



Absolution (Honor Guard 1)

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Action, Suspense

Description: The first book to be contracted in Decadent Publishing newest line: Honor Guard. Honor Guard showcases me in the military or other government agencies such as FBI, ATF, and CIA. They are also Alpha males—who know exactly what they want, and let nothing stop them.

Blurb:

Eva can't believe Joseph dares to show his face to her after he'd cheated on her with a stripper—in her bed. She'd kicked him out, and has no desire to let him back in, despite his claims of being assigned to protect her from the Cartel. Her life very well may be in danger, but she fears more for the safety of her heart.

Joseph made one foolish mistake a year ago, and has been paying for it ever since. She might not want to allow him into her life again, but he doesn't care if she despises the very thought of him. His duty is to keep Eva alive, even if it might end up being the death of him. Because he never stopped loving her.

Can they put their painful history aside, and work together against her enemy? Or will the past prove too strong to be forgiven?

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Chapter One

“Let me get this straight, sir.” Joseph stared at Colonel Hugo Gonzales, wondering if he’d hallucinated. “You want me, your daughter’s ex-boyfriend, to walk back into her life and protect her from some kind of threat? Sir, six weeks ago, Eva threw me out and screamed at me loud enough to wake the neighbors. And you made sure to keep—”

Hugo straightened in his seat and frowned. “I’d rather you not remind me of the past.”

Joseph laughed. “Well, I assure you she remembers finding me passed out, naked, with a stripper next to me. I doubt she’s forgotten.”

“You don’t need to convince me she still hates you. Hell, I hate you. But, I also know you’re the best shot in this city and the best option to keep her alive. And my love for her is stronger than my hatred for you.”

Joseph didn’t find it shocking he brought out such animosity in the man. Who wouldn’t dislike him in the same circumstance? “She’s not going to let me inside her house, yet alone close enough to keep her safe. The kind of vigilance she requires is twenty-four-seven.”

“She’ll do what she’s told. These are dangerous times in Mexico. She’ll agree to my demands, or she’ll return to America like I’ve begged her to.”

Hugo’s arrogance hung over the room like fog, stifling Joseph. A tug at his collar

didn't help, and he let out a dramatic sigh. At that moment, he had difficulty remembering all the enjoyable afternoons he'd spent fishing with Hugo...before the incident. "There's another problem. Poza Rica is a good three hours from Mexico City, where my next assignment is located—"

"Not anymore. I spoke to your superior, and you're officially assigned to the case."

"I'm not Secret Service. I don't do protection detail. Wouldn't you prefer someone more experienced in these manners?"

"You're the best shot around, and you owe her. I'll accept no one else," Hugo snarled.

"I'd been assigned to another mission."

"Things change."

Joseph ground his teeth in an attempt to bite back the sarcastic remark fighting to escape, but he just couldn't help pushing Hugo's buttons. "But people, obviously, don't. You're still an arrogant ass who thinks he can order everyone around—even when they don't even work for you. And interfere in everyone's life."

Hugo frowned. "I've earned the right to order everyone around by busting my ass all my life. Including you. And you will damn well treat me with respect."

Joseph stood straight and clicked his heels together. "Yes, sir." Damn it all to hell, he was right. Joseph had a duty to show this ass deference, like it or not. He was a special agent in the ATF, and Hugo a colonel in the Mexican military. Though Joseph wasn't in the military, he still owed the man respect. "What is the problem with Eva, sir?"

Hugo sighed. Opening the upper left drawer, he pulled out a file, dropped it on his desktop, and motioned toward it with a wave of his hand. Joseph picked up the thick manila file and sat back in the chair that had been placed in front of the colonel's desk. Crossing his foot over his left knee, he laid the file in his lap.

After a few minutes of reading, he raised his eyes to Hugo's. "She's being threatened...why? What have you done?"

"I'm in a secret investigation, working undercover against the Cartel. My cover is Emil Riordes. I'm a trucking company owner who turns his head when, once a month, a shipment of guns is delivered to the coast of Falcon Lake by the Cartel."

Joseph sat up straighter, dread in his heart. "Wait a second, sir. Are you referring to the same people suspected of all the murders and pirating of boats to ship firearms? The same group no one can seem to catch in the act?"

Hugo nodded. "Now, you see why I need you. They demanded I up my shipments to them to twice a month, and I refused. For the sake of my cover, I said I didn't want to draw the suspicion of the authorities. They insisted. I still refused. I hoped to draw out a big shot by my refusals." His voice wavered, and he ran a shaky hand over his mustache. "It worked, but I never imagined they'd find out about Eva. I got this picture today."

Hugo took the photo of Eva leaving the school where she worked. On her face, smack between the eyes, someone had drawn a red X. Nothing more, nothing less. But the meaning couldn't have been clearer. Joseph shoved the picture into the file before slamming it back on the desk.

"How long until the operation is over?"

"Three days. We expect to catch a very big fish."

He ground his teeth and closed his eyes. Aw, shit. Eva would probably murder him before the mission reached completion.

“One of the Cartel’s top men, Captain Soto, is coming to Poza Rica for a huge shipment—and to deal with me. He’s suspected of murdering two border patrolmen a month ago, and the CIA wants him. Bad. The truck has been booked, and an undercover agent is the driver. After this all goes down, the threat will have been removed, and I’ll be off the case. And far away from this hellhole.”

“For both of our sakes, you should consider another option. I know a man who is excellent at guarding—”

“No.” Hugo shoved up from his chair and snapped, “Only the best will do.”

“Sir, with all due respect—”

Hugo opened the same drawer the picture of Eva had been in and pulled out another photo, shoving it under his nose. “Look at this. This is the last woman they murdered. Her fiancé managed to anger them enough that they shot him in the head and then stole his woman to rape her before mutilating her. Afterwards, they sent us her location to mock us. They left her next to a dumpster in an abandoned alleyway. Like garbage.”

Joseph looked down and fought the bile rising in his throat. The woman had been stripped naked and stabbed, the number of times impossible to tell due to all the blood. Not to mention the ear-to-ear slit throat—deep enough so he could see a peek of her vertebrae, creating a mockery of a smile.

“Still want someone else to protect Eva?” Hugo snarled.

Joseph threw the picture back on the desk. “Where do I find her?”

He wasn't about to let Eva turn up in an alleyway like the woman in the photo. She might hate his guts, but he couldn't say the same of his feelings for her.

In fact, he loved her.

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Eva walked out of the school and slipped her sunglasses on. The sun glared against the white cement, and she had to blink a few times to adjust, even with the dark lenses over her eyes. No wonder her students hadn't given her even half their attention throughout the day. They all wanted to go out and play. She couldn't blame them. She could use a bit of playing herself. And she had a date later to prove how badly she needed a night of fun.

She and Antonio had come into the coffee shop at the same time every day, and after a ton of light flirtation, he'd asked her out. Her love life had been a bit slow going the past six weeks, since her ex had broken her heart and stomped it into itty-bitty pieces. Not only had he cheated on her, but he'd also had the audacity to pass out naked and drunk afterwards. With a stripper.

In their bed.

But why dwell on the past? She had a hot date with a new guy.

"Eva," a voice called from behind her.

She stopped dead in her tracks. His voice washed over her like an electric shock, causing her heart to race and her knees to go weak. Oh, hell no. Anyone but him. Did he somehow sense he was on her mind? With a moan, she squeezed her eyes shut tight. No, it has to be a coincidence. My imagination.

"Eva, look at me," he said, his voice sounding closer.

She shook her head, wiping her shaky hands on her khakis.

His face swam into her mind. The only logical explanation for his voice echoing in her ears was pure fancy. She just thought it was him. When she turned around, she would see someone else who sounded like Joseph. A trick of the mind.

“I’m not going to disappear if you refuse to look at me.”

Why me? Why is he back? What the heck did I do to deserve such torture?

Opening her eyes, Eva took a calming breath and spun to face him. She hadn’t seen him since she’d kicked him out of her bed and life six weeks ago. Her heart ached from just one look at him. Damn it, he looked good. His hotness served to make her more furious, and she welcomed the emotion with open arms.

“Really? I was so hoping you would. But you know what does work? Me, walking away. Which I’m doing now.”

She turned, took a step, and found her escape thwarted by his hand on her elbow. When she tried to yank loose, he tightened his grip and stepped closer, his chest brushing against her shoulder. Jolts of lust shot through her.

Damn him.

“Let go.” She fought to control her emotions.

He released her, and ran an unsteady hand through his exceptionally perfect auburn hair. Ha, at least he wasn’t unaffected by her, either. Good.

“I’m leaving, and you’re going back to wherever the hell you came from.”

“Sorry, pumpkin, but that’s not an option,” he said, almost pulling off an apologetic tone. His endearment made her heart lurch.

“Don’t call me that. You lost the right to use your nickname for me when you f**ked a stripper in our bed.”

Joseph paled and backed up a step. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m here to guard you. You’re my new assignment.”

“What? Me? Why the hell would someone send you to protect me? I’m a teacher, for Christ’s sake. I’m in no danger. Well, maybe a kid will puke on me, but it’s no reason for a guard.”

“Your father disagrees.” Joseph crossed his arms over his chest and raised his eyebrows.

“My father put you up to this? But he hates you.” If her father had asked Joseph for help, then he must be worried. And if he had a reason to be worried, well, then, so did she. “What’s going on?”

“I’ll tell you everything. But not until I get you inside. Take me to your place.”

