Dirty money. A wanted man.
The deal of a lifetime.

THE COMPANY WE KEEP

KAY SIMONE
PREVIEW

The Company We Keep
As an undercover agent, you have to see the gray — you have to find some goodness in a person in order to be attracted to them... And as an undercover agent, you understand them in some way.

— BOB HAMER, A 26-YEAR FBI OPERATIVE (VICE MAGAZINE, 2015)
“Show ‘em what you got, kid.”

Dust Wrenshall had been itching to hear those words. Finally, his boss, hunched to his left, had given him the signal to go.

It hadn’t taken him long to plant the dozen charges that would get them into the vault, distract the Las Abras police department, and then cover their tracks as The Company sped away with their bounty. Carrow had been waiting for him with a smile when Dust returned from setting up the explosives, looking more in his dark jacket like a common thug than a billionaire crimelord leaning in the shadows outside the jeweler’s shop entrance.

Dust was getting better and better at this — and during the off weeks when there weren’t any scores and there was no chaos to be made, he found that he ached for it. He wanted to feel the aftershocks of blasts that rocked through his bones, wanted to taste the gunpowder and ozone that always seemed to fill up the air after a perfect explosion, craved the unique silence that only existed between an ear-splitting detonation and the wails of police sirens responding — a lull like the eye of a hurricane, quieter than quiet and wholly zen.

“Leta, Herron, you two in position?” Dust asked into the comms unit in his hands. “You’re gonna wanna duck and cover.”

“Roger that, we’re hunkered down,” Leta said. He could hear the smile on her voice. She would be practically vibrating with excitement waiting for the first blast. The Company’s second-in-
command hadn’t gotten to do anything on the ground since the museum job the year before. She and Herron were tasked with keeping eyes on the cops as they arrived at the decoy blast scene. If the cops started to come towards Carrow and Dust, Herron and Leta would do their damndest to draw the heat off while they completed the retrieval.

He looked to Carrow.
“Vi, Wayles, touch back with your positions,” Carrow said into his own comms unit.
“Bloody hell, we’re all ready,” Wayles shot back immediately.
“You getting cold feet or what, Dust?” Vashvi teased.
Carrow grinned and accepted the ear plugs that Dust held out to him, letting his palm linger over the other man’s for a moment.
“Now or never,” Carrow said. They both pressed plugs into their ears. Then Dust produced the little tablet from his pocket, thumbed it open, and navigated to the first screen he needed.

One tap of his fingertip and twin charges detonated six blocks away. The sound of the blast reached them a moment later — a hollow pop that was deceptively quiet but unmistakable in the quiet mix of street sounds after midnight.

Adrenaline coursed through him like a powerful drug, bringing the world into sharp focus. Everything felt realer than real: the jacket hanging on his shoulders, the breeze wafting in over the Pacific, Carrow’s steady breaths beside him. Dust’s finger hovered over the button that would simultaneously detonate the bombs planted at the base of the vault and the smaller charge that would allow Carrow entry into the jeweler’s shop.

That moment of anticipation, of knowing you were about to rock the street with a perfect explosion — it always seemed to hit him a bit like the thrill of arousal, waking up the sleepy parts of him until every bit of him was throbbing with need.

An impulse seized him.

Dust stepped closer to Carrow, took him by the front of his jacket, and drew him abruptly into a deep kiss. His boss didn’t fight it, his hands flying to Dust’s hips and humming into his mouth.

Dust tapped the button.
Chaos erupted around them, the blast impossibly loud even
through the powerful earplugs. The asphalt beneath their feet shook and the tinkling of broken glass landing on the street was accompanied by the deep groan of the building’s foundation shifting where the bombs had blown the vault door off.

They both shuddered as adrenaline coursed through them, their bodies unable to suppress the moment of fight-or-flight instinct at the close blast. Instead of pulling back and breaking away, though, Carrow caught him by the back of his neck, holding him closer, pressing in and deepening their kiss. They were both half-hard as they ground their hips together, Dust unable to stop himself from moaning into his boss’ mouth at the combination of arousal, fear, and unbridled excitement.

