reveal the top of her breasts and the splatter of freckles.

Oh, how well I remembered those fucking freckles.

My gaze landed on the cream pumps hugging her feet. I felt my dick harden as a vision of her wearing those pumps

with her legs wrapped around my neck while I drove into her flooded my head.

I was so wrapped up in that vision that I hadn't realized she had come to stand before me until she spoke.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Her voice was full of venom, which to my perverse mind sounded sexy as hell.

"Making yet another mistake, apparently. You look... different." She hadn't been dressed like this yesterday or had she? Given the events that had taken place, I never stopped to notice her clothing.

"I had to grow up. Isn't that what kids are supposed to do? We grow up and let go of childhood dreams and take on responsibilities."

"Is that you or your mother speaking?"

"Does it matter? We're not seventeen anymore, Dash."

"So she finally did it. She turned you into the daughter she wanted and made you let go of who she couldn't be bothered with."

"Don't speak of what you don't know. It's been four years, Dash. You don't know me anymore."

"Not quite."

"Excuse me?"

"It hasn't quite been four years."

"You counted?"

"No. I'm just better at math than you, apparently." I had enjoyed the quick sulk before she covered it up.

"Why are you following me?"

"I wanted to see what rock you were running to crawl back under."

"That's none of your business. Excuse me." She attempted to walk around me, but my hand on her arm stayed her. "There is an airport full of people in case you haven't noticed. Move or I'll scream."

"It wouldn't matter. I'll be taken into custody and you'll escape—maybe." The quirk of my lips and confidence in my threat had steam shooting from her ears. "One phone call

later I'd be released..." I leaned forward as if to kiss her but stopped short. "And I'll still know where you are."

"I don't have time for this." I set her arm free when she tugged and watched her make for the exit instead of the departure lane. She had only a small bag on her shoulder that couldn't hold more than a day's worth of clothing. Whatever reason she had for coming to Six Forks wasn't something long term, which only intrigued and irritated me more.

I followed her out of the airport and behind the head of my security who was already on her tail. She looked back as if sensing me or just out of pure instinct. When she spotted me, I could make out the curse that fell from her lips as she picked up speed.

When she made a quick detour to a nearby security officer, I gave the signal.

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# CHAPTER SIX

## WILLOW

I WAS STILL reeling from the reality that he had followed me. I willed myself not to be swept up by stupid feelings. I also desperately needed to ignore my pounding heart at the thought that he even bothered to come after me.

I told myself I could have one last look to see if this was my imagination or reality. A quick look over my shoulder showed me this all was very much real as he followed me out of the airport.

Was it completely strange for me to find his stalking hot? And now, he was following me as if he intended to steal me.

But Dash wouldn't actually take me against my will... would he?

*"When it comes to getting exactly what he wants, my brother would do just about anything."*

I recalled the warning Sheldon gave me four years ago. It was one of our last conversations. She had been encouraging me to give Dash a call. I had a moment of weakness and asked about him. Sheldon had taken it as her cue to convince me to talk to him. She said I was only fighting the inevitable, which was a sad waste of time.

"Shit." I spotted a security officer waiting nearby and headed for him instead of where the buses would be. I could

only move but so fast in these godforsaken shoes, so I decided to get his attention another way.

I hesitated long enough to question if I could really get Dash in trouble but soon learned it would cost me. Just as I made my decision, a car that had been sitting idle at the curb moved forward the few feet it took to reach me. The back door opened and a man tall enough to be a building wrapped his arms around my waist as if hugging a loved one and pulled me into the car—all before I could even scream.

My attempt to calm the panic rising was lost when the car pulled away from the curb. I looked out the back window to see if any witnesses had seen what had happened. However, as the car opened the distance between it and my salvation, it became harder to see.

“Calm down, Miss.”

“Are you out of your mind? Let me out.” My breathing quickened when I caught sight of the exit as we drove toward it. We finally came to a stop near a service road, but by now, the man had my hands cuffed. All I could do was kick and scream. My shoes had long flown off and rested on the car floor. I expected the man to lash out or hit me, but he remained stoic and silent, occasionally checking his watch as if waiting for something. In the meantime, I called him every name in the book and cursed his mother, too.

I was still cursing his mother by the time the door opened and another person entered. “Now there is no need for that. Just because your mother is a manipulative bitch doesn’t give you the right to insult his,” the familiar deep voice scolded. “Thank you, John.” The man nodded and silently exited the car.

“You son of a bitch.” I screamed and lunged at Dash, forgetting momentarily that my hands were cuffed until I fell onto my knees after tripping over my shoes. My upper body rested in his lap while his hands remained at his sides.

“Exactly what were you planning to do?”

"I hate you."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one you're getting."

"Well, then. Let's try another question."

"I won't answer."

"We'll see." His hands lifted me by my arms and into the seat while continuing to watch me with equal parts amusement and anger. "Let's start with an easy one. Where were you going?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"Would I be asking if I did?"

"Then how did you find me?"

"I had you followed." He shrugged as if stalking wasn't a big deal. "It wasn't hard to figure out your next move."

"Well, since you're so good at it, predict the next one because I'm not telling."

"Fine." He reached for me, and I sunk back into the seat, unable to do little else. However, instead of grabbing me as I expected, he grabbed my purse.

"You're not going to find the answer in there. Give me my purse."

He ignored me and dumped the contents of my purse on the floor. I watched my wallet, keys, gum, and other miscellaneous shit scatter across the floorboard. When a tampon emerged, I nearly died. He flicked it toward my feet with an amused smirk, increasing my embarrassment.

"Bastard," I couldn't help but mutter.

"You have no idea how true that is, but you're about to find out."

"Let me out Dash and go away. Go back to your perfect little world."

"You don't know shit about my world. Once upon a time, I thought you would be my world, but you proved you were less than interested."

"Then why are you?"

"Because I no longer care what you want... and I don't trust you."

"I don't remember needing you to."

"Yeah, well, you still have some explaining to do after being thrown out of a moving van in my parent's driveway."

"I've already apologized for that, but if you need to hear it again..."

"I don't want your apologies. I want an explanation." He threw my purse on the floor of the luxury car and sat back.

"Well, you're not going to get one. It's none of your business."

"I'm making it my business." His tone was soft, but the threat behind his statement was unmistakable.

"It's been four years, Dash. We aren't friends anymore."

"We don't have to be friends for me to care."

The look in his eyes made me breathless. "You're confusing me."

"I'm confusing myself." The frown that followed was proof. I'd always thought he looked the most adorable when he was frustrated. His boyish looks made me want to pet him and rub my lavish body against his much harder, narrow frame and feel his strength. I felt my thighs quake and gripped them to gain control. I was not going to allow my body to respond to his magnetism.

Dash oozed sex and it was mostly because he was so... uninhibited when it came to sex.

"Stop eye fucking me and start talking."

I blanched at having been caught but quickly recovered. "What would you like me to say?"

"Why did you ruin my sister's wedding?"

"You think that was on purpose?"

"Give me something so I can think otherwise."

The car pulled into an underground parking lot. The large building loomed over the city, and I could already tell by the exterior design and the valet that the inside would be just as expensive looking.



I tried not to begrudge him or anyone for that matter, his or her financial status. I just couldn't help but remember that if Dash had been normal, we might have been together.

He read me like an open book that he'd read many times before, but there was one thing he had been wrong about—I wanted him.

That was never the issue, and looking at him now—being this close—told me it hadn't changed.

Without a word, I waited for the car to stop before popping the lock and bolting from the car. I spotted a taxi a few feet away and just had to make it. The driver's back was turned as he held a cell phone to his ear, but one look at his cab told me he wasn't currently servicing a customer. I unwittingly left my purse in the car and had no money, but I would worry about that later once I was safely from Dash's grasp.

I was almost to the cab and would be home free, but I was still afraid, and it had everything to do with the silence. I didn't hear footsteps chasing or a yell for me to stop.

I quickly learned why when arms wrapped around my waist. This time, the touch was familiar and created the need to melt into the embrace.

Dash.

He'd run after me and caught me.

Why did that make my stomach flutter? I was undoubtedly a foolish girl.

His hand clamped over my mouth, and as if rethinking it, he dropped it just as quickly. I held my breath as the feeling of his cock against my ass took over my brain. I wiggled out of curiosity rather than to fight.

After unnecessary taunting him, I was thrown into the waiting car that followed the chase.

The altercation was quiet and quick, and all the while, the cab driver was none the wiser as he continued to talk on his cell.

“You ran from me for the last four years, little girl. It ends here.”

“Dash...” It pissed me off how breathless just the sound of his name made me. “What do you want from me?” I felt almost desperate.

“I want you helpless... trapped,” he whispered in a way that made me think it was what I wanted, too. Like a secret wish shared between only us.

“We can’t—” The grin that shone over his model features was almost cruel.

“Maybe you can’t. But I can.”

“You’d force me?”

My voice was laced with disgust, but still, I felt my sex clench, and I shamefully wondered what it would be like to have the decision taken from me... I knew he would never force me sexually, but something told me he had other ways of bending me to his will. Suddenly, those warnings four years ago didn’t seem so harmless.

“For you, I’ll do whatever it takes, and this time I won’t stop until I own you.”

\* \* \*

## ONE DAY AGO

I had a bad feeling about this. But then, I always did when coming home. Only this wasn’t the normal butterfly effect in my stomach.

I felt as if I were being watched as I moved through the crowd at the airport. I realized it was silly with the amount of people crowding the airport, traveling after the end of the holiday. Thankfully, I was able to move faster than the rest because I only had a day’s worth of clothing.

I wasn’t staying long.

I never did.

With a town the size of Six Forks, a lengthy stay meant the chance of being seen, so I never stayed more than twenty-four hours.

It was more than enough time to fulfill an obligation.

None of the twenty odd visits were ever pleasant, and I had no high hopes that this one would be, so one day it was.

In the past, I would always make some excuse to my parents about a test I had to study for, and they would always accept as long as I was spending my time on something they approved of.

Six Forks was a place that always remained familiar to me despite how far or how long I stayed away.

It was late afternoon when I walked outside, and I took a moment to enjoy the Nevada air. The temperature was surprisingly tolerable considering it was late November.

I looked around but didn't immediately spot my mother's car. She sent a text ten minutes before my plane landed to let me know she was waiting outside, so where was she?

I readjusted my bag on my shoulder and dug my phone out of my back pocket. This was another new thing for me—wearing jeans. I used to always think jeans were so plain and easy but then I discovered colored jeans. Eventually, even that little freedom faded away to plain, washed denim,

A broken heart had done what eighteen years of scolding and parental control couldn't. It normalized me.

I always studied hard, got good grades, and totally ignored boys... for the most part. All I asked in return was to be able to express myself, but my mother refused to let me have that small source of independence.

Already regretting this visit, I angrily typed out a quick text and waited.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

PRESENT

DASH

I WAS PISSED way the fuck off. Add to that, my sexual frustration and I were a ticking time bomb waiting to blow. I never felt more alive in the past four years than I did now.

And it was all because of her.

She managed to dupe me once again and flee the car, and without hesitation, I gave chase. It was more than enough to send my pumping blood into a quiet rage. One glance ahead and I knew where she was heading.

Despite the suit, I moved swiftly and silently, recalling all of my basketball training. The parking lot was empty excluding the cabbie. His back was turned as he spoke on his cell. Music poured from the open windows of his cab, allowing me to steal Willow away once more.

Surprisingly, she didn't fight and scream, which I fully expected. Her temper matched her hair, but she seemed distracted, and when she wiggled her ass against my erection, I found why.

I bent low to whisper but bypassed her ear for her neck where she was most responsive. "Unless you're prepared to do something about him, I suggest you stop."

"Stop what?"

"You know what." And she did. I could tell by the way her cheeks pinked and the ragged flow of her breath.

"Let go of me."

Instead of letting go, I shoved her into the car none too gently with my hand on her ass. Her low growl made my dick jump in my slacks, and for a moment, all I could think about were things I could do to force more sounds like that from her.

Bending her to my will would be the cherry on top.

"Take us to the apartments," I ordered while ignoring the hateful glares from Willow. She remained silent, although I believed it was a refusal to talk to me that kept her quiet rather than self-preservation. Nonetheless, it allowed me to think of my next move.

I had her. But what would I do with her?

I took her in, noticing her clothes once more and for some reason, it pissed me off how much she'd changed. She'd even lost a little weight but managed to keep some of the curves that helped make me fall for her.

"Why are you dressed like that?" I asked again.

"I told you—"

"You had to grow up. Yeah, I get it. But why are *you* dressed like that?"

"It's none of your business." She sniffed.

"You lost weight," I observed out loud. Her indrawn gasp of horror signified I did the one thing men were never to do, and that was to comment on her weight, but I couldn't give less of a fuck right now.

"Don't worry. I'm still fat," she snidely replied.

"You're not fat and I'm not worried." Her look of surprise and confusion made me continue. I liked unnerving her. "I'd still fuck you hard and fast into that leather seat under your sexy ass... even if you are twenty pounds lighter."

She blinked once and then a second time with a blank expression as if trying to convince herself and me that my

words didn't make her wet. I could practically feel her walls clenching around my dick as I clocked her subtle squirm.

"There will be someone looking for me, you know."

The part of me that wouldn't accept she wasn't mine flew into a rage all the while I remained silent and calm by picking at imaginary lint. Was she running back to a man?

"Who is he?"

"What makes you think it's a guy?" The smirk on her lips should have pissed me off, but all I wanted to do was feel what that smirk tasted like.

"For your sake there better not be."

"Excuse me?" The snap in her voice caused my dick to jump.

The car stopped just outside the apartment building, and after uncuffing her, I used the opportunity to escape the confines of the car and the temptation to jump her. I dragged in huge breaths of air, willing myself to erase the intoxicating scent of her from my senses.

Once I pulled myself together, I reached in, and without asking or waiting, I grabbed her arm, pulling her from the car. She fought my hand on her arm, but I ignored her and dragged her behind me into the building.

I gritted my teeth as she blasted me with every curse word imaginable, drawing attention from the few residents who were milling about. The elevator waited ahead and I powered forward, forcing her shorter legs to double time to keep from falling.

We stopped inside, and when I was once again facing the residents watching us with curiosity, I laughingly shouted, "It's that time of the month."

The few men laughed while the women glared on, but it was all blocked out when the elevator doors closed and I was left alone once more with her. I quickly punched the code in for my floor and then leaned against the back wall, keeping her close.

She was silent when the car started to rise, and I was content until she said, "This is practically kidnapping, you know."

My head rested against the cold wall of the elevator, and I shut my eyes before answering. "I know."

"Then why are you doing this?"

"Because I'm kidnapping you." A snort of laughter filled the elevator just as the doors opened. "Something funny?" I took her elbow in my hand and led her from the elevator car. Her laughter died, and I assumed she was feeling the same current of electricity that was fast spinning out of control. We stepped into my private corridor leading to my penthouse apartment, and I quickly led her to the door where I keyed in another code to unlock. I watched her eyes widen in shock and her chest heave. "Not so funny now, is it, Angel?"

"Don't call me that."

Her rebuff pissed me off past the point of being reasonable. "Why not? You loved it. I loved it. You blushed every time. You're blushing now."

"Yeah, well, I have a lot of opportunities to be stupid."

"Are you going to take that chance again?"

"Not on your life."

"What about yours?"

She took a step back. "What?" The question came out barely more than a gasp of breath. I could see her mind racing and her body tensing up to fight or flight.

I wanted to console her and ensure I'd never hurt her, but I could only grit my teeth at the realization that she didn't trust me. "It's obvious you're in trouble. Is this secret worth dying for?" I clarified.

Her eyes shifted left. "There's no secret."

"You're a terrible liar."

"And once again, it's none of your business."

"Until you get yourself killed."

My counter didn't seem to faze her, which only alarmed me more.

"I think you're jumping to conclusions."

"How so?"

"I won't be the one dying."

"What the fuck did you just say?" My feet moved on command and I charged her. It wasn't until her back hit the door when she retreated that I realized we were still standing in the entrance. I caged her in with my arms on either side of her head to keep them from finding their way to her throat..

"Nothing. I—I don't know why I said that."

"Are you sure?" Sarcasm rolled off my tongue along with bitter rage. Not only had Willow eluded me for the last four years, but also, when she finally returned, she wasn't Willow. My angel. "Should I trust you, Angel?"

I didn't bother to hide my suspicion. The entire idea of Willow in Six Forks again was like a bad omen. It wasn't what I expected to feel whenever I entertained the idea of ever seeing her again.

"No. You shouldn't." The air left my lungs as I bent in half. Fire spread from my groin where her knee violently connected to my brain. I was forced to take a knee as I attempted to breathe through the pain shooting through my dick.

She was out the door before I could recover, but I wasn't worried. There was a code on the elevator, which she must have just figured out if her shriek of anger was anything to go by.

I was standing upright and had gained control of my anger by the time she came stomping back.

"Open the elevator."

Unfortunately for her, I hadn't gained control of my anger. I seized her wild, red hair in my fist and dragged her to me. "Bitch."



I forced her further into the apartment, and for the first time since she fell back into my life, she had nothing to say. It had lasted only a heartbeat before she started kicking and swearing.

“Watch your mouth.”

“Watch your hands,” she countered. When her foot nearly connected with my still aching dick, I hauled her luscious body over my shoulder, and because I couldn’t resist, I slapped her ass once, twice, three times.

I shouldn’t have enjoyed the sound of pain she made, but for some strange reason, it made my dick harder than ever before.

By the time I made it to my bedroom, I was ready to fuck. I threw her on my king size bed and watched her scramble. As soon as she was on her knees, I was on her, forcing open her knees and settling between her thighs.

It felt like home.

I didn’t bother to conceal the sound of pleasure that tunneled it’s way from my chest and up through my throat.

“Dasher, stop.” She should have sounded stern, but her protest was little more than a moan.

“Why? It’s been a long time. Too. Fucking. Long.”

She pushed herself up on her elbows bringing her lips just a breath away from my own, and because the temptation was too great, I seized her lips with mine. When her lips were nice and red and pouty, I pulled back. I needed more. “Open your mouth.”

“No.”

My fingers dug into the outer skin of her thigh, and I slammed her against my growing erection. “Open.” I followed the order with a bite of her lip.

“Dasher, please.” Her eyelids lowered with lust, and I could practically feel the heat emanating from her skin.

“I love when you say my name.”

“Don’t get used—” I cut off her statement when I began sucking on her tongue for the split second it took to seize

her wrists in my grip and completely take over her lips. Her protests died into whimpers, but then quickly increased to throaty moans. She was delirious by the time I let her up to breathe. Her eyes were shut tight, and I could hear my heart pounding. I listened to her struggle to catch her breath and fight back tears.

“You’re going to make this up to me.” The words and the force of them were unexpected. It didn’t matter. I meant every word.

“What am I supposed to make up?”

I made sure I had her undivided attention, wanting her to hear the promise in the threat.

“Everything.”

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# CHAPTER EIGHT

## WILLOW

I didn't see or hear from Dash again the rest of the night. He left me alone in his bedroom after violating me with his lips. When I awoke the next morning, I was still reeling from the force of his kiss as if he were still there covering me with his hard body and kissing me brainless. I groaned when my mind decided to replay just how much of a fool I briefly became for him all over again.

It always starts with a kiss. So innocent and simple without promises or commitment.

I shook off the bitter reminder of what almost had been and managed to catch the sound of his brusque voice delivering orders to no doubt one of his lackeys.

I was not to leave.

He shouted the order making it clear it was meant for me to hear. I wondered how he could know I was awake. I quickly sat up and looked around for my purse but didn't see it in sight. I needed a phone, and I needed money because, despite his orders, I was leaving.

I left the comfort of his large bed and raced to the front room where he stood alone. It gave me pause as I wondered whom he had been speaking to, after all. When he turned to face me, I found a new reason to lose my thoughts. He looked completely devilish in a dark gray, two-piece suit complete with a crisp white shirt and blood red tie.

“What is it, Willow?” He shot me an impatient look and glanced at the large watch on his wrist that I was sure cost more than my mother’s house.

The use of my name, and not the pet name he gave to me, snapped me out of the vegetative state of lust. “Do you plan to let me go anytime soon?” There, I said it. No good morning greetings or familiarities. “I have a flight to reschedule and a life to return to.”

“I’ll be back tonight,” he stated emotionless as he slipped on his suit jacket. “The kitchen is stocked if you’re hungry.”

I tried to mask my frustration. I really did, but I failed. Plain and simple.

“You aren’t deaf or stupid. You know food isn’t what I want. I—” I was silenced by the long fingers pinching my lips together in an infuriating warning for silence. I never even saw him move.

“What you want isn’t my concern. You came back and now you won’t be leaving.”

I attempted to speak, but he only gripped my lips tighter. I could only use the power of my glare to convey my contempt and hope that none of the misplaced desire I felt shone through—but my body burned with it, but I’d be damned if he’d see.

“I have nothing I wish to hear from you, Angel. Therefore, you have nothing to say. As I said, I’ll be back tonight. The kitchen has food.”

The cold, crisp tone of his voice gave me chills and simultaneously, made me want to obey. To add insult, he assaulted me with an especially invasive kiss while he groped my ass before leaving me trapped in an empty apartment—his empty apartment, which was now my cage. I stood dumbfounded and without a single thought other than his kiss and the promise it held before I came to and snapped into action.

I ran for the door thinking there was surely a stairway in case of a fire. The door was without locks and with one tug, it opened. My victory was short lived by the presence of a man with platinum blond hair and more muscles than humanly necessary waiting in the private corridor.

Think, Willow. Think.

"Um... Hi." I tried for a cheery tone to mask my deception.

"Ms. Waters," he greeted brusquely. He watched me warily from his position waiting for what I might do. "Is there something you need?"

"I have a small request."

"Go on."

"If you could unlock the elevator, I'll be on my way."

"You are aware I cannot do that."

I feigned inconvenience and confusion, hoping to win my way over the burly guard who looked as if he would rather be any place but here. "You're his employee, are you not?"

"You can say that."

"Is kidnapping part of the job description?"

"When the occasion calls for it."

I hid my surprise well at his blasé tone

"I'm sure you are aware of the legal boundaries being crossed here. I'm being held against my will and want to go." Immediately, I added, guessing he needed the extra kick toward common sense.

"Please, lady. I'm just doing my job."

"And I'll forget that fact when I go to the police if you let me go now."

"Sorry. No can do. Go on inside now and I won't tell." He actually had the nerve to wink and look self-assured as if he were doing me a favor.

Fucker.

Frustration led me to slam the door shut as hard as my strength would allow, and when it wasn't enough, I kicked it

until my foot became sore.  
What am I going to do now?

\* \* \*

## SUMMER BEFORE SENIOR YEAR

“Ok.” I attempted to control my breathing to no avail. “What just happened? Get it together, Willow. That did not just happen.” I turned back praying he wasn’t still there while at the same time hoping to catch another glimpse of him.

He was there all right. Only his head was bent, and what I could see of his facial expression looked ready to strangle the phone.

“Hey, wait up!”

A severely muscled guy in a letterman jacket that matched the school’s colors and destroyed jeans jogged up with a cocky smile as if he already had me in the bag.

“I’m not interested.” I was sick of cocky men for one day.

“You can’t turn me down until you at least ask my name.”

“Fine,” I huffed. “What’s your name?”

“Shane,” he offered simply as his smile grew. I could tell he expected his name to spark a reaction, and when it failed, his charming smile fell.

“Well, Shane, I’m not interested.” I moved around his hulking body, but his hand on my arm kept me from getting far. I tugged to no avail. “Let me go.”

“You’re obviously new here, so I’ll let your rudeness pass, but let me explain something to you—”

Before he could finish, a threatening hand clamped around his thick neck, circling it in its entirety. “No. Let me explain.” I blinked in surprise at the angry vision of Dash. I didn’t know what surprised me more. Dash coming to my

rescue or him choking someone twice his size. “You’re going to take those stubby little fingers off her, or I’ll crush your windpipe.”

Whoa. Scary much?

Instead of being afraid, the guy laughed and snapped his fingers. Just like that, we were surrounded by other jocks dressed in letterman jackets. There were two, and both just as hulking as Shane.

Dash wasn’t lacking in the muscle department, but he was much leaner and outnumbered. “I think you better run along, pretty boy.”

He was right. Dash was extremely pretty, and yet the way he handled the guy was completely natural. Nevertheless, it was five against one, and since male ego wouldn’t allow him to back down, it was up to me. After all, it would be a crime against nature to see that pretty face bashed in.

Shane’s distraction caused his grip to loosen allowing me to pull my arm from his grasp. Dash seemed to notice because a second later, his hand took hold of the same spot that was still warm from Shane’s grip, all without taking his eyes off Shane—or removing his hand from Shane’s neck.

“I think you can let him go now,” I prompted when a moment passed and he had made no move to let him go.

“You should listen to your girlfriend.”

“She’s not mine,” he said, sounding suspiciously defensive. I narrowed my eyes at him, taking the insult to heart. Why wouldn’t I? No one would want to be rejected by someone as finely made as Dash Chambers... especially, in front of company of any kind.

Shane’s snort was mocking and eventually, grew into laughter. “All this for a girl who isn’t even yours? She’s just a piece of ass, man.”

Great. I attracted an even bigger ass. This one just happened to be more of a douche than arrogant. It seemed

that the arrogant ass shared my feelings when his fist curled and slammed into the douche's nuts.

"I guess you won't be needing her ass now."

When their leader hit the ground, the other two pounced, slamming Dash with hard hits that would have made a lesser man fall. Dash amazingly proved capable of defending himself and stood his ground against the vicious blows, a skill that could only be acquired through fighting.

I watched him kick jock one in the ass and send him flying to the ground and left with a mouth full of grass.

"You've proved your point. Leave them alone."

"But I was just beginning to sweat."

I huffed, feeling tingly in places that had yet to be awakened. Afraid I would be caught lusting after someone unobtainable to me, I did what any person with a brain would do.

"I'm leaving."

I didn't wait around for an answer and stomped away feeling like a child throwing a temper tantrum. I only wish I knew why I was irritated. I had been having an okay day, though a little boring, when he came along and screwed it up with his half smiles and addictively sweet dimples.

"Will you stop walking away from me?" I had heard the growl before I felt an arm wrap around my waist to haul me backward.

"I don't recall giving you permission to touch me."

"Don't you feel safe?" he whispered against my neck. The feel of his breath smoothing over my skin was too good. It was embarrassing how my legs actually trembled.

"I feel violated."

Rather than let me go, he brought me closer. Oh, God... my ass was actually resting against his... his...

"Is that why you're blushing?"

\* \* \*



## PRESENT

When I woke up hours later in a sweat after succumbing to boredom, I didn't remember falling asleep. I attributed my soaking skin to the rich leather of the enormous couch and the hours I spent sleeping rather than the dream I had of the first time I felt Dash's body against mine. My damp blouse stuck to my skin and my hair, if possible, curled even more.

"One day in his presence and I'm already a simpering idiot," I muttered bitterly. After a long and lazy stretch, I stood to my feet and let my gaze travel the front room, searching for a clue to my freedom. The entire day had passed, and I knew Dash would be true to his word and be back soon. His eyes had promised. I ignored the sudden racing of my heart and thought about taking a cold shower until I remembered I had no clothing other than my clothes from yesterday. They remained in my backpack—which was never returned to me.

Irritated, I stomped over to the door and swung it open. The platinum guard jumped to attention and watched me warily. "My backpack. Where is it?" I was rude, but I didn't have the patience for false pleasantries.

"I don't know about a backpack, girl. Go back inside."

"Do you know when he will be back?"

"No."

"You must be so important to the team." My sarcasm wasn't lost on him judging by the scowl.

"I follow orders."

"I'm sure you do." I closed the door and sunk against it, wondering once again how I ended up here. Of all the things Dash was capable of, I never thought he would hold me against my will.

Maybe he has the code written down somewhere...

With renewed strength, I rushed through the apartment, turning every doorknob until I came across a door that was, unfortunately, locked. Another door revealed a room that appeared to be a guest bedroom with the addition of toys scattered about and various teddy bears. Against better judgment, I ventured further inside and picked up a stuffed turtle with a bandana tied around its face like a mask.

Kennedy.

It was still hard to believe Sheldon had a kid... with Keenan of all people. He had been the biggest pussy hound of Bainbridge High, who I had pegged as someone with commitment issues. When he ran away four years ago, my assumptions proved to be a fact. I knew one day, I would meet them all face to face again. I never thought it would be on a wedding day.

With it came the harsh realization that they all grew up without me.

Over the years, I lived with regret, its intensity growing every day until I had no choice but to feel resentment for everything I had to give up, and everyone who led me there.

I didn't blame anyone, but it didn't stop me from resenting.

When I felt the first tear, hot and offensive, trail from my eye and down my cheek, I hurriedly set the stuffed turtle back in its place and fled the room.

"Don't be stupid, Willow. Don't be stupid."

When my pep talk to myself didn't work, I rushed for the kitchen and downed glasses of water until I was choking on it. I hated that my emotions were running out of control for friends I didn't know anymore.

When I was done drowning my emotions, I aimlessly drifted out of the kitchen and looked around for signs of the person Dash had become. The luxury of the apartment only spoke of the wealth I already knew him to have, but what I really wanted to know was if there was someone else—if there had ever been someone else.

Someone he found comfort in, shared his dreams with, held close at night. Someone worth falling for.

The living room held exactly what I needed when the walls didn't. I picked up the first picture from the fireplace and found an adorable picture of Kennedy when she was a baby. I didn't know much about babies, but she appeared to be the size of a newborn. A thin, pretty pink bow adorned her tiny head, and her dark eyes stared innocently at the camera.

I couldn't help but to smile down at her while fighting tears of regret. I was torn away by the low beep of the door as it unlocked. I set the picture down and crept out of the living room, assuming Dash had come home early. Just as I entered the hallway, the door opened, and only a second later, the apartment was filled with the sound of a single gunshot. I stared soundlessly at the bleeding hole in the guard's head. I didn't react until he hit the wooden floor but found it was too late.

There were three who closed in on me. The first grasped me tight against his body. My futile struggles spurred my anger enough to bring my knee up between his legs much as I had with Dash, except this time I really wanted to maim. Apparently, he felt the same when he brought me down with a backhand that had my head ringing hard enough to rival Big Ben.

The skin of my knees were being burnt as they scrubbed across the floor. As if that wasn't enough, my hair was nearly yanked from its roots when a strong hand gripped it tight, forcing my head back. A cloth appeared over my nose and mouth, and sadly, I was only able to struggle for seconds before I succumbed to darkness.

# CHAPTER NINE

DASH

I LEFT A guard at the door with a trapped Willow inside before heading to my office. I left earlier than usual when I got the idea of staying home and spending the day losing myself in her. Somehow, she made it easy to forget that I had an entire company to run and thousands of jobs relying on me.

I needed to think, and I couldn't do that while being within a hundred feet of her. After admitting she couldn't be trusted, I realized kidnapping her was for the best, if not to prevent her from doing whatever she came to do, then to save her. Now, I only needed to figure out what or who she needed saving from.

Four years ago, I had become adept at reading her like an open book, and right now, it read that she is in trouble, or at the very least hiding something. For Willow, maybe the latter was much more dangerous.

Now that I had her, I had no idea what I was going to do with her. I haven't seen her in four years because I let her have her way. That wasn't a mistake I was willing to make again. I wasn't aware of what life she made for herself these last four years, but it wasn't relevant anymore.

She was never going back.

I entered the private office suite and put my game face on. Celesha flashed me a friendly yet taunting smile as I

bypassed her wordlessly. I ripped away my suit jacket as if it were on fire and threw my body into the chair.

"You did something illegal."

I lifted my head from my hand to find my assistant in the doorway with her hand on her hip. "It wouldn't be the first time."

"Care to share?" she asked with a wide grin. I got the impression that she had a bit of a wild streak when she was younger, which only spilled over now when she was mischievous.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"You could try me. If you share, I'll share."

"Oh?"

"But you have to promise not to fire me."

"You drive a hard bargain, but I'll have to take a raincheck. If there is anything pressing that needs my attention, it will all have to be taken care of by a quarter to six. I have a meeting with Richard Simon at six."

"Richard Simon? How do I not know about this?"

"Because I arranged it myself."

"Isn't he the competition?"

"Not for long."

"You mean like..." She dragged her finger across her throat in a cutting motion.

"Would I have bothered with my favorite suit?"

She snorted. "It's not like you couldn't afford more favorite suits. So, where are you going? Should I arrange a car?"

"There's no time. I'm walking. It's just up the street at Pete's."

"That's a little informal for a business meeting."

"I figured I'd take my time and woo him a little. You know, with dinner and a movie?" I wasn't actually taking him to dinner and a movie, but the concept was the same. My father had always used a take-charge approach and

frankly, could be a bit of dick. My specialty was finesse. First, I'd get Richard to trust me.

She returned my sarcasm with some of her own. "Aren't you the charmer."

"That's what they tell me. I'm hoping if I can win him over and take over Simon Acquisitions, then I can get my old man off my back. My father has always only believed in the divide and conquer method."

"It's a wonder he's managed to stay married for so long."

"My mother is much worse."

"Wow. I guess the Chambers are a family of cutthroats."

"My sister is the exception. The black sheep. She has a gentler touch when it comes to getting what she wants."

"Is that your subtle way of saying she's spoiled?"

"You're becoming too good at your job."

"That's why you're going to give me a big fat raise at the end of the year."

"Or I could fire you and save the money," I returned. I smiled, but she didn't return it nor did she use her sharp tongue to answer with her customary quips. Instead, she fidgeted in her seat.

"Something wrong?"

"I, uh... have some news."

"Go on."

"I'm... pregnant."

"Congratulations. Why do you look like your mother died instead?"

"Because I will need to take leave, and I know I've only been here a short time and don't qualify—"

"Done. It's not a question. Take the three months—"

"I need more than three months." I was unable to hide my surprise so she rushed on. "I'm not expecting pay. It's just that I've had difficulties in the past with pregnancy, and the doctor advised that I remain on bed rest if I hope to carry this baby full term."

Her hands shook with physical signs of upset, and I realized my silence was contributing to her nervousness. Legally, since she hadn't worked for me long enough, she wasn't protected under FMLA and even so, it only covers three months leave. What she was asking for was something most employers would not grant.

"I don't see a problem with that. You will be missed, of course, but I can assure you your position will remain intact."

She released a loud sigh and held her chest. "I don't know how to thank you."

"You've impressed me immensely in a short amount of time. Just let me know how long I have to find a temporary assistant."

"I think I'm safe to stay on for another month. I'm not very far."