She laughed. “Hell, no.” Worried or not, he would get nowhere near her apartment ever again. “I told you when I kicked you out you’d never be welcome inside my house again. Nothing has changed. I’m a big girl, I can handle myself.” She took a step away and once again he took her by the elbow.

This time, Joseph didn’t halt but grabbed her and dragged her behind him. “No, you can’t. And if you won’t take me to your place, I’ll just lead the way. Either way, I’m getting in.” He tugged her toward the red-roofed, stucco building Eva lived in, and she tensed.

“Go to hell!” She struggled against his hold, but he didn’t even pause. She tried to dig her heels into the cement and yanked her arm but failed to free herself from his grip. “I’ll scream.”

He leaned toward her, getting in her face. “You wouldn’t dare.” Without waiting for her reaction, he continued to escort her toward her building.

She opened her mouth, took a deep breath, and yelled, “Help—”

Joseph stopped, eyes wide. He spun her until she rested against the wall of a nearby building. She had time to yelp before he crushed his lips to hers and thrust his tongue inside her mouth.

She pushed against his shoulders, and he groaned, deepening the kiss. She longed to bite his tongue, to kick him in the balls, but damn it, he felt so good. It might have been six weeks since he’d last kissed her, but her body remembered him well—including all the feelings he brought out within her—and wanted more.

She pulled him closer while he slid his palms down her back and cupped her bu**ocks, hauling her up tight against his erection. She groaned in unison with him. He tore his mouth away and nibbled on her right ear.

“God, Eva, I’ve missed you so much.”

Nothing he could have said would have sobered her more. Man, but he had some cojones telling her he missed her! He’d cheated on her, not the other way around. She jerked out of his hold and slapped him hard across the face.

He covered his cheek with his hand. “Damn.”

“You’re a nasty son of a bitch. You broke my heart.” Her voice cracked, and she

grimaced at the tears stinging to her eyes. She'd cried so much over this man already, how could she have more to shed? "And you stroll back into my life, kiss me, and tell me you missed me? Fuck you!"

He pressed his lips together and shrugged. "I can't help it if I miss you. I can't help it if I regret what happened every single day of my life. One night. One night of bad decisions, and my life got ruined. And has been ever since."

Her heartbeat sped up, and she raised her fists. "Your life was ruined? Have you any idea what it felt like to find you with that...together?"

He kicked the wall and grabbed her elbow. "Yes, I do. But right now is not the time for this discussion. I need to get you inside."

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“No.” A sharp tug freed her arm from his hold. She ignored his scowl and raised her chin another notch.

“Tell you what, you’re going to follow me inside your apartment, or I’m going to kiss you again and not stop until you forget why you hate me. Do you understand?”

She could have argued, stood her ground, but she feared he would do what he promised.

Unfortunately, she wanted him to.

While Eva unlocked the deadbolt to her apartment, Joseph drew his gun. They entered the foyer, and he quietly shut the door. Turning, he grabbed her hand and jerked her behind him.

“Wait here until I make sure it’s safe,” he commanded over his shoulder.

He strode into the living room, ensuring it was clear of Cartel assassins before moving on through each room until he reached the bedroom. Once satisfied of the apartment’s safety, he returned to the living room, holstered his gun, and motioned Eva inside. She glared and marched past him, tossing her purse on the table. He moved to lock the door and leaned against it. The smell of gardenias met his nose, transporting him back in time to when he’d basked in her love. When he had been the luckiest guy in the world.

Until the night his life got f**ked up beyond belief. Hell, he didn't even remember most of what happened the night he'd lost her. It was all a blur—always would be. He gritted his teeth. He'd give anything to do it all over again and stay home instead of going out. He wouldn't have gotten drunk and reckless.

But he couldn't. And instead, he got to watch the woman he loved flop herself down on the couch and cross her arms while scowling him. What he would give to have her twined around his body, the two of them naked and rolling around on the bed, wrapped in the blanket of her long hair....

Seeing Eva again had shaken Joseph more than he'd expected. Sure, he'd known it would be tough. Being near her always managed to leave him unsettled. Pure Mexican fire ran through her veins—along with that temper—but her mother's American genes gave Eva's skin a translucent hue. She'd managed to inherit her mother's blue eyes and her father's dark hair. The combination never failed to make his blood boil.

“Well, why are you here?”

Her voice ripped him from his reverie, and he shook his head to clear it. “Your father is working on a mission, and he managed to piss off his target. Imagine that?”

Arrogance ran thick through Hugo, which both angered Joseph and brought a reluctant admiration from him. Long ago, they'd even been friends—until Joseph had the gall to break his little girl's heart.

“They discovered he had a daughter and threatened you to ensure his cooperation.”

She sucked in a deep breath, and her blue eyes darkened. “Who is it?”

The seriousness of the situation seemed to have broken through her thick skull. About

damn time.

“The Cartel.”

She held a hand to her forehead, massaging her brow. “The Cartel wants me dead? What about my father, is he in danger?”

Joseph approached the couch and shook his head at her utter lack of concern for her own welfare. “He’s fine. It’s his job to be safe. You’re the one we need to worry about.” He sat next to her and patted her knee.

She tensed and scooted her butt a few inches away from him. “Don’t touch me. Why did he have to pick you, of all people? Why not some other agent?”

“Because I’m the best.” He leaned back, laced his fingers behind his head and propped his feet on the coffee table. Every time he touched Eva, he couldn’t think straight. Hell, even when he didn’t touch her, he had issues. No way did he have a prayer of escaping this encounter unscathed. “And only the best will do for his precious Eva.”

She scoffed. “I’m sure there are others who can do just as well as you, if not better.”

“If there were, I wouldn’t be sitting here, now would I? Your father hates me.”

“Gee, I wonder why?”

He ground his teeth, guilt heating his cheeks at her sarcasm. “Look, you need to hear the truth about that night. I’m sorry you had to see it. I’m even sorrier I have to be here now, in your house, when you despise me.”

“Oh, shut up already. I don’t want to hear your lame excuses. Just leave me alone.”

“I’m not leaving. Not until the job is complete and you’re safe. Until then, how about we try to exist on a business level?”

She turned to him frowning. “I’m not sure I can be polite to you. Every time I see your bright green eyes looking at me, I want to gouge them out.”

He pulled his sunglasses off his head and perched them on his nose. “There, problem solved.” He motioned at his face, smirking. “Now you don’t have to see them, and I get to keep my vision. Win-win.”

She laughed and then covered her mouth. The sound ended far too quickly and a scowl replaced her smile. He couldn’t believe he’d managed to get her to drop her anger, even if it had lasted a mere second.

“Nope, now I just want to punch your nose.” She ripped his sunglasses off and threw them on the table. Angling toward him, she cocked her head to the side. “Why do you even care about any of this? We broke up six weeks ago. I’d think you wouldn’t feel obligated to protect me anymore.”

“I’m not obligated. I’m doing it because...because I am. It’s enough.” He wouldn’t be stupid and confess he still loved her. He also wouldn’t tell her he would do anything to hold her again, to be given one last chance. It would be pathetic of him to beg, and he wasn’t pitiful.

“Not me. I want someone else,” she insisted, tossing her hair over her shoulder. “This won’t do. I’m calling Dad and telling him to find someone else. Anyone else.”

When she reached for her purse, he grabbed her and threw her back against the cushions. He leaned toward her face, stopping an inch from her lips.

Eyes narrowed, she cried, “Stop throwing me around!”

“I’m not leaving. I’m the best, and I won’t allow you to be killed because you’re too childish to be around me again.”

“But—”

“No buts. You listen to me, now. I won’t take advantage of you. I promise to try to behave myself and to stay out of your way as much as possible. But I’m not leaving your side until you’re safe.” He didn’t know if he could resist touching her if she gave even the slightest hint of interest, but he would do his damndest. He couldn’t be held at fault if his trying fell short of expectations, now could he?

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“How long will it take?”

“About three days.”

She blanched. “Three days?”

“Yeah. When your father’s undercover mission ends.” Joseph stared at her pale face for a few seconds and then pushed away to return to his seat on the couch. But a bit closer than before. “Worried you can’t keep your hands off of me for so long?”

He sure was. Already, his palms itched to grab her and throw her down, so he could have his way with her.

“Pft. I think I can handle myself.” She wrung her hands, scooting a few inches away from him while avoiding his gaze. “I’m more concerned about whether I’ll manage to avoid murdering you.”

“Well, you’ll have to do your best. For the next week or so, I plan to be no more than five paces from your side at all times. If you shower, I’ll be outside the bathroom door. When you sleep, I’ll be next to you. When you—”

“Hold up.” She raised a hand. “Sleep? You aren’t sleeping in my bed, you ass. No way.”

“Scared?” He grabbed his sunglasses and toyed with them. Truth be told, he didn’t want to share her bed, either. Okay, that’s a bit of a lie. He longed to share it, but as her lover. Not her bodyguard. Big difference, there.

“I remember what you do when you’re asleep,” Eva snapped. “How many times did you wake me up, making love to me in your sleep?”

Memories flashed through his head of a few more unforgettable moments, and his c**k hardened. He shifted on the couch to accommodate the apparent growing of said body part.

“And I remember how horny you are in the mornings. So, yes, I am. You can sleep on the floor,” Eva finished.

Her words brought out images in his head of her rising over him in the morning, a sleepy smile on her face as she licked him from head to toe. It wasn’t just him who woke up horny. But, like a gentleman, he would refrain from mentioning it. “Like a dog?”

“If the shoe fits....” She arched a brow.

