

ONE

Clambering into her seat, Devon gripped the edges of the upholstery beneath her thighs and tried not to panic. “Why are you doing this?”

“I’m sorry, Devon, really, I am sorry,” Thad said, concentrating his frown on the desert. It was etched so deep that Devon hoped it was a sign of him regretting his choice as opposed to it being an indicator of how determined he was to get to where he was going.

If she could just convince him of the former, maybe he would turn around, and they could go back. “Why would you sabotage the Kindred? You’re one of them. They’re your family.”

His sneer didn’t suggest remorse. “You don’t know anything about my family. You don’t know half of what’s really going on. You think Zave’s your savior. You think this is straightforward that we go in and take down the bad guys. What you haven’t seen is that most of the time, we *are* the fucking bad guys.”

“You just left them out there! Abandoned them, how will they—”

“They’ll call Kadie or jack one of the cars at the motel,” he said. “Think I don’t know my cousins? I run around with medicine and bandages and patch the Kindred up to send them back out. They don’t give a fuck about me, not really. They use me because they need me.”

Devon had never seen him so resolute. “You can’t believe that,” she said.

He didn’t flinch. “You don’t know anything.”

Trying to seek out the gun, she was pissed to discover it was in the door well on the other side of him. If she wanted to get to it before he did, she’d have to lunge over, somehow getting past both his arms and the steering wheel. Unlikely.

They hit a divot and bounced up, and then the tires began to purr as they settled into the rhythm of the streak of tarmac now stretched out before them. This was a road. But not the same one the motel had been situated on.

With every second, they were getting farther from safety. Panic began to thud in her throat. “Where are we going? Did you know you were going to do this?”

He must have planned his escape from the Kindred if he’d sabotaged Game Time last night. Hell, he must have known before that. In all the time they were talking about poison gas and viruses, Thad knew he was going to fill those canisters with nothing.

“My contacts need those devices.”

If that was an explanation she should agree with, it was lost on her. “You’ve spent years trying to take down the cartels that hurt Bronwyn, and you just gave up your best chance—”

Slamming both of his hands on the wheel, he silenced her. “Don’t talk to me about Wynn, Devon! Don’t fucking do it!”

Had she ever heard the doctor swear before today? She couldn’t remember. But the tension in his shoulders made her reassess everything she’d thought about him. Even though he’d stolen her away from safety, she hadn’t believed he was capable of causing her harm. Until now. “Why did you save my life if you were just going to kill me? Why did you save me?”

Breathing out an ironic laugh, his scrunched expression got tighter when he pursed his lips. “They wanted you to die. You won’t believe what the fuck they said when they found out I saved your fucking life.”

He was making up for all those missed opportunities to curse that he’d had in the past. But he had just destroyed his whole life in the space of a few seconds, so his aggravation was justified. Though she still couldn’t figure out what his motivation was for making such a dramatic choice.

“Are you in trouble?” she asked because that had been Zara’s impulse. “Was Zara right?”

“What have you been told about using real names outside the fold?”

Did he still care about the Kindred, or was it just Zara he wanted to protect? But his impulse to correct her inspired hope. “You are still Kindred. You can’t help yourself. You want to protect them.”

“Conditioning,” he mumbled, dismissing her plea. “And Zara... I don’t want her to get hurt.”

So the man wasn’t made of stone. “I think she’s hurt right now,” Devon said, and he flashed her a snide look. “You just destroyed a friendship she valued.”

“She doesn’t know you that well,” he grumbled.

“I’m not talking about me,” she said, touching his forearm. “I’m talking about you.”

Shaking her hand off his arm, his knuckles went white when he returned them to the wheel. “In the glovebox,” he said. “There are cable ties. Take out one, put it round your wrists.”

Exhaling, her head tilted and she sagged. “Don’t tie me. I’ll be good, I promise you.”

He glanced at her again. “Sorry, Von, I have instructions. My contacts don’t trust you.” With quivering fingers, she opened the glovebox and took out one of the black ties. “Do it.”

Looping it around, she made a circle and put her hands inside to pull it around her wrists. Thad either didn’t trust her or thought he was helping her out, but he reached over and tugged it tight, forcing her palms together.