“You’re gonna kill me one of these days,” Carrow said, finally breaking, dragging a hand down the front of his dark pants, and turning to make his way to the target.

Dust laughed and followed him in a trot towards the blasted-out front door of Lefebvre Jewelers.

THE SCORE, Carrow had explained in the week before, was a simple one. On its face, it looked like a diamond heist: blast open the vault, grab several high-profile stones, and then scram.

But the real client this time was a Lefebvre, and the real goal was insurance fraud. The youngest of the jeweler’s sons, Antoine Lefebvre, had grown weary of waiting for dear old pa pa to pay him what he felt he was owed out of the store’s coffers. So Antoine had hired The Company to rip off his family’s store. Carrow would deliver the diamonds to the son, the father would get his fill of insurance money, and everyone would walk away richer.

It was an ideal situation for Dust Wrenshall, The Company’s demolitions expert. When he was done blasting holes in the place, there’d be no mistaking that Lefebvre had been ripped off by Las Abras’ most notorious gang of criminals, and no room for slippery insurance adjusters to claim that it had been a home-brewed scam.

They wouldn’t need anyone else but the main six of the crew on the job — which was ideal, since Carrow preferred to keep everything in house if he could.
Sniper Vashvi Dhillon would take her normal spot on a rooftop nearby, scanning for cops and other ne’er-do-wells approaching the scene through the scope of her rifle. Russell Wayles, The Company’s in-house tech man, would run security from a van on the street, tapping into Lefebvre’s own systems to keep track of Carrow and Dust when they were inside.

Leta Wright, who normally plotted their escape but was happy to fit into any position in which she was needed, would stay on the street with the terrifying and masked Herron Dent, ready to cause mayhem if the cops weren’t distracted enough by the blasts that Dust planted.

Dust would plant bombs as a distraction several blocks away and more explosives at the scene.

Carrow and Dust, then, were the boots on the ground — Carrow entering the vault to pocket the diamonds and Dust covering him.

Vashvi and Wayles would escape in the security van, Leta and Herron in the sedan they arrived in, and Carrow and Dust would leave on the back of one of The Company’s fastest motorcycles. They’d all rendezvous at a safehouse an hour up the coast.

All in all, it was a night every one of them had been looking forward to.

After the blast, Dust hung back as Carrow entered the vault through the ruin of its door. (He’d only decided to blow the front door off of the building at the last minute, unable to resist the temptation of dramatically defeating a barrier he’d already successfully made his way through.)

The target was a dozen diamonds — some uncut and others perfectly polished — altogether small enough to fit in the breast pocket of Carrow’s jacket.

They’d only budgeted several minutes in the timeline for Carrow to make it into the vault and pocket the jewels. Then they’d exit, Dust would detonate several more charges to make it absolutely clear beyond a doubt that it had been the work of The Company and not someone inside the Lefebvre family, and the six of them would mount their escape.
Dust scanned the street through the ruined door at the front of the shop. There was no movement. The decoy blast had worked and any cops were busying themselves responding to the explosion several blocks away. His heart pounded with the thrill of victory, of an easy success.

“Dust?” Carrow called from the vault, his voice uncharacteristically high and unsteady. “Would you join me in here for a moment?”

With a stripe of cold panic down his spine, Dust spun and entered the vault.

It was exactly what he had expected — and the schematics that Lefebvre had given them were very good. Lines of armored boxes, industrial lighting, several tables used to sort and count and examine the jewels and...

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah. Holy shit is right,” Carrow said.

In one corner there was a stack of gold bullion the size of a large armchair.

“Did Lefebvre say anything about gold bars?” Dust asked, trying to do the mental calculation of how much the stack might be worth.

“He sure as hell didn’t say anything about half a billion in bullion sitting in the vault,” Carrow said.

“That’s a hell of a detail to leave out, boss.”

Carrow nodded, his eyes narrowing.

“New plan.”

Dust held the comms unit to his face as they exchanged grins.

“Wayles, you got a dolly somewhere on that van?” Dust asked.

The answer came after a moment.