He flinched. “The floor’s fine. I just need to be close to you to keep you safe.” And to love you.

“Fine, whatever. But keep your hands to yourself.”

“Indeed. At least, until you ask otherwise. Then all bets are off.” He grinned, trailing a finger down her arm. He couldn’t help himself. She was so fun to torture. She made it too easy.

Her face turned bright red, and she slapped his hand away. “Don’t hold your breath. You’ll suffocate.”

“I don’t know. I have a very high tolerance. You should know from experience.” He wiggled his eyebrows and smiled. After he received the expected glower, he asked,

“So, what are we doing tonight?”

“We’re not doing anything. I have a date.”

Joseph’s heart squeezed in his chest, and he straightened. “The hell you do. Fucking cancel it.”

Chapter Two

Eva watched Joseph’s green eyes darken with rage, and she bit her lip. She hadn’t expected him to be happy about her plans. But she shouldn’t have to back out of the date just because her ex had come into town to guard her.

Right?

“I’m not canceling. I happen to like this guy. He’s sweet, generous, and attractive. And I bet he won’t screw a stripper in my house.”

He growled and loomed over her again. “He sounds great. But unless you want me to murder him in front of you, you’ll cancel until next week. I’m not letting you out of my sight, remember?”

She gulped and pushed him away. “Stop getting in my face. It’s not gonna scare me.”

“No, but I know one thing that scares you. This.” He closed the distance and kissed her.

No, he didn’t kiss her. He ravished her, digging his hand into her curls and plundering her mouth. His tongue stroked hers, and she moaned. At some point, he must have lowered her back against the cushions because she didn’t even remember moving.

His fingers trailed from her scalp, down her throat, and fell upon her breast. He cupped her, toying with her nipple while he nibbled on her lip. Hot desire shot through her blood, and she arched into his palm. When he cursed and pulled away from her, she groaned.

Why the hell does he have to grow a conscience?

She bit her tongue, blocking any attempt to call him back. He paced in front of her like he always did when he felt frustrated. Maybe she needed to give it a try.

“I’m sorry, Eva. I shouldn’t have done that.”

She sat up and touched her fingers to her lips. Her emotions battled, each trying to get the upper hand. Desire, rage, betrayal. They were all there. Including overwhelming sadness. If only he hadn’t ruined everything...or she’d been enough.

No, she couldn’t blame herself. She’d done everything she could, tried her best to keep him happy. She couldn’t be blamed for his indiscretions. She had no idea why he’d done what he had, but she couldn’t be held at fault. Could she?

“Why?” she whispered. Terror gripped her and made her knees shake. She had to know.

He paused in his pacing and faced her. Confusion wrinkled his brow. “Why, what?”

“Why did you do it? Why did you sleep with her?”

He sank to the chair closest to him. “I-I found out—”

Knock, knock, knock.

They both jerked and stared at the door. Then, their eyes met. What had he been about to say? She'd mustered up the courage to ask him the question that had eaten at her for the past month and a half, asked and almost received an answer, when someone had to go and ruin it.

Damn it.

How would she get the courage to ask again? And did she even want to know the answer? She exhaled and stood up. "Coming," she called.

She took three steps toward the door but stopped when Joseph grabbed her from behind and covered her mouth. She gasped and fought his hold.

"Who is it?" His voice rang out loud and clear in the apartment, and with sudden clarity, Eva realized who had to be on the other side of the door.

Antonio, her hot date.

"Um, Antonio Soto. I'm looking for Eva. Is she there?" His voice came muffled through the door, but she recognized his soft accent even so.

Joseph pressed his lips to her ear, and his hot breath made a shiver run down her spine. Oh, how she wanted him.

"Is this your date?"

His hand still covered her mouth, so she nodded. Reaching up, she caught his pinky and bent it. He snagged her wrist with his free hand and held it down. Kicking back, she lurched in his arms. When her foot made contact with his inner thigh—a bit too far to the left, more's the pity—he grumbled and picked her up until her feet kicked without purchase in the air.

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Son of a bitch.

“She’s occupied. Date’s off. Go away.”

Her heel connected with his shin, and he laughed at her attempts to free herself, making her even more furious than she had been. She growled through his fingers and tried to yell. The pressure over her mouth increased, rendering her silent.

“I’m sorry, but who are you?” Antonio questioned from the hallway. “Eva, are you in there? Are you okay?”

Joseph whispered, “Tell him to go away, or I’ll shoot him here and now. We have no clue who he works for or what his motives are.”

Eva shook her head. He frowned, pulled her arms free from between them, and spun her. Somehow, he managed to keep his palm over her mouth. So, she jerked her head in an attempt to get her message across. He removed his hand but kept it close by.

Eva gulped in air and whispered, “He’s not a killer. He’s a businessman. A good guy. Let me talk to him. He’ll stay unless he sees I’m okay.”

Joseph sneered. “No deal. He might have a gun.”

“Eva? Are you okay? Answer me, or I’m calling the police.”

“Please, let me show him I’m all right. He’s a decent guy.”

He grumbled something under his breath but loosened his grip on her. “Fine, but make it quick.”

He kissed her hard before he released her. She scowled at his liberties—while at the same time her heartbeat accelerated.

“Stop kissing me!” she ordered. “I’m not yours to do with as you please anymore.”

“Tell it to my body,” he mumbled.

He motioned her forward and followed on her heels. She looked over her shoulder and saw him rest his hand on his lower back. His Glock 22 was holstered there, loaded and ready to fire at a moment’s notice.

Like always.

She took a soothing breath and unlocked the deadbolt. When she swung the door open, Joseph stuck his foot out, leaving a crack of only a few inches for her to speak through. That was all he seemed willing to allow. She shot him a dirty look over her shoulder and turned to Antonio with a smile. His gaze moved first to her hair, which she had a sneaking suspicion appeared mussed, to her swollen lips, and then landed on Joseph. Eva faltered, realizing what it looked like they’d been doing. Ah, hell, what they had been doing. There goes the ‘he’s my cousin’ excuse I’d wanted to use.

“Antonio, this is Joseph. Joseph, Antonio.” She didn’t bother to explain Joseph’s presence. It seemed pretty self-explanatory. It didn’t stop her, however, from feeling like a complete jerk. “We’ve known each other for years, and he stopped by because he came to town.”

Antonio stepped forward, sticking his hand through the small opening of the door, to shake Joseph’s hand. When Joseph returned the gesture but placed his arm over Eva’s

shoulder instead of on his own damn body where it belonged, she groaned. The message was clear. Joseph had claimed her as his, in male language. She shrugged and tried to step away, but Joseph scooted closer and threw his entire arm around her shoulders. His other hand, she noted, remained on his gun.

She met Antonio's gaze and noticed he'd been watching the silent struggle with wide eyes. "Are you okay, Eva? If this man is intruding, I can—"

Joseph tensed and pulled her closer. "The intrusion, Antonio, is you. There isn't room for a third wheel here, so..." Joseph moved to slam the door shut in Antonio's face, but Eva snapped at his high-handed manner.

"Knock it off right now!" She pushed Joseph back and stepped into the open space of the doorway to hide him from Antonio's view. "Look, Antonio, I know this looks bad, but it's not what it looks like. Joseph is an ex, who is having a hard time separating the past from the present. There is nothing going on between us, but I have to cancel our date. Something came up, and he has to stay here for a while."

"He seems to feel different. He looks like he's ready to kill me."

"Because I am. Go the f**k away," Joseph said from behind the door.

She prayed his voice had been too low for Antonio to make out the words, but if the tensing of his shoulder gave any indication, he'd heard him.

"I think you should come with me, Eva. This man seems to be a little on the unstable side, if you know what I mean. How can you trust him?" Antonio glared at the door as if he could see Joseph hovering behind it. "He might kidnap you or something."

"Oh, I don't trust him. Not one bit." She glanced over her shoulder and saw Joseph's fists tighten.

“Now, there’s the first smart thing I’ve heard out of him so far. I should kidnap you. And have my way with you while I’m at it.”

He fondled her ass and she slapped his hand away, stomping her foot out of sheer frustration.

“Shut the hell up, already! I’m not yours, and I won’t be.” She turned to Antonio. “I’m sorry, but he has to stay. It’s a private matter, but he’s a...um...a friend of my dad’s.”

Joseph scoffed behind her, and she scowled even more.

“Well, I don’t like leaving you with him.” He gestured at the door with his head. “I’ll help you do whatever you two are doing. Just let me in.”

Joseph cursed and jerked Eva to his side, stepping out from behind the door despite her protests. He stuck his head in the doorway and said, “What we’re doing needs two people. I’m not into any kinky shit. Now, get the f**k out of here.” He slammed the door shut, locked it, and turned to Eva with a smile. “There. He’s gone. You’re welcome.”

Eva stood in shock at Joseph’s barbaric ways. He hadn’t been this bad before. He acted like he owned her apartment. And her. She shoved him back against the door, not minding the fact she stood five-foot-three with heels on versus his six-foot-one barefoot, and jabbed a finger into his chest.

“You listen to me, jackass. I am not yours. You lost me when you decided I couldn’t keep you happy in bed. You gave up your right to speak for me and my feelings when you stripped another woman in our bed. The same bed we’d made love in mere hours before.”

His eyes darkened, and he hardened against her as she plastered her body across his. Her ni**les tightened at his obvious arousal, but she forced her body's demands to the back of her mind. She tried instead to focus on the anger. It was safer, by far.