She didn’t want to hear what he might say, but she had to know. Bowing her head, she licked her lips with a dry tongue. “Are you taking me back to them?” she whispered because the cartel was her greatest fear, and he could be about to deliver her to them gift wrapped. “They’ll kill me, you know. They’ll rape me. They’ll torture me and they’ll kill me.”

After being rescued, it hadn’t occurred to her that she might ever be back in that metal box. Marrying Zave gave her a whole new level of confidence that made her sure about coming to this place with the Kindred to fight back. Zave loved her and he would keep her safe, it might take him some time to find her, but he would get to her. She knew enough of his tenacity not to doubt that. But if she had any chance of convincing Thad that this was a bad idea, to get him to turn around, then she had to take advantage of it

Deep down, she knew that he would never have stood up against the Kindred unless he was sure about the steps he was taking because once those ties were severed, they wouldn’t be restored.

The Kindred held a grudge.

In spite of that, she had to feel that she was doing something to help herself, anything.

“No,” he said and was shaking his head. “That’s not what this is about. You won’t be hurt. You’ll be let go. They need you to deliver a message... that’s all.”

He had to abduct her from people she could trust to take her to an unknown place, just so she could deliver a message? A shot of annoyance made her snap, “Haven’t they heard of email?”

“I needed cover,” he said, and she got a real sense of the adrenaline that was keeping him amped. “I had to get out of there.”

But there were other options. It hurt her that she’d been seen as the weakest link, the easiest one to take advantage of, or maybe she was just annoyed that she’d let it happen. Although, there was little she could’ve done to fight off the twitchy guy with the gun to her head.

Thad and his contacts had come up with a plan that made her the victim. “You could’ve stayed at the motel with Kadie,” she said. “You could’ve taken her.”

“No, they need her,” Thad said, making her think that this scenario had been considered.

“Need her? For what?”

“Not her exactly, they need her cousin... Turning Swift would’ve been impossible. The next best thing is the guy who trained under him for years. Kadie’s cousin, Dempsey Harris, doesn’t even realize what he can do with the shit he knows. We’ll teach him. But if we hurt Kadie... he’d never join us.”

Devon didn’t like the sound of what he was spouting. This was more than an impulse to screw over the Kindred; there was more than one objective. Whoever these people were who Thad had allied himself with had a terrifying agenda. “They’re putting together their own team?”

“Synonymous,” Thad said. “They’re calling themselves Synonymous.”

Something in his voice was distracted, like he was trying to think a thousand thoughts at once. Devon wasn’t sure he knew that he was answering her. He just kept his eyes on the road and spewed his responses. “Synonymous with what? The Kindred... I don’t understand.”

“You will,” he said. “We’ll be on the road a while. Give your mouth a rest.”

Devon didn't know Swift well. But she'd have thought if anyone was impossible to turn, it would've been the good doctor, the man actually related by blood to the original Kindred. His reasons for doing this were alien to her, and without understanding them, it was difficult to change his mind.

But she had to keep trying. "You can still go back. We can turn around right now—"

His head was twisting side to side again. "No," he said. "There's no going back... Zave... he doesn't know how to forgive."

Having firsthand experience of his inability to forgive himself, she doubted he'd be any more likely to forgive his cousin for this betrayal. "I can talk to him. He'll listen to me."

"How the fuck did you get him to fall in love with you?" he asked, narrowing one eye and tilting his head. "How the fuck did you do that?"

Devon didn't know what he wanted to hear, but her relationship with Zave didn't seem to be part of the plan. "I... I don't know."

"The guy has been a wall for years. Hard as stone and as thickheaded too. He listens to no one. Always thinks he knows best. But you... you got through... how the fuck do you suck the self-loathing out of a guy in less than a year?" She didn't know such a thing had time constraints. "Your blowjobs must be epic."

Thad would never find out, and his comment gave her a chance to garner her anger. "Is that what this is about? You're pissed at your cousin? Why? Because he didn't listen to you?"

"Bet you must be wondering what the fuck is wrong with this family, huh?" Thad asked, leaning over the wheel. "We've got brothers who can't stand each other, cousins who stab each other in the back and parents who murder each other."