"Great. Write up a two-week training schedule. You'll be training the temp yourself. I'll notify human resources so they can contact a temp agency and prepare you for disability leave."

"Thank you, again." She stood from her seat and crossed the room to the door. I watched her hesitate and then turn back. "You're very kind."

"I'm not—"

"You're nothing like your father..." her head tilted and a sad smile crossed her lips, "...no matter how many times you punish yourself by thinking so."

She left and the rest of the day was a blur. Before long, I was leaving the office building and stepping into the dusk. Ten minutes later, I was walking into the dimly lit bar and grill.

I was starting to feel tightly confined in my suit but didn't have the time to change. For the next few minutes, I silently rehearsed what I would say. I did my homework on the man who was the only one who managed not to give in to my father's selling or intimidation tactics.

Richard Simon had no wife or kids. He rarely spent time in the company of others except to golf every Sunday. He had a passion for boats and expensive whores. I also knew he weighed over two hundred pounds and founded his company five years before my father but was now on the verge of bankruptcy. Like a proud man, he refused to sell or close his company, which could mean thousands of people would be out of a job unexpectedly. I wasn't going to let that happen.

On cue, Simon walked through the double doors searching. His eyes narrowed when he spotted me sitting at the bar alone. "Dash Chambers. You finally left the sandbox, huh?"

"I'm definitely out, but I don't know much about leaving." My bitterness was hard to hide even to a stranger.

"Your father isn't known for being patient. I think it was a big mistake making you the head of the company, but I guess it's better for business... at least for me."

*What business?* Wisely, I left the question to bounce around in my head.

"You can settle down and have a drink. I'm not here to take your company. Not tonight anyway."

"Then why am I here, son?" If he narrowed his eyes, anymore, they'd be completely closed.

"To drink."

"To... What?"

"Drink. I need one, and I don't want to drink alone."

His bushy eyebrows furrowed as they reached for his receding hairline. "Don't you have some college friends you can drink with? I'm almost three times your age, boy. Besides, you wouldn't keep up."

Two hours later, I led him to his victory. I'd stopped drinking after the fifth shot and got him nice and drunk at ten shots in two hours.

He clapped me hard on the back and slurred, "I said you wouldn't be able to keep up."



"Yeah, you got me."

"Not to worry, boy. You'll get better with age." His grin spread even wider as he sat back with a look of content.

"It seems like you've had a lot of practice."

"When you get to be my age with money and power, sometimes a good drink is all you need to keep from throwing it all away."

"Something troubling you?"

"You mean besides your father trying to steal my company?"

"My father is retired."

"Your father will never retire, and I think you know that. He made you the head of the company, but he will never relinquish the power. He's hungry for it."

I was the one to signal for a drink. "He can't control me."

"Then why are you here?"

"He doesn't know about this meeting, Richard."

"And your VP?"

"James has nothing to do with this."

"Now you've got my attention. You want to work for me?"

"Don't flatter yourself. I want to help you."

"Help me? How the hell do you think you can help me? I have the experience. You're just a fresh-faced kid out of college whose daddy handed him his success."

Bingo.

"Is that so bad?"

"You may be an heir, but proper preparation is still required."

"I think my childhood can attest to the fact that my father has been preparing me for some time now."

"You know your father and I were best friends once." I shook my head no and managed to hide my surprise. "We were college buddies and roommates. We shared everything together, even women."

I shifted feeling uncomfortable at the possible direction this conversation was headed. “I don’t need to hear about my father’s sexcapades.” *Or yours.*

“Your father is a thief. It’s why our friendship ended. He first took something I thought was valuable to me, but I forgave, and then he tried to steal my company when I wouldn’t sell.”

I knew my father had attempted a hostile takeover, but what I hadn’t known was that he did it while they were friends. Sometimes I couldn’t believe the lengths my father would go to for money.

“So, you believe you are ready?” he asked, breaking me from my thoughts.

“I believe I don’t have much choice.” Simon was searching for a weakness. Dissension between my father and me.

“I always thought I’d have a son to pass everything to, but now it looks like there are two things that won’t ever happen.”

“Don’t beat yourself up. Your company can prosper for many more years if you can defeat your ego and accept help.”

“Help? There’s no help. I’m a pawn to feed your father’s greed.”

“I told you I’m not here following orders.”

“No. You’re here to rebel.”

“Then we can help each other.”

“I’m curious. How do you plan to help me?”

“A merger. The merger will consist of Chambers M&A Holdings purchasing fifty percent of Simon Acquisitions—”

“You’re out of your mind.”

“And you’ll get to keep your company name on the front door.”

“Impossible. Your father will never go for it.”

“It’s no longer my father’s company.”

"I imagine he still has some power. He's head of the board, is he not?"

"Chambers M&A Holdings will not own Simon Acquisitions. What does a name matter?"

"It matters because I won't do it."

"What about your own board members?"

"What about them?"

"Will they agree?"

"Are you threatening me?"

"I'm pointing out that soon the decision will no longer be yours to make. Do you think I'm the only one who thought of a secret rendezvous in a bar? How long before your stakeholders demand results? Your company is broke. I'm willing to sponsor."

"Forty-nine percent."

"Fifty."

\* \* \*

My phone rang in my pocket as I left the warmth of the bar for the frigid air of the night. The alert sounded more like an alarm than a ring, feeling like a bad omen. I studied the caller ID seeing Fisher's name flash on the screen. I swiped to answer and was immediately greeted by daunting words.

"Boss, we have a situation."

"Is she okay?"

"They took her."

"I'm on my way."

I cursed myself for leaving my car behind and ran the entire distance back to the office. Once I was in my car, I sped home, twisting the steering wheel and eating up the miles between me and whoever had the lack of fucking brains to touch what's mine.

The building and surrounding area was alive with police and ambulances. People stood around clutching one another in the midst of the terror that took place.

Angel.

The elevators were shut down so I took the stairs all the way to the top of the high rise. I barely noticed the pounding of my heart that had nothing to do with the physical labor of the stairs and everything to do with the unknown.

Fisher was waiting at the top of the stairs with a grim expression. He was never one to give into smiles, but the stress lining his face was the first indication of the damage. The blood and bruises on his skin also told me he fought hard and for that reason only, I wouldn't fire him for losing Angel.

"Who?" I moved straight into an interrogation. I didn't have time for pleasantries without information.

"I didn't get a good look. It was hard and fast."

"How did they get in?" I bit out through clenched teeth.

"One of the men folded."

"I want him dead."

"He already is." Fisher cracked open the door and pointed to the body bag being led out. "Their people took care of him once they were in."

"Video?"

"We were able to snag the feed before the police arrived."

"Good. I want the videos as soon as this place clears out and make that happen quickly. Assist anyway you can, and whatever information we don't have, get it."

I stopped barking orders for a moment and remembered I was capable of sympathy. "How many did you lose?"

"Only one. I won't be shedding tears over him."

"Injured?"

"Marks and Cavers were both shot trying to retrieve the girl."

"How bad?"

"A bullet in the leg and the other in the arm. They'll be fine."

"Have you notified their families?"

"I have."

"Good and the other men?"

"I sent two to the hospital and the others are searching the city."

"Let's get this over with, then."

Fisher pushed open the door and led me into the chaos that was my penthouse suite. "Are you Dasher Chambers?" a middle-aged officer with gray sideburns questioned.

"I am."

"We have a few questions to ask about what happened here tonight. Witnesses say a girl is missing."

"Willow Waters."

"She was your guest?"

"What else would she be?"

"We need to know your exact relationship with the victim."

I struggled to answer for many reasons. Our relationship was complicated, and the thought of her as a victim was hard to swallow. "She's a friend," I offered.

"Do you have any idea of who might have done this?"

"No." My short answer led to the skeptical look on the officer's face. "If I did, you can believe I wouldn't be standing here talking to you." That seemed to do it when the officer's gaze traveled from me to his notebook.

"Whoever did this meant business. If you can think of anything that would help, call me." He handed over a card, which I took and stuffed in my pocket without reading.

"Will do, Officer."

Another half hour and my place was finally cleared. I headed for my office with Fisher on my heels. I needed to see what was on those tapes. I was near to combusting from the pent up need to kill someone.

With a few taps, I had the feed of the apartment minutes before Willow was taken. The video showed her walking around the penthouse. I watched her look over the many pictures of Ken and could even see the smile on her

face as she ran her finger down the glass. The second feed showed the door as it burst open, erupting the calm into chaos. The traitor's lifeless body fell inside the doorway. The silent alarm would have been triggered by the forced entry of the stairway leading to the private corridor where the guard had been stationed. None of the security measures established could have protected her from my unknown enemy.

But, what if it wasn't *my* enemy?

Helplessly, I watched them swarm, gripping the wood under my fingers with rage as if it were happening in real time. Angel fought and even got the best of them if for only a moment. She was surrounded but held her own, and I couldn't tamp down the pride that swelled in my chest as I watched her slam that wicked knee into the balls of one of the men. Unfortunately, he was able to bring her down with him with a harsh backhand that had me ready to put my own fist through the screen. Another man produced a cloth that he used to smother her. Seconds later, her body slumped into what I could only assume was a drugged sleep.

"Find her."

# CHAPTER TEN

NOVEMBER 24<sup>TH</sup>

WILLOW

I RUBBED SWEATY palms down jeans that I have become too familiar with wearing and glanced around nervously. I wasn't in Six Forks yet, and already, I was ready to turn and flee to safety.

My uneasiness wasn't a surprise. I made many trips just like this. Always on the third Saturday, every other month, but this trip felt different. It might have been the way my heart pounded and my skin heated to an unbearable temperature, but it was definitely everything to do with the feeling of being watched. It followed me from the airport all the way to the bus that I boarded not five minutes ago.

My backpack with only a change of clothes and toiletries was my only source of comfort. I dug inside and retrieved the pack of gum I purchased before the plane ride and popped one in my mouth before clutching my bag tighter.

The bus was nearly empty with only five passengers including myself. I glanced around and found no reason to be suspicious of any of them. There were two men seated at the very back. One appeared to be sleeping while the other read. A woman and her son sat three rows in front of them

and an elderly woman sat across the aisle. I shook the feelings off and realized I was being silly.

The bus ride to Six Forks was part of the routine when I came home. I was no longer running, but I took precautions to ensure I never came face to face with anyone. My mother and stepfather were the only people I allowed to remain in my presence because they were the least close to me.

The knife in my heart twisted at the reminder that I had not seen my brother's face in four years. Buddy loved me too much and he would have never allowed me to run. He probably would have succeeded in talking me out of it and for that, I was left only with the option to love him from afar.

Buddy had just started his junior year at Reno, studying mechanical engineering. Sadly, my only source of news came from my mother and adoptive father. My mother, unfortunately, was only concerned with who he might be dating and my adoptive was a man of few words. His personality took a nosedive with the use of his legs, leaving him bound to a wheelchair.

The bus ride was short, and as usual, I expected my mother to be waiting, but just as I stepped off the bus, my phone vibrated in my backpack. Annoyed, I angrily fished it and out and read the message I knew it would be.

She was running late.

I didn't understand how she could be late when I arrived at the same time each trip. I knew it wasn't because of my adoptive father. If anything had been wrong, she wouldn't have come at all. My mother worshiped my adoptive father because he was hers, and if that meant putting him before her children, then so be it.

I approached the empty bench, sat down on the cold wood, and huddled into myself for warmth. I usually enjoyed the fall season and the cool air it brought, but the paranoia made the air seem all the colder.

A yawn and sniffle escaped me when I heard what sounded like my name in the wind. I turned toward the voice



and found two men approaching. The instinct to flee brought me to my feet, but once I stood, I couldn't move.

"Willow Waters?" the closest one asked again. I looked between the men with unfamiliar faces and felt the cold chill of suspicion suck the heat from my body.

"Nope. Name's Darcy." I retreated with quick backward steps all the while keeping wary eyes locked with their harder, meaner gazes. The moment they stepped forward, I knew they didn't believe me. I never saw the van until it was in front of me. When the door slid open, I knew the two men were merely a distraction from the real danger.

The opening revealed a stunningly beautiful woman with dark hair that traveled down her slender back. Her large brown eyes and sensual lips were as intimidating as the hard men who surrounded her from her perch on the bench. She sat as if it were a throne, the van her castle, and I were the lowly peasant prisoner.

"I have a job for you. One that will pay well."

Ok, I wasn't expecting that. "I'm sorry. I'm not currently in the market for a job."

"Acceptance is non-negotiable." She dismissed me with a nod at the men I'd stupidly forgotten were behind me. I felt a heavy hand on my back seconds before I was shoved onto the hard floor of the van.

I guess it was too much to hope they would have let me go after turning them down. Before I could fill my lungs with air again, following the hard impact, I was yanked into a sitting position.

"Forgive my rudeness. My name is Esmerelda." She offered a smile uncharacteristic of the situation we were in currently.

"I didn't ask your name... Oh, fuck. Why would you tell me your name unless you are going to kill me?"

Calm down, Willow. Don't have a panic attack now.

"I'm wanted in multiple countries, including yours." She sneered at her reference to America, and I wrestled with the

need to flip her off. “There is nothing knowing my name could do that hasn’t already been done.”

Screw it. I’m having a panic attack.

“What do you want with me?” I struggled over the thickness of my tongue.

“I told you. I have a job for you, Little Tree.” She crossed her tone leg over the other equally tone leg and twirled her foot casually.

“But, I don’t want a job.”

“You’ll want this job. It pays well. You’ll get to keep your life.”

“What kind of job is worth my life?”

\* \* \*

## PRESENT

The darkness was replaced by a blinding light, and my eyes immediately fought to adjust to the seemingly bright light that was truthfully only dim. I raggedly filled my lungs with air to fight off the claustrophobia leftover from the bag in my captor’s hands. His malicious grin spread, revealing his snagged tooth when I peered up at him. Whatever they gave me had worn off and I was left to fight off the disorientation.

One glance around revealed Esmerelda, my true captor, standing a few steps away. She watched me, appearing amused by the fight I put up as I was carried into an office. Judging by the high windows and the concrete walls, I guessed I was in some kind of warehouse.

“You tried to run.” She tilted her head with a small smile, but her tone was chastising.

“I didn’t—”

“Don’t insult my intelligence, girl. If your little boyfriend hadn’t snagged you at the airport, I would have. You might

even say he saved you... or delayed the inevitable."

"I can't do what you asked, so I guess you're here to kill me." This would be the moment I began begging for my life, but the words remained painfully lodged in my throat. She threw her head back and the room filled with the grating sound of her laughter as if I'd just told a joke. When she recovered, her gaze settled on me with a shake of her head.

"Do you still have the gift I gave you? I assume since you haven't done what I asked, you do."

"Yes, I still have it." *Oh, God. But why do I still have it?*

"Good." She signaled to the man holding my arms and thankfully, his vicious grip lessened. I knew the damage had already been done, and I would have bruises in the morning if I survived this somehow. "I'm not going to kill you today."

"You're too kind," I answered half-heartedly. My sarcasm wasn't lost on her. Her lips fell from the teasing, fake smile to an honest line of displeasure.

"It occurred to me that simply threatening your life wasn't enough. You obviously cannot be motivated by just *your* life, so I'm taking the liberty of offering your family as well."

"M—my family?"

"Your mother, father, and your cute little brother."

"Don't touch my family, you poisonous bitch!" I charged but got nowhere before I heard the slap from snaggle tooth—hearing it more than I felt it. "Is that all you got?" I mocked even while my skin felt as it had just caught fire.

"I'm afraid I certainly will. 45 Sandwell Lane. The pitiful little house on the corner."

"What?"

"I know where your family lives—and every move they make," she answered slowly as if I were short a brain. "And I intend to kill them if you do not complete the task."

"The task? Killing a man is not a task and my family has nothing to do with this." I wanted to argue that neither did I, but I was already in too deep.

"Yes, but every war has casualties and sadly, I did not start this war. Your friend did."

"He's not my friend."

"Then you shouldn't have a problem."

"I can't kill him."

The older woman pushed away from the table and approached me with slow but sure steps. "You can, Little Tree. And, darling, you will because, if I have to kill him myself, I won't stop there. I'll kill the little gem-eyed bitch he betrayed my husband for and I'll kill his family—including the adorable little darling. I'll even kill that handsome hunk of meat I stole you from. I'll kill everyone, my dear. Make no mistake about that."

I shook my head and gritted my teeth as if it could stop my tears from flowing. "It's impossible."

"Nonsense. I'm only asking for one life. His life for all the rest."

"I'm not a murderer."

"But you are. If you don't kill him, you will be responsible for many more deaths rather than just one."

"Fine. I'll do it."

"You said that last time. I want proof as reassurance before your family is safe again."

"Proof?"

"Yes, bring me something of his." She smiled.

My nervousness raced alongside confusion. "Like a piece of jewelry?" Did Keiran even wear jewelry?

"No, something better than that. Bring me a *piece* of him." She snapped her fingers at the men as if they were dogs, and a man with a deep and ragged scar across his chin stepped forward with the sack. "Oh, one more thing."

"W—what?"

"When you kill Keiran... should you kill Keiran... you might do yourself a favor and take care of your boyfriend, too."

I sucked in air and prayed she wouldn't order me to kill Dash for my family, too. "Why would I do that?"

"Do you really think he will ever forgive you after you've murdered his best friend? Men rarely admit to loving one another, but chances are, he loved him long before he made his way between your thighs. One guess where his loyalty lies?"

Her parting advice haunted me during the entire ride. I couldn't see where we were going, or even move being sandwiched in between two overly large bodies, so there was nothing I could do but replay it in my head.

"Here. This is a good spot," one of the henchmen grunted. Sweat formed above my top lip despite the frigid air in the van. The van stopped abruptly, and I would have fallen forward if rough fingers hadn't grabbed me just in time. The sound of the van door sliding open greeted me, and then the even colder air blasted me just as the sack was taken off my head. I was pushed out of the van and hit the ground.

"Complete the job and keep your mouth shut," he ordered. The door slid closed and tires screeched as they sped away.

I watched the van disappear, leaving me abandoned on the side of the road. Truthfully, I would have rather taken my chances with the dark streets and cold air. I looked up at the abundance of streetlights and tall buildings and realized I was back in the city.

With no shoes.

No coat.

No wallet.

And no phone.

It had been hours, so I knew Dash must have been alerted to my disappearance and the destruction of his apartment. A chill ran up my spine at the memory of the sound of guns shooting and people screaming as they ran for cover. I had no idea where Dash's men had come from,

but it had been a brutal fight—one they had lost due to their unwillingness to harm the innocent bystanders. It was the advantage Esmeralda's men had on them as they literally sprayed the area with bullets.

I'm not sure how long I walked, but after at least two hours of walking aimlessly through the unknown city, my feet were screaming, and the shooting pain from walking on the hard concrete made me want to scream as well. I considered hitching a ride as if I were on a country road rather than a city street but quickly discarded the thought when the vision of me trapped in someone's trunk formed.

Although, there was the possibility I could be dragged in an alleyway instead...

"Willow?"

I looked around and spotted a large black SUV pulling along side of me. It was déjà vu all over again.

*Shit.* I debated running, but the lack of shoes told me it was a bad idea.

"Don't run," the familiar voice ordered. I stopped and stared as the back door opened and long legs encased in black jeans stepped out.

"Keiran?"

Oh, shit. I looked around, expecting the van to appear and shoot up the street as they did the apartment building. He never got the chance to answer when a second body emerged from the vehicle. I felt as if the blood literally seeped—no, poured from my body when I recognized Dash and the fierce expression he wore.

Run. Fucking run.

He must have guessed my intent because his steps quickened, closing the distance between us with a hard gaze that made me cower. Thankfully, I held it in and kept my own expression impassive. That lasted only until his hand caught my neck in a savage grip. He seemed to catch himself a moment later and loosened his grip, though it

stayed like a collar or a leash to keep me in place figuratively and literally.

"You want to tell me why you're walking up the sidewalk as if you weren't kidnapped after my apartment was broken into and my men were shot to hell?

"Maybe you should tell me. Your men. Your apartment."

His eyes narrowed to slits, but the suspicion in his glare was clear. "And they just let you go?"

I shrugged and swallowed the nagging thickness in my throat screaming at me to tell him the truth. I was so tired and only wanted a warm bath and bed to crawl into—maybe even to wake up the next morning and forget this entire ordeal.

"Angel, tell me what the fuck is happening with you." His tone was desperate now, making me feel even more helpless. "Are you in trouble?"

"If I were, what could you do about it?"

"I would protect you."

"Protect me? I'm not yours to protect."

"Someone has to do it," he gritted. It was a wonder he could even speak beyond all the jaw clenching. Dash was gorgeous on a bad day, but he was breathtaking when he was angry. He was normally so charming and full of boyish smiles.

"How chivalrous of you, but here's a newsflash. Your apartment and your men would have been just fine if you had left me alone to begin with. I shouldn't be here."

"So where would you be?"

I was locked in his demanding gaze and, once again, fought the need to confide in him. It seemed that all I'd done since he forced his way into my life was fight. The reminder of why he did was a bitter truth I didn't welcome.

At the moment, I truly wanted to kill Keiran because I loved Dash once upon a time, and it was exactly what he had counted on.

"Falling out of love."

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# CHAPTER ELEVEN

DASH

I COULDN'T DECIDE between kissing Angel or beating her until she was black and blue. It took effort to remember why hitting a woman, particularly the woman standing in front of me, was a bad idea.

The real question was if my need to hurt her was because she was so careless with her life, or because she admitted to not loving me?

Love was something we'd never discussed, but at some point, I believed it was there. I'd never told her because I wasn't sure it was something I wanted.

I reminded myself it wouldn't matter, anyway. I was engaged to Rosalyn. Someone I knew I would never love.

"Let's go." I gripped her hand in mine and felt the icy stiffness of her fingers leftover from walking through the cold air. It pissed me off more than it should. I shouldn't care about this girl.

Keiran stood by the truck, watching us with a curious expression. His eyebrow lifted. In that simple gesture, there was a flurry of questions, and I didn't have any answers.

Tonight, I'd lost ten years off my life. On top of that, I was exhausted, pissed, and horny with no avenue of relief. I shook my head once and he returned it with a nod. It was good that he was still in town. Lake likely wanted to stay

behind for Sheldon and help field some of the tension from her ruined wedding day.

I kept my gaze on Willow as I helped her into the truck and promised myself I would make her talk for my sister whose wedding day had been ruined.

I climbed into the truck after Willow was situated while Keiran climbed into the front seat with Fisher. We were only a ten-minute drive from my apartment, but I instructed Fisher to drop Keiran off before taking us to a hotel. By now, the penthouse had been cleaned and restored, but the violation of my home was too fresh to return there. The enemy's knowledge, whoever they were, knew where I lived, as well. What's to stop them from returning?

Not knowing who my enemies were made the threat all the more powerful and unpredictable.

We pulled up in front of what was now Keenan and Sheldon's home half an hour later. Willow was curled into the corner of the opposite side fast asleep, so I took the opportunity to speak with Keiran.

Keiran waited outside the SUV doors, sensing my need to talk while I continued to stare at Willow. I ordered Fisher to remain in the car and quietly shut the door.

"What do we know?"

"Nothing," I breathed.

"This could be the work of whoever took Kennedy."

"Why would they go after Willow in my apartment?" I shook my head when the pieces began to form themselves. "No. This doesn't feel like it's their work."

"What are you thinking?"

"That Willow knows more than what she's saying. She wasn't surprised at being kidnapped and not to mention, we found her on the street unharmed and free."

Keiran didn't immediately reply. I could read the inner turmoil in his eyes as he stared into the night's distance and the twitch and hardening of his jaw. "We don't know her anymore, do we?"

"It wouldn't be by our choice. Either she's behind it, or she's involved. Either way, she's in trouble."

"So we help her," Keiran decreed. "But, you have to make a choice."

"What choice?"

"Between your life and hers if it comes to it."

"Why do I need to do that?"

"Because we don't know her anymore. Right now we need to have her best interest at heart until she shows us we are wrong."

"What do you suppose I do?"

"Forget that you love her and get the information you need. By any means necessary."

"I don't want to hurt her."

"If she's behind this, she'll be counting on that."

I didn't reply because the myriad of emotions and responses I had all resulted in the same conclusion. Keiran might be right. If I wanted to protect her, I'd have to be ruthless. I leaned my head against the window and gazed up at the stars.

Keiran took my silence as indecision and continued. "Listen, if you need me to stick around, I will. I'll send Lake back to California. She's got her finals, but I can stay."

"I'm not sure I deserve that." Keiran not only offered to risk his life for me, but he hated being away from Lake. Everyone had worried about the possibility of the two of them working out while holding their breath, waiting for Keiran to hurt her, but it seems we were all wrong. If anything, Keiran had become overly dependent on Lake. She was his anchor. The sole connection to his human side.

"You're my brother. You'll always be my brother. *No one* can change that," he whispered. His voice cut through the night as commanding as if he had shouted the words. I watched him disappear inside the house and laughed when I realized he'd just threatened me.

\* \* \*

This was by far the longest night of my life I had decided when we arrived at a hotel. I could have gone to my parents' house, but they were a complication I wasn't ready to deal with. By now, they would have heard of the shooting that took place along with the rest of Nevada. I swore when I realized her parents were likely notified of her disappearance by now.

"What's going on?" Willow jumped awake at the sound of my harsh curses.

"You need to call your parents and tell them you're okay. Tomorrow morning, we'll go the police station and give a statement."

I left the truck before she could respond, but I caught her groan just before the door closed. An additional security team had joined us and sat waiting behind the first truck. Fisher followed me into the lobby while the other team guarded Angel. I paid for the rooms and handed Fisher two keys for his men.

"I want you all on rotation tonight."

"Roger."

I stepped back into the night to retrieve a certain errant redhead who I found mumbling to herself in the backseat.

"What are you so upset about?"

"You."

I laughed in her face and pulled her from the vehicle. "Get used to being upset, Angel. I think it's about time you return my feelings. Besides... I have a lot of things up my sleeve that are guaranteed to make you criminally insane."

"I can walk without your hands on me."

"I prefer it this way." Thankfully, the late hour left the lobby deserted except for the receptionist who never bothered to look up from her magazine. Willow silently struggled against my hand as we made our way to the elevator.

I chose a suite less obvious than the top floor just in case we were followed to the hotel. This way we would be harder to locate within the hotel.

We made it to our room, and I took pleasure in watching her back stiffen at the sight of the single, king-sized bed in the center of the room. "What is this?" she questioned.

"It's a bed where we'll sleep. Together."

"I'm not sleeping with you."

"Fine. Sleep on the couch or the floor. The choice is yours, but I will be sleeping in that bed, and you will not sleep anywhere else but in this room."

Her face said she wanted to argue, but she thought better of it and stomped off to the bathroom. I figured she'd be in the bathroom for a while so I shed my suit jacket and unbuttoned my shirt for comfort. I sat on the edge of the bed, and I had no sooner leaned back and the door swung open as she stomped out.

Without moving from my relaxed position, I cut my eyes at her as a warning, but she didn't seem to notice because her gaze was fixed on my bare chest peeking through my shirt.

"Yes?"

"I can't call my parents without a phone. Where is my stuff?"

"It's secure," I answered simply. I pulled my cell phone from my suit pocket and handed it to her. Keep it straightforward and brief. I'm tired."

"You know it's unnecessary for you to control every facet of my life or to even think that you can."

"You and I both know I can do whatever I want when it comes to you."

"What gave you that asinine idea?"

"You did."

"Me?" she scoffed.

"Would you like a reminder of exactly how?"

"I'd rather call my mother now and spare her a heart attack." I shrugged, and just to irritate her, I winked and resumed my relaxed position while she called her parents.

As soon as I heard her speak into the phone, I closed my eyes, though my attention remained on the phone call.

"Hello, Mom? Yes, it's me." I listened to her explain to her mother what had happened, but instead of a retelling, it sounded like a fabricated story made up of half-truths and lies that filled in the blanks. The brief conversation solidified my gut feeling that Willow knew exactly what was going on.

By the time she had ended the call, I was sitting upright and was pissed off. She met my glare and looked away. "What?" she asked.

"You want to continue to tell me that you have no idea why you were taken from my apartment?"

"I told you—"

"FUCK what you told me, Angel." She jumped at the unexpected boom in my voice. "I want the truth."

"The truth is you're wasting your time. I'm not your concern. I haven't seen you in four years. We don't just pick up after that just because we were once... um..." The flush on her skin told me she remembered exactly what we once were.

"What about your friends? You just let them go without a reason or a courtesy letter. I didn't think under all the fluff and wildness was a cold-hearted bitch." She flinched, and I almost felt sorry. Almost.

"How is she?"

"Who?"

She rolled her eyes. "Lake."

"Happy."

"With him?" I didn't miss the disbelief in her eyes and the sound of disgust.

"By him, you mean Keiran? Yes, they are still happy together. In fact, they live together." I studied her face and

could practically see the emotions shifting in her eyes. "You seem disappointed."

"I am. She's weak."

"As opposed to you?"

"For starters, I'm not with someone who abused me for ten years."

"But you did fuck his best friend." Another flinch, but I refused to let up. "It's not about that, though, is it? You were fine with Keiran until she chose him over you." The flash of fire in her eyes gave me my answer even when she remained silent. "Grow up. Accept it."

"I have." The shrug of her shoulders and the indifference she displayed did little to put me at ease.

"What are you up to, Willow?"

She released a deep breath and locked her gaze with mine. "I told you. That break-in could have easily had everything to do with you as it could with me."

"But it didn't have anything to do with me, did it? Those men came there for you. Who were they?"

"I don't know."

"You're lying."

"So now you can read minds?"

"I can read yours."

She pursed her lips. "Then what am I thinking now?"

"That if you don't stop testing me, your night will be far from ending soon." The threat seemed to work. Her shoulders stiffened before relaxing in submission.

"I'm tired, Dash."

"Tell me what I want to know and you can sleep."

"I fucking told you—"

My hand reached out and clamped her lips shut. "Watch your mouth." I let her lips go and met her stare, feeling smug. She didn't like the way I handled her, but she couldn't ignore the way her body responded, either. It was always lust that betrayed us and made us weak when we so desperately needed to use our heads.

"Why do you keep doing that?"

"Because it keeps me from spanking your ass."

She scoffed. "I'm not a child."

"No, you're not." I grazed my eyes over her body long enough to make her squirm. I stopped eye-fucking her long enough to notice her dirty feet and yesterday's clothing. "Shit."

I stalked over to her, plucked my phone from her fingers, and dialed Fisher. He answered on the first ring. "I need you to send someone to get women's clothing and toiletries." I ran down her sizes and hung up.

"How do you know my size?"

"I know everything about you."

"Not everything," she whispered. Her tone was soft, but her eyes were defiant. She should know better than to challenge me by now. I took her chin in my hand and lifted her face so she couldn't hide.

"Take your clothes off and let me see how well I remember you."

There it was. The lust and longing were there. The four years behind us had done little to demolish or lessen the way she responded to me. When she finally realizes she'll never stop wanting it, I'm going to make her beg for it.

My cock came to life with the idea and because the feeling was one I remembered and didn't want to let go, I decided to voice it.

"I might even make you beg for me to remember you."

"You've got it wrong. I'll never beg."

"Angel, you already are. Each time your skin heats, your breath hitches, and your pussy drips in my presence, you're begging for me to take you."

I waited for a response, but none came. She was too busy staring at my now hard cock that I didn't bother to conceal. I used the opportunity to run my fingers through her wild copper hair that drove me insane. The texture and



feel of her wild mane slipping through my fingers was exactly how I remembered it.

With my hand in her hair and her face level with my cock, it was the perfect opportunity for me to feel her mouth on me again after four long years of being without.

All I would need to have that feeling again was a gentle tug.

The movement was so quick, I almost missed it, but when it happened again, I knew my eyes weren't deceiving me. Her tongue darted out a third time to lick her lips as she stared at my cock stretching the material of my pants.

"Are you thirsty?" I found myself asking.

"Huh? Oh... what?" Her face scrunched up in confusion, causing the freckles on her face to dance.

"You keep licking your lips."

"And?"

"While staring at my dick." I laughed when she attempted to push me away, but her hands only gripped my abs. She came to her senses quicker than I liked and snatched away.

I shrugged and finished removing my shirt without moving from my position in front of her. When she realized my intent, her mouth opened and closed as she searched for something to say.

My pants were next, and with a flick of the button, she found her voice. "Can't you keep them on?"

"I sleep naked. You remember." It wasn't a question. I held her gaze as I shed my pants. She remembered. "Look, none of us are getting out, anyway. I want a shower, but I can't trust you not to run away."

"Aren't your guard dogs keeping watch?"

"I can't keep them outside the door without attracting attention." I could already see the wheels turning in her head. "But they are close," I warned. "You would never make it out of the hotel."

"Why didn't we just go back to your place?"

“Do you miss it already?” I grinned.

“When did you become such a smart ass?”

My smile fell and the piercing in my chest returned. “Around the time you left me to become a cold-hearted bitch.”

Silently, with only my glare to pin her to her seat, I communicated everything I wouldn’t say out loud. She needed to know that her absence affected me. I wasn’t interested in her reasons, knowing that none of them would ever be good enough to make me understand.

The coded knock on the door was the only thing to break our connection. I ripped my gaze away, which set her free and stalked over to the door in only my boxers. Fisher delivered a status report along with two bags filled with women necessities and a bag for me, as well.

When the door closed behind my head of security, I returned to her and dropped the two bags next to her and then dug through the bag meant for me. She silently grabbed the bags and disappeared into the bathroom. I laughed when I heard the lock turn.

Minutes later, I heard the shower. My erection returned at the realization that she was naked on the other side of the door. With just a thought, she managed to make me feel like a horny seventeen-year-old again.

\* \* \*

## SUMMER BEFORE SENIOR YEAR

“That had to be the most boring two hours of my life.” We had just completed a seminar on adapting to college life for the upcoming freshman. I set my lunch of a double burger and fries on the table. I then sat beside her, watching as she picked over her salad. After a few minutes suffering the cold shoulder, I asked, “Are you ignoring me?”

“More like pretending you aren’t here,” she snapped.

I leaned over and placed my lips above her ear. “Ouch.” The tomato she was toying with rolled off her plate and off the table. “If you don’t want the salad, why eat it?”

“Of course, you would say that. Your muscles have muscles.” She let out some high-pitched unnatural sound. I placed my hand on her back soothingly and she made the same sound again, this time longer and higher. “Are you choking?”

“I’m fine. Please stop.”

“Stop what?” My hand ran gently down her spine, feeling her tremble from my touch.

“Assaulting me.”