“Eva, I never meant to hurt you. I’ve been trying to tell you what happened that night for weeks now. I made a bad choice. I found out—”

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She held up a hand. “I don’t want to hear your excuse. I don’t want to talk to you at all. I’m going to go shower, and you’re gonna leave me the hell alone.”

She knew she contradicted herself. When his explanation had been interrupted before, she’d fumed. But now? Now, she didn’t want to hear him make excuses about why he had broken her heart. It didn’t matter. He’d destroyed her trust, and nothing would take the hurt away. Nothing would repair the empty hole he’d left inside her.

“Eva. I’m not going to beg you, but you have to at least hear me out.”

His eyes beseeched hers, and she ignored the plea. He never begged, so part of her enjoyed the power. Mostly, she feared his explanation—terrified she would forgive him and they’d be in her bed by nine.

She shook her head. “I’m going to go shower. Don’t follow me.”

He sat on the couch and leaned back with a mock smile. “Yes, ma’am.”

He gestured her toward the bathroom, using a superfluous motion of his hand, and reached for the television remote. CNN, she’d bet. Or maybe one of the stupid gun shows he so enjoyed.

He looked right at home, just as he would have if nothing had ever split them up. She stared at him, remembering how she used to bring him coffee on Sunday mornings, and her heart twisted. He would sit on the couch, going over files for work, and she would cuddle up next to him and grade papers. Then, when they’d finished their first cup of coffee, he would cook her breakfast.

She shook her head, forcing herself back to the present. She headed into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. Then, for added safety, she locked the door, ensuring the latch turned hard and loud.

Chapter Three

Joseph watched Eva's retreating back and tried to ignore the pain in his chest as she ripped his heart out and carried it away. He tossed the remote back onto the table, giving up any pretenses of caring about what he wanted to watch. He knew what he wanted to see—Eva naked in the shower, soapy and wet with his hands on her body.

I'm such a fool.

Just because she'd asked him why he'd cheated on her didn't mean he stood a chance at getting her back. She hated him, and believed him to be a sick bastard—a monster who didn't give a damn about her or her feelings. Her body might still desire him, but she would never admit it. She wouldn't tell him how her knees quivered every time he stepped close to her. He felt her though.

He knew.

But he also knew she'd never let him in her heart again, even though she still desired him. He'd ruined it all.

He listened for the shower to start, and about thirty seconds after it did, he hopped to his feet and strode into her bedroom—what used to be their bedroom. Everything looked the same but with one noticeable exception—there were no longer pictures of the two of them anywhere. In fact, there were no pictures at all.

He walked over to the bed and rubbed the indent in her pillow. She didn't roll, his Eva. She would lie down and pass out as soon as her head hit the pillow. Always on

her right side. And he had held her, burying his face in her hair while she slept. She'd smelled of cucumber melon after a shower, and to this day, whenever he caught the scent of it, his heart skipped a beat. He leaned down to inhale.

Yup, her pillow smells like her.

His penis hardened while, at the same time, his heart softened. If it worked the opposite way, his job would be a hell of a lot easier.

Straightening, he advanced on the closet where he'd kept his clothes. He swung the door open, and halted in his tracks. She'd left the closet empty. She hadn't even put any of her clothes or shoes inside. The confines of the small closet remained barren.

Like my life.

Why hadn't she put something inside? Was she saving space for the next lover? His heart protested the very thought of another man using anything in his place. His closet. His woman.

Or—and he liked this option far better—had she kept the space empty because it hurt too much to use the closet which had once been his? Did she miss him? Perhaps still care for him even a tiny bit?

The shower stopped, and he cursed. Dropping to his knees, he pried the floorboard open in the back left corner. The board came up without a fight, as it always had. Reaching inside the cubbyhole hidden beneath, he held his breath until his hand closed around the velvet box inside. He retrieved the case and glanced over his shoulder to make sure Eva wasn't out yet. She usually took a long time to dry her hair, and he hoped that hadn't changed.

He turned his attention back to the box, opening the lid. There, his secret rested. A

princess cut, two-carat brilliant diamond shining on the size five white gold band, which would fit her to perfection. He'd checked and double-checked before sizing the band. Nothing would ruin the night when he would propose. Or so he'd thought.

But then he'd gotten drunk and ended up in bed with a stripper.

The squeaking hinges on the bathroom door warned him she approached, and he tucked the ring back in its hiding spot. He didn't have time to secure the board without arising suspicion, so he swore under his breath and lunged to his feet. He turned around just in time to find Eva, wrapped in a robe and nothing else, standing in the doorway.

His c**k hardened, and his mouth lost all of its moisture.

Jesus, he loved her. And the way she looked in a satin robe.

Eva entered her room and froze a few paces inside. Joseph stood in front of his old closet, looking shamefaced. When she noticed his eyes darken with lust, her gaze lowered on its own accord to his crotch. Her mouth turned as dry as cotton balls at the sight of his penis straining against the fly of his jeans. With an inward groan, she flicked her gaze back to a safer area and found him studying her, but then noticed his gaze dart to the side of her face. He always did that if he had something to hide.

She tilted her head. Did she detect a hint of guilt on his face?

She swallowed and chose to ignore the horny part for her own sanity. This, and self-preservation. Because, damn it all to hell, she ached for him, too. More than she'd care to admit, thank you very much.

Hell, his cocky attitude made her want him even more. If he could be so confident of what she wanted out of bed, she knew he damn well knew what she wanted in it. All too well. Like when he stroked behind her knees and kissed her neck at the same time.

Wrong thought, Eva. Move on to something safer.

“Why are you in here? And in my closet?” She glanced over his shoulder, and saw nothing out of order. Of course not. The closet was empty, after all. She’d never wanted to use the damned thing after he’d left. She’d packed his clothes in boxes and closed the door. She saw no reason to open the door after that, even if she could have used the extra space. It smelled too much like him.

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He glanced behind himself and then shut the door before leaning against it. “Oh, I need a shower, too, and I decided to check for any missed clothes of mine. But, it’s empty.” He pointed over his shoulder. As if the place he spoke of were in question.

She sighed. “I threw them out the window. Remember?”

“Not really. All of them?”

His eyes grew comically wide, and she couldn’t help but grin. She had known he would be upset at the thought of his clothes gone forever. It was why she’d done it. She hadn’t been fond of him at the time. And still wasn’t.

She cringed at the mental oversight that had slipped through. She already thought of her anger in past tense. It wasn’t a promising sign. Each second spent in his company chipped free a mental brick from the wall she’d erected out of tears. “What else should I have done?” Her voice rang a bit sharp, but she did not bother to soften her tone. “Keep them as a shrine to you or pass them on to my next lover?”

“What lover? Who is he?” He frowned at her and flexed his jaw.

She smiled and leaned against the wall. “What’s it matter? I’m not your concern anymore.”

“Bullshit you aren’t. How many have there been? One? Two?”

“None of your business!” She shook her head at his audacity. “What about you? I’m sure you’ve been far from celibate yourself.”

“It’s different. I don’t want to kill people who have touched me. You, however, I find myself very protective of.”

“Pft. That’s a double standard if I’ve ever heard one.”

He sighed and rubbed his eyebrow. “Fine. You want to know my number? Zero.”

She burst into laughter. “Yeah. Real funny. And I’m Mother Teresa.” He didn’t grin in response, and she sobered. “You’re kidding, right? I mean, you’re the guy who wanted sex at least twice a day. Sometimes more. This is you.”

“Yeah. It was me. With you.”

He refused to meet her questioning stare, and she sensed he’d been embarrassed by his spur-of-the-moment confession. She, damn it, was heart-warmed. And flattered. And optimistic. All of which were bad in a the-world-is-ending-and-you’re-going-to-die kind of way.

“And the stripper. Let’s not forget her,” she said in a rush. She wondered if she was reminding him, or herself.

“How could I? She split us up. And I’ve never been more pissed off about anything in my entire life.”

His gaze crashed with hers, and she tried to look away, but something in his voice called to her, spoke to her of his vulnerability. Of his love. And, damn it, she believed him.

“You’ll never know how angry I get when I think about that night,” he said. “I’m sorry you got hurt. I am. But you have no f**king clue what is really going on.”

Excuse me? She had every single clue nailed down to perfection, thank you very much. Asshole.

“I know you feel b—”

Joseph tackled her to the floor, knocking the air from her lungs, just as a gunshot rang out. She hit the wood hard with Joseph’s weight pressing into her. Another bullet whizzed overhead, and she screamed.

Joseph rolled off, sitting up and drawing his gun in one smooth motion. Aiming, he fired and jumped up to chase after the man who’d stood in the bedroom doorway moments before. Eva lunged to her feet and followed but found Joseph, swearing and kicking the doorjamb. How in the world had they both missed the intrusion? Had they been so caught up in each other they’d missed the sound of the lock being jimmied? She had no idea how much noise picking a lock would make—but shouldn’t they have heard something?

It seemed unfathomable.

Joseph gave Eva a once-over, and he replaced his gun in its holster. Then he rushed to her and gathered her into his arms. For the first time since he’d returned, she didn’t fight him or object. She couldn’t believe what just occurred. Someone had fired a shot at her. She had to be the dumbest person around. Teacher by day, single woman by night. Her most exciting evenings consisted of a girl’s night out—where she got home by ten. Why would anyone want her dead?

Oh, right, because of Dad. Shit.

She rested her cheek against Joseph’s speeding heart. Thank God he was okay. “Don’t ever put yourself in front of a bullet meant for me again. Are you insane? You could have been hurt.”