Devon didn't know about the brothers or the parents, but she knew the cousins. "I envied what you all had," she said. "When I saw the way the Kindred stood up for each other... I thought it was amazing."

How wrong she had been. Maybe Thad was right regarding how little she knew about what was really going on. But Zave wouldn't have hidden information that could endanger her life. There was no way Thad's betrayal had been anticipated.

"Yeah well, you're wrong. It's not like that on the inside. Not unless you're willing to idolize Brodie or Zave. Those of us not willing to do that, those of us who question them... we're ignored, pushed aside. I can't live like that anymore. I need to make a difference, and I can't just wipe noses anymore."

This family had pathology, all right. Devon didn't have the qualifications to begin to analyze it though. "You were making a difference to the Kindred. Zave, Brodie, they're your blood... And your mom, oh my god, Thad—"

"Don't you mention her," he snapped.

His glare returned and she sank back in her seat to think about Bess. The woman would be devastated when she found out about this. "You can't do this to her, Thad, please."

He opened his mouth and then clamped it shut again. She wanted to prompt him into saying whatever had gotten stuck in his throat. Devon had used his real name and perhaps he was going to chastise her, except... if he wasn't Kindred anymore, did that mean he wasn't Wren anymore? Had he cast off that identity? Maybe that truth was just hitting him now.

"My mother doesn't understand," he said after a while.

Focused on her joined hands, she twisted them to look at the diamond Zave had put on her finger. "I can't let you do this to Bess, she's a good woman," she said. "What will you do if these people hurt you? What if you want out?"

"I'll figure it out."

"Swift will be watching your bank accounts," she said. "If he doesn't empty them. You can't be down here on your own with no exit strategy."

"Sounds like something Swallow would say," he said.

Curling her fingers, she managed to pull her engagement ring from her hand, and she reached over to slip it into his hip pocket. He jerked and grabbed for her, but she held open her hands as best she could to show she was no threat and sat back.

"That's your way out, it's worth a fortune," she said, though she didn't have a clue how much Zave had paid for the stone. It was large enough that she knew it would've been expensive. "Sell it if you need money."

Gritting his teeth, he set his eyes on the road again. "I won't."

“Humor me,” she said. “This way I’ll be able to look your mother in the eye... because she won’t believe this is your choice, you know. She’ll be sure you’re acting in the Kindred’s best interest. She won’t believe you’d be this selfish... this cruel.”

“Give it a rest, Von,” he said, and the name made her think of her brother. What the hell would Rigor do when he found out she’d gone and gotten herself kidnapped again and right from under the nose of the new husband he didn’t know she had.

“I—”

“Wait,” he said, leaning back and digging in his pocket to pull out the ring. “Where the fuck did you get this? Did he give it to you?”

Who else would’ve given her an engagement ring except her fiancé? But he didn’t wait for a response. His act of putting the window down made her twist to brace herself against the door. “No, please don’t!”

Tossing the diamond out the window, he grabbed her wrists to pull her nearer. “What else did he give you? What other jewelry are you wearing?”

“Just my wedding ring,” she said, and he began to try and wrestle it off her finger. “No, please! It’s just a ring!”

She didn’t want to lose the gift her husband had given her the day before. Losing the diamond was bad because it contained the GPS tech, but the wedding ring was a symbol that meant so much more to her.

“You think I believe that?” he yelled. “You don’t know him!”

When he threw her ring from the window of their moving vehicle, she leapt forward and punched at him, screaming and fighting to hurt the man who’d broken her heart and deceived the man she loved. “You fucker! You bastard! You—”

Thrusting her away, he held her tethered wrists down. “You better calm the fuck down, Von! Don’t make me give you a shot!”

And he could. Thad was a doctor and would know what drugs to give her, and he’d have contingencies for this. When they brought women back from the auctions, they were drugged by the cartels.

But Devon had woken up on the island, no single drug would keep her out for that long, Thad had to have administered something to keep their rescues out until they were secure in the custom-built suite.

Devon didn’t want to be drugged; she needed her wits about her. Thad had said they were going to be driving for a while, so there might be more chances to talk to him later. For now, she let her head fall back so she could look into the sky out her side window... God knew when she might next see it after Thad delivered her to her destination.

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