“I thought you were choking.”

“Well, I’m not.”

I decided to give her a break and dropped my hand from her back. “So you like my body, huh?”

She choked on the water she’d just sipped, and I used the opportunity to touch her again. I rubbed her back and watched her fight to gain control of herself again. “Are you choking now?”

“Why are you here?”

“I’m eating lunch.” I popped a fry and smiled. She returned it with a scowl.

“Why does it have to be this table?”

“I like the view.”

“There are plenty of other views. In fact, there are views at other tables.”

“Are you always so insecure?”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re distrusting of my attention because you don’t really believe I would be interested.”

“That is the most self-centered bullshit I’ve ever heard. Have you ever considered that I’m not distrusting of your attention but annoyed?”

“I may annoy you, but you still want me.”

She shook her head and stared at me with a curious expression. "It's a wonder you aren't bursting, Dash Chambers."

"Go out with me tonight."

"What?"

"Go out. With me. Tonight."

"I heard you. I just don't understand you. Why would I go out with you?"

"Do you have anything else better to do?"

I could see on her face that she didn't. It'd been a week since our first encounter, and I knew for a fact that all she'd done was attend classes and seminars. This was the first time I'd even seen her eating in public.

"I'm not going out with you."

"I'm not asking you to run away with me and elope."

Smooth, man. Real smooth. Her smart mouth made it hard to remember that I was supposed to be charming. Then again, I would be lying if I said I didn't enjoy our interactions.

I was also treading on foreign territory. She was different from the girls I was used to. None of them would have hesitated to fuck me the first day. This was my first time giving chase and the part of me I didn't realize existed liked it a little too much.

"Then you shouldn't have a problem understanding the word 'no.'" She stood to her feet with her uneaten salad.

"Find someone else."

I watched her walk away, turning heads as she moved. Her wild hair attracted enough attention, but the highlighter green, Girl Scout vest, and white skirt made of what looked like bird feathers, and her purple combat boots ensured everyone took notice. I wanted to break the fingers that pointed at her outrageous getup. I knew she noticed, but she held her head high as she crossed the yard and bypassed the lunch tables. Her curves were on display, and I admitted they pleased me more than I thought they would. I

hadn't been able to get them out of my mind in the week since I made her blush, and I would give anything to be able to explore them.

I had the entire summer to make her fall for me and mistakenly thought getting her would be easy. I couldn't even get her to like me.

My phone vibrated in my jeans with a call from Keenan.

"Dude, how's it coming?"

"This chick is a block of ice," I grumbled.

"With all that red hair?" he asked, voicing my thoughts. "I thought redheads were the biggest freaks."

"Where did you get that from?"

"I don't know. Porn, maybe."

"She's not like other chicks, period."

"Gasp!" he yelled dramatically. "It sounds like you like her."

"I've talked to her twice, and she's skinned me alive both times."

"Not the Almighty Dash, Charmer of Maidens and Reigning Champ for Melting Panties. " He cackled into the phone. "So, you met your match."

"She's not my match. She's insecure as hell."

"So then do what you do best and make her feel secure. You're women's worst enemy, but you make them think you're their best friend."

"I thought girls liked me because of my tight abs and pretty face."

"That, too."

"I don't know, man. I don't feel right about this."

"Bullshit. You're just off your game. What did you say to her?"

I ran it down and by the end, Keenan was laughing out of control. "Dude. What is up with you? What happened to your tenderness? I've seen you talk to vipers better than you talked to her."

"My tenderness?"

“It’s easy. You just got to squeeze her. Don’t tease her to get her to make love. Just try it. Try a little tenderness.” The next moment he busted into a shitty rendition of Otis Redding’s, Try A Little Tenderness.

I hated to admit it, but he might have been right. It was odd for someone who went through more women in a month than I did since losing my virginity two years ago.

It was clear I wasn’t going to win her over with my name only, but I did know she was attracted to me. I also had the feeling she was innocent. She unknowingly gave away signs that she was interested even when her lips were telling me to fuck off.

I hung up on Keenan during the chorus and began planning my date night with a vicious redhead.

A few hours later, I snuck onto the girl’s hallway. It was a Friday night, which meant everyone was out partying it up, so all was quiet. I found her room number and knocked with my hands full. The door swung open after my third knock.

“I thought I got rid of you.”

“I bounce back easily, and I come with a peace offering.” I held up the large box of pizza.

“I told you—”

“It’s not a date. It’s just food.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You didn’t eat your lunch, and you haven’t left your room since.”

“Are you stalking me?”

Yes. “Not at all. I just made a good guess.” The truth was I found her roommate about an hour ago and paid her to spy for me—and to get lost for the rest of the night.

“Go away, Dash.” She attempted to close the door, but I stopped it with my forearm and muscled my way in. I closed the door and locked it while holding her gaze and then took her hand, leading her away from the door.

“Which one is yours?” I asked, indicating the twin beds. She pointed to the bed on the far side with the purple and

black bedding. I placed the pizza on the dresser and took her hand and sat on the bed. I opened my legs and pulled her between them. Her hands twitched at her sides, and when I pulled her closer, she placed them on my shoulder. I knew it was only for balance, but I enjoyed the feel of her hands on me all the same. "I have movies. Are you going to let me stay?"

"I'm not interested in watching movies with you or eating your pizza."

"Even if I promise you'll be safe from me tonight?"

"I'm safer with you gone."

"I won't try anything." My reassurance fell on deaf ears.

"I wouldn't let you. Now leave."

"Fine." I stood up and caught the way her shoulders slumped with relief... or maybe disappointment?

I caught her wrists in one hand, and I reached into my back pocket with the other. She was too busy staring at my hand on her wrists to notice the metal cuffs I now had in my hand. I managed to secure a wrist before she noticed and began to struggle.

"Let me go."

"I can't do that, Angel. Don't scream or I'll have to gag you, too." I took a chance by kissing her on the forehead and then gently settled and positioned her along the edge of the bed. I shed my backpack from my back and pulled out my laptop while she softly cursed and kicked her legs out. "I brought one of every kind." Her frown deepened with confusion. "I have chick flick, comedy, action, and horror. You pick." I showed her the choices, but she kept her gaze trained on me.

"You're crazy."

"I'm not crazy. I promise you." The soothing tone of my voice seemed to calm her when she relaxed against the mattress.

"I can't believe you handcuffed me so I would hang out with you."

That makes two of us. I was sure it wasn't what Keenan had meant by trying a softer approach, but I believed in being prepared for all situations.

"If you're a good girl, I'll remove the cuffs. Now, let's try again. Are you hungry?" As if on cue, her stomach growling filled the room. "I'll take that as a yes." I opened the box and pulled out the paper plates sitting on top of the steaming, greasy pizza. "Are you a vegetarian?"

"No. Why?"

"Just figured it would have been one of your eccentricities."

"How stereotypical of you."

"It's only stereotypical if you take offense."

"The way I dress has nothing to do with what I eat."

"Hence, the reason for my asking. I'm sure you've made some assumptions about me."

"Only a few. I think you're a narcissistic, whoring, rich prick who thinks he'll get in my panties, and who has a pretty face and daddy's money."



# CHAPTER TWELVE

PRESENT

WILLOW

I FELT LIKE a shy seventeen-year-old whenever I was around him. I hid behind biting words because it was my only defense. I figured if I made him hate me, he wouldn't want me as much as his eyes were telling me did.

Wanting Dash was risky. Fucking him was dangerous. Loving him would be a tragedy.

My aching muscles called to the large garden tub. I stared at its empty depths longingly, but more than a soak, I wanted to sleep so I turned on the oversized glass shower and made the water as hot as possible. I questioned whether a cold shower would be best, but I wasn't sure a cold shower could wash away the effects of Dash. To rid myself of Dash Chambers, I would have to bleed. Again.

Steam rose as I fished through the bag, thankful to find a set of pajamas—and not the skimpy kind, either. I also found lavender body wash and moisturizer inside. I didn't want to think too much about the fact he'd paid attention to a minor detail. Dash knew it was the little things that mattered to me.

But, Dash is a manipulator. It wasn't about my comfort or pleasing me. He wanted to prove me wrong and remind

me how well he knew me.

The shower helped soothe my aching muscles, but what I really needed was a good foot massage. I would have to settle for a few hours off my feet instead. Braiding the end of my single braid, I left the steam filled bathroom and found Dash sitting on the side of the bed, facing the bathroom with his phone plastered to his ear. He watched me walk to the bed and smirked. I rolled my eyes and snatched a pillow from the bed and the thinner duvet folded at the end before moving to the couch.

He quickly ended his call as I made my makeshift bed. "Business so late at night?"

"Are you concerned about my well-being?"

I settled my body on the couch before answering. "I'm still trying to figure out if you've become like your father."

"And?"

"I don't know yet." I turned and faced away from him, hoping he would take the hint. A part of me couldn't believe Dash would ever become anything like his father. He had been benevolent in ways his father would never understand, but did that Dash still exist?

The sudden silence in the room lured me into sleep, and just as I was able to fully succumb, I felt his hands grip my body and lift me. "Well, maybe you should stay close until you can figure it out."

"You said I could sleep on the couch." He slipped us under the covers and spooned me from behind.

"I changed my mind."

"You mean you lied."

"Angel, if you continue to tempt me with your mouth, I might change my mind about other things, too." To drive his point home, he pulled me closer, pressing his erection into my back. The heat of his skin felt too close, and against my better judgment, I reached my hand between us and felt his warm, naked skin under my palm.

"You're naked?"

"Sleep," he ordered. Fatigue was evident in his curt tone, but I couldn't just sleep knowing the pajamas that suddenly didn't seem so protective were the only barrier between us.

I struggled for a mental distraction and control of my breathing once more. *Why did he have to be naked?*

"I shouldn't want you." I flinched at the sudden sound of his voice. His words were equally abrasive. I wasn't prepared for him to flip me on my back and lean over me. The disgust in his voice was overshadowed by the lust in his eyes.

"I didn't ask you to."

He shook his head as if disappointed, and for an insane moment, I wondered why. I didn't have to wonder for long. He let me go and rolled over to face away. "You've become as screwed up as your mother," he shot back.

"And you're as greedy and heartless as your father."

Unwanted tears soaked my face and pillow. My body shook with silent sobs.

At least it wasn't lust I felt anymore.

\* \* \*

"Where are we going?" I questioned the next morning. It was the first thing I'd said to him since we'd woken up almost an hour ago.

"I need to shower and head to the office. I'm taking you to Keenan's."

"I don't need a babysitter. I need to go back," I stressed, yet again. Of course, I couldn't really go back yet. Not without making sure my family was safe. Ensuring their safety meant killing Keiran, which wasn't something I could do. However, I couldn't think straight around Dash, and I needed to figure out what I could do or go to the police.

"You're not going anywhere until you tell me why you came back, and where you've been for four years."

I considered telling Dash about Esmerelda, realizing I wouldn't be able to help my family on my own, but then I was reminded of how Esmerelda found me and bested Dash's men. Was I willing to risk the safety of my family, as well as his safety if she had already proven to be powerful and resourceful?

It occurred to me that I had no idea who Esmerelda was, or her connection to Keiran, or why she wanted him dead. Lake had told me the entire slave ring was either killed or imprisoned four years ago.

Without knowing who she was, I had no idea what I was truly dealing with. She knew about everything and everyone, including me. I haven't been around in four years, so I wondered why she picked me over those closest to him.

Esmerelda had already shown her hand twice by dumping me at the wedding and kidnapping me from Dash's apartment. They already suspected me. They just didn't know why.

Another puzzle piece of the game she was playing. Maybe it was just a game and she planned to kill us all, which meant I was nothing more than a pawn.

My head spun with the possibilities, and I realized I was in way over my head. The risk of losing to Esmerelda was far greater than exposing her hand.

"Dash?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm ready to talk. I'm—"

I was cut off by the sound of Dash's phone ringing. The screen on his dashboard read Rosalyn's name, and from a simple phone call, I could feel my blood boil. Why was she calling him? I thought they lost contact long ago.

"Go on," he pressed.

"Aren't you going to answer that?"

"No." His jaw clenched and unclenched and his fingers tightened on the steering wheel. The ringing stopped and his shoulders visually relaxed.

“Why?”

“Is that your business?”

On cue, the ringing started again with Rosalyn’s name flashing on the screen. “I’m making it my business.” I pressed the button for accept before he could react, and immediately, Rosalyn’s shrill voice filled the car. I literally cringed.

“Dasher? Are you there?”

I leaned over the armrest and tauntingly whispered, “Oh, you’ve got her calling you Dasher, too?”

“You’re going to pay for this later.”

“So I’ve heard.” I waved toward the screen, silently communicating that he should talk.

“I’m here, Roz.” His use of the nickname he called her when they used to date knocked the air out of my lungs as if he had kicked me in the chest. His smirk further added to the hurt.

“I thought I heard someone else. A woman.”

I wanted to confirm for her what she suspected. That he had another woman, more specifically, an ex-lover in his car whom he spent the night with, but I wanted answers more so I kept my mouth shut.

For the time being.

I needed to know if there was something between them again. I almost wished there were so it would make everything easier.

Easier to let go and easier to forget.

“Sorry, did you need something?” he asked, sidestepping her question.

“Yes. I want us to do lunch and discuss the wedding.”

*Wedding?* Please tell me she sunk her claws into someone else.

“Now is not a good time.”

“Our fathers want us married within the next six months,” she screeched, confirming my fears while they had no idea that she had ripped out the remnants of my heart

and spat on it with each word she spoke. "We have absolutely no time to plan as it is."

"I'm not stopping you from planning without me," he pointed out.

"I'm not going to let you run away from this. We have a commitment." I snorted at her idea of commitment and earned Dash's glare. "Are you mocking me?"

Her screeching began to give me a headache, and I wondered if it was the sound she made when Dash made love to her.

*Oh, God. Did he make love to her?*

I must have made some sound of distress because Dash took that moment to meet my stare. "Rosalyn, we'll talk about this later." He hung up without waiting for her response.

I took a deep breath and found my voice. "So, you're getting married." It wasn't really a question but hearing it out loud solidified it.

"I didn't want you to find out this way."

"So, when did you plan to tell me? Before or after you had your way with me again?"

"It's not like that."

"No? So, you're not a liar and I'm not a fool?"

"What did you expect, Angel—"

"Stop calling me that."

"It's been four years," he went on.

"Forgive me. I forgot that my extended absence meant you could lie to me today. God! You actually kept me prisoner here with little regard for the life I created while your *fiancé* plans the rest of yours together. I guess I should blame myself because, really... how dumb can one girl be?"

"Angel..."

"Gah," I screamed. "Just stop." I angrily wiped away the intrusive tears rampaging down my face. I didn't understand the strength of my reaction. I always knew he was promised

to her. I just never thought he would go through with it, and if he did, I never thought I'd be around to witness it.

We arrived at his apartment minutes later. The tension had increased with each second we were confined in the tight space of his car.

I needed air.

I needed a breath.

Dammit, I needed to *breathe*.

I was grateful he didn't stick around when we entered his apartment. He headed straight for the shower and left me alone to my thoughts. My thoughts as tears spilled onto what I was sure was an insanely expensive couch.

Twenty minutes later, he emerged looking the role of a high-powered businessman while I had leftover snot drying on my face.

"Ready?"

"Do I have a choice?" He wisely chose not to respond and held the door open.

"Sheldon will take you to get clothes. Get whatever you'll need."

"How long do you plan to keep me here?"

"I told you. Until you give me what I need."

"If I tell you what happened Saturday, you'll let me go?"

He nodded but just as quickly averted his gaze, and I had the feeling it wasn't his intention at all.

"We'll see," I returned and bypassed him with my arms crossed under my breasts. His gaze raked them, and I tried my hardest to only feel disgust. There was nothing desirable about an engaged man. I wasn't naive enough to believe he actually loved her, but nonetheless, he would belong to her when they married.

It only solidified my decision to never return home if I were able to leave alive and sane.

The drive from the city to Six Forks was made in silence. So many times, I wanted to ruin the quiet and tell him exactly what I thought of his impending nuptials.

Sheldon greeted me at the door with a smiling Kennedy, who looked as if she had just finished rolling in syrup. She quickly sent her inside to clean up after one glance at my appearance.

“Willow! What has my brother been doing to you? You look fucked up,” she cried with extra emphasis on fucked.

“Your fiancé should teach you how to use better language,” Dash joked.

“I’m not a pet dog,” she snapped back.

“Prove it.” They began bickering back and forth, and because I felt as if I were intruding on their teenaged sibling duel, I stepped past Sheldon and let myself into the house.

I didn’t see Keenan when I stepped inside, so I turned the corner into the first room that turned out to be the kitchen. I did witness the little mischief-maker pouring ketchup on her pancakes, though.

“Hi,” I greeted. She dropped the ketchup and threw her hands in the air. I laughed at the sight of her. Her pictures didn’t do her justice, and the brief moment I saw her at the wedding wasn’t enough to realize how cute she was.

“Hi,” she whispered and plopped onto her butt in her seat where her feet had been planted.

“You must be Kennedy. I’m Willow.”

“Hi, Willow.” Her pronunciation of my name was more like ‘whoa’.

“It’s very nice to meet you.” She only stared back while I grappled for something else to say. “What do you have there?” I nodded at the pancake cut into tiny triangles with ketchup and syrup.

“Cakes. Want some?” She picked up the tiny square with the most ketchup and syrup soaking in and extended it. There was no way I would eat that so I wondered how I could refuse without hurting her feelings?

I was saved by Keenan’s sudden appearance. He swooped down and ate the offering out of her hands, making hungry noises. Kennedy erupted in a fit of laughter



and swatted away at her father when he pretended to eat her tiny hand, as well.

"More," he demanded.

"No, Daddy. Willow have some."

Keenan finally looked up at me with mischievous eyes, the same eyes Kennedy had clearly inherited, and a shrug. "Sorry, Wills," he laughed using the nickname he dubbed me with five years ago. "I tried."

"Maybe she shouldn't eat that, either. She could get a stomach ache."

His smile turned down and his head snapped back to his toddler. "Hey, princess. How did you get the ketchup?"

"Daddy ate a burger last night."

His eyes widened and he snatched up the bottle and ran the short distance to the pantry as if hiding the evidence. The evidence was also all over Kennedy's face and clothes as well as the pancakes that remained so I wondered what his game plan was.

"When Sheldon comes in and loses her shit, we say the kid acted alone," he prepped me.

"Keenan..."

He covered Kennedy's ears. "If I get in trouble, I won't get my afternoon nookie when Ken takes her nap."

"Shame on you." I laughed hysterically. I'd forgotten how funny Keenan could be. It appeared as if the last four years hadn't changed him, but I could have been wrong.

"How's it going, Wills? I missed you."

"I missed you, too" I found myself admitting and realized it was the truth. I'd missed all of them but found it easier to admit with Keenan. Out of everyone, I might have been able to identify with Keenan's need to leave and him with me.

"Don't be so stiff. Can't I get a hug?" I let him envelop me in his embrace, and that brief moment of contact made me feel as if I finally had a friend again. He let me go and

stared down at me with sad eyes. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"I was finally able to put some things into perspective."

He turned away to start pouring cereal for himself. Kennedy was no longer attempting to eat the pancakes but instead, raced them around her plate. "So what brings you back?"

I contemplated answering his question. I might have understood him, but I knew where his loyalties were. He sensed my hesitation and looked up from pouring his milk. "It's not a loaded question," he assured.

I nodded and answered simply. "I was visiting my mother."

"I see. Was this your first trip back?"

"More like the twentieth or so."

"So, how did you end up on the Chambers' doorstep?"

"It's complicated."

"I have to admit it was a pretty epic way to crash a wedding."

"I promise that wasn't my intention." I had found out from my mother a couple of months ago that Keenan and Sheldon were getting married. My initial decision was to skip the visit, knowing they would all be in town at once, but my mother had guilted me into coming. Other than the single visit every other month, I didn't keep in much contact with her. The call I placed the week before was one of the rare calls I made home.

At times, I felt like a fugitive on the run.

Dash and Sheldon entered the kitchen, and I only just realized they had been outside the entire time. Sheldon's expression was nervous while Dash's was grim. I met his stare from his perch at the door. He seemed to be searching or waiting for something from me. If he was expecting a goodbye or to wish him a nice day, he was delusional. After another few seconds of staring, he finally left, and I could breathe again.

"I've been ordered to take you shopping."

Before I could decline, Keenan grumbled, "That's my cue to leave."

"Baby, I need you to watch Ken for a few hours, and by watch I mean watch her."

"I do watch her."

"Oh yeah? Then how do you explain the ketchup on her half-eaten pancakes?"

"I don't know, Shelly. You were on pancake duty this morning."

"Yes, but you left the ketchup out."

"It could be worse. She could have thought your birth control pills were candy," he snapped.

*Whoa.* Tension.

Sheldon's amber eyes seemed to glow as she glowered at Keenan. "What does that have to do with any of this?"

"Nothing. Forget it." He picked up Kennedy and stormed from the kitchen. Sheldon stared after him on the verge of crying.

"God, he can be such a dick," she cried.

I risked hugging her because she needed it more than I needed to keep my distance. "Am I missing something?"

"Keenan is trying to get me pregnant."

"So? I thought you two were happy..." It's true they were still young, but they already built so much together. It only seemed natural to want to add more.

"I haven't even started medical school, which he practically forced me into pursuing, and I'll be years away from finishing. I already have one small child and an overgrown one. It's not the right time."

"So tell him that."

"I have. He's not listening. He said he didn't see a problem with me finishing school and giving him more minions at the same time."

"Minions?"

"He has this evil mastermind plan involving any future kids we may have and taking over the world," she clarified exasperated.

"Okaaaay then."

"I don't know what to do."

"Birth control?"

"I've tried the pill, but he always manages to find them, and he refuses to wear a condom. I have an appointment next week for a shot. That will hold him off for the next three months at least."

"Do you think maybe he wants to make up for missing the first three years of Kennedy's life?"

"I don't blame him for that. Not anymore. We've talked about it and realized we've both made mistakes, and there is nothing we could do to erase the past."

"Did the both of you agree with that or just you?"

"I'm not following."

"It's pretty clear he wants more than to make up for lost time. He's intelligent enough to know he won't ever get that back. He's trying to fill a void."

"A void that I put there."

"Don't be stupid. You both made decisions, but the important thing is that you're together now. Kennedy had you and now she has the both of you. Don't fuck that up over 'what-ifs.'"

"You should take some of your own advice." She grinned. "What's going on with you and my brother? That was a pretty intense look he had given you before he left."

"Nothing is going on. He's engaged to Rosalyn, which I'm sure you know."

"He told me at the wedding after telling me that very day that he'd brought her. I'm also grateful the wedding was ruined so I didn't have to see her there."

"I'm sorry I ruined your wedding. Have you guys decided on a new date?"

"No, and I'm not that sorry." She shrugged.

"Why not?" I couldn't conceal the surprise from my tone. Did she not want to marry Keenan? It was undeniable that those two were in love, even more so than before.

"Because I realize now that it wasn't perfect. You weren't there with me and now you are."

"I don't think my presence would have really made that big of a difference."

"And that was always the problem, wasn't it? You underestimate your worth to the people who love and care for you. You probably thought the same when you took off, but you hurt all of us. I just wish you would tell us what we did to make you leave."

"I just had a lot to figure out. I found someone who could help me do that. I might not have ever come back given the choice, but I don't blame you."

"There's someone?"

I shook my head. "It's not what you think."

She nodded, accepting my answer, which wasn't much of an answer at all. No one knew where I'd gone. Not even my mother.

"What about Lake? Do you blame her?" she blurted.

"Lake hurt me, but it's not about blame. My decision to leave was for me. I'm not even sure if my feelings or my reaction to her leaving were reasonable, but they were real."

"Where did you go?"

"Somewhere I thought I'd be safe."

"And you'll go back there, which is why you won't tell," she guessed.

I nodded and looked away. I couldn't handle the look in her eyes that begged me to stay. It wasn't possible. Especially now that Dash was getting married.

"You know he won't marry her."

"That's what you said last time," I pointed out.

"And I really believed it as much then as I do now. How could he when he has found you again?"

“But he didn’t find me.”

“Well, someone did, and it doesn’t matter who takes the credit or... blame. The important thing is you’re back. I just hope you come around in time to save my brother.”

“Your brother is in control of his own fate. He doesn’t have to marry her.”

“But, he thinks he does. He has this unhealthy sense of duty and never learned how to chase his own happiness until you.”

“I’m nothing more than a guilty pleasure.”

“Don’t undersell yourself when it comes to Dash. Think about why you’re still here. He could have let you get on that plane and never see you again. He might have searched forever for you just to know if you were okay.”

“He looked for me?”

“He always denied it, but I know he did. I’ll never understand how you were able to escape my brother.”

“I had some help.”

“Will you ever tell me?”

“I think it would be better if I didn’t.”

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## SUMMER BEFORE SENIOR YEAR

### DASH

“MAYBE YOU WOULD like to be gagged,” I reminded her. I was secretly amused at being called so many things in one sentence and was quickly learning that she had a sharp tongue.

She took the pizza I offered, but her cuffed hands made it hard to move. I watched with amusement as she slowly brought the pizza slice to her lips. “I can’t eat like this.”

“You’re doing just fine.”

“Where did you get these cuffs anyway?”

“A sex shop.”

She scrunched up her nose with disgust. “Have you always had these?”

“I bought them for you.”

She ate silently after that, taking her time with dainty bites. I’d already inhaled two slices by the time she’d finished her first.

“Ok, I ate so what happens now?” I took her empty plate from her hands to the trash, but she chose that moment to clean her fingers free of the grease with her tongue. My own

dried up in my mouth as I stood rooted to the old carpet.

“Why are you staring at me?”

“Do that again.”

“Do what?” The startled look on her face brought me to my senses. I shook myself free of my thoughts and trashed the plates.

“Never mind.” She continued to watch me curiously as I set up for the movie. I chose the comedy since it was the most neutral. Once the movie started, I joined her on the bed with my laptop in hand. Her twin bed was narrow and by no means meant for two people, but I knew just the way to make it work.

“Lay with me.”

Her back stiffened and her head whipped around to face me lying behind her. “What are you doing?”

“Lay with me,” I repeated.

“No.”

“I could make you.”

“You can’t make me—”

I pulled her down against my body before she could finish. Her back was flush with my chest while her bottom wriggled against my dick. I slid my hand down the curve of her hip and whispered to her.

“I can do whatever I want.” We were so close that I felt her shiver against me. I couldn’t resist the opportunity to bait her. “Cold?”

“I’m a little hot, actually.” Her tone was anxious and light. The movie had already begun to play, but neither of us noticed it.

“We’re both fully clothed. If you’re hot, I can fix that.”

“No. No. I—I’m fine.”

The skin of her face was like porcelain so smooth and pale. I couldn’t resist dragging the tip of my finger from her hairline down to her chin I used to guide her face toward the laptop. “Relax. You’re safe.”



She seemed to believe me and relaxed enough to enjoy the movie, and I found that I liked the sound of her laugh. The husky tone of her laugh hit me straight in the gut, and halfway through the movie, I suffered a severe case of blue balls.

Thankfully, she was completely oblivious to my current condition. So much so that she made the mistake of wriggling her bottom against me whenever she would laugh particularly hard. By the end, I couldn't remember what the movie was about because of all the fantasies playing out in my head.

"Dash?"

"Yes?" I struggled to keep the evidence that I wanted to fuck her silly out of my voice.

"The movie is over." She was back to being nervous again. At least she wasn't cutting me down with that mouth of hers.

"So it is. Would you like to watch another?"

"It's late. You should go."

"I'm kind of comfy." I lifted my hand from her hip to wrap my arm around her. Actually, my back hurt like hell and my arm was asleep from holding my head up for two hours, but it was worth it.

She twisted around to face me and I helped her. "Thank you for the pizza and movie, but I would really like for you to leave now." I might have been able to take her seriously if her gaze wasn't trained on my lips. She did that thing with her tongue when she touched the corner of her mouth and breathed out.

I suddenly got the uncontrollable need to breathe the same air as her. I leaned closer. When she didn't back away, I got a little bolder and didn't stop closing the gap until my lips were on hers.

Fuck me, it was better than I imagined. I had kissed a lot of girls but never one that had my heart beating out of control. Her taste alone was electrocuting.

\* \* \*

"You shouldn't have kissed me." If she wanted me to stop, her moans were the wrong way to go about it. I didn't stop attacking her neck. The taste and smell of her skin were so addictive. It was as if I had never known a woman before... or maybe it was because, after Willow, none of them mattered.

"It's what someone does when they want another person, and Angel, I want."

"Why do you keep calling me that?"

"Calling you what?"

"Angel."

That brought me to a screeching halt. "I wasn't aware that I was."

"How couldn't you? You never really say my name. Do you not like it?" I could detect the insecurity in her voice and shook off my raging lust long enough to offer the assuring she needed.

"There isn't anything about you I don't like. My feelings toward you are nothing short of an addiction. I crave you, Willow Waters." Her name rolled off my tongue sensually, delivering sex with every syllable.

"Give me one good reason why you want me, Dash. I'm ten pounds overweight, my hair looks like the wild kingdom gone wilder, I'm a penny below poor and according to the rest of the world, I'm colorblind."

I picked over every flaw she so graciously pointed out, nodded my head slowly, and then told her what she thought she wanted to hear.

"You're right. You're a fucking mess." Her face fell in disappointment. "I've never met anyone more perfect."

\* \* \*

## PRESENT

Leaving Angel behind, after the morning proved one for discoveries, seemed almost cruel. I was still fighting the need to track down Rosalyn and strangle her with my bare hands. The look on her face and the sound of her voice as she inadvertently begged me not to break her heart again wasn't something I'd forget anytime soon.

Marrying her was the last thing I intended to let happen, which is why I kept the engagement secret. Richard Simon was the key to my freedom. By law, of course, I could simply refuse, but I didn't care to live the rest of my life as a disgrace to not only him but also anyone who would listen.

Last night, while Angel showered, my father called to demand I meet with him this morning. Whatever his reasons, I no longer had the patience. Watching as Willow's heart broke this morning because of me again had fucked me up.

By the time I arrived at the office, I was irritable. Celesha wisely chose to remain silent. She bit into her apple with wide eyes and watched me cross the suite to my office. I found my father had once again invaded my office, but this time he had James, the company Vice President, with him.

"Dad. James." My greeting was short, but so was my temper. "I would have met you in the conference room."

"This shouldn't take long. James had some pressing concerns about your campaign to change the company's acquisition procedures."

"What particular concerns?"

"I want to know about this nonsense idea you have of a 'gentler approach,' as you put it."

I looked between the two men before fixing my gaze on my father. "James, why don't you get back to work while I speak with my father about your concerns?"

“Don’t be rude, son. He brought this to my attention. He needs to be here.”

“Which is precisely my reason for excusing him from this meeting. He brought his concerns to you instead of directly to me, so I’ll speak to you and you can relay the message.” I nodded to the vice president in dismissal. “James.”

James left without a word, and as soon as the door closed, my father stabbed his finger on top of the desk. “Your behavior is taxing, Dasher. I did not make you head of this company for you to behave like a petulant child.”

“Yet you speak so highly of the man who can’t even speak for himself. Listen well, father. I’m not going to continue to do this job with you breathing down my back and your spies watching my every move. Interfere again, I’ll quit, and you can find yourself another heir.”

“I’ll do no such thing.”

“Why did you give me all this so soon if you don’t trust me to do this job? You must have known I wasn’t ready. I’m fresh out of college.”

“What does age have to do with it? I wasn’t much older than you when I started this company.”

“But how long before you were actually *good* at it? I only have the skills you hand fed me.”

“Then learn more by listening to James. You cannot simply ignore decades of business practices just because it doesn’t suit you!”

“Your business practices are nothing more than carefully worded threats. Over eighty percent of your acquisitions were hostile. Instead of cultivating relationships, you’re making enemies.”

“We are not in the business of selling dreams, son. We’re conquerors and conquerors do not ask for permission.”

“I don’t want to be a conqueror. I want to be a smart man and smart men know how to pick their battles.”

“And a smart man knows how to pick useful allies. You’re still in contact with Keiran Masters.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve heard you’ve been gallivanting about the city with him again looking for a woman who is not your fiancé.”

“That woman is my friend who was kidnapped from my apartment in broad daylight by very dangerous men. Keiran’s woman is her best friend. Naturally, he offered to help.”

“His kind of help will land you in prison, boy.” His eyes narrowed with scrutiny. “Maybe you do want to marry Rosalyn.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. No man would want to marry Rosalyn.”

“Then sever your relationship with that criminal, and I’ll call off the proposal.”

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not going to do it. Keiran is more than my friend. He’s my brother. I’m not giving him up because you want to protect your image.”

“It’s about time you found your balls.”

I looked up to find Keiran in the doorway. The dark hoodie he wore over his head mostly obscured his expression so I couldn’t tell what he was thinking.

“Son, we’re having a private conversation—”

“That I’m ending now. Father, I’ll talk to you later.”

“Don’t dare dismiss me for him.” I met his glower straight on, unfazed by his anger. “Leave.” After a few more moments of staring, he realized I wasn’t backing down and stood to his feet.

“I will speak to your mother about this.”

“Tell her I said hello.”

The office door slammed to a close. I expected Keiran to say something, but he simply made his way to the couch

and slouched with his head against the back of the couch and eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"Something bothering you?"

"Lake wants to stay behind for a few more days."

"Doesn't she have finals coming?"

"She does, but she's worried about Willow."

"Really?"

"Why are you surprised?"

"Her reception has been kind of cold."

"Yeah, I asked her about that, and she nearly bit my head off."

"Maybe you should check her purse for your balls."

"Cute."

"So what are you going to do?"

"We're going. She needs to study, and I want her alone so I can fuck her properly. I can't do that with a toddler insisting on a slumber party every night."

"Get used to it. You and Lake have been going strong for four years now. Wedding bells are ringing. Baby comes next."

I don't think I've ever seen fear in Keiran, but his complexion paled considerably, and he leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "Do you think she'll want that?"

"She's a woman and she loves you. Of course, she will. Wait... don't you?"

"I would love to make her mine on paper but a kid..."

I was pretty sure if Keiran weren't already sitting, he would have fallen. "There's no need to panic. There is still plenty of time."

"I'm not sure I'll ever be ready for that. I can't create a child knowing what's out there ready to hurt them. I used to think it could be possible, that I could give her a family, but I can't ignore that less than a year ago, I had a hit on my head. I'll never know if there will be another and when it will

come. I lay awake at night wondering how I'm going to protect her."