His chest shook with laughter. “Of course I could have been hurt. It’s kind of the point of protecting you. Speaking of which....” He pulled his phone from his pocket and punched in numbers faster than she could watch.

“Who are you calling?” she asked and then frowned, realizing who it must be. “Don’t call my dad. He’ll only worry, and it’s bad for his heart.”

Ignoring her, Joseph released her to pace a distance away, presumably seeking privacy. “Sir?”

Oh, hell no. She followed him so close that when he stopped, she bumped into him. He shot her an aggravated look, and she arched a brow, putting a hand on her hip. She wasn’t going anywhere.

“Sir, we’ve been attacked. Someone broke into her apartment and took a couple of shots at us. I’m removing my charge to a remote location. I’d like two additional men to accompany us for eyes outside.” A slight pause. “Yes, sir. Right away.” He hung up the phone and ran a hand through his hair.

“I’m an assignment? I thought you were here to help, not because you had to be.” She walked away from him, more upset by this revelation than she cared to admit.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. She almost reached her bedroom, but he grabbed her elbow, maneuvering her so her back hit the wall, and placed his hands on either side of her head. He crushed his lips to hers and rubbed his torso against her erect ni**les. With a moan, she curled her arms around his waist and trailed her fingers to his ass. She’d always loved his ass.

His erection nudged her belly, and she wrapped her leg around his thigh. His hands parted her robe to caress her br**sts. Cupping them, he toyed with her ni**les, rolling them between his fingers.

The phone rang, causing her to jerk from his arms. She stumbled until her back hit the opposite wall, and she leaned against it for support. With her heart pounding in her ears, she fought to catch her breath. Joseph never took his gaze off her while she adjusted her robe to cover her bare chest.

“This isn’t over,” he warned.

“Yes, it is.” She took a shaky breath and shook her head. “A momentary weakness. It won’t happen again.” Even as she spoke, she knew she’d lied. God, she wanted him. Here. Now. Wherever. What a traitorous bitch her body had turned out to be.

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“The hell it won’t.” He put the phone to his ear and snapped, “Yes?”

“Don’t yell at my dad,” she whispered.

That gained her a scowl in return. She shrugged and stomped into her bedroom. They would need to leave, and she couldn’t wander the streets wearing a bathrobe. His muffled voice filtered through the closed bedroom door while she threw some clothes on. She didn’t need him walking in on her naked. She had a hard enough time resisting him. No sooner had she pulled her shirt over her head than a knock sounded on the door.

“Come in.”

Joseph swaggered in, his gaze hovering on her low-cut neckline. She’d chosen the garment because it showed off her cle**age quite deliciously. Or, so she’d been told by her friends. It couldn’t hurt to look good in front of an ex-boyfriend, right? Heck, every woman likes to show off how hot she looks to an ex, and she wasn’t any different, right?

If I say it enough times, I might believe it, too.

“Pack a few changes of clothing. We won’t be coming back. We’ll have to stop somewhere to grab clothes for me. I’d planned on getting them later tonight from my place, but now we need to move to a more secure location. Fast.”

She blushed and smoothed her hair. “I have a few things of yours. I didn’t get a chance to throw them out yet.” Lowering to her hands and knees, she reached under

the bed for the Rubbermaid container. She'd kept these things because they were his favorites—and they smelled of his cologne and soap. Whenever she had a wretched day, she removed them and inhaled his scent—even though any trace of him had disappeared long ago.

He took the container, shooting her a curious look. The bin was clear plastic, so he could see what she'd chosen to keep. And he seemed to know why, too.

“Thank you, Eva.”

His voice cracked, bringing tears to her eyes. Damn it, why did it have to be so hard to forget the feelings she'd had for him?

Because they'd never went away.

Not meeting his gaze, she waved a hand in front of her face. “I'll get the stuff I need from the bathroom while you finish up in here.”

“Eva, please. Listen to something before we go.”

“No, we better hurry. I don't want to get shot at again. Talk later.” She chose to call her exit a nicely timed retreat, but in all reality, calling it a coward's run would have been more accurate.

Chapter Four

As Eva walked away, Joseph locked his gaze on her swinging ass, enjoying the sight for a moment before he kicked the bedpost. Why wouldn't she let him explain? He'd been trying to get through to her for six weeks, only to be detoured at every attempt.

Once he got her to safety, he would tell her everything. What had happened the day

he'd broken her heart. She might not want to hear it, but she would damn well listen, even if he had to tie her up to accomplish it. But she had been right in one aspect. He needed to get her somewhere safe. Then, all bets were off.

He put the container on the bed and ripped off the lid. His breath caught at what she'd chosen to keep. The shirt she'd always stolen to sleep in because she liked how it smelled like him. The jeans he'd worn every Saturday for walking through the local farmer's market. The sweatshirt she'd bought him on their first vacation. The list went on and on, each item more sentimental than the last. How had she managed to keep anything if she'd thrown off his stuff out the window?

Dare he hope she still had feelings for him? She'd kicked him out and refused his calls. He hadn't seen her since the day he had stumbled away from her, broken and confused. Now, he came to find she hadn't banished him quite as completely as she would like him to think.

And if he stood even a one in a million chance of having her allow him back in, he wouldn't rest until she damn well let him explain the truth behind what she had seen that day. One way or the other, he would make her see reason even if he had to tie her up to force her to listen to him.

What the hell did he have to lose?

Slamming the lid back on the container, he tucked it under his arm and exited her room. After one last look at her bed, he shut the door. He didn't dare to retrieve the ring with her so close. Maybe someday, if she ever let him talk, he would return, get the diamond, and propose. If not, he could always leave it there to rot in hell. Like him.

Eva exited the bathroom with an overnight bag, and when she saw him standing guard outside, she grimaced. "Your charge is ready to leave."

He groaned. “I think we both know you’re more than a mere assignment to me, Eva. So cut the drama.”

She blushed and charged for the door, but he caught her elbow before she could make it out. Redirecting her behind him, he drew his gun and turned his head from left to right, checking for any unwanted visitors lurking. Two uniformed officers stood at the end of the hallway, and Joseph nodded at them. They approached, and he returned his pistol to the holster on his lower back.

He seized Eva’s fingers. “Stay close to me, no matter what.”

“Okay,” she murmured.

Her petite hand clutched his, and his heart did an odd little flip-flop. Using his body to shield her, he stepped out into the hallway. The hair on the back of his neck tingled, and he threw Eva to the ground along with his belongings and drew his gun. The officer on the right pulled his gun, aiming at where Eva had stood mere seconds before. Rage pumped through Joseph’s veins. The punk dared to try to kill his woman? Two quick shots and the Cartel thugs crumbled to the ground. He rushed toward them, kicked their weapons out of reach, and checked for pulses...finding none. Each man had hidden a pistol behind their backs, and had fresh blood on soles of their shoes.

“Son of a bitch.”

He helped Eva to her feet, grabbed their stuff, and hurried her out of the apartment. She stumbled behind him, her breath catching as they passed the bodies.

“Why’d you kill them?” she squeaked.

“They’re not federales. I’m guessing the actual policia are dead somewhere in the

building.” They entered the staircase, and he halted. “Right here. You better not look.”

The men had been shot in the head. Joseph cringed at the carnage and continued on, releasing Eva’s hand to grab his phone from his pocket. He hit the speed dial button and waited for an answer.

“Oh, my God. Those poor men.”

He glanced at her to see if she was okay. Her gaze darted between him and the dead men. She turned white followed by an odd shade of green. Lurching to the trashcan, she threw up. He couldn’t blame her. Two men with their brains sprayed over the place never looked pretty.

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Hugo answered, and Joseph pulled his attention from Eva retching into the garbage. “Your officers have been murdered. There must be a mole on the inside. For Eva’s safety, I’m taking her somewhere even you don’t know. I’ll contact you as soon as it’s safe. Expect my call.”

He hung up the cell without waiting for an answer and stepped to Eva’s side to rub her back.

Wet and clammy looking, she raised her head and stumbled back. This time, she averted her eyes from the corpses. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. No one likes to see stuff like this.” He motioned to the side with his head and then chucked his phone into the trash.

“Your phone!”

“GPS. Give me your phone.”

She pulled it out of her purse, and he threw it with his.

“Hey, I need that. It’s got everything in it. Calendar, numbers, schedules.”

“Which will do you little good if you’re dead. Let’s go.” Grabbing her hand, he led her down the stairs. He held his clothes in the crook of his arm and rested his hand on his gun. No chance in hell would he allow himself to be taken off guard again. Thirteen shots remained in his pistol plus the extra magazine he kept on him at all times. “I’ll buy you a new phone when this is done.”

“No, you’re right. I’m being silly.” She followed him without speaking.

He left her in the shadows to do a quick surveillance of the streets. A drunken man stumbled down the sidewalk, singing at the top of his lungs. Joseph tightened his grip on his pistol, bracing for shots to be fired, but the man belched and then continued on his way. Joseph led her to the parking lot. Salsa music drifted out a nearby window, and three children ran by, giggling and holding hands.

Joseph’s gaze darted nonstop, looking for any threats lurking in the darkness. When they arrived at his nondescript Ford Focus, he unlocked the door. “Get in.”

“When did you bring your car here?” Eva asked as she slid inside.

He shut her door, stalked to the driver’s side, and climbed in. “I left it here earlier then came looking for you.”

“Awfully cocky of you to take a chance at guessing I’d let you come home with me.”

“No chance or guessing about it.”

She scoffed. “Where are we going?”