“Think so, yeah,” Wayles said. “What’s up?”

IT ONLY TOOK Dust 90 seconds to retrieve his stash of extra explosives from the back of Wayles’ vehicle and blast a new, cargo van-sized hole in the front of Lefebvre Jewelers.

Wayles drove straight in. Back in the vault, Dust and Carrow loaded up the dolly as fast as they could while Wayles set up a ramp to allow them to roll the bounty into the back.
Each bar was surprisingly heavy — though Dust didn’t know what else to compare it to, having never held a brick of solid gold — and after several trips, the back of the van was sagging visibly.

“Get everyone organized to fall back,” Carrow said, nodding at Dust while he struggled with Wayles to get the last load up the ramp. Dust stood to the side and started the sequence.

“Vi, Wayles will pick you up at the base of the tower in three minutes,” Dust said into the comms.

“Roger that,” she said. Through the comms unit, he could hear the click of her rifle snapping apart as she prepared to leave her position.

“Herron, how are you and Leta holding up?”

Herron let loose a wicked laugh into the comms unit, gunfire crackling in the background.

So. LAPD had decided to show up.

“Tell that maniac to stop taking pot shots at police and get ready to go,” Carrow said over his shoulder.

“Boss says you two should prepare to pull out,” Dust said, not expecting an answer from Herron anymore, knowing their friend would be too swept up in the fun of the moment. “You with me Leta?”

“Yeah, we’ll hit the road on your signal,” Leta responded.

When he turned back to the van, Carrow was examining the wheels. The body of the vehicle looked like it was about to scrape the tops of the rubber.

“What’s this thing even rated for?” Dust asked. Carrow and Wayles gave him a dumb look.

“It’s not rated for several tons of bullion,” Wayles said. “I know that much at least.”

They’d only managed to grab, wheel out, and load about half of the bouillon. Still, it was clear they were testing the limits of what the van could safely carry.

“It won’t take any more if we’re meant to go up the coast,” Wayles pointed out.

“Screw the safehouse,” Carrow said. “Just get it to the penthouse.”

“Seriously boss?” Dust asked, raising an eyebrow. Taking a score
straight home was reckless — asking for trouble right where they all slept.

“You think LAPD knows Lefebvre is sitting on more money than the State of California in gold bars? This cash is off the goddamn radar. Nobody is going to come looking for it but the elder Lefebvre, and there aren’t any hired goons on the coast better than the goons Antoine Lefebvre hired in the first place.”

He was right. The jewelers couldn’t go to the cops about money they weren’t supposed to have in the first place — and when it came to street justice, people went to The Company or they didn’t go anywhere at all. It was the perfect score.

Once they loaded the gold into the cargo elevator and got it into Carrow’s penthouse, there would be no safer place for it. It made more sense to take it straight home.

They were all about to be significantly richer.

“We’ve left plenty behind, don’t worry, Dust,” Carrow said, smiling and slapping him on the back. “Enough to leave LAPD asking Lefebvre where all the goddamn gold came from.”

Wayles hopped out of the van and shut the doors behind himself.

“Well lads, we’re off, then?”

“We’re off,” Carrow said. “I think we’re going to take a detour on the way back. Go ahead and get the team unloading, will you?”

Wayles nodded, tossed the keys up, caught them, and spun on his heel.

“Where are we going?” Dust asked.

Carrow fixed him with a perfect mugshot grin.

“For a ride.”

Dust held Carrow tight around the waist as they leaned into the turn. He whipped them around corners in the dark like the two of them were invincible — And maybe we are, Dust thought.

Carrow sped them faster than Dust thought the bike was capable of, but he never felt anything other than thrilled. It didn’t occur to him to be scared or to fear an accident. They were riding twin highs and it seemed that nothing could bring them down from it — not yet.

He buried his face in the other man’s neck, appreciating the
proximity, not bothering to hide his hardness pressing into Carrow’s back. Dust was helpless against it. Not every heist was a turn-on, of course. Sometimes things went wrong, innocent people got hurt, or the job got far more complicated than any of them had planned.