"You can't plan your life around what-if. The right thing to do is to give you both what you need. Lake trusts you to protect her, but she also trusts you to give her happiness. Don't fuck it up. Trust is a hard thing to earn after it's lost."

I expected him to react. Instead, he went back to staring at the ceiling. Instinct and years of friendship told me he had more on his mind and judging by the hard set of his jaw I knew it was nothing good.

"There's something else." I watched him carefully, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Mitch is dead."

Forget the shoe. Keiran had just laid an atomic bomb in my lap that would detonate at any moment. "Fuck man. When?" Already I was mentally preparing for the legal battle ahead if Keiran was caught. He had been in too much trouble with the law to walk away for the umpteenth time.

"About a week ago."

"How? You weren't in Nevada." The lingering question was in my tone which he sensed. I watched his shoulders tense with frustration.

He cracked his knuckles and flexed his fist before settling perfectly still again. "It wasn't me."

"Come again?"

"I didn't kill my father," he spelled out slowly. "The police showed up on Keenan's doorstep while they were out. I haven't told him yet." His frown deepened and his chest moved with harsh breaths.

I knew better than to think he mourned the motherfucker who almost succeeded in stealing his humanity, but the deep lines in his forehead told me his father's death bothered him.

"This is good news. Mitch is dead and you get to keep your hands clean."

"Do I?"

“So you’re saying you’d avenge him?”

“Fuck. No. I’m saying my back may have just become someone else’s target.”

“You know they say the enemy of your enemy is your friend, right?”

“Or just a bigger enemy.”

I stared at him at a loss for words knowing he could very well be right. Keiran trusted little and suspected everything. The worst part is he was always right. Except when it had come to Lake... It is clear that she had always been the rule rather than the exception. The day Keiran went against his better judgment could very well kill him.

“You have to tell Keenan and soon. Are you going to go after whoever killed him?”

I was hoping the answer was no, but I knew better than that. Keiran didn’t like loose ends and he didn’t take chances. Especially now that he had someone to live for.

He turned to face me and in his eyes I could see the killer born from slavery and pain. “Do I have a choice?”

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# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## SUMMER BEFORE SENIOR YEAR

### WILLOW

SINCE THAT FIRST night weeks ago, Dash had made every excuse, plan, or a ploy to get into my room or for me to come out. The very next day, he had come back, claiming to not understand the assignment given to us in our time management course. Since I'd refused to give him my number, he had been forced to come over.

Only when he was inside did I discover he had already completed the assignment.

He placed me in handcuffs again and made me watch another movie with us crammed together on the twin bed. Only this time was different for several reasons.

This time, he took the liberty of removing his shoes and locking our feet together. The movie was also different. It was a romantic comedy called Bridget Jones' Diary.

That had been one of my favorite nights for one particular reason.

When Mark Darcy admitted to liking Bridget Jones just the way she was despite all her bad qualities, he had played it back and turned up the volume. As I listened, he placed kisses on my neck and when Darcy repeated it, Dash had whispered it in my ear.

Luckily, my roommate had been gone, and over the weeks, I found that she was always gone when Dash came over but never when I needed time alone.

The very next night, he claimed to have left his computer charger. He placed me in handcuffs, brought over Twilight, and removed his shirt and shoes.

By the fourth night, I assured him there was no need to handcuff me. He then attempted to bribe me with a kiss instead of the handcuffs. I was going to choose the less dangerous route, but he took the decision from me by trapping me against the door and introducing me to his tongue once again. That night was the first time he slept over. We were moving into dangerous territory at full speed.

I looked myself over in the mirror once again and couldn't recognize myself. My hair had been tamed into disciplined waves that flowed down my back. The white sundress hugged my body and actually looked flattering against my curves. Plain white flip-flops and a long gold chain completed the outfit. Although I felt foreign in my own body, I liked what I saw so maybe Dash would, too.

I wanted to call Lake for advice but didn't know how she would respond to my friendship with Dash. He was best friends with the enemy after all, and in a way, it made him the enemy, but being here alone made it easier to accept his friendship. I had no idea what would happen when we both returned to Six Forks.

We'd been hanging out for weeks in secret. I would only agree if we were in my dorm. Today when he asked, I finally decided to go on a date with him. I had no idea where we were going, but the butterflies in my stomach hadn't let up since I agreed.

I opened my door and was greeted by a face that looked like Dash but a body that was not dressed like Dash. The bright yellow shirt with thin purple stripes was accessorized by a purple bow and suspenders. His jeans were plain dark

and cuffed at the bottom with purple loafers to end his outrageous outfit.

He looked gorgeous.

"Why are you dressed like... um..."

"You?"

"I suppose." He looked entirely too conformable in what people like him wouldn't be caught in.

"Why are you dressed normally?"

"Are playing with me?"

"You don't have to answer to everything with hostility you know."

"I don't trust you."

"Why?"

"Because you're friends with *him*."

"Him?"

"Keiran Masters." His eyes narrowed and his lip curled with disdain completely transforming his features into someone unrecognizable. I was stumped by his fierce expression given their relationship.

"What do you have to do with Keiran?"

"You know what."

His hands snatched away from my waist as he took a step back and growled, "You fucked him."

"What? No! I'd rather die."

"Those are strong words. Then what do I know?"

"He's a bully."

"I see... and he has bullied you?" I faltered at the anger in eyes but also the recognition.

"If he had?"

"I would have to speak with him."

"Why?"

"Because he hurt you."

"He hasn't... not directly."

"You're speaking in riddles."

"You mean you really don't know?" For the first time, he was silent without something witty, smart, or charming to

say. He actually appeared to be fighting for words.

"No." He cleared his throat. "I don't know."

"How can you be best friends with him and not know about the one person he actually hates?"

"I don't want to talk about what's back in Six Forks or Keiran. What I want is to take you on a date, but first, I want to give you a gift."

"A gift? For what?"

He ignored my questioning and took my arm in his hand. He placed a kiss on the inside of my wrist and then clasped a thin, platinum bracelet around my wrist. I pulled my arm away to inspect the bracelet.

It was simple yet elegant, breathtaking, and nothing like I expected.

Transparent purple stones adorned the platinum chain. It was a beautiful, unexpected sight. I fingered the bracelet and admired the angel wings. Beside it was the letters 'D' and 'W'. The right arm of the W was hooked around the curve of the D.

"I don't know what—um... why?"

"I saw this and thought it was something you should have. I had it personalized with our initials."

*Our initials.*

The phrase sounded like a commitment, but I knew better than to read too much into it with someone like Dash. He could have anyone he wanted so the reality of him settling for me would never be anything more than fantasy.

I looked up from the bracelet in time to see the flush on his cheeks. "Why, Dash, I do believe you're blushing," I cooed in an imitation of a southern belle.

"I will only ever blush for you."

"And what about acts that would make me blush?"

"Are those only for me as well?" I laughed at my joke but was cut short by the look of promise in his eyes.

"You should know better by now." His voice had deepened further with lust.

"And what should I know?"

"Everything I am is only for you."

"I wish I could believe that, but it's too powerful a promise for two strangers."

"We aren't strangers."

"We barely know each other."

"You know me better than most."

"How is that?"

"Because I trust you. Being the son of one of the richest men in the country doesn't afford me the ability to trust easily."

I thought about the question nagging in the back of my mind since he approached me on campus three weeks ago.

"Should I trust you?"

"No."

I swallowed past the thick apprehension in my throat.

"Why?"

"Because I don't have good intentions when it comes to you."

"What are your intentions?"

"If I were trustworthy, I wouldn't tell you exactly what was on my mind and exactly what I wanted from you."

"Even if I wanted you to?"

"One of us has to know better."

"Or we could do the wrong thing together."

He reared back in surprise. "Am I seducing you or are you seducing me?"

"Anything you can do, I can do better."

\* \* \*

## PRESENT

Sheldon took me shopping for a change of clothes just as Dash had promised. I expected it to be a brief trip out, but

we spent the entire day out. Four years ago, I wouldn't have been caught dead in a chain store. I had always preferred to make my own clothing, but with each year that passed, I looked less like me. I no longer felt like me anymore.

We stopped for lunch and she filled me in on everything that had happened over the years while I'd been gone. Out of everything, I was mostly surprised to find that Keiran had been a large part of Sheldon's strength during her pregnancy and after. And when she revealed what happened to Kennedy, I realized keeping my predicament a secret was endangering more than just my family. Later, when Dash arrived to pick me up, I knew what I had to do.

"Are you ready?" he asked when he walked through their front door. I studied the stress lining his face and heard the fatigue in his voice.

"Not quite. We need to talk."

He rubbed his hand across the back of his neck impatiently. "We can talk at my place."

"We can't. It involves them as well." Keenan had been sitting nearby, playing on his phone, and pretending not to listen.

He lifted his head and said, "I'll get Shelly."

I couldn't break my gaze from Dash's so I nodded that I had heard. "What is this about?"

I shook my head. "They need to hear it, too."

Keenan and Sheldon entered the living room, and I took a deep breath that was supposed to be calming, but all it managed to do was to get caught in my throat along with the words.

I ran through everything that happened Saturday and Monday night, calling for every detail, but the ability to start escaped me. I stood up to pace and found it easier to speak with each step.

"The day of the wedding, I came home to visit my mother. I'm not sure exactly what happened or how she knew me." I wasn't making much sense and was rambling

to keep up with my racing mind. At the back of my mind, I realized my heart pounded out of pace and my palms began to sweat.

“Slow down,” Dash ordered. “Who knew you?”

“Not who. Them.”

“You said she.”

“There were men who found me and forced me into this unmarked van. She is their leader. Anyway, she said she had a job for me and I could live if I completed it. She drove me to your parents’ home after that and they dumped me there.”

“What did she want?” Keenan demanded.

“She, uh... she wants Keiran—” My tongue twisted and my gut knotted.

“She *wants* Keiran?” Sheldon’s voice was full of surprise.

“No. Um... She wants him... dead.”

The room filled with silence. Everyone’s mouths were agape as they stared at me. Keenan was the first to speak.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Keenan mumbled. “This is the second attempt on his life in less than a year.”

Sheldon had filled me in on Kennedy’s kidnapping a few months ago. She was ransomed for Keiran’s death and whoever was behind it wanted Sheldon to make the hit.

“Who? Do you know who?”

“We know who physically took Kennedy, but we don’t know who was behind it.”

“Where are the people who took her?”

“Extremely dead.” Keenan smirked.

“They could have known—”

“They didn’t know anything.”

“Well then, I think I know who did this.” They all looked as if I’d grown an extra head.

“How?”

“She told me who she was. She said it didn’t matter.”

“Who is she?”

“Esmerelda.”

“Esmerelda Phalan?” His lips twisted with disgust and confusion.

“We didn’t exchange last names, but whoever she is, she’s dangerous, and she knows who we all are.”

“How do you know?”

“Because when she took me the second time after I had tried to leave, she threatened my family if I didn’t kill him. She’s been watching all of us.”

“We need to tell Keiran.”

“Keiran and Lake left for California this morning.

Keenan’s shrug of his shoulders was nonchalant, but his voice was thick with authority. “Then I guess we’re taking a road trip.”

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# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DASH

“FUCK, BABY. WHEN I get you in my bed, I want you naked and on my cock. Don’t make me wait, Lake.”

I laughed at the thought of all the years that passed and Keiran still felt the need to threaten her.

“Mhmm... I love you,” she cooed.

Through the doorway, I could see Lake tugging open Keiran’s belt. The only sound that filled the house they had rented from a middle-aged couple was the sound of their heavy breathing and kissing. When it became painfully apparent that they wouldn’t make it to the bedroom after all, I cleared my throat. Keiran’s head snapped from biting Lake’s neck, and his dark orbs peered through the doorway getting angrier by the second.

“Dudes. Get out.” Keiran was nothing short of annoyed to see everyone posted in his living room.

“We need to talk.”

“I don’t want to talk. I want to fuck. Leave my fucking key on your way out.”

“Baby, don’t be rude.”

Lake’s scolding earned her a glare to which she rolled her eyes. She’d come a long way from the cowering girl who feared the very thought of him.

“Do you think you two can tone down the freakiness for a few minutes?” Keenan blew out exasperated. “We drove

for hours in the middle of the night because this is important.”

The serious tone from the generally playful Keenan had them straightening and cooperating.

“What’s up?”

“We have a lead on who took Kennedy and killed John.”

“Who?”

“Esmerelda.”

“The entire organization was eradicated.”

“Apparently, a few fishes slipped through.”

“How do you know this?”

I found myself pushing the answer through clenched teeth before Keenan could have the chance to continue.

“Because she is the reason Willow crashed their wedding. She kidnapped her at the bus stop and threatened her into agreeing to kill you.”

“Not again,” Lake whispered horrified. Keiran took her chin in his hand and whispered to her. It was too soft to hear, but whatever he said calmed her down.

“We need to deal with this as soon as possible. I knew she was still out there, but I underestimated her. I never thought she’d come for me. “

“Who exactly is Esmerelda to you?” Willow questioned.

“She’s Arthur’s wife. She ran the runaway home they used as a front to trap kids on the street and buy the ones that were sold. The babies were kept there until they were old enough to move to the compound.”

“Why does she want you dead?”

“She’s a fugitive and her husband is dead for starters.”

“What happens when Esmerelda is taken care of? How long before the next one comes along with another attempt to see Keiran dead?” Sheldon pointed out.

“One crazy psycho at a time. First, we need to find Esmerelda.”

“Willow,” Keiran addressed her with a hard look. “Where did they take you?”

"I don't know. I was drugged and they kept a bag over my head when they let me go. What I did see looked like a warehouse."

"Were you drugged when they released you?"

"No."

"Can you remember how long the ride was?"

"I'm not sure... maybe thirty minutes? I had walked for about two hours before you found me."

"We'll need to figure out where she was left and search for any warehouses within a thirty-minute radius."

"Why didn't you tell anyone before?" Lake questioned. There was an unmistakable bite in her tone. Willow tensed under everyone's stare as we all waited for her answer. It was an issue that had played at the back of my mind since she first told us. It had been three days since the wedding and Willow had countless opportunities to say something before now.

Her chin lifted as she met Lake's stare. "For the same reason you didn't tell anyone when Keiran threatened your aunt's life for shits and giggles."

"Careful, Willow."

She turned her icy gaze to Keiran. "When Esmerelda threatened my life, I simply left... or at least I tried." She shot me a glare full of accusation. "The second time she took me, her men cut down Dash's security effortlessly and then she threatened my family and everyone else I know. If you're wondering if I thought about killing you, the answer is yes."

"So what made you change your mind?"

"Sheldon told me what happened to Kennedy a few months ago, and it all sounded too familiar to not be connected. I realized there was more at stake than just my family."

The room fell silent when everyone retreated into their thoughts. I was mulling over the meaning of Willow's decisions when Sheldon spoke.

“Willow, I know it couldn’t have been an easy decision. A decision none of us could have made any easier,” Sheldon directed to the rest of us, warning not to condemn too quickly. “You risked your life and your family by sharing this information for my daughter. I only hope we can help protect you and your family in return.” Sheldon met my gaze issuing a warning and I nodded my head.

“We will protect them,” Keiran agreed. “Right now, Willow is our only connection to catch them. As long as she’s alive we have a chance.”

Keiran nodded his agreement. “How long did she give you?”

“She didn’t say.”

“She just told you to kill me and nothing else?”

She merely shrugged. I could tell she just wanted it all to be over, but I couldn’t muster sympathy for her. Willow had proven a second time that she couldn’t be trusted. Instead of confiding in me, she kept it to herself and even considered going through with it. It was a struggle to remain silent, but I would get my answers and my retribution for her lies when we were alone.

If I was supposed to thank her for her mercy, she was wrong. My sister had been forgiving, but nothing in me could bring myself to forgive how she hadn’t trusted me and had intended to betray me.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## WILLOW

REGRET WAS SOMETHING I had become accustomed. Ever since I ran, I've lived with it every day. And now it seemed at every turn, I was adding to my list of things to regret. I saw the accusation, the anger, the distrust...

I'd made the wrong decision and paid the consequences by further damaging my friendship with Lake.

I excused myself to the bathroom when I couldn't fake it with my head held high anymore. I splashed water on my face and pretended I wasn't crying. I told myself I wouldn't be a bad person and that from now on, I would only make good decisions, but I knew when I reentered reality, none of it would hold any weight.

A knock on the door jolted me out my self-loathing. I became as stiff as a board and held my breath as if the person on the other side could actually hear.

"Willow?" The feminine sound of Lake's voice calling my name made me grip the counter. "I know you're in there." The doorknob turned as she knocked again.

With a deep breath and then another, I unlocked and snatched open the door. "Yes?"

"What was that down there?"

"I don't follow," I answered slowly.

She pushed into the bathroom and closed the door shut. "Who are you?" The pain was etched all over voice. "The

Willow I know would never have kept such a dangerous secret like that and put lives in jeopardy.”

“The Willow you knew isn’t standing here. You took what was left of her when you walked away for him.”

“If you think it hurt watching me move to another school, then be thankful you never had to feel what it was like to find one day that your best friend was gone without a trace. I fucking mourned you, Willow. I didn’t leave because I preferred him. I left because I needed him. I love him, Willow.”

“And I needed you.” The volume of my voice increased with the overwhelming emotions raging inside. “He’s abused you since we were kids. You’re such a fucking masochist.”

“I’m not living in the past like you. I forgave him for me.”

“Have you? Why? Has he even apologized or did he just make you a bunch of promises that sounded good?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know what he did to you.”

“No one knows better than me.” Her tone took on a harder edge, and I could tell the pain was still there despite all their happily ever after bullshit.

“And what about what he did to me?”

“What Keiran did was despicable, but he didn’t make you fuck Dash and he didn’t make you fall in love. You did it because you wanted to and because your heart craved Dash. The start may have been false, but the journey was real.”

I searched for a spot on the wall and fixated on it. I couldn’t stand to look in Lake’s unusual eyes and not give in.

“This great love you speak of tormented you for ten years and did unthinkable things to you for entertainment. In every war, there are casualties and people get hurt. I was one of them. It was one thing to fall in love, but it was

unbearable to watch you ride off into the sunset with him. You never even thought to help me learn how to heal as I did for you. Did you forget? I dried every one of your tears and shared your pain so you could find the strength to face the next day only to be knocked down again. And now you're actually trying to convince me that it was love? Well, I found *and lost* my only chance at love *because of him*. I won't forgive him. Not even for me. The pain serves me much better. It reminds me I'm alive, and it's love that destroys you."

Lake watched me with sad eyes and then shook her head, defeated. She turned to grasp the door handle to leave but turned back at the last minute. "You didn't lose him," she shot back forcefully. "You let him go."

Once she was gone, I shut the door and slid down the wooden length until I sat on the wooden floor. I never realized how long four years truly was until I saw up close how much Lake had changed. I couldn't say if it were for better or worse, but womanhood definitely agreed with her. Maybe I was the only one holding on to my emotions from high school, but that didn't make them any less painful.

I angrily wiped away the tears streaking down my face and composed myself. In just a few days, I could go home. Now that they knew of the threat, I would be able to leave will a full conscious. I had considered killing Keiran but now knew it wasn't something I could ever do. Despite my feelings toward him, some people cared for him and would mourn or suffer from the loss of him, including Kennedy. Including my best friend. The first person I loved who didn't share my blood.

I finally found the courage to leave the bathroom, and when I opened the door, I found someone waiting.

"Standing outside the door while someone uses the bathroom is a tad creepy."

"You weren't using the bathroom. I heard you crying."

"Yeah, sometimes I do that when I really have to pee."

“Willow.”

Keiran’s warning was simple but held a lot of weight. “I suppose you’re here to tell me what a bad person I am, too. Let me just save you the breath. I agreed to kill you for the sake of my family and so they wouldn’t kill me on the spot and slaughter them anyway. If I would have gone through with it to protect them is something we’ll never know, but I can say I don’t want you dead. I don’t like you, but Lake thinks she’s happy with you, and I haven’t been a model friend since I left so my opinion doesn’t really matter. I thought for someone who’s killed without reason, you’d understand my plight.”

“You thought wrong.”

“Because you’re a saint?”

“Because I’ve never killed without reason.” The underlying threat was as clear as if he had shouted it.

“I didn’t ask for this. I didn’t come back here with some vendetta against you.”

“Then why did you come back?”

“I wanted to see my mother.”

“You hate your mother.”

“What do you know about how I feel about my mother?”

“Because I know what it looks like.” He pushed off the wall and took away some of the same distance I had kept between us. “It’s written in your eyes when you talk about her.”

“I never talk about her.”

“Exactly. It’s why you never learned how to hide the truth.”

“What do you want?”

“My gut is telling me to kill you, but I don’t know if it’s instincts or the slave driving me to the conclusion.”

“So what happens now?”

“I warn you.”

“I thought you didn’t kill without reason.”

“I don’t... so tread carefully, Willow.”



He left me standing alone, and I would be lying if I said I wasn't shook.

"He'll do it." Dash's voice pulled me out of my funk.

"He's serious. You know that."

"I'm not afraid of him," I lied.

"That's the problem. You should be."

"Just because you are—"

Dash shook his head and looked away. "I'm not afraid of him."

"Then why do you follow him?"

He barked a laugh. "Is that what you think? I'm Keiran's friend because he needs me. Maybe more than I need him. But what I am afraid of is losing our friendship."

"Why?"

"Because if he hurt you, I'd kill him."

I stared at him in disbelief. "You wouldn't do that." I denied it, but the look in his eyes suggested it was true.

He shrugged. "He would do the same for Lake."

"Would he?"

"In a heartbeat."

I rested my head against the bathroom door to ease the spinning. "Then your friendship is no friendship."

"I've been friends with Keiran for a long time. In the beginning, I tolerated, overlooked and made excuses for everything he'd do until I realized why he needed me and why I felt I had to be friends with someone so troubled. He needed a moral compass. A conscience. Someone to tell him to ease back. I couldn't stop him, but I figured out he listens... sometimes."

"Big help you were. Where were you with your super power when he tormented my friend?"

"Keeping him from literally killing her."

"So what happens now?"

"I protect you both."

\* \* \*

There was no way we could take the long drive back to Six Forks so we camped out at Keiran and Lake's for the night. Kennedy had been left with Sheldon's parents so they stayed as well. There was only one extra bedroom open, the other occupied as Keiran's office, so Keenan and Sheldon took the bedroom and we took the living room.

I watched Dash make a pallet on the floor from my perch on the couch. There was enough room on the couch to fit the both of us so it completely took me by surprise when he didn't insist. The hard look on his face told me it had nothing to do with chivalry.

He didn't want to be close to me.

I should have been grateful or relieved. Instead, I felt slighted.

When he finished and lay down, he looked completely out of place for someone who wore thousand dollar suits. He'd shed his jacket and shirt and crossed his arms behind his head, making his impressive chest and abs even more prominent.

"So are you sleeping on the floor because of your fiancé?" I waited, but he didn't respond. The muscles of his jaw clenched, telling me he was awake. "I have to say it's pretty pathetic. You weren't concerned with her feelings before I knew about her." I waited and got nothing. Not even a twitch this time. I didn't stop to consider the consequences of baiting him. "I wonder how many times you've cheated on her."

"Her? Or do you mean you?"

"Why would I mean me? I'm nothing to you."

"If you believe that, then why are you upset I'm not up there with you? Is it because you want me to touch you?"

"Get over yourself."

"Or would you rather touch me?"

"I would rather swallow nails than touch you."

"Fine."

When he brought his hands down to his pants, I suddenly felt as if I hadn't had a drop of water to drink for centuries. "What are you doing?"

"What you're too afraid to do." I swallowed hard at the sound of his zipper lowering. It was dark with only the moonlight streaming through the windows.

"Dash, no."

"It's too late to say no, Angel." He lifted his ass and slid his pants down to rest on his hips. His cock sprung free and bobbed against this taut stomach when he settled back on the makeshift bed.

As soon as he did, he brought his hand up to his mouth and spit. He then slowly grasped his cock around the head and squeezed. I found my legs mimicking the action and closing tight.

*Stop watching him!*

I couldn't find the willpower to tear my eyes away. I knew without taking my eyes away from his cock that he watched me watch me.

"Fuck," he grunted and I sat up. I leaned forward and clutched the edge of the couch as his hand worked his thick cock. His lips curled showcasing his pearly whites. His hips rocked subtly. All the while, his heated gaze pinned me to my seat.

I could feel the sweat between my thighs increase as my body temperature rose. I couldn't believe he was really pleasuring himself and making me watch.

I was panting by the time I found my voice. "Dash — " I lost my breath at the sight of pre-cum leaking from the tip of his cock.

"This feels good, Angel. So. Fucking. Good."

The twinkle in his eye as he bit down on his bottom lip told me he enjoyed teasing me. The thought snapped me out of my helpless state though I was still overcome with lust.

But if he wanted to push, I'd push back.

“How good?” I didn’t miss the shock in his eyes at my unexpected question. “Does it feel as good as me?” I asked before he could answer.

“Nothing feels as good as you.”

“I’m not sure I believe you. It’s been years since you felt me.” I sat back against the cushions and ran my hands up my bare thighs and his eyes followed.

“I remember,” he gritted.

“It’s a shame really...” up and down, I teased my own skin, “...a memory is all you’ll ever have.”

“You and I”—grunt—“both know”—grunt— “if I wanted you in bed”—grunt—“I would have you.”

“Anything you can do, I can do better, Dasher. Maybe it’s me who is seducing you.” The reminder of our first time together brought a dangerous glint in his eyes, and he reared up and jumped to his feet before I could react.

His hands grabbed and caught me when I attempted to scramble over the back of the couch. I was flipped onto my stomach and then held by his hand on my neck while he raised my ass in the air.

“Dash.” I squealed his name, but it was mostly muffled by the couch.

“Shhhh,” he whispered and then flipped up my skirt to slap me on my ass.

“Oww! Don’t hit me!”

“Shhh.” He repeated the punishment. I groaned and he repeated it once more. On the fourth slap to my ass, I pleaded with him to stop. It earned me another slap. This one harder and more forceful. Wisely, I didn’t make a peep on the fifth, realizing it was the reason for the slaps.

“Good girl.” His hand invaded my panties and rubbed the skin he’d just abused. “No more kid games. When I tell you to do something, you do it. Understand?”

“Fuck off.”

He chuckled and the next moment my ass was on fire as he rained down three controlled slaps. I fought to get away,

but his hand kept me in place. The burning sensation made me wish his hand would rub me again, and just as I wished it, his hand found the spot again. He rubbed once and then dipped his hand lower until it was resting between my legs and tangling with the sticky evidence of my arousal mingling on my thighs.

His silence stretched for seconds too long. I held my breath through every second. I knew he knew it was there because his fingers ran through it. "Is this what I think it is?"

My shoulders slumped in defeat at having been caught for coming. "I don't know, Dasher. What is it?"

His other hand gripped my hair and pulled my head back at the same time his fingers left my thigh. I watched as he brought his fingers, coated with me, to his lips. His tongue darted out briefly to touch the tips and then an entire digit disappeared in his mouth. He made a hungry sound while keeping eye contact and then his finger slid back out. "Still my favorite part of you."

I was breathing hard as if I'd just run a race. "Why did you do that?"

His eyes flashed with... something. I thought he wouldn't answer, but then he leaned forward and rested his forehead against mine. "Because I'd almost forgotten what you tasted like," he whispered with pain in his voice.

I was engulfed in his body heat and his cologne mixed with his sweat. It made me crazy. It made me want.

"Dash."

He lifted his head and peered into my eyes. I let him see my need and to know that whatever he was offering, I was willing to take. I knew the moment he recognized it.

"Yes, Angel." He caressed his face against mine. "I know."

I reached for his pants, but he grabbed my wrist. "Shit... I almost forgot." He snapped his fingers and smirked.

"Huh? What did you forget?"

“I’m having dinner with my fiancé tomorrow.” He let me go, settled back on his pallet, and turned over, giving me his ass to kiss.

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# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

## SUMMER BEFORE SENIOR YEAR

### WILLOW

AFTER TEASING AND flirting with him, I found my back up against the door and was assaulted by hungry kisses. I was ready for him to complete the final act of our month long foreplay by the time he showed mercy.

“Dash?”

“I wouldn’t forgive myself if I took you before I even took you to dinner so stop tempting me before you find yourself full of me and screaming from the pleasure.”

“O—okay.”

“Good girl.” He kissed the tip of my tongue, took my hand, and led me from the dorm. When he opened my car door for me, I practically melted into the seat. Why is it that everything he did made my legs weak?

This was my first time riding in luxury. I looked around the foreign car in amazement. The gray leather was so soft against my skin and his intoxicating scent filled the car.

He slid in and started the car, bringing the sporty car to life. I was a little nervous, having seen what these cars can do on TV. He must have sensed my nervousness because he leaned over and kissed me softly. “Don’t worry, Angel. I got you.”

We took off for the restaurant, and I found that he could handle the car quite well. I thought it was a bit much for a seventeen-year-old, but maybe it was the way of the wealthy.

The restaurant was a short drive, but just the exterior made me feel out of place. Dash took my hand again and led me inside the restaurant. He seemed to like being in charge, and since I was out of my element, I let him lead.

The hostess beamed as we approached and laid it on extra thick for our benefit. I fought the urge to roll my eyes and then wanted to claw hers out when she touched his arm.

Figures he could pull a girl looking the way he did.

I expected Dash to thrive in the female attention. After all, she was undoubtedly gorgeous. I was thrown when he pulled me around to the side where the hostess walked and wrapped his arm around me, effectively dislodging her hand and rebuffing her.

*Take that, cheeky bitch.*

She showed us our table and walked away without asking if we needed anything. Dash's shoulders shook and he snorted. His twinkling gaze locked with mine, and I smiled at him across the table.

A waiter approached with our menus almost immediately and announced the specials. Dash instructed me to order whatever I wanted.

One look at the menu, and I was lost. None of it was familiar.

Where were the appetizers or the burgers?

I flipped to the page and read the first entree or what I assumed was an entree. Cocotte de Légumes. There was no mention of meat so I skipped over it.

"I can order for you."

"But you don't know what I want."

"Do you?"

"I don't recognize anything on this menu."



“Ok, can I make a suggestion then?”

“Sure.” Seemed harmless enough. Dash signaled and the waiter came over.

“Sir?”

“Yes, my lady and I will have the Coq Au Vin with baby carrots and potatoes.”

He nodded and collected our menus while I glared at Dash. I waited until he walked away before voicing my displeasure. “That’s not a suggestion. You ordered for me.”

“I did.”

“How do you know I like Coq Au Vin or carrots or potatoes?”

“Coq Au Vin is chicken. Everyone likes chicken, and I’ve seen you eat both carrots and potatoes, and if you can eat what the school serves, then you can eat the carrots and potatoes here, so what exactly is wrong with what I ordered for you?”

“The fact that you ordered for me.”

“It’s okay that I hold the door for you, but I can’t order for you?”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“Ok, what’s the difference?”

“Holding the door open is a kind gesture. You would do it for anyone regardless of gender. Ordering for me is just pretentious.”

“Would you prefer that to call the waiter back and have him read every line of the menu so you won’t feel as if your right as a woman is violated? I’m sure the waiter wouldn’t mind. We *are* the only table he has to wait on, and I’m sure he isn’t counting on the tips from the other tables to help pay his bills or feed his children.”

He sat back and gestured for me to do exactly as he suggested. His smugness was too much. Instead of crying like I wanted to do, I stood from the table and walked away.

Yup. I’d done it. I’ve fallen into stupidity. I knew going out with him was a bad idea. And now I’ve fallen from grace.

I looked down at the clothes I put on to please him and felt like a sellout. I ruffled my fingers through my hair, destroying the control.

I stepped to the curb to hail a taxi and hoped the ride back wouldn't be too expensive.

"Where are you going?" His tone was gentle, but I dared not look at him. I stuck my hand out for a taxi, but his arm shot out to stop me. "Don't. I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted. Now go back and eat your Coq Au Vin."

"I apologize for insulting your right as a woman. I rather enjoy your *womanhood*."

I spun around and slapped him on his chest. "Don't make jokes."

I wasn't prepared for him to hug me. "At least I got you to look at me."

"Once again, you're taking liberties."

"Please accept my apology."

"Why should I?"

"Because I know where the real food is."

He pulled me down the street to a bar and grill. There was a Friday night crowd but luckily, we were able to secure a booth. I picked up the menu and was delighted to find foods with names I recognized. "Ahh, there are the burgers."

"You like burgers?"

"I hate them, but it's good to see them on a menu. I've got a taste for chicken." I sent Dash a sweet smile across the table and then burst out laughing at the grumpy look on his face. "Cheer up! What are you getting?"

He looked at the menu and flipped back and forth before deciding. "The bacon cheeseburger looks good."

Just then, the waitress arrived to take our orders. I made sure to speak up this time. "Yes, my guy and I will have the chicken alfredo and two cokes." She took our menus, and I made a point to make eye contact with Dash across the table.

"That was cute," he said slowly.

"Now I forgive you."

"I think it's sexy when you're snarky." The heat in his eyes gave credit to his statement, and I found myself squirming in my seat.

"That wasn't really the point."

"I get your point, but I still find you incredibly sexy. Even if you need to brush your hair."

*Shit. Shit. Shit!* I'd forgotten that I mussed my hair when I stormed from restaurant number one. I touched my hair, feeling self-conscious when I never had before. "Excuse me." I jumped from the booth and rushed to the bathroom to salvage what I could of my hair.

*What is this jerk doing to me?*

\* \* \*

## PRESENT

We arrived back to the city around mid-day. Dash drove us to his apartment, showered, and changed. Did I mention he dragged me into the shower with him? He hadn't spoken a word to me but manhandling apparently wasn't off the list.

The air around us felt different. He didn't feel like Dash and that scared me. When he handed me a shopping bag I hadn't seen before, and ordered me to get dressed, I was even more confused.

Soon, I was wearing a tight gray pencil skirt and burgundy top with a modest neckline. It was the type of attire worn in an office setting, and I wondered why he had me dressed for the occasion. We arrived at his office building and rode to the very top floor.

We entered a large suite, and straight across were a large desk and a woman tapping away at the computer with a phone plastered to her ear. "Mr. Chambers is unavailable

at the moment, but I can take a message.” Dash moved forward to stand in front of the desk and waited while the woman took the message. When she hung up and turned her attention to us, I got the full effect of this woman’s striking features. “Good morning, Mr. Chambers.”

“Good morning, Celesha. Apologies for my absence. I had personal matters to attend. This is Willow. She’s going to be your temporary replacement.”