“Fiesta Inn.” Joseph pulled away from the curb but didn’t remove his fingers from the butt of his pistol. As he wove and bobbed through traffic, he kept checking the mirror for a tail. “Grab the hat in the backseat and put it on. I don’t want anyone being able to describe you.”

She reached back, retrieving the baseball cap. Scrunching her nose, she shoved it on her head. After the thirty-minute drive—which should have taken fifteen—they entered the hotel.

Three women sat behind the wood and cream granite receptionist area, and Joseph approached them with a smile. He checked to ensure Eva kept the baseball cap low over her eyes and remained close by but not in clear sight, either.

“Hola. Queríamos un cuarto superior, a fines de un pasillo en el segundo piso, por favor.”

The receptionist smiled and began the booking. Joseph peeked over his shoulder again, jaw stiff and hand hovering next to his lower back where his pistol remained holstered and hidden. When a man walked in, he cursed and stepped closer to Eva. The hotel patron didn’t even glance their way but instead walked straight to the elevator and out of sight.

Once he had paid for the suite, Joseph led Eva up a flight of stairs to the second floor and to the room at the end of the hallway. Next to them stood the custodial closet, so if he heard anyone sneaking around outside, he’d know they came either to clean or to cause trouble. Much less traffic than, say, the first room on the hallway.

Joseph opened the door, did a quick once-over of the layout, and shooed Eva inside. Twisting the deadbolt behind him, he pressed his ear against the cool metal to listen for any suspicious activity before following Eva. The carpet was a navy blue color, the walls one of those shades of white—ecru maybe?—and a king-size bed rested in the middle of the room, along with a desk. No couch, no roll-up cots. Just like he wanted.

By nightfall, he would be between those sheets with Eva.

“There’s only one bed.” Eva turned to Joseph, eyebrow raised. “We need another one.”

“You might feel the need for two. I don’t.” He looked out the window, closed the blinds tight, and hopped onto the mattress. “Mmm...soft. Come try it out.” He patted a spot two inches away from him.

Is this how Eve felt when Satan offered her an apple? Just one bite, my dear. She shook her head. “No, thanks. I’ll stand.” Her stomach rumbled, and she flushed.

“Hungry? Here’s dinner.” He gestured toward the tray on the nightstand holding someone’s room service they’d grabbed off the cart they’d passed earlier—dropping a few dollars in its place. “Taco or burrito?”

She chose the taco and sat down at the desk across from him, unwrapping the paper from her taco. He remained quiet for a while, but she kept stealing glances at him while she ate. He looked even more handsome than she remembered. It seemed unfair for a man to appear so hot even while stuffing his mouth. His biceps tightened every time he raised his arms. As he took his last bite, she sighed at the muscles bulging in front of her.

“Enjoying yourself?” He grinned and stretched.

“Hmm? Oh, yes, it’s very good.” Her cheeks heated, and she jumped up, tossing her half-eaten taco in the trash. She regretted her impulsive act before the food hit the plastic bag. It had to be one of the best tacos she’d had in months.

“I meant your entertainment. Not your dinner. I couldn’t help but notice you staring at me. Like what you see, pumpkin?” He flexed his arms.

She glared.

He burst out laughing.

“I told you not to call me that. I don’t like it.”

“You didn’t mind it before.”

“Before you cheated on me, you mean?”

His eyes narrowed, and she bit her lip. Why did she bring up the topic she’d hoped to avoid? She tensed and waited for the explanations and excuses to begin anew. Instead, he surprised her by shrugging and facing away. She breathed a sigh of relief but groaned when she saw the bottle of wine he’d grabbed from behind him.

“No, thanks. I need all my brains around you.”

“Suit yourself.” He strode across the room and set the bottle on the bureau to retrieve two plastic cups. “But I know you well enough to know you’d love some. It will help you relax.”

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“That’s what I’m scared of,” she muttered.

He chuckled and turned earnest green eyes on her. “In all honesty, you should have some. You saw a lot of gore tonight. Things most people never have to see. And someone tried to kill you. Twice.” He filled both the cups and walked toward her with one held out. “A drink will help soothe your nerves. Trust me.”

As she took the glass, her gaze never left his. He held his wine up, and she clinked hers to his, ignoring the fact they were plastic.

“To new beginnings,” he whispered.

She scrunched up her nose. “And to not forgetting past wrongs.” She raised a salute to him and chugged the contents. When she finished, she met his stare and flushed. “What? I’m following your advice.”

“By all means, continue to do so. Here, have another.” Giving her his still-full cup, he rushed across the room to grab the bottle. Returning, Joseph poured her another full glass.

She looked at both the cups in her hands. “What? You have nerves of steel and don’t need help?”

“I’m on duty. Remember?”

She stuffed a cup back in his hands and marched away. “Oh. Right. I forgot. You’re babysitting me.” She plopped on the bed and leaned back on one arm, sipping her

beverage. The alcohol already made her brain a little fuzzy. She didn't often drink wine, and when she did, she sipped it with dinner. Giggling at his confused expression, she swallowed the rest of her drink, held out the empty glass, and smiled. "This is good."

"Maybe you should cool it a bit," he suggested but nevertheless approached with the bottle. "It would suck to be hanging over the toilet all night."

"Nah. I'll be fine," she assured him. He poured her more wine, but stopped when it hit the halfway mark. "Don't think I'm too tipsy to notice you only gave me half."

She played with a lock of her hair and scooted until she leaned back against the pillows. His gaze followed her movements, his eyes darkening to an emerald green when he sat on the edge of the bed.

"I wouldn't dream of underestimating your abilities." He put the bottle on the floor and took a sip of wine. "Tell me what you've been up to the past month or so. Your father said he asked you to go home to America, but you refused."

She shrugged. "My kids at the school need me. Most of their parents are too busy struggling to survive to raise them, so I'm all they've got. Who knows how long it would take to find a replacement for me?"

"Your father plans on leaving town next week when his mission is finished. I'm sure he plans on you accompanying him."

"He can plan all he wants. I'm not going anywhere." She couldn't leave her kids and her apartment, the place she and Joseph had shared. She couldn't leave her friends, her co-workers, and the life she'd built. She couldn't leave....

Him.

The realization hit her like a ton of bricks, but she had to acknowledge the truth behind the thought. She'd been able to ignore her lingering attraction for him because he had been gone. But now that she'd seen him again, touched him, she had a feeling he wouldn't disappear from her mind. He'd more than likely be in her head non-stop.

"Why won't you leave here? I'm sure there are some kids in America who need you as well." His voice washed over her, low and soothing. He set his glass on the floor—still half full—and shifted closer. "There are ways to help which won't endanger your life."

"Says the ATF agent," she drawled.

He smiled. "I'm different. I'm not you."

"Again with the double standards." She shook her head and finished her wine, slamming the empty cup on the side table.

She scooted a bit farther from him, and he took in her movements but didn't show disappointment or even anger. He looked amused, if anything. Time to wipe the smirk off his face.

"Anyway, besides working, I've been having fun with my friends. Going out at night. Picking up a few hot men to bring home. You know. The usual."

He growled and grabbed her ankle to drag her over to him. She ended up flat on her back with him braced over her. The wine made her head spin before she could focus on his face. She giggled.

"You think it's funny to torture me, to taunt me with the men you've screwed?" His breathing grew heavier, his anger increasing. "I spent the last few weeks trying to straighten things out between us, and you jumped on top of the next available dick."

It's disgusting."

She pushed his shoulders, but he captured her hands and pinned them to the mattress.

"Disgusting? I'm disgusting? Excuse me, but you're the one who betrayed me. And then you come here and insult me, insinuate I've done something to wrong you? You're ridiculous in your arrogance!" She struggled against his hold, but he didn't budge. "Get off of me!"

"No. You won't listen to what happened, but now you have to, because you're stuck."

"No, let me go! I don't want to know your reasons. It doesn't matter."

"The hell it doesn't! You'll listen to me, and you'll listen well. I'm not going to repeat it again. Everything started when I found out my friend from the war died. The same one who saved my life in Iraq. So I, stupidly, went out to get a drink with my—"

"I didn't bring any men home," she blurted.

He sucked in a breath. "What?"

Confusion shot through her, followed by anger. She didn't know why she'd interrupted him. All she knew was she sure as heck didn't want to hear his stupid excuses.

"I'm trying to talk to you here, and you just interrupt me with a random statement?" He choked on his words, eyes widening. "Wait, you mean you didn't move on? Didn't sleep with anyone else?"

"No one else seemed good enough to replace you," she whispered. His eyes widened,

and his penis hardened against her belly. “No one will ever be better than you.”

He groaned and leaned down to plunder her mouth, his tongue sweeping inside without any resistance. His hands still pressed hers to the mattress, and she fought to pull them free, eager to touch him. But he tightened his grip and ripped his mouth from hers. “No. I’m in charge tonight, pumpkin. You’re mine.”

She couldn’t help but feel his statement held two meanings, yet she chose to ignore the innuendo for the moment. She instead focused on the hot trail his mouth traced down her neck, knowing she should fight his embrace, knowing there must be at least a dozen reasons why she should stop kissing him back. But suddenly, she couldn’t remember them.

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He kissed her nose before looking down at her in determination. “You’re going to listen to me without talking.”

“No! I don’t want to hear this.” She squirmed, trying to break free. He’d planned his trap well, though. She couldn’t even wiggle a freaking leg. “Let me go!”

“Eva. Listen. The night you found me, I went out drinking with my old unit. We got carried away because we were mourning David’s death. One of my buddies suggested we hit up a strip club. Since we were all drunk, we thought it sounded great.”