But every piece of the diamond-turned-gold job had been a pure aphrodisiac, and Dust seemed to be caught in a feedback loop of sensations: adrenaline coursing through him, the smell of Carrow’s skin, the air roaring past them on the highway, the knowledge that they’d gotten away with something even better than what they’d had their sights set on. He was mentally thrilled and physically throbbing.

He kissed the back of Carrow’s neck and felt a pleasant shiver roll through the other man in response.

Spurred on and a little reckless, Dust slipped a gloved hand down between Carrow’s thighs, palming him. He couldn’t hear the pleased chuckle that his boss let out at that, but he could feel the low laugh through the man’s back. Dust stroked against the hardness trapped there again, and Carrow finally chanced a look back at him that was equal parts amusement and caution.

You’re gonna make us crash, the glance said, and I might be OK with that.

It was Dust’s turn to laugh. He pulled off, impatient but knowing that he’d have to wait if he wanted more.

As they barreled down the dark highway, Dust didn’t know where Carrow was taking them and he didn’t care. He was content to put his fate in this man’s capable hands every day, and every day Carrow had proven himself worthy of the trust. Dust didn’t try to make sense of the directions as Carrow took sharp turns. Since Dust had joined The Company, Carrow had saved him more times than he could count on one hand, after all.

He felt drunk off of the score, off of the smoke and broken glass and the laughter of his friends. He let the scenery wash over him: the dark Pacific Ocean beyond the cliffs on one side and the impossibly tall palm trees silhouetted against the light pollution of the city on the other — and then the city itself, sparkling and gritty and beautiful in its own way.

They exited the highway. Carrow pulled them up to a hotel, and as
soon as the name of the place came into view, Dust should’ve known that this was where they were headed. Most places paled in comparison to the type of luxury that Carrow had access to in his own penthouse, but the hotel they were entering at that moment spared no expense and was one of the only places in the city where Carrow felt as safe as he did in his own 45th story penthouse.

It was Carrow’s favorite haunt.

Better yet, The Company was a known entity there — and instead of being treated like wanted scum, the staff understood that Carrow was a valuable client. They treated Carrow — and in turn, Dust — like a king.

The concierge met them at the door, falling into step beside them. She was familiar, recognized the billionaire even when he was wearing his nondescript, dark heist clothes instead of the fine suits he normally chose.

“Your regular suite, sir?” she asked, offering out a key card. Carrow chuckled deep in his chest, a hand on the small of Dust’s back. He took the card and nodded.

“Just one night’s stay,” he said. “Much obliged.”

She smiled meekly and nodded, falling off as they reached the other side of the hobby.

“I’ll send up clothes for the morning?” she asked, noting that neither man had a bag. Carrow just nodded. “And room service this evening?”

Carrow started to say no, but Dust cut him off.

“Yes, please,” Dust said over his shoulder. “The usual, if the kitchen’s still open.”

“Veuve Cliquot Brut and a large vegan pizza?”

Carrow stopped in his tracks.

“Louise, make it the Grande Dame Rosé. And give us an hour before you send it up.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, smiling at the upgrade — maybe sensing a big tip. People did tend to love it when Carrow was in a generous mood. “Enjoy your stay, sirs.”

“Thanks so much, Louise,” Dust said as Carrow guided him towards the elevator. (There were plenty of perks, of course, to sleeping with an outlaw billionaire. But it never hurt to be polite.)
And Dust was hungry. He was always hungry.

Dust felt a pang of regret as he opened the curtains in the hotel’s presidential suite only to realize that the panoramic views were impossible to appreciate in the dark.

“Should we tell the others where we are?” he asked, turning to Carrow.

“They know where to find us,” he said, catching Dust by the hips, swaying to some silent rhythm.

“I can’t believe you’re going to deny me my dream of having sex on top of a stack of gold bullion,” Dust said, narrowing his eyes at his boss.

“Come, come,” Carrow said, his mouth curling into a smile. “There’ll be time for that back home.”