Dash just disappeared inside a room, leaving me standing alone with his secretary after dropping that bomb. He didn’t even bother to offer me an introduction so I could only assume she was his secretary.

Celesha’s surprise was nothing compared to mine. She recovered and stood up to shake my hand. She was beautiful with slender cheeks and dark curly hair that wasn’t wild but tamed and don’t even get me started on the length of her legs. They would put Lake’s to shame. And then she spoke.

“Hello, Willow. I’m Celesha Amsel. Dash’s personal assistant.”

*For fuck sake!* She even has an accent. I guessed German. I’d never thought it was an especially sexy sound until this woman, who looked like sex on legs, spoke.

And she was Dash’s *personal* assistant. I couldn’t help but wonder how personal her job description got. I know my assumptions were cliché, but the two incredibly attractive had worked closely together. I’m sure the desire and opportunity had arisen more than once.

“Hi, nice to meet you.” My own voice sounded gruff and strained and every opposite of sexy. I felt frumpy and out of place. She moved around the desk, bringing her ridiculously high heels that were a bit bold for office wear into view. She towered over me, but I didn’t feel protected or womanly the way Dash made me feel. I felt intimidated though she seemed nice enough.

“Why don’t I show you around?”

“Sure.”

I moved around the private office suite with Celesha. She showed me a kitchenette and small living area. There were three other rooms within the suite. Immediately to the right of the entrance was marked Storage. Straight across was Dash’s office. I stared at the third door curiously. “And this room?”

“This is Mr. Chamber’s private quarters. He keeps a spare bedroom whenever he’s working late but rarely uses it.”

*Or whenever he wants sex with his morning coffee and lunch.*

“Have you worked for Dash long?” Her eyebrow lifted at my tone and use of his first name and I wanted to scream, “*I had him first, bitch!*”

“Only for a few months,” she finally answered, unfazed. “He hired me in Germany. My husband had just lost his job a few months before when his company downsized. To help with the finances, I started looking for a job and applied for the assistant position.”

“You moved from your home to the United States for an assistant position?”

“When Mr. Chambers interviewed me, he asked if I was willing to relocate. At first, I declined since my husband was looking for a job and my working would be temporary. Mr. Chambers asked what my husband did, and the very same day, he brought him in to interview him. He offered us both jobs here in the states.”

“That seems a bit extreme to hire an assistant.”

Her laugh filled the suite and I wondered what was so funny. “If you’re asking if Mr. Chambers and I are having an affair, the answer is no. I’ve wondered myself why he would go to such lengths to employ me as well as my husband. I’ve asked him as much.”

“And?”

“He told me it wasn’t something his father would do.”

“That’s it?”

She shrugged and picked up a folder. “I’ll need you to fill out these forms for human resources and then we’ll get started on your training.”

Training.

I wasn’t even aware when I woke up this morning that I would have a job. A job meant permanency and I had no intention of sticking around. I intended to decline but thought better of it when I recalled the dangerous vibes I got from Dash this morning. Refusing to fill out simple forms for a job I had no intention of taking would spark a fight I didn’t have the energy for, so I filled out the forms. When they were complete, Celesha scanned and emailed them to human resources.

Immediately after, she began to fill me in on the basic requirements of the job and one of them was to be available to him at any time.

Typical.

I had no intention of being at his beck and call since leaving by the end of the week. I would make sure of it.

Dash finally emerged from his office an hour later to send Celesha to lunch. I sat feeling out of place when she rose and picked up her purse. Once she closed the door behind her, Dash grabbed me from behind the desk and pulled me into his private office. Gently, he nudged me toward the couch and then turned to lock us in.

When the door was secure, he quickly strode toward me. I backed away without looking and found myself on my back on top of the cushions. I didn’t have time to recover before he was on me.

I was confused about what was happening until he lifted my left leg and hooked it over his hip. Next, his hands searched out my shirt and pulled at the hem until my breasts were exposed. His thumbs rubbed each side of my rib cage in a soothing caress, and by then it was clear he wanted sex.

Too bad.

I wanted answers. When I refused to respond to his touch and bit into his shoulder as hard as I could, he growled at me and sat up.

"What's your problem?" he barked. I resisted the urge to laugh because frankly, he was acting like a rebuffed, horny teenager.

"Is Celesha leaving for vacation? This temporary replacement thing is only for a few days, right?"

He blew out air in a sign of impatience, but I held his stare. "Celesha is pregnant and will be on maternity leave for the rest of her pregnancy."

"But she doesn't look pregnant. Especially not enough to be returning in a few days."

"She's eight weeks along."

"And what about the other seven months? Why wouldn't you hire someone who can stick around that long?"

"I did. I just hired you."

"There are two problems with that theory. One, I never agreed to any job. Two, I can't stay here that long. You'll have to find someone else."

"Don't worry. I've cleared your schedule."

"What are you talking about?"

"I mean, you're not leaving."

"Excuse me?"

"For some insane fucking reason, I crave you. I want you more than I've ever wanted anything or anyone. I didn't know what to do with that until a meeting with my father yesterday. He taught me a lot I didn't agree with, but for the first time in a long time, he taught me something useful."

"Which was?"

"A conqueror doesn't ask for permission."

Embarrassingly enough, I felt my sex respond shamelessly to his threat, and I cursed my body and my heart, which now beat out of control. "And you think I'm someone to be conquered?"

“I want to be with you, Willow.” I flinched at his use of my name. It sounded weird and out of place. I’d always been Angel. *God, what am I thinking?* I shouldn’t be worried about what he called me. Especially a stupid pet name. “I’m no longer waiting for you to admit the same.”

“I can’t stay here. Especially with you.”

“Whatever you left behind isn’t your concern anymore. Your only concern from this day forward is to please me.”

“Let me rephrase then. I won’t stay here. *Especially* with you.”

“How do you plan to get away from me long enough to go back to wherever you came from?”

“You can’t decide the rest of my life for me!”

“You made a decision for your life four years ago and I didn’t like the answer. So you can either do this job or spend your days chained to my bed.”



# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DASH

I HELD A tight grip on my anger and managed to make it through countless meetings. I was preparing for the last meeting of the day and had sent Celesha to show Angel the rest of the building. They were instructed to be back in time for me to introduce Willow to executive management, which was in just ten minutes.

As if on cue, I heard the outer door open and their voices fill the suite. They were laughing as if they've known each other for five years instead of five hours. I threw on my suit jacket and met them in the reception area.

On sight, Willow's laughter stopped and her expression became guarded. She had done nothing but murder me with her eyes since I had threatened her into obedience. I told myself I didn't care, but it was hard not to when she continued to look as if I kicked her favorite puppy rather than express my wish to be with her.

Women were indeed complex creatures.

"How was the tour?"

"It went well, I think. Willow here might have even found a few suitors. Nate in accounting especially. I think the poor guy might have taken a liking to her with only a brief encounter." She sent Willow a conspiratorial grin, not knowing the storm she was brewing. Angel, however, sensed my anger and shifted from one foot to the other.

“How nice,” I agreed sarcastically. I could barely curtail the sneer in time. “We should be going.”

The meeting was being held on the floor directly below us so the private tension between Angel and me in the elevator was cut short. Too bad really. I wanted her to sweat. I was curious about this encounter that caused the guilty flush on her skin.

The conference room was already full of the company’s top executives and officers. Every head in the room turned when I entered, followed by Angel and Celesha.

“Good evening, gentlemen.” A chorus of greetings followed as I made my way to the head of the table. “Most of you have been in meetings with me all day, so I promise this meeting will be uncharacteristically brief. My objective is to make an announcement and to issue a warning.”

“A warning, son?” The question came from David, the head of international sales.

“Yes. I’ll be getting to that. You may have heard by now that I have replaced Celesha temporarily as my personal assistant. Please welcome Willow Waters. She will fulfill Celesha’s duties until she can return in a year’s time.”

Willow stepped forward and waved while the room greeted her and offered her welcome. Once she was through greeting everyone, I stepped forward to claim the room once more.

“Now, it was brought to my attention in a rather displeased manner that some of you are less than optimistic about some of the endeavors I have taken up. I want to make it clear that my father is no longer head of this company, and unless he fires me, I am the only one you report to. If you are in disagreement about a business decision I have made, feel free to schedule an appointment to speak with me on the matter. From this day forward, anyone who shares accusation, complaints, or strategies with my father will be fired. Do I make myself clear?”

\* \* \*

I needed to take the edge off. I was pissed and my cock was hard and I had an errant fiery-headed female on my hands.

I watched her in my peripheral as I drove us home. She kept her head turned away, staring out the window at nothing remotely fascinating. I knew it was her way of ignoring me. She was nervous and she should be. Her confession last night was a game changer. I learned that she couldn't be trusted but that she also needed protection.

I shouldn't have felt responsible for her. I had an international company to run and a fiancée to keep happy.

"What happened between you and the guy in accounting?"

"I met a lot of guys in accounting."

"It's not the time to try my patience." I shook my head, and once again, wondered what she was doing to me. I've never had to threaten as much as I did as when I was with her.

"You're not seriously jealous, are you?" She never stopped staring out the window as she spoke. "I should hope not—when you can't even recall his name."

"Can you?"

"Nate." Her expression was smug when she turned to face me.

"Ok. So what happened between you and Nate to make him fall head over heels in love?"

"I think Celesha exaggerated a bit."

"Celesha never exaggerates."

"There's nothing to tell. He asked me out. That's it."

"And you said?"

"I turned him down. After all, I wasn't under the impression I would be sticking around long enough to be accepting dates. Had I known sooner that I would be forced into slavery, I would have accepted."

"You should have told him you belong to someone. That someone being his boss, who could have him fired and out on his ass if he so much as looks at you again." I fell silent and waited to see if my threat would take.

"You're a bastard," she whispered, once again staring out the window.

"If I'm a bastard, it's only because you pushed me this far."

"Right. I pushed you to lie to me and to purposely make me fall—" She stopped short and took a deep breath. "It doesn't matter anymore. We'll never be together because we aren't meant to be. Have you ever given the possibility any consideration?"

"No. I control my future and now I control you. The only things I can't control are my feelings for you."

"You don't have feelings for me. You're obsessed with being in control. Your ego doesn't like that I didn't fall for your mind games and walked away from you after finding out what a manipulative, lying bastard you are."

"Manipulative?"

"That's what I said."

"So what exactly did I manipulate you into doing because, as I remember, you begged for it *every* time I touched you?"

"I don't deny the physical, Dasher. I wanted you, but it was my heart you toyed with. That summer was the best time of my life. You made me feel so many things I never thought I would experience because of who I am. My taste in clothes and the way I wore my hair didn't stand a chance, and I accepted that until you. But then our summer ended and the truth showed me the real you was far worse than I feared. You took something from me that I'll never get back and I'm not talking about my virginity... But if I have to explain it to you, then you really don't know what our summer meant. Your *feelings for me*, Dasher Chambers, is nothing more than your bruised ego wanting to mend your

pride with lust. I'm not an all you can eat buffet. You can't just take from me until you're satisfied."

\* \* \*

My attempt to make her feel small in the car backfired and I was the one left confused. The truth is I did toy with her heart during our summer together but while I toyed, I fell. Hard. No amount of apologies and promises could see me past my lie. Angel had swept me off my feet so quickly that I can't even recall when it was no longer a ploy and became the real thing.

It could have been the first time of many when she had called me a narcissistic prick, or the first time I kissed her lips, touched her hand, smelled her hair, or watched her sleep. I have no clue because when it happened it felt natural as if I loved her my entire life.

My decisions led us here. After a year of fighting for her affection, four years living without her, and a week of stumbling and fighting, I was no closer to making her mine than I was when I first approached her on campus.

We had arrived at my apartment minutes after she put me in my place and because I couldn't stand the silence, and because she fucked me up so bad, I did the unthinkable. I agreed to dinner with Rosalyn, who would likely make it into a romantic occasion. I wanted Angel to suffer so I made sure she knew exactly where I was going and who with. I wanted her to wonder while I was with Rosalyn. I wanted her to share my frustration. She was hell bent on returning to her life without me, and I couldn't help but wonder what or who was worth leaving me for... again.

No matter my wrongs, I kept coming back to that. It was as Keenan had said—she was the one who got away.

"Dash, darling, come in. Rosalyn is just putting the finishing touches together. You can never look too good for your future groom."

"Good evening, Mrs. Cordell."

"Oh, stop and call me Mom."

*Yeah, fucking right.*

She placed kisses on my cheek and I resisted the urge to scratch at the crawling sensation. Her father came out of his study and did the customary slapping on the back and shaking my hand.

"My boy, how do you like heading a multi-international company. The power really gets you going, doesn't it?"

I faked my way through the pleasantries, but after ten minutes of waiting, I was ready to turn around and beg for Angel's forgiveness. Just as I was ready to put thought into action, Rosalyn strutted down the stairs in a tight red number. The color somehow looked gaudy on her. Or maybe Angel just ruined the color for me on any other woman.

Her heels clicked on the marble as she sashayed up to me with a grin meant to be seductive but came across as leery. I mustered the will not to roll my eyes. "Hello, lover," she whispered while sliding her hands up my chest.

"Now that's just incorrect." I lowered my voice so only she could hear. "I haven't touched you in years."

"We can fix that little problem tonight if you're a good boy." I silently made a vow to be on my worst behavior.

"Don't you two just make a beautiful couple? I have full confidence that you'll make the most beautiful children."

"One agenda at a time, Mother. I need to get his ring on my finger first."

"You mean your ring? No doubt you'll pick it out yourself."

"Dasher, don't be rude."

"Don't call me Dasher," I growled a little too forcefully.

"Why not? That is your name."

I wanted to hurt her feelings in the worst way, but I showed mercy since her parents were watching. "Come on. We have reservations."

And with any hope, the next couple of hours would pass quickly.

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# CHAPTER NINETEEN

## SUMMER BEFORE SENIOR YEAR

### WILLOW

WE MANAGED TO get through dinner this time without arguing. By the end of the date, my crush had turned into something deeper. It was indescribable and foreign.

"Can I come in," he breathed. Those four words ended our hot and heavy make out session against my dorm room door.

"Please."

He took my key from my hand and unlocked the door. We stumbled inside and tore at each other's clothes in the dark. I would never forget what he did for me tonight by wearing this getup.

Somehow, we landed on the bed and never stopped exploring each other to consider the twin size.

"Fuck, baby. Are you sure?"

I only nodded when words escaped me. This unraveling was the weeks-long culmination of time spent, make out sessions, and pent up desire.

He slipped my sandals off and then slid his hand up my dress, pushing it to rest around my waist. Having him see so much of me suddenly made me self-conscious. I grabbed at



my dress to cover myself, but his territorial growl shocked me so much, I froze.

“What are you doing?” His eyes narrowed, giving him a dangerous appeal.

“I’m not skinny.”

“And?” The way he voiced the question made me feel silly. Having low self-esteem was almost as embarrassing as my chunky thighs and pudgy stomach.

I shrugged and stared at the ceiling.

“You have the...” I jumped when I felt his lips touch my waist, just above my panty line, “...the hottest...” his lips kissed another spot on my waist, “...fucking body.” This time, his lips trailed up my stomach, taking my dress with him until it slipped over my head. Once I was free of my dress, he leaned down to kiss me, now completely covering me with his own body.

I felt his leg nudge mine apart so he could settle between them, fully clothed. Once he was settled, he seemed to think better of it and sat back on his haunches. “I want you to undress for me.”

My eyes felt as if they were going to bug out of my head. The only things left on me were my bra and panties. “Can’t we do it with them still on?”

He smirked. “We could...” I relaxed against the mattress, “but I won’t.”

“Dash—”

“If you want me inside you,” he leaned forward and planted his fist next to my head and stroked my hair with the other, “you’re going to have to give me all of you.” When I didn’t move, he took my hand in his and moved it down my body to my panties. “Trust me.”

Trust him.

I repeated it to myself and found the courage to pull at my panties. His red-brown eyes darkened as they made their way down my legs. My bra was next and once I was free, I knew there was no turning back.

I lay stiff as a board while he praised me with his eyes. I could feel his gaze rake my body shamelessly.

"I want you to place your hands under your head and don't move them until I say." Surprisingly, I followed his order without hesitation, which seemed to please him. It didn't escape my attention that I was completely bare while he was fully clothed.

When his lips trailed from the tips of my breasts to my stomach, my hand twitched against my resistance. I fought against his order to bare myself to him and keep my hands under my head while he worshiped my body. All I could think of was my pudgy belly he currently traced with his tongue.

"Dash, please."

"Dasher."

"What? Everyone calls you Dash."

"You're not everyone."

"Then what am I?"

"You're just mine. So don't fuck with me."

I tried not to melt from his words. I really tried but melt I did. Right against his lips. In such a short time, kissing him had become my drug of choice. I was a willing addict.

"Are you ready?"

"I think so."

"Be sure, Angel, because once I start, I'm not stopping. I won't be able to."

"Please... I need you."

My plea acted as a spell, transforming him before my eyes. I watched the amber flecks in his eyes darken further and his tongue flicks his lips. He left me and stood beside the bed. Keeping my gaze, he undressed, starting with his shirt. He took his time and this time, *I worshiped him* with my gaze. I searched every muscular plane until I came to where his cock jutted almost angrily.

Thick.

That was the first word that came to mind.

And long.

I didn't have experience to compare him to, but the size of him was remarkable. His body was lean and fit and unyielding.

He produced a foil packet from his jeans and brought it to his lips. His teeth tore into the packaging with a single tear. The act was simple but from him it appeared savage. A promise of what's to come.

Once he sheathed himself, he settled between my thighs again. I expected him to enter me, but his hand disappeared between our bodies, and I felt him touch my clit with a kiss of his fingers.

"You're wet," he praised. I felt his cock press against my sex.

"I want you."

"You have me." My pussy came alive with the sensation of pain and pleasure all at once. He pressed forward and with each press of his hips, my discomfort grew until it became unbearable.

"How bi—big are you?"

"Big, Angel." He clutched my thigh and brought it to rest on his hip. "Very big."

"I can't." I began to back away but his hand on my thigh stopped my escape.

"No, baby. Don't run away. You can take me."

"Maybe just a little."

"All of me."

"All of you?"

"Every inch. And if you're good... I'll kiss your pussy better."

"Promise?"

His lips brushed mine, distracting me from the pain. I deepened our kiss, searching for more pleasure as he moved lazily inside me. "You fucking bet. Spread your legs more for me." I did as he commanded and felt some of the pressure ease. "Hold onto me."

His hips grew bolder and stronger until he was pounding me. I buried my face in his chest to muffle my cries, but his hand gripped my hair and forced my head back, making my cries fill the room. I worried that someone would hear, but I wanted more of what he could give me so I let go and... came. I fucking came.

Dash's eyes locked with mine so he could watch me. He plunged harder inside me, prolonging the sweet agony of my release. My body trembled and I screamed, and then I felt the inner walls of my pussy gripping Dash. He groaned and then roared, marking his own release. I could feel every inch of his cock throbbing, but what he did next shocked me into another release.

He pulled out of my body, ripped off the condom, and pumped his come on my stomach. His groans mingled with my cries and the room seemed to echo with them. Eventually, he collapsed on top of me and we both lay spent.

It was a struggle, but I caught my breath eventually and even found the strength to run my hand through his hair soothingly. He had gone completely still and I wondered if he was sleeping.

"I'm sorry, Angel."

Nope. Not sleeping.

"For what? You didn't hurt me... much." The soreness between my thighs attested to it. I found myself giggling. An act I would have never been caught dead doing before.

He lifted his head to look at me. His eyes were wide and emotional. He looked... scared. "I'm sorry that I can't let you go now. No matter what happens. You'll hate me... but I can't."

"Who says you have to?" I smiled, but it wasn't returned. "Come on, *Dasher*." I emphasized the use of his full name as he commanded. "I expected pillow talk but not this... besides, you promised me something."

His face turned down with confusion until the blush heating my cheeks enlightened him. He smirked and once again, appeared entirely in control and cocky.

"I remember now... I promised to kiss your pussy. I don't want to keep my woman waiting but first..." He brought his hand between us. I gasped at the contact of his hand on my stomach, rubbing his come into my skin. "MINE," he growled.

\* \* \*

## PRESENT

Dash had once again left me alone with a guard. He practically dumped me in his apartment and took off, only stating he had an engagement. The engagement being a dinner date with his fiancée, who had yet to discover how his ex-lover was practically living with him.

This entire set-up was fucked up, and I was sick and tired of being Dash's prisoner and damsel in distress.

Thirty minutes after he left, I found that my damsel role was not quite over. I had helped myself to his kitchen and was making a quick spaghetti dinner when the front door opened. The warning beep of the locks disarming disturbed the calm of the empty apartment. I braced myself for Dash's return but found myself trapped with far worse when Esmerelda walked through the front door as if she belonged.

"What?" Confusion and fear paralyzed me.

"Hello, Little Tree."

"How did you get in here?"

"Oh, that." She shrugged her thin shoulders. "Your new guard dog works for me." Her tone was casual as if I'd just asked for the time.

"Why are you here?"

“Because you’re disappointing me. You still haven’t held up your part of the deal, so now I’m faced with the inconvenient task of killing you.”

*Oh, fuck. Think, Willow.* I could beg for my life. I could fight. Both would likely get me killed anyway, but I had to try something.

“I need time. If killing Keiran were simple, I’m sure you would have done it already.”

“My dear, I’m not asking you to put a gun to his head or fight him. You have the poison. Why haven’t you used it?”

“I haven’t had the opportunity. If I don’t do it, I’m dead. If I do it and I get caught, I’m dead. I’m working in a pretty tight space.”

Her lips pursed and she seemed to ponder my excuse. When she took a step forward, I took one back. “Do you know why I decided to use you rather than to take care of it myself?”

*Because you aren’t a moron?* I dared not voice my thoughts. Instead, I shook my head.

“Because if I disagreed with you, and it was simple, I would have already put a bullet in him. I chose you because while you’re not friends as you say, you can get close to him. Close enough to administer the poison to his drink or slip it into his food. I don’t care how you do it, just do it. This is the last chance I give you. You have one week.”

She turned to leave but seemed to think better of it. “Oh and that cute brother of yours? He’s first on my list. The girls appear to like the little man whore a lot. How tragic would it be that one day the girl he takes home slits his throat in his sleep or while she rides his cock?” She beamed at me and shut off the light, plunging the room into darkness. “Think about it.”

Her mocking laughter taunted me as the door closed behind her. Against my better judgment, I rushed for the door and opened it only to find her gone, including the guard Dash had entrusted with my life.

At that moment, it became clear that Dash couldn't protect me. Esmerelda was too powerful. If she could infiltrate his security team, who knows what she could or would do next.

Buddy's life was now in jeopardy, and I had no reliable allies. No one who could take on Esmerelda and win.

I knew what I had to do.

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# CHAPTER TWENTY

## WILLOW

I DIDN'T ALLOW myself to cry... at first. I spent the time plotting and only when I had a plan did I collapse and cry. The last thing I remember was falling asleep on the couch. What I didn't remember was how I'd ended up in Dash's bed. With him lying next to me.

Anger flared at his audacity to spend a romantic evening out with another woman, *his fiancée*, and then make his way into bed with me. He had a lesson to learn about respect. I stared at him for a moment before determining that he was sound asleep and ignored the teenaged girl in my subconscious that cooed over how peaceful yet primitive he looked his sleep. His left arm was thrown over his head and his right hand rested over his massive erection. His pecs and abs were splayed out like a buffet, begging for me to feast with my tongue.

*No!*

Lesson.

Respect.

Payback.

I slipped from the bed and thought of just the thing to bring him to heel. At the door, I stopped to think of what could happen if I pissed him off, but then the image of him touching Rosalyn formed and with renewed purpose, I



headed for the kitchen where I made a forty-quart pot of ice water.

I'd seen this done on one of those reality TV shows Buddy liked to watch and never thought I would ever try it. The pot was heavier than I expected, but I managed to get it to the bedroom but not without soaking his expensive carpeting.

I made my way over to his side, and because I couldn't resist, I kissed those irresistible lips, luring him out slumber. When his eyes finally opened, giving me a first peek at his red-brown eyes, I almost said fuck the payback and climbed in with him.

But I did kiss him again. Enough to get him interested so when I pulled back, he followed. With a quickness I didn't realize I possessed, I hauled the water up and over, soaking him with ice and water. I leaped back just in time to miss his arm as it flailed about.

"Fuck!" He jumped from the bed and swiped at his face. His complexion was pale and he shivered as he hugged himself.

I covered my mouth to conceal my laugh, but it was too late. My giggle slipped through and it was as if a switch had been flipped.

His arms came to rest at his sides and his body went completely still. Slowly, his head lifted until his eyes, now dark with unmistakable rage and promise of retribution, fixed on me.

He spoke without speaking at all, telling me I fucked up. So... I did what anyone would do.

I ran.

I didn't have to look back to know he gave chase. I made it to the front door and managed to get the door opened when it slammed closed again. My scream was muffled by his hand and then he wrapped his arm around my waist and carried me back to his bedroom.

I thought he'd make for the bed once we were inside, but instead, he pinned me against the door with his weight. "That was stupid," he whispered.

"You needed to learn a lesson in respect."

"Yeah?" I could hear the smile in his voice. "Well, I guess it's your turn, Angel."

His fingers tugged at my sleep shorts until they pooled around my feet. I stood perfectly still and let him trace my spine with his finger, sending shivers up and down my body. His frame engulfed mine when he stepped closer, forcing my body against the door.

"It's been four years since I've been inside you... You know I'm going to fuck you silly, right?"

"It was just a joke." My plea for mercy fell on deaf ears.

"Funny... a second ago it was a lesson. Respect, correct?"

*Oh, God.*

"I have a lesson I'd like to teach you now. Bend over." He didn't wait to see if I would obey and he pressed his hand on my back. His hand slid down my ass until he reached my sex. I closed my eyes in shame because I knew what he would find.

Surprisingly, he didn't comment. However, the sound of his wet basketball shorts hitting the floor followed. I knew what was coming next and braced myself against the door with both hands.

Dash had other plans, however. He took my left hand and placed it on his right shoulder, forcing my body to twist sideways. "I want you to touch yourself while I fuck you. I won't deny you release. In fact, I'm going to give you more than you can stand." He then grabbed my other hand, led it to my pussy, and ordered, "Fuck yourself."

Of course, he couldn't just fuck me and be done with it. He had to torture me in the process.

"Dasher—" His name was caught in my throat when he slammed into me. My hands immediately grabbed for the

door for balance. We both froze with the realization of what we had just done. Dash hadn't been inside me in four years, but it was just as explosive as it had always been if not more. However, he seemed to recover quicker than I did.

"Keep your hands where I placed them. If you hold yourself against with the door, I'll assume you'll need additional lessons later."

Oh, he was being such an unreasonable prick!

His hands gripped me and forced my hips to meet his as he pounded me mercilessly. He moved as quickly as a jackhammer and made it impossible to hold my position.

"Dasher!" My plea ripped through the air, but he only increased his pace. I fought in vain to keep up while coming non-stop. The animalistic sounds coming from him sent chills up my spine, forcing more orgasms from me. "Please, baby, please."

He chuckled. "Have you learned your lesson yet?" Sweat dripped from his body onto my back, coating me with his exertions. "Fuck," he grunted. "I'm coming."

Coming... he's coming. I suddenly became agonizingly aware of the fact that he was not wearing a condom. His rhythm slowed and his thrusts deepened, signaling he was on the verge of coming.

I had to stop him. I forgot about my hands and braced them against the door once more as I struggled to speak through my cries.

"Dasher, pull out."

"Too late, Angel," he spitefully teased. "I'm already coming inside you."

\* \* \*

"Why is it that you can't find the man? He's your employee."

"Sir, he's new and it's possible he had a change of heart about the job."

“Find out. I want a concrete answer by the end of the day. He had been guarding Ms. Waters and left his post without leave. That’s unacceptable.”

It was painful hearing Dash as he ripped into the older man. I wanted to say something but was back at square one. If I said something, it would endanger Buddy’s life.”

“Ms. Waters.” The sound of Dash calling me saved me from my inner conflict.

“Yes?” I looked around, but Fisher was no longer in sight. It was just Dash and me inside his private office as he insisted.

“Get me some water.”

I wanted to scream at him to get his own damn water, but after the ‘lesson’ that I’d had this morning, I thought better of it. I entered the outer suite and poured water from the cooler. When I returned, he was talking at the computer monitor. Voices filled the room, and I realized he was on a video conference.

I placed the water on the coaster and turned back to my seat. Before I could sit, however, he said, “I want ice.”

I concealed my growl of frustration and reached for his glass again. “Bring it to me in a separate glass.” He met my stare this time and sat back, barely concealing his smirk. I smiled politely and turned to leave again. “And tell Celesha to pick up my dry cleaning and lunch.”

“Where should I tell her to pick up your lunch?”

“It doesn’t matter. She knows my usual preferences.”

“Fine.” I stomped out this time and relayed the message to Celesha. I threw ice in a cup and stomped back to his office. This time, I couldn’t control myself enough to not slam the cup down.

There was no way he hadn’t noticed, but he said nothing. He continued to talk, but I noticed he disabled the video feed. I could tell the conference hadn’t ended because the voices continued to fill the room. It sounded as if several

people were bickering over the lack of benefits for acquiring a soup company in Japan.

"Ms. Waters, come here, please." I immediately tensed. I distrusted his tone that was far too calm. "Take a seat."

I stared at him as if he were daft. Maybe he meant his lap? No... that would be unprofessional and surely not while on a conference call. "Where?"

He patted the tabletop directly in front of him.

"I'm not sitting there." He shook his head and moved the mouse, killing the mic as well. Now we could only hear what was happening.

"You can sit here or on my face, but you will sit where I want you. Take your pick." When I continued to hesitate, he made a grab for me so I quickly hopped on the desk. He grinned up at me, showcasing those awfully adorable dimples.

"I find your defiance way too sexy, Ms. Waters."

"Why are you toying with me?"

"I told you. I like when you defy me. Lean back on your elbows."

I did as he asked. "What are you doing?"

"I'm rewarding you for your good behavior this morning," he answered with sarcasm lacing his tone. "You were an excellent pupil, but you still have some learning to do."

"I don't think this is the right time."

"It's a perfect time. Quiet now," he warned just before he cut the mic back on. His hands slid up my thighs and spread them wide. The heels he insisted I wear rested on the edge. When he slipped his fingers into my panties and tugged them down, I wanted to protest but knew I couldn't say a word.

A woman's voice addressed Dash with a question and he answered as if he weren't... stuffing my panties in his pocket! His fucking nerve.

His fingers returned to my center and grazed my outer lips with soft caresses. I bit back a moan that had been too close to the surface. He sent me a warning glare, which I returned with an eye roll. I wanted to tell him to get on with it, admitting to myself that I wanted his touch as much as he wanted to touch me.

But it wasn't his touch I received. He leaned forward and the first stroke of his tongue on my heated center sent my body arching off the desk. His hands rose to restrain me as he feasted. I felt as if I would burst a vein or blood vessel from the strain of not moving and keeping quiet.

"Dasher, please," I begged, no longer caring who heard me.

His hand shot out and pinched my lips closed in that infuriating way he used to tell me to shut up. The same hand slipped down to my neck and shoved me back to lay flat all the while his mouth never stopped his torment.

"Mr. Chambers? Mr. Chambers?"

It took me a moment to realize he was being called by a member of the conference. I tugged at his hair, but he resisted. An answering growl sounded from between my thighs, too low for the members of the meeting to hear, but loud enough to warn me. He wasn't going to stop.

"Mr. Chambers?"

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

I jackknifed up to a forty-five-degree angle. Dash clutched at my hips and anchored me to his face.

"Um... ohhh." It was hard to conceal my pleasure and speak coherently. "Mr. Chambers is, uh—on a—call."

"Ms. Waters, are you okay? What happened to the video?"

It became even harder to speak when I felt Dash's tongue enter me. "We, uh—seem to be—having—diff—difficulties."

*Please stop speaking.*

“Very well. Please make note of pertinent details and concerns to report to him.”

“Y—yes, sir.”

I made sure to mute the mic and then gave in. My hands clutched at his hair and my hips undulated, demanding more.

Soon after, I came, screaming, onto his face and realized he was right. He could have me however and where ever he wanted me.

\* \* \*

“What you did was despicable,” I gripped and fixed my clothes.

He chuckled and kissed my lips. “Is that why you came so hard?”

“My body has nothing to do with your behavior.”

“I think my behavior has everything to do with what happens to your body.”

“I hate you.”

“Finally, you admit you feel something for me.” His tone had changed from playful to serious like the flip of a switch. I needed to change the subject.

“Did the conference end?”

“Yup.”

“You’re CEO and President of the company. You shouldn’t do things like that.”

There was a knock on the door before Dash could respond. Dash permitted them entrance and I half expected it to be Celesha and was surprised to find his father at the door.

I didn’t really care for the man but saw it necessary to be polite and professional so I greeted him. “Good afternoon, Mr. Chambers.”

He didn’t feel the same obligation and barely spared me a nod of acknowledgment.

“What’s this talk I hear of you meeting with Simon next week?”

“Hello, Father.”

“I want an explanation.”

“I thought I explained to you what would happen if you interfered again.”

“I’m not interfering. I’m doing the professional thing and warning you. You aren’t ready!”

“How about doing the fatherly thing and supporting me?”

I went back and forth, watching the interaction between father and son. They both seemed to forget I was even in the room... or so I thought.

Dash took my hand in his and squeezed tight. His thumb rubbed me back and forth. I looked at Dash’s father nervously, wondering if he could see, although the desk concealed our connection.

I wondered for the reason behind him clinging to me. Oh, my... was he drawing comfort from me? The idea caused butterflies to erupt in the pit of my stomach and travel up to my head until I was dizzy.

*Focus.*

“I’m not getting in your way. I’m asking you to rethink this. Besides, he’ll never agree to meet with you. I haven’t been able to meet with the man in six years.”

“That’s funny because I’ve already met him once before. This is a follow-up.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m thinking he considered my offer. I don’t know what that means for Chambers M&A and taking over, but on Monday, I’m flying to Seattle to find out.”

I witnessed three emotions from the older man—shock, disbelief, and suspicion. I would have expected pride, respect, or maybe even gratification at his son having accomplished what he couldn’t.



"I don't believe this. You should send James in your place. You're not qualified to handle this big of an acquisition."

"You're a prick," I blurted. Dash squeezed my hand as a warning, but there was no way I could keep silent any longer.

"Excuse me, young lady?" His chest puffed out in a show of dominance meant to intimidate, and I bit back a snort.