“I don’t want to hear anymore! I’m sorry your friend died, but I’m failing to see how this excuses you cheating on me.”

“Shh. Listen. We all got rowdy and came back to our apartment. One of the guys brought a stripper along. I started feeling really sick, so I went to lie down. I’d only had a few drinks. Enough to get buzzed but not thattrashed.” His eyes beseeched hers to believe him. To trust him.

She laughed. She couldn’t help it. “So, I’m supposed to believe you were so drunk you didn’t notice a stripper crawling into your bed? Am I really so gullible?”

“I’m not done yet.” He closed his eyes, seeming to search for the right words. “When I woke up, you were yelling at me, screaming at me to get the hell out, and there was a woman standing next to me. You threw my clothes at my face, and I hauled ass out of there without even really knowing what the hell had happened.”

“Gee, I wonder why I did that,” she snapped, yanking on her wrists. How dare he hold her down and force her to listen to his miserable reasons for cheating on her? Asshole. “I swear to God if you don’t let me up, I’ll kill you.”

“When I stumbled out of the building carrying my clothes since I wasn’t allowed to get dressed,” he continued without hesitation, “I realized I’d lost my wallet and watch. By the time I made it back to base, the puking started.”

“Shut the hell up!” she shouted. Tears came to her eyes as she arched her back.

He finally released her, rolling to the other side of the mattress. She lunged at him, knocking him off the bed.

Tightening her fists, she leaned over the side of the bed and snarled, “You’re lying!”

“No, I’m not.” He hopped back on his feet, grabbing her shoulders. “I’m finally getting a chance to tell you the truth. She didn’t f**k me—she robbed me.”

Against her wishes, images came into her mind, hitting her in the gut full force. The stripper sitting next to Joseph with his watch in her palm. The terrified look on her face as she shoved something into her purse. All along, she’d thought the woman panicked because she’d walked in on them. What if it had been more? What if she’d caught the bitch robbing him—and let her go?

He had looked gaunt on the bed, his breathing shallow. She’d just assumed it was from the alcohol and sex.

“And I’m supposed to believe that?” Her heart raced at the possibility he could be innocent. Could she even begin to imagine the scenario? “So you’re an innocent victim? You never touched her?”

“It’s true. I’ve been told the same story from numerous witnesses. I never touched her. I shouldn’t have allowed a stripper in our home, it’s true, but that’s all I’m guilty of.”

“So you’re telling me, after over a month of me believing you slept with another woman, you were faithful? You were simply mourning a man you cared for? Got carried away with booze? That’s it?”

He nodded. “I didn’t touch her. I swear it. Now, we can move on. We’ve been given a second chance.”

“Why didn’t you try harder?” she whispered. All this time she’d been picturing him as this...this monster. And he hadn’t bothered to tell her the truth? “You’ve had six weeks to tell me the real story.”

“I tried. For three days, I was sick as hell. Puking my guts out. I had a bad reaction to the drug she slipped into my drink. I needed to be hospitalized for dehydration.”

“Wait a second,” she said slowly. Sitting up on her haunches, she frowned. “That bitch drugged you?”

“Yes.” He grabbed her hands, squeezing tight. “That’s why I wasn’t banging down your door right away. And then, when I tried, your—”

“You didn’t try,” she said. Remembered pain echoed through her heart, and she closed her eyes as tears escaped. “You never tried. I waited. You didn’t come.”

“Yes, I did. Every time I got within three feet of the place, or your school, your father had men waiting for me. I tried to fight through them,” he shrugged, “but even I can’t win a match against six guys. Especially not in those days right after.”

“My father didn’t do anything like that!”

“Oh yeah?” he snapped, eyes flashing. “Ask him.”

“What about the rest of the six weeks? What’s your excuse for those?”

“Your father,” he said slowly, “pulled some strings with his buddies in the US, and had me reassigned overseas. With no warning. The only reason he brought me back was because of—”

“Me. I don’t believe this,” she whispered. “I can’t.”

“It’s true. I swear. I’ll make it up to you, but I never cheated on you.” He ran a hand over his head and then gestured at her. “Why would I? Look at you.”

She gritted her teeth. “I don’t really know what to say here. To any of this.”

“Say nothing, then.” He sat beside her, playing with her hair. His touch sent shivers down her spine. He seemed to notice, for he tugged a little harder. “You know the truth now. That’s all that matters.”

“Do I?” She scowled at him, leaning her cheek on her raised knees. “I’m not sure.”

“You do. You know it, too. Why would I cheat on you? Did I give you any signs I wasn’t completely happy with you?”

She scowled deeper, but grudgingly shook her head.

“I love you. You know it.”

“I don’t know who I’m more pissed at. You, her, or my father,” she growled. “But it

changes nothing.”

“Yes, it does. It changes everything.” He picked her up, plopped her on his lap, and crushed her lips beneath his. She put up a token resistance, but really, who did she think she was kidding? Certainly not him. His tongue plunged into her mouth, and she clung to his shirt, tugging him closer.

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He tore his lips from hers, nibbling at the base of her throat, and she groaned at the sensations assaulting her. Fire, ice, and desire all warred within her, and her legs itched to wrap around his waist.

He licked the skin above the neckline of her T-shirt and nudged the top down with his chin, so he could caress the swell of her breast. His chin brushed against her erect nipple, and she arched her back, panting for more.

“Please, Joseph,” she begged. She writhed, needing to feel him all over her, to have his skin on hers, his flesh on her flesh.

“What do you want, Eva? Do you want me to stop?” He lifted his head from her br**sts and met her stare.

She inhaled at what she saw there, so pure and open in his eyes. He loves me. She knew it to be true, just as she knew she loved him still.

“I will, but you’d better tell me now. If I wait another second, I’m not sure I’ll be able to.”

She nodded and rose to kiss him. He pulled away, sitting on his haunches, and released her hands.

“Maybe this is a bad idea. You’re drunk. And I’m on duty.”

She lurched up after him, grabbing his hair to pull his face back to hers. “I am not drunk. I’m horny, and I need you. Now.”

She crushed her lips to his and slipped her tongue inside his mouth. With a groan, she arched against him and ran her fingers over his shoulders, down to the small of his back to jerk his shirt up. He rocked back on his heels, so she could yank the garment over his head. Seconds later, he'd relieved her of her blouse and tossed it to the side. She skimmed her fingers over his taut torso, enjoying the feel of his crisp hair on her fingertips. She circled his nipple with her nail, and he moaned, flipping her onto her back.

This time, though, he nestled in between her legs and rolled his hips until she forgot to breathe. With a smooth motion, he reached under her, unclasped her bra, and threw it over with her other clothes.

“Jesus Christ, I’ve missed you so.” he muttered before cupping her br**sts and burying his face in her bosom. He nipped the side of her left globe and then took her nipple in his mouth.

She cried out and squirmed, desire overcoming her. Her body demanded more. Grabbing his ass, she pressed against him and tugged at his jeans. “Off.”

He lifted his head from her breast and grinned. “Okay.” Joseph hopped off the bed and unbuttoned his pants. “But yours have to go, too.”

He peeled his jeans off inch by inch, revealing the glorious body she'd missed more than she wanted to admit. When he dropped them, kicking them to the side, only his black boxers remained between her and her ultimate goal.

Her mouth watered. Eva bucked up, stripping off her pants as quickly as she could manage. Bunched fabric snagged her ankle, stopping her progress, and she struggled to free herself. “Shit.”

“Hmm. Looks like you need some help.”

She bit her lip, nodding. Anything to get naked faster and him inside her. Leaning down, he released her leg only to nibble the sensitive spot behind her ankle while running his fingers behind her knee. She quivered, placing her hands under his arms to yank him up her body. Tearing at his boxers' waistband, she dug her nails into his lower back. God, she wanted him to kiss her while thrusting into her in one swift movement, but he avoided her clasping hands, instead licking her inner thigh—oh so close to where she longed for him to be. She whimpered, jerking his hair as she shifted toward his mouth.

He removed her panties and raised her hips. His hot breath fanned her swollen flesh, and she whimpered, grasping his shoulders. His gaze met hers in triumph before he flicked his tongue over her. She cried out, striving to move closer to him. He held her still with a firm grip and caressed her with his tongue. Her senses heightened, and her entire body tensed with need, demanding satisfaction. When at last he plunged a finger inside her, a cry tore from the back of her throat, sounding distant to her hazy mind. Pleasure tore through her body, all the tension inside her releasing, leaving her legs shaking and her arms weak. How in the hell had she survived without this—without him? Could she go back to surviving it?

He flipped her onto her knees. As he opened the condom, the crackle of the wrapper met her ears, and she wiggle impatiently for him to take her. Kissing the nape of her neck, he rose over her and plunged inside.

“Oh, Joseph!”

With each stroke, he increased their rhythm. His hips jerked to the left, telling her he would come quickly, so she reached between her legs to stroke his balls.

“Eva,” he yelled, thrusting once, twice, his body tensing against hers, his fingers tightening on her hips as they climaxed together. A moment later, he withdrew and collapsed beside her, pulling her down with him, so she rested in his embrace.

They stayed twined in each other's arms until their breathing calmed. He brushed her hair away from her face to kiss her temple. Nothing could have broken her from her pleasure-filled daze more so than that. She raised herself to an elbow, staring down into his eyes. They glowed with happiness.

Shit.

How had she let this happen? Nothing had changed between them. He'd still broken her heart. Couldn't be trusted. Yet, he looked at her...as if they were a couple again. Why did he have to look so damn satisfied?