He caught Dust, then, in a kiss, walking him back from the floor-to-ceiling windows. The adrenaline still hadn’t worn off for either man, and Dust knew that everything he felt would be mirrored for the older man. Sensations were more intense — smells sharper, colors brighter, noises more definite... Sex even better.

The temptation to crash together post-heist was too great to resist, and neither man was strong enough to fight it. Carrow maneuvered him back towards the king-sized bed. Neither of them wanted it gentle in that moment, and that was just fine.

Carrow undressed him quickly, stopping here and there to suck a mark into the skin of Dust’s neck, his taut belly, his inner thigh, before hippling him down onto the bed. Dust laughed and fell easily, lying back to watch Carrow undress — a sight he never grew tired of.

He couldn’t think of a view he enjoyed more — not watching the sun setting in a kaleidoscope of colors over the Pacific from Carrow’s penthouse, not the blaze of a perfectly timed explosion, not even the stack of gold bullion in the back of The Company’s van. They all paled in comparison to the sight of Carrow’s dark smile, the careful way he dragged the pants down his hips, the deep chest and the thick length straining against the front of his boxer briefs.

If Dust hadn’t already been flush with desire for the other man, watching Carrow undress a foot away from him would’ve been
enough. Finally, he joined Dust on the bed, taking him by the hip and moving him, flipping him to his belly with an ease that made the younger man groan.

Carrow wasn’t going to bother with foreplay. The entire goddamn heist had been foreplay as far as Dust was concerned.

Carrow produced a bottle of lube from one of the fully-stocked bedside consoles, not bothering with a condom. (They’d been cleared by The Company’s in-house medical staff months ago, a formality meant just for moments like these when neither man was in his right mind or patient enough to find a condom.) While he planted hot kisses up and down Dust’s spine, he slipped a hand down, pressing a finger into him slowly.

It was perfect and in no time Dust wanted more, arching back against him, urging him to continue — wanting to feel Carrow and not just his hand, to be consumed by the other man, to gain that full satisfaction that he’d craved since the first blast of the evening. It wouldn’t be enough for Dust until Carrow was taking him, fucking him hard, until they were both groaning with want and then release.

Carrow hurried, responding to Dust as he rutted back against the other man’s hand. Even in his rush, he’d make sure Dust was properly prepared to take him. He wouldn’t hurt Dust — not even if it was what he wanted. It simply wasn’t in him.

His first digit was met with a second and, after a few moments, a third. Carrow worked into him steadily as he kissed the skin at the back of Dust’s neck.

“Please,” Dust said quietly, his voice cracked open with want. “I’m ready.”

Carrow hummed into Dust’s neck as he pulled back, taking him by the hips and grinding his body against him, teasing him and reminding him of the type of physical power the older man had, always there but usually half-forgotten underneath his bespoke suits, the silk ties.

Dust wanted it rough and knew that Carrow would give it to him. Sweet, slow nights were better suited to cap off long days of planning or idle days lounging in between jobs. With a score like that night’s, neither man was going to be satisfied by anything but this.

Finally, Carrow took mercy and stopped his teasing, lining up and
slowly pressing his thick length into Dust. The sensation of Carrow’s cock sinking in was like air in his lungs, flooding his senses simultaneously with relief and want. He was pliant and ready, eager to move under Carrow, to work his hips. Carrow steadied him, though, as he always did in the beginning, catching Dust by the hips and refusing to let him rock back until Carrow was sure he wouldn’t be uncomfortable or hurt.

It didn’t take long. A few slow strokes of Carrow’s full length and they were both lost to it, Carrow’s gravelly moans joining Dust’s more desperate, throaty noises.

“God, you’re perfect,” Carrow said, leaning down, his words tickling the sensitive shell of Dust’s ear. He hummed at the combination of fullness and praise.

As Carrow’s rocking was met with less resistance and Dust rolled his hips back to meet every thrust, they finally began to gain the speed both men were seeking. Their bodies worked together and Carrow set a steadier pace, Dust moaning openly in time with their rhythm.

Their bodies met with an obscene sound, the big bed steady beneath them, Carrow issuing a strangled “fuck, Dust,” and finally relinquishing control, no longer holding back as he clamped his hands harder on Dust’s hips and fucked hard into the body beneath his.