"I said you're a prick. Your son is the head of this company, a position you appointed him to before he was even ready, simply because he's your heir, and like the dumbass he is, he accepted because he wants to please the man who is supposed to be his father first. So what do you do? At every turn, you do nothing but tell him how he's not good enough. He's been doing this job for only a few months, and already. He's managed to accomplish what you couldn't in years. Doesn't that count for something?"

"Young lady, I have more experience in my pinky finger than you two have together. I know what it takes to win, and since he's my son, I'm doing everything I can to teach him."

"Dash doesn't want to win. He wants to lead. If you continue to cut him down, you might one day wake up and find your company completely liquidated and with one less son."

"My son would never do something so ludicrous."

"That goes to show you how you don't know your son much at all. I can guarantee he would."

"Dasher! Do you let all of the employees behave this way? I should suspect as much. I knew better than to hand this company over to a child. A man—a winner would never let some little lower class tart act amuck on his behalf."

I was ready to cut him down when Dash shot to his feet. He guided me into his vacated seat and pressed his hand on my shoulder as a warning to stay. He then straightened his suit jacket before stepping around the desk. He took a

confrontational stance in front of his father. From his profile, I could see his jaw clench and unclench and I could tell he was holding back.

I never wanted it to go this far, but I couldn't say that I was sorry for confronting him. I couldn't bear to listen to him destroy Dash any longer. Because just as Dash claimed he knew me, I knew him, and I knew that behind the nonchalance and smart comments, Dash was hurting for his father's approval. It was something he may never win even though he'd more than earned it.

"I'm only going to explain this once so I implore you to listen. She's not just an employee. She's damn well not a low-class tart. She's my friend and she would have been my wife by now if I hadn't fucked it up, but she may still be my wife in the near future and the mother of my children so show her some respect."

I was completely floored. My jaw nearly touched the floor. Wife? Children? Had he gone completely insane?

"Show *her* respect? What about the way she just spoke to *me*? I am your *father*! I demand it!"

"She earned it."

"What do you mean she will be your wife? You're marrying Rosalyn. Someone of your social and financial stature."

"I'm not marrying Rosalyn."

"What are you going on about? You're engaged. I saw to it myself."

"Then perhaps you should marry her."

"You are not calling off this engagement, Dasher."

"I already have. I broke it off at dinner last night and then I went home to my woman. The spoiled brat who deserves *my* ring on her finger."

Dash broke it off last night?

"I would have heard about this."

"I paid Rosalyn to keep her mouth shut until I was ready to tell. She's probably in Paris or shopping in Louis Vuitton

by now.”

“This is unacceptable.” His father shook his head. “You are proving to be a disappointment.”

“So are you, Dad.”

“Don’t get too comfortable with this new arrangement. I’m going to salvage your fuck-up with the Cordells. You will not be marrying this girl.” He pointed his finger at me and sneered.

“The only thing I won’t be doing is living under your shadow any longer. If you wish for me to run this company, I will, but I’ll do it my way.”

His father stormed out but not before sending me a threatening look. I wagged my fingers and released a snort.

“Well, that was fun,” I said when the door slammed behind him. I tried to walk away, but Dash caught me around the waist and hauled my back up against his chest.

“What the fuck was that, Angel?” He rubbed his nose in the crook of my neck.

“I’m not sure what you mean?”

“Why did you stick up for me?”

“Someone had to do it. You were just sitting there and letting him say what he wanted.”

“He’s my father.”

“Yet you found it necessary to send him packing when he insulted me.”

“I said I would protect you.”

His vow brought me back to reality with full force. Esmerelda was a threat to us all and she terrified me. It wasn’t just because she could kill me, but because she could also harm everyone I loved as she had proven.

I managed to pull away from him and put some space between us. I fully expected him to force me into his arms again and secretly wished for it, but he simply blew out air and sat in his seat.

“I’m fucking trying, Willow.”

Willow. Not Angel.

"I know you are," I whispered back. I couldn't look him in the eye. I wasn't prepared for his fist to slam down on the desk with force. The boom of his fist pounding the wood nearly made me jump out of my skin.

"Then what the hell is the problem!"

"Can you please not shout?"

"Do you think I give a fuck who hears? Anyone blind, deaf, or dumb, within a ten-mile radius, can see that I want to be with you."

"It's not enough of wanting to be together, Dasher. We don't trust each other and you know it."

"I would be able to trust you if you would stop keeping secrets and let me protect you."

"But I still wouldn't be able to trust you."

"I'm not asking for you to forgive me overnight. I'm asking for you to try."

"I want to... so bad."

"What's stopping you?"

"Me," I cried.

"Come here." I shook my head so he repeated himself. This time, his voice was more forceful and commanding. I walked the short distance until I was by his side. He pulled me down to his lap and made sure to position me right over his erection. "There is nothing wrong with you, and whatever you did or think you did wouldn't even matter to me. I've been too long without, Angel. Don't make me wait another four or five years."

As much as I wanted to scream yes and give in, I couldn't. At least not now. Not when I was planning to do something that would cost more than my life. It will be unforgivable.

"I—I'll have to think about it."

I expected anger and violence, but all he did was kiss me softly on the lips. "I'll take that answer... for now."

I smiled down at him and he smiled back. I'm not entirely sure what happened in that office together, but

something had taken a natural turn and changed for the better.

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# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

## SUMMER BEFORE SENIOR YEAR

### WILLOW

I HAD BEEN back in Six Forks for only two days and missed Dash like crazy. For weeks, he was the face I could count on seeing every day, but now we were back to our own lives with separate economic and social statuses.

The only upside was that I got to see my best friend again who actually had been strange. She was jumpier than usual, and I wondered if it was wise to have left her alone all summer, especially since Keiran Masters was back from juvie.

It was unnatural the way he hated her. It was as if he were obsessed with hating her.

The sound of the doorbell ringing snapped me back. I figured it was one of my mother's friends coming to complain about their jobs while drinking too much wine so I flopped down on the bed.

I forgot Pepe had made it his new napping spot and unintentionally disturbed his sleep. He lifted his head and gave me the stink eye before settling once more. He had been giving me the cold shoulder ever since I returned, upset over my leaving for the entire summer. I didn't

understand what his problem was since he likely slept through it all.

“Uh... sis?” Buddy walked inside looking nervous. “You have a visitor. A guy visitor. A Dash freaking Chambers visitor.”

I flew out of my room and down the stairs, wondering if this was for real. I soon found out it was very real. Dash stood on my porch, gazing out at the street. His hand gripped the white pillar with chipped paint, causing his muscles to bunch under his plain white t-shirt.

“What are you doing here?”

Smooth, Willow. Real smooth.

His head had turned before his body did but when it did, I felt gut-punched. It had been two days too long.

“I miss you.”

Don’t melt, Willow. Don’t melt.

“I miss you too.” Yup... definitely melting.

“I can’t explain it. It’s just... weird... not seeing you.”

“Willow?” My mother’s voice called to me from inside.

“What are you doing out here? Who’s at the door?”

“Shit. You better come in,” I instructed Dash. He looked all too happy to oblige. I pulled him in and closed the door just as my mom made it to the door with a dishtowel in her hand.

“Oh,” she remarked as she took in Dash. She appeared startled as she looked back and forth between us. Buddy stood off to the side grinning like a fool. “Well, go on, Willow. Introduce me to your friend.”

“Mom, this is Dash. Dash, this is my mother.”

“Dash? What an unusual name, but then I suppose Willow and Chance are, too. Come in and have a seat.”

I’ve never had a boyfriend or a male friend for that matter, but I was intuitive enough to know an interrogation was about to happen.

We were settled in the living room when she asked, “So, do you go to school with Willow?”

"Yes, ma'am."

"I've never seen you around before, and she's never mentioned you. Are you two dating?"

"Mom..."

"Hush, honey. I'm speaking with your friend."

"Willow and I have only become friends this summer."

"This summer? But she was away." Dash likely didn't recognize it, but my mother was becoming suspicious of my now tattered virtue by the question, especially now that she knew we spent an entire summer together unsupervised.

"Yes, ma'am. We attended the same program and got to know each other." I stifled a groan and resisted the urge to sink under the floorboards.

"I'm sorry. I only just realized Willow didn't tell me your full name. Who are your parents?"

That was the final straw. I was officially mortified.

"Cale and Melissa Chambers. Do you know them?"

I watched my mother's lips tighten with disapproval. Her eyes no longer held a semblance of kindness. "Only too well."

If Dash was offended, it didn't show. He remained perfectly still, the only movement was his jaw clenching and unclenching before he ultimately settled.

"Willow, it's getting late," my mother announced and stood. She left without another word and my eyes immediately flew to Dash, who watched her leave with narrowed eyes. She wanted him gone and said as much. I wasn't fooled and neither was Dash.

"I—I'm so sorry. I don't know what came over her. M—maybe you should go." Dash looked as if he would refuse until I pleaded with him with my eyes.

"Fine. I'll go." He lifted me from my seat and brought me close, kissing my lips. "But I'll see you later," he threatened.

Once he was gone, I allowed my anger to reign. I found my mother in the kitchen preparing the pot roast as if nothing had happened. "What was that? You were so rude."



"I don't want you seeing him again. I know his kind. He comes from money and his blood is blue."

"So?"

"I am trying to protect you, Willow. You'll never be nothing more than a toy to him. He'll make you fall in love and then marry another, just like your father did."

"But mom, he's not my father. Neither Dash nor his family has anything to do with him."

"I'm done discussing this, Willow. I forbid you to see him."

\* \* \*

## PRESENT

"Why are you cooking that?" I asked hours later while I watched him mix together mac and cheese with cut up franks.

"It's my weekend."

"For what?"

"To babysit. Kennedy is coming over." Butterflies for reasons I didn't understand erupted in my belly. "We alternate weekends."

"Is this something you just started now that school is over?"

"Nope. Keiran, Lake, and I would come home for our weekend."

"Wow... that's really supportive."

"She needed us to be there for her so we were. No matter the costs." He turned away to finish the dinner, but I got the message loud and clear.

It wouldn't matter because tomorrow he would be on a plane to Seattle and safe from Esmerelda, and I could exact my plan and finish what she started.

“So what time will Kennedy be here?” He checked his watch and frowned.

“They should be here by now.”

We had waited another half hour before Dash decided to take a ride to Six Forks and dragged me with him.

The trip typically took half an hour, but we made it in less than twenty. Dash didn’t say anything, but I could tell he was worried. My own heart beat a wild staccato.

Their street was quiet and Keiran’s car was parked in the driveway. Dash barely gave time to park his car. He hopped out, and I ran behind him just to keep up.

When we reached their door, he knocked and waited but no one came, so he fingered through his keys until he came across a gold key marked K&S.

The front door opened and as far as our eyes could see, we noticed nothing out of the ordinary. He took me by the hand and stepped inside. Dash was about to call out when we heard a voice.

“Don’t worry. Daddy has you, baby.” Keenan’s voice drifted from the living area so we followed. Seconds later, we both heard an answering moan that was far too sexual to be Kennedy, but it was too late.

We stood frozen and took in the sight of Sheldon as she sat atop Keenan, both as naked as the day they were born and splayed out on the floor next to the fireplace. She rode Keenan, completely uninhibited by the openness of their act.

“Damn, Shelly. I love you,” Keenan groaned. Sheldon wailed and picked up her pace.

I looked up at Dash, who had already looked away, but his disgusted expression was very much evident. I pushed him away, and we tiptoed up the stairs.

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t know they did it,” I mocked.

“Knowing and seeing are two different things.”

I couldn't help but laugh at his expense. "Think it's funny, do you?"

"So much." I laughed even harder. Completely unable to contain it. "Hey, where do you think Ken is if they're doing it practically in public?"

"I don't know. She could be sleep."

We made it to Ken's room and peeked in. Sure enough, she was sound asleep, but dressed in clothes to go out.

"I guess she fell asleep."

"Those jerks could have called instead of making a detour to get laid."

"Sounds like someone is jealous," I sung. The next moment, my back was against the wall and his face was buried in my neck.

"Why would I be jealous when you have all this ass?"

"Are you trying to say I have a fat ass?"

"Yes," he growled, "and I love it."

I had just felt the beginning stirrings of extreme horniness rising when Sheldon's cries and the sound of slapping skin drifted up the stairs. Dash's body went rigid and his complexion paled.

"Please, get me out of here," he pleaded. I clamped my hand over my mouth stifling my laugh and led him by the hand, down the stairs and out the door. I looked back at Dash whose face was set as if he didn't find any of it amusing.

*Poor baby.*

"What do we do now?"

Once he managed to stop looking so disgusted, he spoke. "It's still early. We can wait around for them," he screwed up his face, "to finish."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

## SENIOR YEAR - HIGH SCHOOL

### DASH

I DECIDED A million times not to bother, but each time I threw away caution until I was finally pulling in her neighborhood. I didn't stop to consider if her parents might be back soon. I knew her brother wasn't home either, having seen him climb into the neighbor's window during my stakeout five minutes prior. It was unbelievable that she had managed to make me desperate enough to become a stalker.

It was only the first day of school, but we had been back for a couple of weeks now, and already, Willow had discarded me as if I were yesterday's newspaper.

Anger flared, hot and ready to burst. I wanted to know how she could be such a cold bitch as if we didn't share the same feelings over the summer.

I didn't care that it had been exactly what I was supposed to do when I returned. Long before it was ever time to return, I decided I wanted to be with her and damn the consequences.

Apparently, she did not share my feelings.

I knocked once and after mere seconds of waiting, I began to beat on her door. Finally, the door opened and I

held my breath, waiting to see if it would be her.

My gaze finally locked with hers, and I could see the shock written in her green eyes. She barely had the door open before she was telling me to go away. "You can't be here."

"Too late. I already am and I'm not leaving." Because I couldn't *not* touch her, I gripped her waist tight and lifted her as I stepped inside.

"My parents are home."

"They left five minutes ago."

"Buddy is home." She was grasping at straws, and it couldn't have been more obvious, much to my amusement. I knew what my nearness did to her. I could practically see her knees weakening. She needed me gone, but it wasn't happening.

"Buddy is next door, screwing the neighbor."

"Fine. I don't want to see you, now get out."

"Not until you talk to me."

"About what?"

"Why you're shutting me out?"

"Please don't do this."

"What? Do what?" I hadn't realized I had shouted until she jumped.

"Don't pretend what we did was more than just a thing. We had fun. It's over, right?"

"You're a cold piece of work, you know that?"

"Are you mad because I said it first?"

"Fuck no. I'm crazy mad that you said it at all." This girl, with little effort, had managed to turn me into some lovesick puppy. My hand left her waist to grip her shirt in my fist. We were turning and her back was suddenly against the door. I needed to touch her in every way so I leaned down letting my breath fan across her neck knowing how much it affected her. "I told you when I took you the first time not to fuck with me. Do you remember?"

“I do. I could certainly see how you were known for your charm,” she answered sarcastically.

“I’m not going to give up, Angel.”

She didn’t answer and was almost catatonic while her eyes shimmered with emotion. I picked her up and carried her upstairs. With little effort, I found her room since the door was left open. Her room was decorated very much like her typical choice of attire. Bold and completely wild. I set her on the bed, but then caught sight of Pepe asleep next to his cage rather than inside it, so I picked him up and placed him inside. When she told me she had a ferret, I couldn’t believe it because who really has pet ferrets? They looked like overgrown rats.

When I turned back, Willow was sitting up and watching me. “We can’t do this,” she protested, finally finding her voice but my hands were already removing her clothing.

When she was completely naked, I fingered the charm bracelet I’d given her the night of our first date and the first time I took her. “When we fuck, I only ever want you to wear this.”

She shivered and I knew it was from the harsh way I said ‘fuck’. The third time I took her, she revealed, rather bashfully, how hearing me use the word to describe sex made her crazy. I had teased her about having weird fetishes and then told her the many ways I planned to fuck her, ensuring I used the word each time. She had been soaked on the verge of coming by the time I took her, just as I knew she would be now. It had even become my new favorite word.

I trapped her chin and bent my head low to whisper against her neck. “I’m going to fuck your pussy so hard, you won’t be able to breathe.” My hand slid between her thighs and found her sex drenching the sheets below, signaling she was ready.

I wanted inside her in the worst way, so I quickly slid on protection and positioned myself between her thighs. Her

breath caught from the first sharp thrust of my hips, plunging my cock into the very depths of her. I couldn't get enough. I needed my hands and mouth everywhere so I obliged.

"Dasher." She moaned my name, secretly asking for more, and I would give her what she wanted but first I had to know...

I held my upper body above hers and locked her gaze with mine. "Are you my little angel?"

"Yes," she whimpered.

It was all I needed to hear to drive forward.

I moved inside her so forcefully that her body lifted from the mattress as I drove her upward. I followed, not willing to let her get away, and when I found my rhythm, hard and unyielding, so did the headboard. I sent a quick prayer hoping her parents wouldn't return because there would have been no way to conceal the throes of passion.

"You drive me wild, Dasher Chambers."

"I could say the same, Willow Waters. Hold on to me."

For once, she obeyed without hesitation, locking her legs tighter around my hips. Her hands grabbed my ass, pushing and pulling and silently asking for me to go deeper, so I did.

She threw her head back in ecstasy and let out a long cry. Right then and there, I was going to tell her but a small sound from behind us snatched my attention. My head whipped around and I found Lake Monroe, Willow's best friend, and Keiran's obsession, frozen in the doorway. She was the ultimate reason I was feeling this way and no longer myself. The look on her face was a mixture of disbelief and hurt at finding her best and only friend willing in the hands of the enemy and loving it.

The decent and benevolent thing to do would have been to stop, but I wasn't feeling either of those things. I wanted this girl to share my pain so I kept giving Willow every inch

of me and smirked at the bitch who was responsible for my ruin.

Her eyes grew even larger and then she stepped back, closing the door behind her. Willow was mine. I knew it and now her friend did, too.

Willow had gone completely still and then trembled the way she did when she came, and with a few more thrusts, I followed her over, coming inside her and sealing my fate forever.

She had me completely gone.

Head over heels.

Obsessed.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her the true extent of my feelings as well as the truth about it all, but I couldn't. I had to know first that she even felt something for me at all other than lust.

Keiran had sent me on a mission to make a girl fall in love and sacrifice her heart, but it seemed the only one who had been sacrificed was me.

\* \* \*

## PRESENT

"Do you think they're done?" Willow asked after sitting in the car for fifteen minutes. I had been tempted to just drive away and take her to my bed, but I stuck around. I occupied the time remembering my downfall and plotting how I could make Willow completely mine once and for all.

I knew the desire to be with me was there, but she wasn't giving in, and once again, I wondered what was holding her back. It had to be something to do with where she'd ran off to four years ago.

Jealousy ran free at the thought of another guy.



Just as I was ready to question her and demand the truth, my phone rang. It was Keenan.

"Hey, man. We're on our way with Kennedy. Sorry I'm late. She couldn't fall asleep at her usual nap time and then fell asleep at the last minute."

"Don't bother. I'm outside. I came to check it out when you guys hadn't shown up."

"Sweet. How long have you been waiting?"

"Oh, about fifteen minutes or so." An awkward silence filled the line so I decided to fuck with him. "Just bring the baby outside, *Daddy*."

I held my stomach and fell out laughing when the line disconnected. Angel watched me from her seat as if I were crazy.

"Now why would you let him know we saw them?"

"Because I witnessed what no brother should ever have to see. Payback's a bitch." She smiled and shook her head but said nothing.

Not long after, her smile had faded away and she stared out the window, appearing lost and even frightful. Something was up with her and pissed me off that she wouldn't confide in me, but I knew anger and making demands wouldn't get her to respond in any other way than anger.

I reached over and undid her seatbelt and then lifted and brought her over the console and straight into my lap. Instead of fighting, she clung to me and buried her head in my chest. "What's wrong, baby?"

"I'm drowning," she whispered.

"Who's hurting you?"

"Everyone. It's everywhere. No matter how fast I swim or how far I go, the water is always there."

"It sounds like you just need to head in the right direction. Your life is there waiting for you to take it and so is your salvation."

"It's too dangerous."

“It too dangerous not to.”

She started to protest but I took her lips with mine. She fell into it immediately, seeking comfort in the distraction. I’m not sure how long we kissed, but it seemed to go on forever until we heard...

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# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

## WILLOW

“UNCLE AND WILLOW sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G.” We both snatched away at the sound of Kennedy singing. Dash lifted me over the console and I settled into my seat. He stepped out to take Kennedy and help her in the car seat he already had situated in the back.

“Did you hear that?” Keenan yelled. “Kennedy just spelled her first word!”

“Are you sure she spelled it or garbled sounds that sounded like it—Keenan, where are you going?”

“We need the encyclopedia,” he called back. “Who knows what else she may know?”

“But she’s only three and she barely pronounced the words in the song.”

“Laugh now, but Kennedy will be a rocket scientist by the time she’s ten if I have a say in it.”

He disappeared inside the house and Sheldon looked at us exasperated. “Sometimes I wonder how I had a child with him,” she mumbled as she shook her head and followed him inside.

I turned in my seat and found Kennedy watching me. “Hi, Kennedy.”

“Hi,” she breathed in that angelic voice of hers. “Uncle and Willow kiss again?”

“Yes,” Dash answered as he got in and started the car. “But you won’t be around to sing about it.”

I couldn’t believe when the little thing actually protested. She and Dash had a natural dialogue going built from a bond that I regrettably had not been here to gain with her. They had all pulled together to help Sheldon overcome the strain of single motherhood and I had not been here. For that, I believed I had betrayed Sheldon.

When we got back, Kennedy tore through the apartment. She managed to turn it upside down in less than an hour. It all started with the mac and cheese incident.

She had decided to play a game of hide and seek with it and dumped her dinner under the couch cushions.

I considered it an isolated incident but had no idea what was coming.

\* \* \*

By the end of the night, Dash undressed us both and carried me to his bed where he put his arms around me and made me forget all about my sorrows. His cock had been hard and I had been more than willing, but soon after we lay down, we had drifted to sleep. Kennedy had worn us both out. When morning came, however, I found myself being woken up with soft kisses and caressing hands.

“Turn over,” he demanded, his voice soft. I obliged and flipped onto my stomach. He chuckled and slapped my ass once. “Not what I meant.” He pulled me on top of him and I look down at him with confusion. “Ride me.”

“Why are you whispering?” I would never admit it to him, but I always appreciated the gruff way he commanded me to please him.

“Because my niece is always a light sleeper at the wrong time.”

I looked at the door nervously and found it locked, but I still hesitated. “Do you think we should? She’s in the next

room.”

His only response was to lick my naked hips enough to slip inside me slowly. I gasped at the feeling of being filled. “Then I guess it means you can’t scream.”

His red-brown eyes challenged me and like the wanton I was, accepted. Bracing my hands against his chest, I held his eyes as I lifted my hips. I took him by surprise when I slammed back down. The pleasure in his eyes was unmistakable, but he tightened his grip on my hips to keep me from repeating the move.

“Slowly.”

He guided me this time and we rocked together. Keeping quiet made the act feel forbidden and before long, I lost control again. I rode him hard and fast to a pleasure that took Dash a few moments to snap out of. He flipped me over on my back, taking over and punishing me with slow, deep strokes.

I quickly realized the benefits of making love to fucking. We were able to look into each other’s eyes and see more than just lust and the need to release. We were able to communicate. To say what we weren’t brave enough to say out loud.

“I missed you,” he whispered against my lips. He continued to move inside me slowly. The pace allowed me to feel every inch of him.

“Me too,” I found myself admitting. Maybe it was because for once there were no threats or accusations between us. Later, I might regret it but at this moment, I could only admit what beat in my heart. To avoid making any more mistakes, I took his lips and lost myself with him until we both came.

Quietly, of course.

No sooner had we caught our breath than a soft knock interrupted the silence we rested in with content. “Uncle Dash, I made a mistake.”

His body stiffened a second before he sprang into action. He snatched his black basketball shorts from the floor and hastily stepped inside them, hopping from one foot to the other.

I didn't understand what the big deal was. Kids went in the bed all the time. He tossed me his shirt from last night and I slipped it on. Once I was decent, he snatched open the door and picked up a scared Ken. "Where is it, huh?"

"Bathroom."

He then carried her to the bed and placed her beside me. She curled into my lap and watched her uncle leave with wide eyes. "I in trouble," she told me and shook her head.

When I heard him curse and what sounded like water running, I got curious. I pecked Kennedy on top of the head and followed the string of curses into the spare bedroom. The room was smaller and held a smaller bathroom inside. I saw him inside fiddling with the toilet and walked in without paying particular attention to the floor. Water quickly rushed around my feet. "What the—"

The entire bathroom was flooded. Some of the water now traveled from the bathroom and into the carpeting in the bedroom.

"What happened?"

"Ken happened." I moved closer to see what made the toilet overrun and was surprised to see the bottom end of a Barbie sticking out of the mouth inside the toilet. He stuck his hand inside the toilet and pulled the doll loose, but the water kept coming.

"I think you need a plumber," I offered lamely. He shot me an impatient look and pushed past me.

"Stay with Ken. I forgot to put the gates up." He disappeared inside his office, and I stood in the hallway long enough to hear him speaking on the phone, ordering a plumber.

I found Kennedy lying on her stomach looking content with the world around her. She was holding the TV remote and had turned the TV to Teenage Ninja Mutant Turtles.

Her attention shifted when I entered the bedroom, and she assaulted me with her bright smile. "Willow, I made a swimming pool for Barbie."

"So you did."

It took half the Saturday to fix and clean the destruction Kennedy had caused. I dubbed it the Great Flood of Ken.

Dash did not share my amusement.

Sunday came but uncle and niece-bonding time had quickly turned into Dash preparing for the meeting that was taking him out of town tomorrow. Eventually, he left the apartment altogether, leaving Kennedy and me alone.

It didn't take long for me to fall head over heels in love with the little tyrant. She had a devious mind and I constantly found myself suspicious of her whenever she would flash that signature grin but by Sunday night when it was time to return her to her parents, I found someone new to love.

And protect.

\* \* \*

Monday came and Dash announced he was scheduled to fly out later that evening. He also announced he would be taking me with him and that the trip would carry out over the rest of the week.

By lunch, I was in full panic mode.

I couldn't leave.

I had yet to figure out a way to get Keiran here a week early.

When I suggested that Celesha accompany him since she was more experienced, he pointed out that since she was dealing with a difficult pregnancy, she could not fly.

Since I had caught on quick under her tutelage, she was expected to enter maternity leave much earlier than planned.

“Angel.”

I looked up from the computer screen to see Dash towering over the desk, looking powerful with his tall frame. The muscles in his arms, chest, and legs complimented his suit perfectly.

“Yes?”

“You looked ready to cry. Is something wrong?”

“No not all. How can I help you, Mr. Chambers?”

He groaned and planted his hands on the desk, leaning over and completely invading my space. “I love when you call me Mr. Chambers. It makes me want to bend you over this desk and make you scream it.”

I don’t know what I was thinking, but I heard myself say, “So, why don’t you?”

His grin was predatory as he pulled me up from my seat. I quickly came to my senses and reminded him that Celesha was due back from lunch any minute. “She can watch,” he growled.

The next moment, my dress was around my waist, my panties were lowered, and he moved inside me slowly. His strokes were only hard enough to tease, but for some reason, my release was a thousand times more intense.

“So how many times have you tried that?” I asked when my clothes were back in place.

“Don’t start, Angel. I’ve never fucked her.”

At that moment, the door open and Celesha walked in carrying a giant turkey sub in one hand and an equally giant ham sub in the other.

“Hungry much?” Dash joked.

“I couldn’t decide so I got them both.”

“Or you could have asked them to put both meats in one sandwich.”



She rolled her eyes at Dash as if he were slow. "But then I'd have less bread."

I was the first to lose control and burst out with laughter, Dash and Celesha followed.

"Should I take that?" she gestured to the legal envelope in Dash's hand.

"This is going to accounting and you look like you need to sit." He thrust the folder towards me. "Ms. Waters will take it."

His blatant disregard pissed me off. Even Celesha noticed it and lifted an eyebrow. I chose not to say anything and took the folder from his hand none too gently. The envelope was addressed to the head of accounting who was none other than Nate. I smiled to myself realizing that if Dash wasn't too concerned with being a dick he would have realized it.

With each step, I expected him to come charging after me, but I made it all the way to the accounting department.

The floor receptionist led me to Nate's office. He was on the phone, but when he noticed me, he quickly ended the call. "Willow, hello." He dismissed the receptionist with a nod. "I hope this is a social call."

"I'm afraid not. Numero uno wanted me to deliver this to you."

"Well, I'm glad he did. I've been meaning to catch up to you. Would you consider having dinner with me?"

"Oh, um. I don't think that's a good idea."

His smile was arrogant in a way that said he thought I was playing hard to get. "And why not?"

"Because I'm not sticking around so there's no point in us getting to know each other."

"Ouch. Are you always this cold-hearted?"

I reared back and considered slapping the smirk off his unremarkable face. "Excuse me?"

"Don't get me wrong. I love it very much. I expected your temper to match your hair. Tell me... does it also match

the rest of you?”

“You’re a pig.”

“You wound me. I am simply a man that can appreciate all you have to offer.” His hand slid around my hip and rested on my ass before I could put him in his place.

“Nate—”

“What the hell is going on here?”

I felt the color drain from my face and knew who it was that spoke before I even turned.

“Mr. Chambers, I was just speaking with your assistant about proper dress attire—”

“With your hand on her ass?”

Nate snatched his hand away as if he’d forgotten that it was even there.

“Well, she—I—”

“Save it. Get your shit and get out. You’re fired.”

Dash didn’t wait around for a response. He took me by the hand, disregarding the baffled looks and whispers as he led me out of the suite and to the elevators. Not once during the ride up did he speak, but he didn’t have to. He was pissed and ready to take it out on me.

My theory proved right once we made it to his floor.

“What are you trying to do to me?” He growled as he all but flung me from the elevator and into his office suite. If there was a door, I was pretty sure it would be slamming right now, but I was forced to settle with the powerful thud of his footsteps as he charged me.

“I could ask you the same. You didn’t need to fire him.”

“I think his hand on your ass meant I did.”

“It doesn’t matter because you sent me down there in the first place.”

“An error I overlooked because of your childish behavior about my relationship with Celesha. For fuck sake, you had no reason to believe I ever fucked her.”

“You had no right to be this upset over a stupid ass grab.”

"No one touches what's mine."

"I'm not yours!"

He tipped his head and regarded me with narrowed eyes.  
"You say that as if you have a choice."

"I do. I always did and I made it. I left, remember?"

"You ran. Big difference."

"Whatever the difference, I got far away from you and your overbearing ability to be a complete ass!"

"Stop shouting."

"You first." I should have heeded the threat, but I was done taking orders. I only ever wanted to be my own person and only two people had ever succeeded in stealing my right. He shed his suit jacket while keeping me trapped in his gaze. The part of me that longed to submit knew what it meant, but I held my ground figuratively and literally.

"Stand down."

"No."

"Where was all this bravery when I asked you to be with me? It was so easy for you to be a coward but hard to love me?"

"It was easy to leave because you were nothing to me. You meant nothing because you never could. I thought of you so little I could have forgotten you." I choked on the last, but it was too late for regrets.

His silence was deafening. Or maybe it was the pounding of my blackened heart. The one that he sought to rip apart so callously.

So wrapped up with the battle between my angry heart and my conscience was I that I never noticed him closing the distance until he was standing in front of me. The amber flecks of his eyes disappeared to the silent anger raging in their depths.

When his hand rose, I flinched but didn't miss the question in his eyes as his finger swept his lip thoughtfully.

I desperately needed to know what he was thinking just as my conscience had won me over. "Dash, I didn't—"

“Shh, Angel.” His voice was deceptively calm. His finger left his lips and fingered the button on my dress. The first slipped through followed by a second and third before I could muster a sentence.

“What are you doing?” I held my now gaping dress together with trembling fingers.

“Undressing you.”

“Yes, but why?”

“Because I like this part of our arguments.”

“Then you haven’t been listening.” His small smile followed by his lips moving against mine was his only reaction, and whether it was an answer or a distraction, it worked. My lips moved with his seeking more of his taste, and I suspected he did the same judging by the hungry urgency.

“I heard everything,” he whispered when he finally came up for air. I could see the unmoving purpose in his expressive eyes.

“Celesha,” I reminded.

“She won’t be disturbing us.” I was lifted in his arms and carried through a door I’d never noticed before. Inside was a small bedroom that still managed to appear luxurious. The large bed with its dark sheets dominated the room, and for the first time since returning, I admitted fear.

“I don’t—”

“Shhh,” he repeated as he forced my fingers away and unzipped my dress. “I don’t care.”

His hands pushed the dress from my shoulders first and then tugged the tight material down my trembling legs until it drifted to the floor with finality.

It wasn’t until the dress was gone that I remembered I never got my panties back. I looked down my body hoping I was wrong. How could I possibly forget my panties?

Oh, God... maybe they were still on the floor. Celesha surely would have noticed them by now.

“Looking for these?”

I turned my head to see my panties hooked around his finger at eye level. I moved to take them, but he moved his hand away just in time and stuffed them in his pocket.

At least they weren't lying in the middle of the office floor...

In the next moment, his hand forced its way between my thighs. "Spread your legs."

I wanted to refuse.

I really did.

Instead, I did what any girl would do when faced with someone as hot as Dash and a voice that promised ecstasy to the stars and back. Never mind the emotional connection. Sometimes the physical was enough to forget who we are.

As soon as my legs shifted, his hand cupped my sex completely.

"Why are you doing this to me?"

His fingers rubbed tantalizingly against my sex. Strumming me to delirium. "I'm going to make you remember."

It was then I realized my mistake. I wasn't fighting some horny teenager anymore. I was defying a man bent on having his will obeyed.

He led me to the bed, and with every shift of his body, his clothes rubbed against my naked skin, increasing my feels of vulnerability.

He pushed me lightly, bending me over, and I caught myself on my hands and crawled toward the headboard. His hand caught my foot before I could get far so I looked over my shoulder, silently asking the question.

"I want to see your face when you remember me." His hands made quick work of his belt. The sound of his zipper lowering was like a threat. He didn't bother to shed his pants before he covered me with his body. "Who am I?"

"Please."

"Who am I, Angel?" He lifted his hips and lowered his pants enough to free his erection.

“Just fuck me.”

He wasted no time following my command. His hard length plunged to the very depths of me making me cry out and lose my breath simultaneously. Just as I began to revel in the feeling of him filling me full, he abandoned my body slowly.

“Don’t make me ask again.”