Carrow laid the full length of his cock into Dust in even strokes punctuated by their bodies coming together, his fingertips curling tight — and, Dust thought, probably leaving marks that would be faintly visible tomorrow on his tanned skin.

They were both helpless against the want, fully relaxed and rocking against each other in a pace that went syncopated when Carrow leaned low and wrapped a slicked hand around Dust’s aching cock. He had been bouncing and straining against nothing, but at the added stimulation he was torn between rutting back against Carrow’s hips or fucking forward into his palm.

Carrow stopped for just a moment, hitching Dust’s hip up with his free hand where he’d begun to slide down towards the mattress. It put Dust’s hips higher than before, and from the first stroke Dust felt a flush of new, deeper pleasure, realizing that the slight change
in position had Carrow’s cockhead pressing hard into his prostate at the bottom of every thrust. He whined desperately and pushed back, shuddering with pleasure at the new sensation, knowing he’d be leaking precum as Carrow fucked him and worked an adept hand around him.

At each squeeze around his needy hard-on, at each stroke of the nerves inside him, Dust’s moans became louder until he was babbling Carrow’s first name like a mantra: Ansel, Ansel, Ansel.

“It’s so good,” he said, once he could find it in himself to form sentences again. “You’re going to make me come.”

“Come for me, then,” Carrow said, not missing a beat and stroking into him with the full force of his hips. “Come on. I’ve got you.”

He squeezed harder around Dust’s cock, twisting his fist over the sensitive, slicked head.

The combination of it all was too much: the feeling of Carrow fucking into him, the reality of the heist at their backs, the ever-present understanding that the most powerful and feared man in Las Abras wanted him, Dust Wrenshall, above all others, above everything else — all of it came together in that moment as Dust issued a broken noise at the crescendo of orgasm that peaked with Carrow working his cock against Dust’s prostate.

A rich pleasure unfurled, starting in his groin and moving outwards until it felt like every cell in his body was vibrating. The feeling was something akin to the adrenaline high of the night, but richer, more profound, buzzing into every muscle as Carrow wrung the pleasure from him, as Dust ruined the expensive comforter beneath them and let out a cracked moan.

Carrow’s own orgasm crashed quickly behind, and the man kept stroking and twisting around him even as his hips stuttered, as his cock throbbed into Dust, filling him with the man’s hot release as he began to whimper helplessly at the overstimulation of the hand on his spent hard-on, the thick member that continued to press into his prostate. The moment and the crackle of pleasure rolling through their bodies seemed to stretch out impossibly, time going funny and warped as they appreciated the conclusion of their evening.

Their legs both trembling, Carrow took him around the waist,
pulling him back and to his side without pulling out of him. They both fell heavily to the bed.

Carrow dragged him closer, pressing the length of his body against Dust’s back and tangling their legs together, sneaking kisses into the skin at the base of his neck, behind his ears, across his shoulders.

The relief of the release was profound and full and Dust felt sleep pulling immediately at his consciousness, as if he were already drowsing with one foot in the dream world and one here in reality. A strong impulse welled up in him, making his chest tight even as his mind drifted.

“I love you,” he said softly, not sure if Carrow was even still awake.

The arm around his waist squeezed tighter.

“I love you, Dust. So much it scares me.”

The morning seemed to come too quickly.

They didn’t bother with breakfast, both still full from the late-night order of pizza, the stupidly expensive bottle of champagne. They’d wolfed down the meal with the type of appetite that only seemed real after a night of adrenaline.

Carrow and Dust slipped into fresh clothes, trashing the things they’d worn to pull off the heist the night before.

They paused for just a moment, Carrow retrieving the little bag of diamonds and spreading them out on his palm. They caught the morning sunlight, and the rocks that were cut and polished blazed in a million impossible colors.

It was odd to think how much wealth was suspended there in the man’s hand, and at the same time to realize that it didn’t begin to touch the sort of lucre that Carrow ultimately had amassed. Finally, he closed his fist and deposited the diamonds back in their bag, tucking it neatly into his suit.