“Then don’t ask again.”

His hands were quick and strong, flipping me over onto my stomach. I felt his fingers digging into my hips and his chest pressing into my back as he leaned over me.

“Angel.”

His pet name for me was followed by a bite on my shoulder sending vibrations down my spine.

It was a warning.

A threat.

One that I should heed, but my pride wouldn’t let me.

“Fine.” His hand parted my thighs but bypassed my sex for the forbidden. “Have it your way and I’ll have you mine.”

“Dasher...”

“Too late, Angel.”

His fingers biting into the skin of my hips was my only warning before my ass was forced in the air.

“Dash?”

“Shh.” His finger dipped inside my sex and teased until I was dripping with need. He then slowly eased them out and brought them up, spreading my ass open more and teasing the puckered flesh. With each pass of his fingers, he grew bolder until his fingers invaded my ass and then started the familiar push and pull until I was writhing and wordlessly begging for more.

“I’m going to fuck your ass now, Angel.”

I had only registered the feeling of him probing my entrance before he plunged inside me uncaring, unforgiving, and unapologetic. He was impossibly hard as was his thrusts.

The force of his possession was too much for my heart and body to handle and yet I couldn't make him stop. In this moment, I wanted to give him what he wanted. What we both wanted. Even if it was just pretend.

"I told you, Willow Olivia Waters. You're mine."

I could only muster a small sound that was barely a moan and to push back onto his cock.

That's when the pounding began.

Hard.

Fast.

Unrelenting.

And completely mind blowing.

I wanted to beg. I wanted to scream. Fuck me, I wanted to be his. But I was tainted. By lies and fear. I didn't deserve love with him.

I hadn't realized I was crying until I felt his tongue trail my cheek. "Crying won't make me stop, Angel." The rumble of his voice was electrocuting and thrilling.

"No."

"No?"

"Don't stop."

His answering laughter was unexpected and strangely chilling. "You better fucking believe I won't."

The threat of pleasure led to floodgates opening and the tiny thread of Dash's control to snap.

"Such a tight ass." As if on command, my ass gripped him and the groan that rumbled from his chest was music to my ears. My ass pushed back against him, against my will, silently asking for more. "When I'm ready, I'm going to come in your mouth. Would you like that?"

"Yes."

"Say it. Say you want to swallow my come."

"I want to swallow your come."

"Yeah?"

"Taste you..." I felt delirious. Words were impossible. I could only feel and submit to his possession.

Finally, after I didn't think I could survive anymore, he forced one final thrust and then flipped me over. His hand gripped my hair and lifted my upper body from the bed just as his cock erupted.

But it wasn't my mouth that received him. His warm come coated my lips and cheeks in the most vulgar way that both excited and pissed me off. I stared up at him questioning him with my eyes when my brain refused to function.

"You don't deserve my come," he answered simply.

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# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

## WILLOW

"YOU'LL BE STAYING here," Dash announced at the last minute as he gathered his bags. He barely even looked at me.

"What made you change your mind?" And why was I disappointed at the thought of not seeing him for an entire week?

"You."

I faltered at the sadness in his voice. "Me?"

"I need to think, and I can't do that with you around. I'll only end up hurting you or fucking you."

"So am I supposed to be stuck alone in this apartment for a week?"

"You won't be alone."

"Another guard?"

"Of sorts," he answered vaguely.

I felt as if I should say something but words seemed impossible. He hesitated only a second before leaving without another word or a goodbye.

I wandered to the couch and dropped onto it feeling lifeless. I should have been relieved. I was no longer going, but I was still trapped inside... or so I thought.

My gaze landed on his car keys lying on the glass cocktail table. He must have taken a car to the airport...

My mind raced, already putting my plan into action. This morning as we left he had been too distracted by the phone call from his mother to notice me watching him key in the code. I still had no wallet or cellphone, but I now had my freedom and means of transportation.

But first things first...

I tiptoed to the door and opened it. My eyes ran up and down the private corridor leading to the elevator only to find no sign of a guard.

Had he been toying with me?

I shook off the suspicion and counted my blessings. After dressing in one of the jeans and plain shirts I'd bought during my shopping trip with Sheldon, I prayed that my luck hadn't ran out and headed for his office.

The next step in my plan would require cash.

I took a deep breath and tried the doorknob. To my utter disbelief, it was unlocked. The door opened a crack, and I hesitated for only a moment before pushing inside. The room was dark so I flipped on the light switch. My eyes immediately landed on his desk.

I crossed the space and came around until I was facing the drawers. I tried them but found my luck had run out. All of the drawers were locked.

I banged my fist on top of the wooden surface in frustration.

What was I going to do now?

I sunk into the leather chair and placed my head in my hands. If I couldn't get my hands on cash, I would need something else worth trading, but what?

Someone of Dash's status would have to have something of value lying around...

Jewelry!

I rushed for his bedroom ignoring the fact that I had just been reduced to petty theft. Considering what was at stake, I was willing to take the decimation of my character.

The large walk-in closet held all that I needed. I perused the watches and took what looked like the least expensive though I was sure they were all worth a pretty penny.

I resisted the urge to celebrate before the true victory was won and slipped out of the apartment.

All the way down, I held my breath, waiting for someone to jump out to stop me, but no one came.

When I made it to the parking garage, I quickly located his car and slid into the leather seat. I immediately felt out of place. The car looked as foreign as a space ship to me.

I started the car and carefully drove away, smiling only on the inside.

I did it.

Now for the risky part...

My destination was the local university Sheldon had attended. Using the built in GPS, I made it there in just less than fifteen minutes.

The next part took longer than expected. Everyone was wary of the unknown girl asking to buy a product that would surely land them in jail for the rest of their days, but eventually, I scored what I came for and sped all the way back to the apartment.

I rehearsed in my head the next step and ignored my sweaty palms. This part was particularly hard because it involved Keiran directly. I had to get him here without making him suspicious. If he blew me off and warned Dash, then Buddy would die.

I only had a few days left, and Keiran and Lake wouldn't be back for the Christmas holiday for a few days. By then it would be too late.

I made it back without getting caught and made my way to the bedroom. All the fucking, planning, and sneaking around had done me in, and no sooner had I laid down, I was out like a light.

Shortly after, the low beep of the front door jarred me from my sleep as if it were the sound of a bomb detonating.

The clock on the nightstand read that it was just after midnight. Had Dash come back?

Maybe he'd come to torture me more with his presence.

My toes sunk into the plush carpet as I shook off the remnants of sleep. I felt as if I could go a few more hours, but the silence leftover from the door opening was spooking me.

Hesitant steps led me to the front of the apartment, and I was scared shitless by the sight of Keiran standing at the door wearing all black. The dark hood over his head shielded his expression, but the energy drifting across the space was enough.

It took seconds too long as we stared at each across the large space that wasn't large enough. I managed to find my voice along with a little misplaced courage. "What are you doing here?"

His hand rose to push back the hood, and I could see his eyebrow lifted as if asking a question. "Something tells me you needed me here."

I fought to keep my voice neutral and guilt free. "I wouldn't know why."

"Don't you?"

"Dash isn't here," I offered lamely.

"I know."

"So?"

He inhaled and exhaled as if annoyed and disappeared inside the living room. I looked toward the door that was left open and thought about bolting.

Instead, hesitant feet moved against my will guiding me to the living room where Keiran sat absently scratching his chest where his bullet wound would have been if it weren't for the tattoo of Lake's name. She said it was a reminder. Of what I didn't know or care.

"Come sit," he ordered and patted the couch next to him.

I wanted him gone, but it was now or never.

“Could I get you something to drink?” At first, I thought he would refuse, but instead, he removed his hoodie and nodded.

“I would love something hot. It’s freezing out there,” he remarked.

“Maybe you wouldn’t be freezing if you’d wear a decent coat.

“Funny. Lake says the same.”

“Oh, what do us warm beings know,” I answered sarcastically to which he found no humor.

I disappeared inside the kitchen and placed a hand over my chest to calm my beating heart. It took everything to conceal my nervousness. It didn’t help that Keiran looked at me as if he saw straight through me.

It was enough for me to reconsider and come clean, but then I thought about my brother, I knew it would be a small price to pay for his life.

While the water boiled, I managed to slip to the bedroom undetected and grabbed the powder. I stuck them both in my jeans and rehearsed once again before I crept back to the kitchen.

I nearly died when I entered the kitchen to see Keiran pulling the teakettle off the burning aisle and setting it aside.

“It’s ready,” he said simply.

“Oh. I must not have heard it from the bathroom.”

He nodded and left the kitchen. Only when he was out of sight did I begin to breathe. I prepared the tea and pulled the powder from my jeans. I hesitated and thought of all the ways it could go horribly wrong before hardening my resolve and dumping the powder in the dark, steaming liquid.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

DASH

"WHAT'S GOING ON, Simon? I thought I was meeting you in Seattle." I settled into the booth and studied his solemn expression. Just as I had been ready to board, I had received a phone call from Richard Simon saying he was here in Nevada and needed to meet. I made the detour and met him at the bar where we had initially discussed the merger.

"Change of plans. I'm looking for my daughter."

"Really? I thought you said you didn't have kids."

"I said I didn't have an heir, at least to take the reins of the company. Forgive me, but I'm old fashioned though, so I guess I shouldn't be choosy. A few years ago, I didn't even have a daughter but even so, after meeting her, I know running the company would be the last thing she would want. She's a wild little beast."

"Hmm. So why do you think she would come to Nevada?"

"She came to visit her mother who lives a few towns over a week ago and never came back."

"Maybe she extended her visit for the holiday. I'm sure she's fine."

"In all the years she's popped around, she never stayed more than a day. I try not to worry since she's young. She probably came to gamble for all I know." He tried to laugh it off, but the worry in his eyes overshadowed it.

My heart started beating and I felt gut punched as I began to connect the familiar dots. It had to be a coincidence but even as I tried to convince myself, I found myself blurting, "What town?"

"Six Forks actually, your town. My men are trying to find an address as we speak, but I figured you could help. You must know her."

Only too well.

"If she only stays a day, why did you wait an entire week to start worrying about her?"

"Son, I've worried about her since she showed up on my doorstep three years ago with a tattered suitcase, a paternity test, eighteen years old, and said I was her father, and no answers... or questions. But I always thought one day she'd get tired of running and find her way home."

My mouth had gone completely dry, and I fought over my tongue to ask the inevitable, "What's her name?"

"Willow. Willow Simon."

I frowned with confusion since Willow's last name is Waters. "Do you have a picture?"

"Uhh, yeah." He pulled out his phone and quickly found a picture dated three months ago. It was definitely her in the picture. She was smiling and appeared all too happy and as beautiful as ever, but it wasn't she who had my attention. It was the fucking, smiling prick with his arm around her.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

## WILLOW

"WELL DONE, LITTLE Tree." I was standing over Keiran's body slumped on the couch after he had finished the tea and had slowly slipped away just ten minutes before. I had been working out the next step when the door burst open and Esmerelda strutted in.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to collect the body."

"Body? But you said you only wanted... a piece... of him. How did you even know?" The thought of butchering a person made me want to retch all over her Jimmy Choos and ruin them permanently. Her presence so soon had thrown a wrench in my plans.

"I told you we are always watching, and I've changed my mind. I must admit I had my doubts if you really could do it. I was prepared to kill you both."

"I couldn't do it."

"Excuse me?"

"He's not dead," I confessed. Esmerelda wordlessly stared at me. Rather than answer, she had one of her goons check his pulse. The man looked up and shook his head.

"He looks pretty dead to me."

"I drugged him with a drug called Death's Kiss. It—"

"I know what it does. It's my product. My only question is why did you drug him instead of killing him?"



“I told you, I couldn’t do it but he’s helpless now. You can do what you want with him.” My words rushed out while praying she didn’t put a bullet in him right then and there. “I want you to leave my family alone now.”

I didn’t miss the flash of anger and malice in her eyes and reminded myself that she still had the power to hurt them.

“You’re not in a position to make demands. As I said, I want the body.” She snapped her fingers and the two men moved forward and roughly lifted Keiran’s body onto the shoulders of the biggest.

“What are you going to do with him?”

“Oh, Little Tree, your dainty little mind wouldn’t want to be bothered by the messy details. Since you left him alive, I get to play. I’m going to make him scream, Little Tree.”

And just like that, they were gone.

With Keiran.

\* \* \*

I had to act fast. I had no idea where they would take him. I could only assume it would be the same warehouse where they’d taken me but I didn’t even know where that could be.

As soon as it was safe, I took the elevator, hoping to make it in time. I had only a moment to wonder how they made in and out of the building undetected when I was hit with the painful reality that they hadn’t.

Just inside the lobby door laid the door guard, face down in a puddle of his own blood. To the right, the receptionist’s lifeless eyes stared ahead from his seat as blood oozed from the single bullet wound in his head.

If they could do this to innocent people, I knew she wouldn’t hesitate to harm Keiran. I mentally pushed the dead men from my mind and burst through the garage entrance. There wasn’t time to call the police so I could only

hope the silent alarm they tripped when they broke through the stairway would be enough.

For fuck sake, where was the security team? It had been at least ten minutes since Esmerelda showed up, executed two people, and kidnapped an unconscious Keiran and they have yet to surface.

I hopped in Dash's car and managed to catch the familiar van just as it turned the corner. With no cell phone to call for help, I was Keiran's only hope for survival.

Killing Keiran had never been a part of the plan. Esmerelda taking Keiran had definitely not been a part of the plan.

When Keiran showed up I had the chance to come clean, but I couldn't risk telling Keiran the truth because I didn't know if he would ever go through with it. I couldn't trust him to agree with me, and I couldn't trust anyone with Buddy's life so I drugged him.

Esmerelda said she only needed a piece of him as proof.

My plan was to take only a small part of him. Something he could survive without and something he wouldn't miss.

Like a finger...

I didn't want to butcher him any more than I wanted to kill him, but it seemed like a small price to pay for my family. For everyone.

I was prepared to live with the consequences of knowing no one would ever forgive me for it no matter my reasons, least of all him. I hadn't planned on sticking around long enough to face the music.

But Esmerelda showing up had thrown my plan up in flames and now it looked as if he really would die.

I had only a small window of time. I knew what she meant by making him scream. She would torture him before killing him—so I was the only thing standing between him and death.

I stayed a safe distance behind until the van and lead had eventually pulled up to what looked like an abandoned

warehouse.

So I had been right.

I fell back and lurked in the shadows, watching them cart him inside and wishing I had a phone to call someone. My only comfort was knowing that as soon as Esmerelda entered the penthouse, a silent alarm had been sounded. I had no clue how and if his security team would find us in time, but I had to hope.

Keiran would be coming out of his drug inducement any moment now. I exited the car and moved closer to the warehouse, ensuring I kept a low profile. If I was caught, we were both fucked.

There were no guards posted outside so I was able to approach the building. The door hadn't shut all the way, carrying the voices from the warehouse to my position. I found a low window and peeked through the dirty glass. They were all gathered in the large open space, smoking and laughing as if they weren't ready to commit something heinous.

Keiran had been tied down to a table and I noticed his head move slightly, signaling he was coming out of it.

"Boss, he's waking up," the largest man I'd ever seen spoke.

"Oh, goody. Be a dear and fetch my knives, please."

The men snapped to attention and Esmerelda approached the table. Her hand drew back and she slapped him with sickening force. It was enough to fully awaken him.

I expected him to scream or thrash around, but he remained perfectly still as he stared up at Esmerelda.

"Hello, slave."

When he didn't respond, she made a clucking sound and moved slowly around the table. "Don't tell me you forgot your mother," she purred. "It certainly seems you've forgotten your training."

"You're not my mother," he finally spoke. "I killed my mother." The snarl as he bragged about killing his mother

sent chills up my spine, and I shook my head in amazement at how he could still invoke fear when he was the one in danger.

However, I was prepared for the crushing blow to his ribs from the large man. I heard the air leave Keiran's lung with a whoosh.

"This is The Handler," Esmerelda boasted. "If you talk out of turn, disrespect me in anyway, or fail to answer a question, you will be sorry. I'm sure you remember all this well, Keiran."

"What do you want," he groaned.

"Revenge."

"For?"

"My husband, of course .Your testimony put him away for a very long time but he never got to serve his sentence, you see, because he was killed shortly after he was incarcerated. I'm sure you had something to do with that."

"You don't give a shit about your husband, lady."

"Oh, on the contrary, I did. He provided me a very rich lifestyle and now, because of you, I'm a fugitive on the run and making money by supplying petty college dealers in this godforsaken country."

"Is that why you took my niece and had my father and uncle killed?"

She smiled and looked impressed. "Sorry, slave. Wasn't me. But I wish I had because then you would be suffering much more than physical pain before you died." She started pacing again. "Of course... there is something else."

"Which is?"

"You have my daughter."

He laughed. "I don't *have* anyone and she's not your daughter. She doesn't even know you."

"Where is Diana?" The patience in Esmerelda's voice was waning quickly.

"Like I would tell you."

Without warning, The Handler slammed his meaty fist into Keiran's face this time. His head snapped to the side and I could swear I'd heard the sound of bones cracking. I wondered why Keiran would risk his life to protect a girl he never seemed to like. Maybe it was just a natural act of defiance. Whatever it was, it had surely just gotten him killed. Esmerelda no longer looked interested in playing.

"Check his restraints and make sure they are tight. I want to ride his lovely cock before I torture and kill him."

Keiran didn't move an inch, and for a moment, I thought he was out cold from the brutal hit he'd just taken, but when his fists tightened, I was able to feel relief for only a moment.

Right there for all to see, she lifted her skintight dress, exposing her bare ass. I couldn't take it anymore. If he had to die, then I deserved to die with him. I did the unthinkable burst through the warehouse door before I could change my mind.

"Don't touch him!" I screamed. Keiran's head snapped and followed the sound of my outburst as well as everyone else in the warehouse. Horror flashed over his features as he gritted his teeth and attempted to sit up in vain.

"Willow?" he barely whispered.

The men quickly descended upon me, grabbing me, and forcing me closer.

I fought against my own restraints, unable to hide my disgust. This was all my fault, and now Keiran would pay the ultimate price. I could only pray they would kill me after because there would be no way I could face Dash or Lake after what I'd done.

"What a surprise, Little Tree. I have to say I'm surprised given how you betrayed your friend and all, but don't worry... after I fuck and kill him, every man in this room will have their turn ripping you apart." The ominous threat was followed by her soft, trickling laughter, making me sick to my stomach.

"I would advise against that."

"Oh?"

"Five minutes ago, I notified the police of the location of a certain fugitive. They should be along any moment now so if you're going to kill us, you'd better get to it." It was all a lie, but it was the only shot I had.

"And why should I believe you?"

"Why shouldn't you? Do you really think I'd be stupid enough to come here empty handed?"

She seemed to consider my claim while I fought to keep a straight face. "Very well. If you're in a hurry to die, I'll be happy to oblige you. But this one," she looked at Keiran as spoke, "comes with us."

Shit.

"Titan and Locas, untie him and put him in the van. Handler," she called while staring at me, "you stay behind for me and take care of the little bitch. I want you to kill her slowly, but if you hear sirens, cut her throat." With that, she rushed from the warehouse.

The two guards tasked with taking Keiran holstered their guns and untied Keiran. The Handler's footsteps thudded across the cemented floor as he headed for me wearing a revolting grin.

I took one last look at Keiran who remained perfectly still, letting the men drag his body before I was lifted from the ground and carried over his shoulder to a back room.

As soon as we were out of sight, he threw me to the ground and began unbuttoning his belt. My bones felt like they would shatter after the impact, but I managed to crawl backward across the dirty floor, scraping my hands along the way. "I don't suppose I can reason with you, can I?" I attempted to remain calm despite my impending rape and death, but the threat was too much. I was hyperventilating by the time he dropped to his knees.

At one last attempt to fight, I kicked out and hit him in the gut. When he barely reacted, I knew I was in trouble. He

dragged me to him with rough hands and pinned me to the floor.

I could no longer hold it in. My scream ripped through the air at the same time I heard commotion on the other side of the wall. Male voices screamed and then two shots rang.

I couldn't mourn the possible death of Keiran with my own impending. I only hoped he didn't suffer as I was about to.

The Handler disregarded it all and tore at my jeans. "No!" I screamed again when he managed to get them to my knees. A harsh backhand sent me backward. I hit the floor way too hard and couldn't bring myself to move.

This was it.

I was giving up.

I deserved everything that would be done to me.

My only wish was that I would see Dash's face one last time so I could tell him what I had been so scared to admit since he came into my life.

I stared up at The Handler rather than look away. It was my one last atonement for what I'd done. I sent a prayer up, hoping Keiran wouldn't suffer too much even though I knew he would.

I barely registered my legs being forced apart and his hulking body settling between them.

I barely registered what sounded like the creak of a door opening.

But when I saw two hands grab The Handler's neck and his eyes widen with surprise and fear, feeling in my body and soul came rushing back at once.

The sickening crunch of The Handler's neck as it was savagely snapped filled the warehouse. I braced for him to fall forward, but he was dragged away and I was left with the vision of Keiran standing over me. His expression was fierce and his eyes, dark with rage.

He had just been outnumbered and unarmed yet somehow killed them all.

Those few moments did what fourteen years couldn't. It was then I realized he was someone to fear after all.

He stepped forward and I shrunk back, expecting and fully deserving to be next, but then he shocked me when he bent and lifted me. He stepped over The Handler's lifeless body and carried me out.

When the day began, I thought of Keiran as my enemy and him likely the same, yet we had risked all to save each other.

In the end, it didn't matter anyway. Esmerelda had gotten away.

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# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

## WILLOW

KEIRAN HAD SILENTLY driven us away from the carnage. We had yet to speak a word to each other until he stopped just outside the city.

"Why are we here?" I stared up at the sign of the small diner that read Joey's Pizza Creations.

"I'm hungry."

I stared at him dumbfounded. "And you have to eat now?"

"Yes. We need to talk." He snatched the key out of the ignition and flung himself from the car. I scrambled after him while he waited with the door held open.

"We need to get you to a hospital. There could be side effects. There *should* be side effects."

He didn't appear fazed as he stared down at me. "All right," he shrugged. "Let's make a deal. You eat with me, and I'll go to the hospital after."

For someone who almost died and killed a room full of people, he had his priorities screwed. "Please," he added when I continued to stare.

"Fine." I told myself I only agreed because he would only do what please him anyway and stepped in the diner with him close behind me. The patrons watched us with wary expressions, and I realized how bad we looked. I sported only a busted lip and stained shirt but Keiran's shirt was

torn. Bruises marred his body and blood stained his clothing in spatters.

If Keiran had noticed the looks of disgust, he didn't show it as he swaggered to the counter. He looked back and grinned. "Cheese or pep?"

I tilted my head in confusion before coming to my senses. "Cheese."

"Cheese it is," he directed toward the pimply faced cashier. While Keiran paid, I found the nearest booth and slid inside, no longer able to trust my legs to hold me up. I placed my head in my hands and mentally counted all the reasons I was a horrible person. I never even noticed Keiran approach minutes later.

He set the pizza and two paper plates at the center of the table before taking his seat. He then tore off a slice, dripping grease and cheese on the plate in front of me, then pointed and grunted, "Eat."

I looked from the pizza to him and felt my stomach rumble. Turns out I was completely famished, but even hunger couldn't fight the apprehension.

"It's not poisoned," he assured with impatience. I continued to hesitate until my stomach growled again. We fell into a natural silence while we ate. I took unsure bites while he wolfed down slice after slice.

"So what did you give me?" he asked after finishing off his fourth slice. He sat back and rubbed his stomach which I was sure had not an ounce of fat. He probably burned hundreds of calories by just sitting there.

"Death's Kiss."

"You wanted to kill me."

"I was *supposed* to kill you."

"But you wanted me dead."

"I didn't—" I stopped short at the hard look in his eyes that warned me not to lie. I thought I wanted him dead until I believed he was. It's amazing how reality could put things into perspective.

"It's okay, Low. I deserved it."

"Low?"

He looked as surprised as I felt before shrugging. "I think it fits you."

"I've had enough of nicknames."

I would have expected Keiran to have some insult, but he simply studied me as if genuinely curious. Maybe he was looking for an advantage. He was, after all, a cold piece of work. "What does Death's Kiss do? Why am I not dead?"

"It's a drug that mimics death but nothing like the stuff everyone's heard of before. It's used by junkies to calm the speed of a high and housewives that have trouble sleeping at night. All the symptoms of death but nothing more than a deep sleep."

"I've heard about that on the news. How the fuck did you get your hands on that?"

"I bought it from a dealer at the university. Apparently, Esmerelda is the mystery supplier."

"This is becoming too fucked up to be real."

"Tell me about. A one-day routine visit with my mother turned out to be a fight for my life."

"You were supposed to let me take care of it."

"Believe me—no part of me wanted anything to do with this. I had been fully ready to let you deal with your own issues until Esmerelda paid me a third surprise visit."

"When?"

"After we had returned from California after we'd warned you. She showed up at Dash's apartment and just let herself in."

His frown deepened at that. "How?"

"The new security guard Dash has been combing the streets for was her inside man."

"Son of a bitch."

"Anyway, after she was able to get that close by infiltrating the very team meant to keep him safe, I realized

no one could keep me safe. She threatened Buddy if I didn't kill you within one week."

"How were you supposed to do it?"

"She gave me a vial of poison the day of the wedding. When she kidnapped me a second time, she told me she wanted proof the deed was done."

"Proof?"

"A piece of you."

I expected more of a reaction, but he simply shook his head and bit into his pizza. "So you got the idea to drug me and butcher me against my will to fool her rather than confide in me?"

"Precisely."

"You know that's fucked up, right?"

"I—"

"But I would have done the same thing. You could have just killed me, but you didn't. I guess I owe you thanks."

"I think we're even," I replied in a dry tone.

"You came after me, too. You didn't have to."

"It was my fault you were taken."

He nodded and stated, "True."

I rolled my eyes and then asked a question of my own. "Why did you come tonight?"

"I was guarding you. I followed you to the school and back."

"So you knew about the drug?"

He shook his head and took another bite. "I thought you were on drugs. I was going to ignore it and told myself I didn't care, but I found myself coming to stop you anyway."

"I can't believe you thought I was on drugs."

"I can't believe you were going to chop me up."

"I wouldn't put it that way. I would have taken a finger, is all."

He stared at me again in that way he did that said he was reading my every thought. "I found you," he finally stated after a long silence.

"What?"

"Thirteen months after you disappeared, I tracked you down," he clarified.

"You looked for me?" I wasn't sure whether to believe him or call him a liar. He answered first with a single nod and a solemn expression.

"I did."

"Why?"

"I had to."

"You had to," I repeated dumbly.

"Do you realize how much your disappearance affected everyone?"

"You all seemed all too happy together."

"Lake missed you. Dash needed you—"

"Yet you took them both from me."

"They were never yours."

"Nor were they yours," I countered. Air blew from his nose reminding me of a dragon and breaking the temporary peace we had. The vein in his forehead became prominent, and I wondered just how buried below the surface was the old Keiran.

As soon as the thought formed, the vein disappeared and his shoulders slumped.

"You might be right," he whispered.

"Don't be stupid. Lake loves you."

"I did a lot of fucked up shit to her. No amount of love can just erase it."

"It got pretty intense at times, but I'm sure none of it matters to her now."

"I raped her."

"Excuse me?"

"Lake."

My fist whipped out before I even knew what was happening and hit him hard in the eye. His head snapped.

"You sack of shit." I swung out again, but he caught my wrist in a tight grip.

"Enough," he growled and looked around pointedly. The other patrons were watching with horrified expressions. I sat back against the booth and looked out the window, unable to stand the look of him. "I didn't hurt her."

"Allow me to not believe you. You raped her," I cried.

"Talk louder, please."

"You should be in prison."

"I didn't force myself on her, but I blackmailed her into letting me have her, and I didn't give her much choice to say no."

"She never told me."

"She wanted to protect you."

"From you."

"From me," he confirmed.

"I knew you were cruel, but I never thought you would go that far. You tortured her for years and for what cause?"

"I never thought I would go that far either. Some days I wish I had an excuse to hate her as much as I did just so I could live with the guilt."

"Should I feel sorry for you?"

"I'm not asking you to do anything but listen."

That shut me up. Begrudgingly, I nodded and folded my arms, appearing to have authority, but really, I was terrified of the truth.

"Twenty years from now when someone asks how we met and fell in love, what am I supposed to say? The truth? Our story is fucked up, and it's all because of me."

I grabbed his hand and squeezed. Surprisingly, he squeezed back. "But it's still being written. You can't change your past. The only thing you can do now is to learn from it. Make her happy and more importantly, always make her feel safe. She needs it."

We both became lost in mutual silence as we retreated into our thoughts.

"You realize we almost died together," he pointed out after some time.

“Yeah, so?”

“I think that makes us friends now.”

“We’ll see.”

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# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

## DASH

TWO HOURS WAS all it took for me to become fully rabid. After Simon had confirmed that Willow, my Willow, was his daughter and that she was engaged to some prick, I rushed home with her father in tow only to find her gone.

I worried and pulled at my hair while calling around in search of her until I found that my car keys were also missing, which meant she left willingly.

No one had heard from her. I even became desperate enough to show up on her mother's doorstep. I wondered how she could have slipped away. Keiran, the person, I trusted the most with her safety had been guarding her. After many unsuccessful attempts to contact him, I realized my missing person list had been updated to two.

I had just been convinced we needed to get the police involved when a call came through from Keiran.

I couldn't answer fast enough.

"Where the fuck are you?"

"Grady Hospital."

"Fuck... Willow?"

"She's fine. Just a little banged up, but she'll survive. Just get here."

"I'm on my way." I hung up and notified everyone who mattered to get to Grady Hospital. Before long, the waiting area was crowded. My parents, Willow's parents, Keenan,



Sheldon, and Lake were all in attendance. However, the only people they were letting back were immediate family.

Everyone was causing an uproar, but it didn't matter. Not even two minutes later, Keiran, and Willow came strolling down the hallway side-by-side, looking pretty banged up but alive.

"Oh, my God. What the hell happened to you," Willow's mother exclaimed.

"I'd like to know the same," her father stepped forward as well. I gritted my teeth against the reminder that I had the key to Willow's location in my grasp for months now.

"Dad?" she asked, sounding every bit as confused as she looked. "What are you doing here?" Her eyes flitted in my direction before she nervously cast them away again. "How did you find me?"

"Young lady, you were due back over a week ago. I was worried."

"Wait a minute. This is your father," Lake asked. It sparked everyone to start asking questions as tension rose higher than before. I stood off to the side, holding on by a thread as her parents interrogated her.

I needed answers so I looked to Keiran, but he had his hands full with Lake, who was back to crying and babbling in his chest.

"Son, I'm glad your friend is okay, but I think it's time to go," my father stated quietly.

"If you think I'm about to leave her, you're crazy."

"As you can see she's in good hands."

"No."

"Son, think about the image of this family. God knows what crimes happened tonight."

"I'm not leaving," I repeated while pinching the bridge of my nose.

"It's time you consider this family rather than just yourself." His voice had risen, attracting the attention of everyone else.

“Dad,” Sheldon called.

“Be quiet, Sheldon. It’s bad enough you had a child with one of them. Your interference is not needed.”

“Did he just tell my lady to ‘be quiet’?” Keenan snarled.

“Do you see what I mean? You do not need to mix with the likes of these people. Your sister is beyond saving, but I will not have my heir chasing some two-bit girl from the wrong side of the tracks.”

“Have you lost your mind?” Willow’s mother shrieked.

My father had effectively gotten the situation out of hand. Willow stood nearby with tears glistening in her eyes. It was clear she heard every word that was spoken.

“Chambers!” Simon’s voiced boomed from across the hall, shocking us all. He had been quiet through all of it until now. “If you interfere with my daughter’s happiness like you did with mine, I’ll kill you.”

Willow’s mom made a strange sound that didn’t escape Willow’s notice. “What’s he talking about, Dad?”

“Richard, I don’t think this is the right time,” Willow’s mom cut in.

“Mom?” Willow spoke up for the first time. “Since when do you know the Chambers?”

She must have sensed Willow wasn’t about to let it go, so she took a deep breath and sat in one of the plastic chairs as if no longer able to stand.

“Your father stopped me from marrying your mother,” Simon offered. “He didn’t think she was good enough because her blood wasn’t blue. When he couldn’t convince me to break it off with her, he told my parents and they forced me to marry someone else. I never even knew Natalie was pregnant.”

I looked at my father in disbelief, waiting for him to deny it, which he never did. He actually looked proud.

“You’re the reason?” Willow whispered. She stepped away from her mother, her stare fixed on my father. I had no

idea what she meant, but I knew I needed to diffuse the situation quickly.

I crossed the short walkway and took Willow's hand, turning her. "Now isn't the time. You were just attacked or God knows what. You need rest, but first you need to finish your discharge." I nudged her towards the receptionist desk. The nurses had stopped working to watch the drama unfold, but with one hard look, they snapped back into action.

\* \* \*

I nursed Willow back to health over the next week, despite the protests of her mother and father. All they managed to do was argue who was the worst parent. It had driven Willow up the wall, so I kept them away from her with orders not to come around until *a//* her scars had faded.

It had been a long, hard week considering everything that had unraveled. Willow had come clean about everything, even the fiancé she hypocritically never mentioned and her attempt to butcher my best friend.

In the end, I could do nothing more than nod and accept the truth of what is all the while wondering if I could truly forgive her.

After a week, the answer came to me when the bitter truth had transformed into resentment, and I could no longer pretend anymore.

I came home after working from sun up to sun down and found her in the kitchen making lasagna. The apartment smelled delicious, but I couldn't bring myself to appreciate the smell or the sentiment behind it.

I stood against the doorframe for long moments, watching her move around the kitchen. She seemed like a natural. She had always been someone I could just sit and watch do mundane things like brush her hair and never get bored.

I waited and waited for the familiar stirrings I normally felt when just looked at her, but none came. I felt dead inside.

"You weren't just coming to visit your mother, were you?" The words were out before I could stop them. She jumped at the sudden sound of my voice and clutched her chest with deep breaths. I continued to watch her dispassionately from my perch.

When she finally collected herself, she asked, "What are you talking about?" She looked around nervously and now clutched her middle.

"And you weren't going to return to Seattle either," I continued, not really requiring an answer. "You were going to run."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not so ridiculous. What is ridiculous is why you would condemn me for being engaged when you were engaged, too and for the very same reasons."

"I never agreed to marry him."

"So did you run?"

"I didn't, Dash. I—"

"You did!" I roared. I swear my voice could have shaken the world.