Carrow’s new dark suit fit him perfectly, and Dust pondered the fact as he brushed his teeth and watched the man finish preparing for the day. Did the hotel keep a tailor on call 24/7? It wouldn’t surprise him, considering how often he and Carrow showed up at odd
hours with no change of clothes.

When Dust was dressed too — pulling on a perforated motorcycle jacket that was a little too small but still just his style — Carrow caught him by the waist and pressed a kiss into the corner of his mouth.

“Are you ready to go home and count some bullion?”

“Do you count gold bars or weigh them?” Dust teased.

“Don’t be pedantic, kid.”

Carrow laid out a big cash tip for the housekeeping team, and they made their way to the lobby.

It was a brilliantly bright morning in Las Abras, and while the high-ceilinged lobby had been empty the night before, the first floor of the boutique hotel bustled with new arrivals and departures that morning. Every surface seemed polished, reflecting the sunshine and bouncing the chatter of families on vacation, executives in town for work.

There was no need to check out. The concierge knew to bill everything to Carrow’s account — knew that every charge would be settled as soon as it was reported. Carrow was nothing if not a conscientious and generous guest... Especially when he was coming off of a successful job with Dust by his side.

Dust felt oddly proud as they strode through the lobby and passed the families, the office workers. He had found something better than a family, and a career that surpassed the type of wealth and satisfaction that most executives dreamed of.

Their future lay before them, better than gold bars.

“Charlie?”

The name bubbled up from the noise around them. Dust and Carrow kept walking.

“Hey — Charlie Judge, right?”

Some part of Dust buried deep in the back of his head lurched to life. There was a woman in a neat suit walking towards him, getting directly in their path. She had short black hair and a straight-toothed smile.

“Christ, I haven’t seen you since back at Abe,” she said, approaching with arms out as if to hug him. Dust tucked his chin and stepped back. Carrow slowed his pace, ready to put himself between
Dust and the stranger if necessary. Dust could tell just by the other man’s posture that he was alert, already treating the woman as a threat.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” Dust said, his mind going in a thousand directions at once. His heart thudded in his chest and he willed it to slow. He shook his head.

“We were in the same class back at the Bureau before I dropped out,” she said, sounding apologetic and extending a hand. “Cheryl Gilchrest.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Cheryl,” Dust said, shaking her hand, forcing his voice to be casual, willing himself to laugh like the entire situation was absurd. “But I’m afraid you’re thinking of someone else.”

She cut her eyes at him.

He couldn’t believe this was happening. What the hell was Gilchrest doing on the West Coast? Why the hell was she approaching him like this? If she’d spent even the first day at AIIB, she ought to know to drop this now.

“I’m sorry,” she said, dropping his hand and flushing with embarrassment. “You look just like my friend Charlie. Sorry to bother you.”

“Hey, no problem,” he said. “I just have one of those faces.” He stepped around her in a movement that was probably too fast — and Christ, now he was overanalyzing every little thing. How fast was too fast to exit the lobby without looking guilty? Was he supposed to laugh about that with Carrow or pretend to be suspicious? Could the man at his side detect how hard his heart was beating, how adrenaline was dumping into his system?

They stepped out into the heat and Dust was immediately thankful for it. The temperature would provide a neat excuse for the cold sweat he’d fallen into.

“Abe Agent Charlie Judge,” Carrow said, forming his mouth around the words carefully.

Dust’s entire world tilted on its axis.

He turned to the other man — to A.R. Carrow, notorious crime boss, head of The Company, wanted across the country, and the object of Dust’s affections.
Carrow was smiling.
“Do you think you have a doppleganger out there, hunting you down?” Carrow asked.
“That would be a hell of an ironic thing, boss.”
He could barely make eye contact with Carrow.
Together, they mounted the bike and made their way back home, back to Las Abras — back to the life that had been made infinitely sweeter by their time together, if not infinitely more complicated.
**COMING SOON**

The Company We Keep will be available exclusively at Amazon.com on **July 19**.

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