"Why would I run?" she screamed back. "It was a stupid idea. Where would I have gone? There was nowhere for me to go!" Her screams turned into sobs, never realizing she had confessed. One thing that hadn't changed in the week since I found her in the hospital was how I hung on her every word.

"You thought your father would make you marry him, so you ran, and you came to say goodbye, didn't you?"

"Yes," she cried, finally admitting the truth. I should have felt victorious, but I didn't. Like I'd said... I was dead inside.

I looked into her eyes and held them. I needed her to know what she did to me. "Well, then I guess this is it."

I saw the shift in her eyes. The fear that was in them was painful to watch, but I couldn't bring myself to console her. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I can't survive you walking away for a second time. This time it could be for ten years or twenty." It could be forever.

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I'm choosing myself this time. I'm saying that I'm the one walking away."

"Dash—"

"Goodbye, Willow." Her name tasted bitter on my tongue, but I couldn't bring myself to call her Angel anymore.

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# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

TWO MONTHS LATER

WILLOW

I STARED DOWN at the little white stick and shook it as if that would really change the result.

This could not be happening.

Positive.

Pregnant.

I was positively pregnant.

There was no doubt about it.

I had effectively ruined my life and that of my baby. I could just add it to the list of things I had ruined in the last four years, including my only true chance at love.

When I decided to drop out of school, I had no direction. I figured if I couldn't pursue my dreams there was no point in trying at all so I packed up my things while, in the back of my mind, I knew there was nowhere for me to go. I couldn't show up to my mother's home a college dropout. She would be even less accepting of my failure to finish school than she was of my dream. So I did what I had never been brave enough to do before. I found my father.

He wasn't particularly hard to find. My mother had never bothered to hide exactly who he was or where he lived. She'd even gone so far as to give me a paternity test

she illegally managed to have taken without his consent. It's almost as if she needed me to hate him as much as she did.

Ironically, the only person I hated in the end was her.

I resented her.

I mourned the loss of a real mother-daughter relationship.

Six months later, I accepted for what it was and always will be only to realize I was too late.

When my mother couldn't get her way with me, she did the unforgivable and gave Pepé away to an animal shelter three towns away. I didn't find out until three months after arriving in Seattle when Buddy finally came home and grilled her about him.

I hated her for what she did but not as much as I did for leaving him behind. I still had no idea what became of him. He was six years old and reaching the end of his life span and I would never get to say goodbye.

My father had done all he could to break me out of the depression the loss of Pepe caused but to no avail. Sadly, my father and I had no real connection. I could tell he cared for me as I did him but a part of me felt as if it were too late to cultivate a bond expected between a father and daughter. After nearly four years of trying, we'd failed but I couldn't deny he'd been supportive ever since I showed up on his doorstep uninvited.

The only hiccup had been when he attempted to marry me off to a business associate's son. He felt it was his right and duty since I wasn't enrolled in school. After his attempt to play matchmaker, I convinced him to find me a position and so he did as an assistant at my fake father in law's firm. There I met Thomas, my enforced intended, and we became good friends. However, that solution lasted only about three years when my father's insistence became a demand. Everyone had been on board except me.

I knew I had to do something and so I ran.

I just wish I could have brought myself to run without saying goodbye.

I didn't hear the knock on the door at first, but when my name was called, I snapped out of my daze, washed my hands, and left the bathroom. I opened the door and found Thomas waiting on the other side.

After Dash had kicked me out of his life, I returned to my mother's house and spent the next week wallowing in self-pity and shame until I couldn't take my mother's constant nagging and attempts to make me feel worse about myself.

Luckily, my father accepted me with open arms... and a stipulation.

I had to give a relationship with Thomas a try.

A *real* relationship.

I agreed knowing my heart would never be at risk again. I had left it back in Nevada, discarded on the kitchen floor where Dash had crushed it.

I couldn't say I blamed him. He had been right about everything, including me. He gave me no less than what I expected after what I'd done.

So here I stood, starting over again without ever having moved forward. When I showed up on my father's doorstep, once again he demanded what he failed to four years ago. He wanted answers, starting with Dash Chambers.

"So?" he asked excitedly. "What does it say?"

"Well," I cleared my throat. "There's going to be a baby."

Thomas gave a shout and then picked me up, twirling me around. It took everything in me not to push him away. After all, he was only being a good... boyfriend. I told myself it could be worse. I could have been stuck in a town watching the person my heart beat for ride off into the sunset and marry a viperous bitch.

There wasn't much to Thomas, which made him good for me. He wasn't bossy, athletic, powerful, or manipulative. He was your typical former college frat who now worked in



his father's law firm and probably made love with the lights off and under the covers.

I bet there wasn't anything dirty about the way he fucked...

God, what is *wrong* with me? I stifled a groan and plastered on a smile meant to hide my true feelings

He finally set me down and I took a step back, fighting queasiness. "I take it you're excited then?"

"I'm ecstatic. We're going to be a family."

I swallowed hard at that. I didn't want a family with him.

I wanted Dash, but he didn't want me... not anymore. I had succeeded in blowing it with him.

"There is only one thing that could make this more perfect," he grinned.

"What?" I couldn't keep the wariness out of my voice.

Nausea returned when he lowered to one knee and pulled out a ring from his pocket. "Willow Waters, will you do me the honor of being my wife?"

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# CHAPTER THIRTY

DASH

I STARED DOWN at the papers in disbelief. When my brain wouldn't register what my eyes were seeing I sat back in my chair only to shoot up once again and clutch the paper in my fist.

I fucking did it and I couldn't even remember how.

Simon had surrendered his company to me. Completely. There wouldn't be a merger or strategic alliance. He was selling to me.

The only condition he had was that the company remains operating so long as it returns a profit and I make Willow a silent board member and shareholder.

Seeing Willow's name brought the long lost feeling back into my body. My heart was pounding and the blood coursing through my veins no longer flowed but rushed, heating every inch of me.

I ignored my reaction and continued to read through the papers. When I got to the last, I noticed it was a hand written letter addressed to me. I stared down at the bold handwriting while fingering the edge of the paper.

Just as I read through the first line, my office door burst open. "You look beautiful in the morning. I just love how that suit outlines your many manly muscles." Keenan version of a woman's voice filled my office, pushing out the tension

and silence. Keiran was right behind him, holding onto a smiling Kennedy.

“What are you guys doing here?”

“It’s spa day. We’re babysitting.”

“You mean I’m babysitting,” Keiran snapped. He set Kennedy down along with her favorite ninja turtle backpack. Ken unsurprisingly, ignored her backpack likely full of toys and ran full speed around my desk. I leaned down just in time to catch her and lift her into the air. Her squeals of delight proved infectious when I felt my own smile awaken.

“Dude, I’m her father. It’s implied that I’m watching her.”

“Uncle Dash, higher!” Ken demanded.

“You are, huh? Then how did she manage to get that frog into the car?”

“I don’t know. Weren’t you watching her?”

“Children,” I interjected and set Ken on her feet when the vein in Keiran’s forehead made its appearance. I was happy to see some of their former relationship mending itself. With each day, their brotherly bond was returning but today was not one for me to be high on patience. When I had their identical glares, I continued. “What is the reason for this visit?”

“We told you. We’re babysitting. Shelly and Lake abandoned us with Ken for girl time,” Keenan pouted.

“And?”

“This includes you.”

I gritted my teeth. “What includes me?”

“Babysitting. We think it’s only fair you share your load.”

“My load? It’s one three year old girl.”

They each looked at me as if I was in denial and I had to agree. Kennedy could be a handful pretty much all of the time but I didn’t have time to pacify them.

“That’s not all,” Keiran huffed. “Her b-i-r-t-h-d-a-y is in two weeks and their making us plan it.”

I couldn't help it. I had to laugh at his helpless expression. Four years ago, I never would have imagined anyone would ever have Keiran Masters by the balls, much less Lake Monroe, but as it turned out the girl he spent his entire childhood and young adult life torturing, had them clenched in her iron fist.

Karma is a bitch you should never fuck raw.

"I don't know why you're laughing. The last thing they said was to make sure *you* helped."

"Fuck, I'm really busy here. I'm sure you'll manage without me."

"Too late. We already promised her we're *all* going to the park."

"Yay! Park!" Kennedy looked up from digging in her backpack and screamed. "Uncle Dash come, too?"

I could have killed the snickering idiots. How do you turn down an adorable three-year-old as cute as her?

You didn't.

And the assholes knew it.

Rather than answer her because I couldn't trust myself to keep the anger and aggravation out of my voice, I turned my glare full on to my best friends. "The park is back home. You did this on purpose," I said, stating the obvious.

"Of course we did," Keenan shrugged. "Now leave behind whatever shoved that stick up you a-s-s and come on."

\* \* \*

I watched Ken take another ride on the slide. No matter how many times she slid, it never seemed to get old. To be that innocent and without burdens was now foreign and out of reach to me. I lived with it and was just grateful that Ken would have a good life. I looked at Keiran and Keenan, who watched her with the same wonder as I did, and knew that she had more than enough people guarding her to ensure it.

“We need to do something about Esmerelda and find whoever the fuck killed John.”

“Your father,” I blurted, earning their confused stares.

“Come again?”

“John was your father.” I looked at Keiran to let him know it was meant for him too. “He fucked up. He knew it and he died hoping you two would forgive him for your own sake. Respect his memory by accepting him for who he failed to be for you, no matter how imperfect he was at it.” I shook my head and thought about my own father. Our relationship was nearly nonexistent. He had finally stopped interfering but with that came the end to our relationship as father and son. The worst part was that I didn’t mourn the loss. “We only get one.”

Kennedy ran over, interrupting the tension that followed. “Daddy, I go swing now.” She slid her tiny hand into Keenan’s and I watched as he gripped it as if searching for strength. I wasn’t prepared for the emotion in his eyes when he swung his gaze to me.

“Of course, Princess.”

Keenan led her to the swings, leaving Keiran and me on the bench. I fixed my gaze ahead even though I could feel his on me.

“Whatever you’re thinking I know you’ll say so what are you waiting for?”

Another few seconds of tense silence passed.

“Why did you let her go?”

Fuck.

I wasn’t expecting that.

It took me longer than necessary to answer though it wasn’t much of one. “Does it matter? She’s gone.”

“She’ll never be gone. She’ll haunt you forever, bro.”

“She’s not dead. I let her go and she left.”

I still hadn’t looked at him but I heard him inhale and let it all out a second later. “And that pisses you off, doesn’t it?” I shrugged and stopped my nails from digging into my thigh.

“When I realized I loved Lake, I *knew*,” he continued. “She’s everything for me. She’s my light and my air and I’m nothing without it. She stopped me from dying and when she stopped me from dying, she became my existence... Just like Willow became yours.”

I shook my head, denying the truth. “I can live without her, man.”

“And I could live without Lake...if I really had to... but I choose not to.”

“Lake could do better.” I finally faced him to gauge his reaction and was surprised to find acceptance.

“I’d never let her. I said I was in love. I never said I wasn’t selfish.” He looked away and for the first time I saw the tension in his shoulders. “I’ll probably never be good enough for her.” He fixed his cold grey stare on me once again. “But that doesn’t mean I’ll ever stop trying. I’ll do whatever I can to never let her feel it. I want her happy. I just need that to be with me.”

His prying only reminded me of the emptiness I felt since I let her walk away again and with it came my frustration in full force. “What do you want me to do?” I felt my growl more than I heard it. “You want me to fucking chase after her and beg her to be with me *for the third time?*”

Keiran’s answering laugh was void of humor. It was dark and threatening. “No, man. I want you to do what you already want to do. She’s already yours.” His eyes darkened to black pools. “Take what’s yours.”

I thought back to the letter Willow’s father sent with the sale agreement. I stuck it into my pocket and managed to block everything else out long enough to read it. His letter turned out to be more of a note.

Chambers,

I hope you're smarter than you think you are. You made me realize pride shouldn't stand in the way of common sense. This is me returning the favor.

Richard Simon

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# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THREE MONTHS LATER

WILLOW

IT WAS THE day of my wedding to Thomas. Two months after Dash walked away, I found that I was left with a piece of him. When Thomas proposed, I couldn't answer right away. Instead, I convinced him to give me a month to consider what it would truly mean to accept. But in that month, I couldn't bring myself to think... but I did a lot of waiting.

I waited and I waited but the answer never came so I made my sanest choice and accepted his proposal.

Thomas was the son of one of my father's business acquaintances and therefore, a preferred choice for me in my father's eyes. He was all too willing to accept the baby of another, and at that moment, I was convinced he felt more for me than friendship. He was in love with me yet I didn't share his feelings.

Three years ago, we had become fast friends and he made being away bearable. I liked him a lot so when he proposed after finding out I was pregnant something inside convinced me to accept.



It could have been because I was emotional, alone, and pregnant with the child of a man who hated me.

Or... it could have been because I convinced myself I could be happy with him.

Ten years from now, when I'm celebrating my tenth wedding anniversary, it wouldn't matter.

I had only just accepted my decision three months later only to find out on my wedding day that the officiator had fallen ill with a stomach virus. My thoughts were flying every which way, and with all the mindless chatter that surrounded me, I couldn't think straight.

So I sent everyone away.

Once I was alone, I dropped in the ivory chair that matched my dress and placed my head on the dressing table. Was this a sign that I was making the worst kind of mistake?

The sound of the door opening behind me interrupted my internal battle.

"I'm sorry, but I need a moment," I directed to the intruder without looking. "Please, tell everyone I will be out in a few moments."

"You look beautiful, Angel."

My entire body came alive at the sound of the voice I remembered all too well. I whirled around to see Dash standing in the doorway wearing a black suit and clutching purple flowers in his hand.

"Wh—what? How?"

"I have my sources," he stated smugly.

God, I love his cockiness.

What am I saying?

"I just wanted to come and wish you well." He moved closer and I fought the urge to back away. Something about the way he stalked me was predatory. "I hated how we left things."

"I don't think it's a good idea that you are here. It's not right."

“Relax. I didn’t come to steal the bride.” He laughed. My eyes narrowed. His presence made me wary.

“Don’t even joke. I don’t know how this day can get any worse.” I clutched my protruding stomach and took a deep breath unknowingly drawing Dash’s attention to my stomach. He rushed forward and placed his hand over mine and my heart skipped a beat.

Did he know?

How could he not know?

“Shhh. Calm down. You don’t want to hurt the baby.” His hand rubbed ever so lightly, and for a moment, I forgot myself and closed my eyes, leaning into his touch.

“Judging by his kicks, I’d say he’ll be just fine.”

“His?”

“Oh. Uhhh, yeah. He’s a he.” I laughed, but it sounded nervous and awkward. I didn’t know what else to say. I was afraid of what would come next. Would Dash deny his son? Would he resent me for being pregnant when he wanted nothing to do with me?

“I’m having a son,” he whispered. I had never heard his voice so delicate. It was a healing balm to my own fears.

My brain must have truly taken a break because I found myself saying, “I have pictures... if you want. They’re at my father’s place, but I can have them sent after the honeymoon... well, I guess it will be sooner rather than later.”

His eyes darkened with an emotion I couldn’t place. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

“I’m sorry... How? There is no way I can find a priest on such short notice,” I exclaimed in disbelief.

“There’s always a way.” With that, he pulled out his phone and walked away. I stared after him and tried not to feel anything. I never expected him to be this civilized or calm about the pregnancy after I kept it from him for five months.

Ten minutes later, he returned with a wide grin. "I have good news. I was able to call in a few favors and find a priest who can be here within two hours."

"Are you serious?" He nodded and took my question as elation when in truth I was disappointed and... hurt. I was hurt that he went to all the trouble to see me married off while I was feeling confused about it all. He seemed to notice my hesitation and frowned. "Why the long face? You should be smiling. You're going to marry the man you really love today and start a family with him."

My tongue completely dried in my mouth and I felt like I was choking on air. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"Doing what? I don't understand." His expression told me he really didn't.

"Why are you saying these things? You should be mad at me, throwing things, cursing my name."

"Why would I do that, Angel?" His eyes implored me to tell him exactly why.

"Because you love me," I blurted.

I expected him to deny it and call me crazy given the last time we had seen each other. I finally realized when I saw him last that we had done nothing but destroy each other slowly.

"I do. Very much."

"Then why?"

"Because I love you enough to do what I have to do. Loving you means it's my responsibility to make you happy. I finally realized you belong with the man who makes you happy."

"Wow, that's very good of you to say." His answering stare was dark and lingering, sending chills up my spine.

"And the baby?"

"If it's okay with you, I'd like to be in his life. I won't interfere with you and Thomas, but I want to know my son."

I nodded and finally asked the question that had been lingering since he came back. "How did you know?"

"I didn't. Not until I walked in and saw you. I can't wait to meet him."

Just then, the baby kicked as if returning the gesture. Without thinking, I grabbed his hand and placed it back on my stomach where he kicked. After a few seconds, he kicked again and my greatest wish was for a camera so I could capture the look of wonder on his father's face.

"I think he likes me." His grin was boyish bringing out his dimples.

"Yeah..."

"Maybe even more than you."

"Hey, I'm carrying him. He'll never love anyone more than me," I joked smugly.

"I can relate." He dropped his hand and stepped back. "I guess I'll see you in two hours."

And just like that, he was gone.

Two hours later, I was walking down the aisle. The wedding march played and I clung to my father. My mind wasn't on the man to be my husband, the music, or the guests. My mind was fixed on putting one step in front of the other and on my heart... Well, my heart was somewhere else watching.

I didn't need to see him because I felt him. He was close and he was watching.

I chanced it and looked back. Dash stood in the outer aisle between the first and second row, burning a hole through me with his stare.

I made it to the alter and stood where I was told and spoke when prompted. I recited my vows from memory rather than speaking from the heart. Thomas also seemed to be going through the motions though he seemed a bit more pleased than I did.

It didn't take long before we were announced husband and wife. We kissed, but I didn't feel it and counted the seconds until it was over.

I turned with Thomas to face the guests and a loud cheer went up in the air. I chanced another look at where Dash had been standing only he was no longer there. I no longer felt strong because he took my strength with him.

When it was time to walk down the aisle, I cried. I didn't bother to conceal my tears because the guests mistook them for tears of joy. I looked straight ahead and refused to make eye contact with anyone.

The large, wooden doors opened up to the street and the sunlight beamed down, temporarily impairing my vision. When my eyes had finally adjusted to the sunlight, I was brought to a jarring stop.

Dash stood at the bottom of the stairs wearing a fierce expression. His hands were shoved in his pockets, but I could tell they were clenched. Behind him was the limo, my new mother-in-law insisted we get... with Keiran and Keenan sitting on top of the car as if guarding anyone against getting near it and looking far too smug. Lake and Sheldon with Kennedy in her arms stood off to the side trying their best to appear innocent.

I wanted to scream and demand an answer, but Thomas' father beat me to the punch.

"What the hell is going on? Have you no respect?" Spittle flew out of his mouth and his face turned red and purple. "Pipe down, old man," Keenan called out.

I let go of Thomas because I couldn't bear to have him touch me with Dash watching so intently. I held on to the rail and made my way down the steps to stand in front of him. "What's going on?" I whispered.

"I didn't come all this way to not do what I came to do and leave empty handed."

"Which is?"

"You."

"Me?"

"I came for you and I'm not leaving without you."

"No," I protested. "You are not doing this."

"I already am."

"What about all that stuff you said about letting me be happy and marrying the man who loves me?"

"And I meant it. The only one who will be making you happy is me."

"Have you forgotten that I just got married not five minutes ago?"

"Did you?"

"You were at the fucking ceremony." A smile threatened to break free on his lips and I knew he was laughing at my cursing him. I only cursed when riled and when I was riled, horniness usually followed.

"Oh... right. Father Casey is not a father after all. Oops."

"Come again?"

"He's an aspiring actor."

"You son of a b—"

He gently cupped the back of my head as a warning before I could finish that sentence. "You didn't want him."

"You don't know that."

"It doesn't matter. Did you really think I would let you marry him while you carried my child—or at all, for that matter?"

"You can't do this."

"I already am," he stated with authority.

"What is going on here? Say, man, please remove your hands from my wife."

Dash's eyes trailed from me to Thomas, darkening with every passing second.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

DASH

I COULDN'T BELIEVE it took me as long as it did to come after her. Five months and not a moment too soon, apparently.

She had actually been ready to marry another man with my kid inside her. If she weren't pregnant, I would have surely strangled her.

I finally realized Willow was prone to make fucked up decisions though she meant well, and this one took the cake.

I never would have even known if Keenan hadn't overheard Sheldon on the phone with Lake discussing how they could talk her out of it. I hadn't even known they kept contact, but I wasn't surprised. Those three could bounce back from anything as if it never happened it seemed.

Me? I clung to my resentment for warmth at night until I couldn't take it anymore.

I plotted how to convince her to come back to me, but nothing ever seemed good enough. Keiran gave me the idea to simply take her from that prick's hand if I had to. Though the idea appealed to me, the chance to fuck with her and punish her appealed to me more.

So I showed up and pretended to be okay with everything all the while planning her wedding's demise. Starting with her original officiator.

Turns out priests could be bribed after all.

The plotting took little effort.

Seeing her again spurred me to go through with it.

It was seeing her walk down that aisle and fake marry that prick that had nearly done me in. When it was time for the kiss, I high-tailed it out of there, ignoring the dirty looks from the other guests.

It was better that way because had I stayed, I wouldn't have been able to keep from smashing his face in.

I would have tossed her over my shoulder and carried her away, but it would have been impossible. Her glowing body was ripe with my son.

My son.

Damn.

I waited for her outside the church with Keiran and Keenan to back me up if things got out of hand. I wasn't going to leave without her and would take on everyone who stood in my way including Angel.

The doors finally opened with fanfare and flowers thrown about. I fought not to roll my eyes. I was jealous and wasn't ashamed to admit it. They may not have been legally married, but the animal inside me didn't give a fuck.

Seeing is believing.

The second her eyes connected with mine, I knew I had made the right choice. She didn't know it, but her soul had been calling out to mine, bringing us together at this moment.

I knew she felt it.

I just had to get through all the red tape first.

She finally broke away and approached me although hesitantly. She knew something was up when she spotted Keiran and Keenan behind me.

These fools had scared the driver off and then took up residence on top of the car. It was a wonder they hadn't realized sooner that they were brothers. They were each two sides of crazy of the same coin.



“What’s going on?” she whispered. Then again, maybe she wasn’t whispering. The loud fuck who was the father of the groom was shouting obscenities around us.

“I didn’t come all this way to not do what I came to do and leave empty handed.”

I could swear I heard her heart skip a beat. She looked almost relieved. “Which is?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“I came for you and I’m not leaving without you...”

And you better fucking believe I didn’t.

After listening to her protest about right and wrong and blah blah blah, she leaned her head against my chest and cried, “What took you so long?”

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# CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

## WILLOW

DASH HAD SWEPT me away from the wedding, not giving me anytime to change my mind. Not that I would have.

He also wasted no time bringing me back home either. I wasn't even allowed to stop for my belongings. He simply told me to have my father send them and if he wouldn't, Dash would replace it all.

It took some doing, but I eventually convinced him to let me call and apologize to Thomas. I was fully expecting to lose a friend, but he was more than understanding and revealed that his father had cornered him into proposing and even accepting the baby. He told me how he would always be there for me, but he wasn't ready to be a father and had actually been terrified. By the end of the conversation, I hung up feeling as if all was right with the world.

My father was also surprisingly easy. He gave the incident no more than a cursory acknowledgment and simply stated, "As long as you're happy."

"Dasher?" I called sleepily. We had just finished making love. He had worn us both out and now held me tight while lazily stroking my protruding stomach.

"Yeah, baby?"

"Why do you call me 'Angel'?"

He was silent for too long that I began to think my simple question wasn't so simple. "Remember when I told you I didn't remember you?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, later I did. I don't know how or why, but I remembered the Christmas play our school held when we were in the fifth grade. Your hair was so odd in the white costume. I don't see how I could forget."

"Wow... really? That's it?"

"Pretty much."

"Hmmm."

"Are you disappointed?"

"I just think if we ever get married and someone asks us the story behind it at our wedding anniversary we should have something more profound."

"See that's where you're wrong. There is no *if*. We will. You're pregnant. You love me. It's done. The way I see it, all I need are papers on you so you'll never forget." I felt his arm tighten around my body and felt his breath tickle my neck where I was most sensitive. "I won't let you run away from me again, Willow."

I did my best to conceal my surprise. His use of my name told me one thing only and that he was completely serious.

How did I reassure him that running away was no longer an option for me when it giving up was all I'd done to us in the past? He'd done so much to break my heart but I could no longer deny my role in breaking the love we created that summer.

"So what do we do now?"

I felt him shift until his entire upper body hovered over mine. He stared into my eyes and I held him with my gaze. "You promise to love me and never leave me again."

"And you?"

"I promise to chain you to my bed if you try."

I batted my eyelashes dramatically. "You say the most romantic things."

Instead of responding, he spread my legs, careful not to rest his weight on me. I was responding to him long before he touched me. "Only you can make that crazy, Angel." He entered me with a slow, smooth stroke, forcing me to feel every thick inch of him. "Never forget that."

Breathless, I whispered, "I'll never forget."

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# CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

## ONE MONTH LATER

WE FELT THE need to all be together that day so we ordered pizza and wings and made it a movie night, but hanging out, soon turned into a strategy meeting for survival.

"We still don't know who kidnapped Kennedy and killed John."

"What are you talking about? It was that crazy whack job. Sorry, Di."

"None taken." When Keenan turned his attention away, she threw a chicken wing and hit him in the head.

"It wasn't Esmerelda. When we were taken, I questioned her about it. If she didn't take the opportunity to brag about it to two people she was about to kill, then she couldn't have done it. She only said she wished she had because then Kennedy wouldn't be alive, and I would be suffering much more than physical pain before I died."

"Damn," Keenan murmured. "He turned to Di and said, 'My mistake, Di. Your mother is a *super* crazy, whack job.'"

She flipped him off and leaned forward. "So we still have a major problem on our hands."

"Fuck! I need answers now."

Just then the door burst open and what seemed like the entire police force rushed in, shouting for everyone to get down.

Everyone put their hands up and assumed they were there for Keiran, but we were in for the shock of our lives when the police bypassed him and placed the love of his life in handcuffs.

“Lake Monroe, you’re wanted for questioning in the murder of Mitchell Masters. You have the right to remain silent...”

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will you succumb to fear  
or will you be  
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## Fearless

LAKE

“Did I do this to you?”

“What do you think you did?” My voice and heart were pleading because I didn’t understand the look in his eyes. He looked confused, heartbroken, and ready to bolt.

“Did my being with you turn you into this? I don’t even know you.”

“What is there to know, Keiran? Everyone always says how weak I am. How you’ll destroy me. How I can’t handle you. I just wanted to prove them wrong, and I wanted to protect you.”

“You killed my father, Lake.”

“I did it for you.”

“Yeah? What would make you think I would ever be okay with this?” he asked forcefully.

When I couldn’t find the answer, he turned and walked away from me, and I felt my world crumble right before my eyes.

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# INTERVIEW WITH DASH & WILLOW

If you could have a phone conversation with Dash, what would you say?

CELESHA CARILLO: Dash, if you were to have an affair, would you chose me?!

DASH: Celesha, if you weren't my employee and married, and I weren't irrevocably in love with Angel, I would be honored to choose you.

KIMBERLY ERVIN-ECHOLS: Dash, you are by far the most mysterious of the three. Were you ashamed of Willow or did you believe she wasn't good enough for you and your upper crust family outside of your games with Kieran and Keenan?

DASH: Despite the upbringing, my father insisted on for us, I've never believed I was better than anyone. My financial advantage was all because of my father. I earned none of it; therefore, I claimed none of it. I guess that would make Willow and me equals. We're from different worlds financially, but when it was just the two of us, there wasn't any room for money. I enjoyed her even though she intimidated me. Her caliber of human being far exceeded my own.

ILLIMANI RAMIREZ: Dash - how could you have let Willow walk away!?

DASH: I asked myself that very question every day she was gone, but secretly, I was glad she did because I never would have had the strength to let her go. We weren't ready to love each other because we weren't able to accept who we were individually.

LYDIA COTHRAN: Knowing what you know now... looking back, what would you have done differently with Willow?

DASH: I wouldn't have been such a fucking coward. I would have told her I loved her sooner. I would have taken the time to heal the wounds I had caused.

LAUREN STRYKER: Did you feel bad using Willow because Kieran asked you to?

DASH: Before Willow—in every sense—I thought going along with Keiran's plan was the lesser of two evils, not knowing I was ruining the best thing I never had. Did I feel bad about it? Of course. I'm a dick, but I'm not an evil dick, baby.

SAMMY BAKER: When did you realize you had real feelings for Willow?

DASH: If I were a smart man, I would have known she was mine the first time she gave me her ass to kiss... I don't know when I realized I had feelings for Willow because falling for her came as natural as my heartbeat.

KRISI FULLBROOK: Why haven't you pulled your head out of your ass yet and gone and dragged her back home? And 'because I don't know where she is' is NOT a good enough reason!!!

DASH: Damn, baby. I fucked up, okay? I wasn't yet a man. I let my pride and my ego decide my future and that's never a good thing. I know that now. Believe me—no one will benefit more from how sorry I am than my lady.

BRIE BURGESS: Dash, the day you dressed up all Willow style crazy, what were your motives? What did you think when you saw her dressing down for you? And how did it make you feel?

DASH: Keiran wanted results and Willow was still too smart for her own good. I needed her to trust me, but more than that, I knew what that night would lead to. I felt it in my fucking gut. We were closer than I ever expected, and I knew I could have done many other things to make her fold, but I decided if I had to take from her what I had no business ever touching, she needed to know I accepted her for who she was because I did. I wanted Willow more than I wanted anything in my life, but I didn't want her to regret it afterwards. I owed her that at least. Seeing her dressed normal only showed me that what I felt was real. I missed her crazy get-up, though I appreciated the gesture.

ROSEMARIE ADAMS: The summer you spent with Willow, you said it was real. Was that your true feelings? Or just part of Kieran's game?

DASH: Even the best-laid plans never go accordingly. Willow changed the game, wrote her own rules, and fucked me up in the process. My feelings for Willow were very much real, and I have Keiran's game to thank for it

FEENA DON: Was it just a stupid game for you from the start? Or maybe you had some strong feelings for Willow way before Kieran even asked you to fuck with her life?!

DASH: If I had ever held a fraction of the feelings I had for Willow when Keiran wanted to play his game, I would have told him to go fuck himself and meant it.

RACHEL CAMPBELL: Dash...so...you got with Willow because Keiran told you to and you're going to work for your dad because he told you to. When are you gonna stop being everybody's puppet and go after what you want?!?

DASH: I made the decision to give in to my father and I made the decision to follow Keiran. I'm no one's puppet. A man takes responsibility for his decisions. This is me being accountable.

CHEYENNE DAVIS: Dash, did you like Willow from the start or after you slept with her?

DASH: I liked what I saw and planned to own all of it, but that mouth of hers had to go first or after... whichever came first.

BRIANNA BLACK: Why did everyone leave Willow on her own knowing she was going through shit with her parents? None of you deserve her!

DASH: Willow's chip on her shoulder became a mountain when Lake left. None of us could get through or around it. We never left her alone. She shut us out. But I get it... We should have tried harder to help her heal.

RHEA EPPERSON: What was your initial reaction when you saw Willow for the first time?

DASH: I wondered how someone so bold and sexy and wild could have been so close but to have escaped my attention... and then I wondered if she owned a brush.

LILLY ROSALES: Why are you such a fucking douchenugget?

DASH: Sorry, Lilly. It's in the gene pool.

JAMIE BUCHANAN: Why didn't you fight harder for Willow?

DASH: If I got any harder for her, Jamie, I could fuck through a brick. <wink>

ANGIE ESQUILIN: Do you really want to work for your dad or would you like to become your own man?

DASH: I've always been my own man. I'm just finding that out. It's why my father hates me so much. My father might have started the company, but it's mine now, and I'm going to make sure everyone knows it. Including him.

MARIA WILLIAMS: Dash, if you truly cared for Willow, why did you hurt her so badly? When you took Willow's virginity, was that the moment when you decided you were going to keep her? Also, do you hate or strongly dislike Keenan, Lake, and Keiran?

DASH: When I realized I cared for Angel, I wanted to fix it, but I didn't know how. How do you explain that their body and heart were nothing more than a pawn in a game when someone else was the true prize? There's no coming back from that, and I wasn't prepared to lose her. Keenan, Lake, and Keiran are more than friends. They are family. I could never hate them but... I wouldn't mind killing Keenan a few times a week if a reset button were available.

HATICE SAHINER: Dear Dash, what was going through your head when Willow gave back to you the angel bracelet you

bought just for her? Did it fucking hurt? Will Willow ever become your wifey?

DASH: Angel didn't realize it was more than just a simple trinket. It represented how deep in my skin she'd gotten when no girl had ever gotten close. When she'd given it back to me, I wanted to brand her with something she could never give back. Now... I have. She's carrying my kid, and soon, I'll have papers on them both. Let's see her try to give that back. <grin>

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Mary E. Palmerin – You're bananas. It kills me how someone as twisted as you is so nice!

Penelope Douglas – I still can't believe I actually get to hold conversations with you! I fangirl every...single...time. Thanks for being so nice and receptive. There aren't enough authors or people in general like you. Your humbleness is something to aspire to. Also, I want to apologize for sounding like a frog during my video tutorial. LOL! I'd just woken up so no judgments, lady. Even though I am judging you for not liking man buns. The fuck?

The psycho four whose names shall not be revealed – Lydia, Adrienne, Katie, Tiffany. Oops... Stay away from my chocolate. Let's not have this conversation again. Mokay, pumpkins?

Last but not least. I just want to thank chocolate, shrimp, and barbecue sauce. God, I love you.

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## **ALSO BY B.B. Reid**

Broken Love Series  
Fear Me  
Fear You  
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## **ABOUT B.B. Reid**

B.B., ALSO KNOWN as Bebe, found her passion for romance when she read her first romance novel by Susan Johnson at a young age. She would sneak into her mother's closet for books and even sometimes the attic. It soon became a hobby, and later, an addiction, influencing her life in a positive way.

Bebe is fresh out of undergrad college and has always wondered about the existence of her talent. When she finally decided to pick up a metaphorical pen and start writing, she found a new way to embrace her passion.

She favors a romance that isn't always easy on the eyes or heart and loves to see characters grow—characters who are seemingly doomed from the start but find love anyway.

Fear Me, her debut novel, is the first of many.

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