And where did he get off assuming she would be happy about this, too? She'd been in his company for mere hours, and already she'd jumped back in bed with him.

Disgust rolled through her veins. How had she let this happen? How could she let him back in, after all he'd put her through? He came into her life, spouted a handful of excuses about what had happened—lies, more than likely—and she'd smiled and stripped naked without so much as a hesitant twitch. She had no pride. No dignity. And, no self-control.

"I'm so glad we get a second chance at this," he murmured into her ear, squeezing her tight.

"A second chance," she echoed. She trembled from the force of emotions fighting inside her—disbelief, pleasure, shock, panic. All of them fought over her, trying to get the upper hand. Why did it seem to hurt more now, hearing he might be innocent, than when she thought he'd betrayed her? She felt...guilty. As if she'd wronged him. She preferred being the one hurt, it seemed. Guilt didn't suit her any more than yellow. Both washed her out. Rolling into a sitting position, she rested her forehead on her knees, trying to hide her expression from him. He always could tell how she felt by looking at her eyes. Damn inconvenient at times like this.

“You have to believe me now. I never did anything to hurt you. You should have let me explain earlier. All this lost time....” He sat up, stroked her cheek with his thumb. “I love you. God, it feels good to say that again.”

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Her hands shook. She clutched her legs harder to hide the telltale sign of her panic.

“Come here. Let me show you just how much I adore you.” He massaged her neck.

She peered at him over her shoulder, but averted her gaze before he saw too much.

“Um, yeah. I mean, I have to—”

She gave up trying to make a coherent sentence, dropping her head back to her upraised knees. All the words she could say to end that sentence ran through her head. Get out. Leave. Stay.

Too much. Too fast.

Would her dad really have kept them apart? Could he have gone so far as to threaten Joseph’s job? Maybe even...his life? No way. She couldn’t believe it, couldn’t trust Joseph.

“What’s wrong?” He stopped massaging and tightened his grip on her shoulders.

“Why won’t you look at me?”

She straightened, took a deep breath, and faced him, purposely making eye contact.

“This was great. Really. A great way to end everything. You know? Now we can look back fondly, instead of with pain.”

“Look back? End things?” He stared, not moving. If not for the grinding of his teeth, she’d have thought he turned into a statue. His face turned red, and she cringed.

“That’s all this is to you? A goodbye f**k? I tell you I love you, and you send me on

my way?”

Her eyes filled with tears. She hugged her chest, feeling exposed and inappropriately naked. “Yes, of course. We were both horny. We used each other to fix it. What else would it have been?”

She ignored the tugging of her heart. Ignored its screams about what an idiot she was. She’d listened before. What had it gotten her? Nowhere good.

“Oh, yeah. Of course. How foolish of me to have thought you might feel something else.” He shoved off the bed, stomped to the trashcan, chucked the condom in it, and tugged on his jeans before storming into the bathroom. When he came out a minute later, he looked even angrier than before. “You’re worse than I’ll ever be. You thought I hurt you, but at least I didn’t seek to rip you apart. You refuse to listen to reason, won’t acknowledge the truth, and do it all without the tiniest bit of remorse. Do you even have a heart inside that cold chest of yours?”

Tears rolled down her cheeks, and she swallowed past the lump in her throat. He didn’t get it. Didn’t understand she couldn’t risk loving him again—couldn’t allow him in her life, only to break her heart once more. “I didn’t—”

“I never should have taken this assignment. Never should have allowed your dad to talk me into it. Now, I’m stuck in this room with you, and I can’t do anything about it.” The last word ended on a shout.

When he threw the bin containing his belongings across the room, she flinched. He glared at all the clothes he’d spilled out on the floor. She followed his gaze, gulping in a deep breath as she laid eyes on all of the things she’d deemed worthy enough to save. Scattered memories on the floor—taunting her feelings without remorse.

“Joseph, I don’t want to fight. I’m sorry if you’re—”

“Oh, stop it. You got what you wanted,” he sneered. He crammed his shoes on and yanked his shirt over his head. “You stay here. I’m going to get a phone. Quite frankly, I don’t want to be near you right now.”

She shot to her feet. “I thought I needed to stay with you.”

He checked his weapon, pivoting to her. His gaze traveled down every inch of her naked body. He paled and swung away from her, his shoulders hunched. “Not right now. You’re in more danger from me than any damn Cartel.” He opened the door and stepped out into the hallway. Without facing her, he turned his head to snarl, “And put your damn clothes on.”

The door banged closed behind him, and Eva collapsed to the bed. Oh God, what had she done? She hadn’t wanted to hurt him. She didn’t want to love him, either.

The idea of opening her heart to him, after she’d discovered just how horrible it could feel when he broke it, seemed too much for her. What if she allowed herself to care and he decided she was more trouble than she was worth, or grew sick of her temper and stubbornness? What if he left her for good after he realized she didn’t deserve him?

No. She couldn’t do it. She was right to push him away. To end things and save herself from more pain.

Why, then, did it hurt so much?

Chapter Five

Joseph leaned against the door, drawing in a shaky breath. He couldn’t believe after he’d made her listen to the truth, after he’d told her he loved her, that she’d told him she’d had fun and said goodbye.

What the f**k did she mean, anyway?

One didn't pour their heart into another's hands only to turn to say, "Well, I had fun, but I never really want to be with you again." Did they? He damn well didn't. He'd given himself to her in every way possible, and she'd rejected it all. She should have just shot him in the heart—it would have hurt a heck of a lot less.

He sighed, rubbing his neck. No, really, the whole thing reeked of unfairness. His treatment of her. Her blasé reaction to his confession. It all...well, it sucked. Yet, he would have sworn he'd seen something in her eyes while he'd made love to her, leading him to believe she'd felt more than base lust. Apparently, it had been put there by his own desire to have her love him, his own need to hold her until they turned old and gray.

Pain squeezed his heart, demanding he lash out at something. Anything. He needed to blow off some damn steam, or he would combust. She'd had an itch. He'd scratched it. Now, she wanted to move on. He damn well didn't, but he couldn't force her to have feelings for him. Couldn't make her trust him or even want to trust him.

He'd been trying his damn best to get her to listen to him, and now that she had, it hadn't changed a thing. He couldn't blame her father this time, either. The anger lay solely at her feet. He didn't like it one little f**king bit.

Helplessness didn't sit well inside him. He never liked being out of control of his life, hated allowing someone the power to hurt him. He'd given too much to her, not to mention too much of himself. Time for that to change. Time to revert to his old way of life before Eva—not allowing anyone inside his brain. Or his heart.

Grunting, he stomped down the hallway and out of the hotel. He needed to hurry. Angry at her or not, he would still keep her safe from anything or anyone threatening her.

Eva stood under the water, allowing the shower to wash away the evidence of her lapse in judgment. She didn't know what felt worse. The fact he'd never cheated on her and she'd refused him the chance to explain his side of the story to her, or maybe that she still didn't trust him. For over a month, she'd thought him a lying, two-faced scumbag. How could she flip a switch in her mind, believing he spoke the truth? What man wouldn't lie when asked if he'd cheated?

But he hadn't defended himself. Now, all this time had been lost between them, and he expected her to pick back up where they'd left off. As if nothing had happened. Had her father really done all the things Joseph accused him of? It wouldn't be too difficult to imagine him doing it. But even knowing of Joseph's supposed innocence, she couldn't commit to him. Could she?

Without warning, the shower curtain was yanked back. Eva screamed and spun to face her intruder, soapy arm held out at chest level—what would she kill the man with, bubbles?—only to find Joseph staring at her with hooded eyes. He stepped into the shower, clothes and all, pressing her into the corner until he stood so close their noses touched.

“You say you don't love me. You lie,” he accused, his voice raw.

She shook her head, swallowing hard. “No, I never said I didn't love you.” Water dripped into her eyes, but she did not look away from his face. She couldn't lie. Not to him. “I only said I didn't know what to do.”

His brow furrowed. “Why not? I told you I’d never been unfaithful. I told you I loved you. What the hell do you want from me?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered. She trembled in his arms, clinging to him while trying not to get lost in his hypnotic eyes. But she failed. Boy, did she fail. “I don’t know what I want anymore.”

“I damn well know what you want. I’m right here. You want sex without attachment? Fine. Don’t come crying to me when you realize you lost the man you loved—again.” He peeled off his wet shirt, tossing it out of the shower. His pants followed, and she noticed he’d set his gun on the counter beside the sink—within easy reach—before climbing inside the shower with her. Did he ever lose his cool, not plan ahead for unforeseen circumstances? “I’ll be your toy to use as you please, but once this is over...so are we.”

“Joseph, I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Too late.” He fondled her br**sts and nibbled on her earlobe. “But it won’t stop me from f**king you until I leave.”

“Don’t be so vulgar.”

He bit her neck, and she moaned. Lifting her, he caressed her knee while he wrapped her legs around his hips. He entered her in one smooth thrust, and she threw her head back. The cold tile pressed against her skin while the hot water washed over her and Joseph.

He panted, plunging inside her again. “It’s what you wanted, isn’t it? We won’t make love, we’ll just have fun.” He withdrew again before driving back in. “Just like you thought we were before.”

He reached down, caressing her above where their bodies joined, while continuing to tantalize her with his motions. She dug her nails into his back, moved to kiss him, but he avoided her lips, instead burying his nose in her wet hair.

“Kiss me,” she said, pulling his face to hers.

Slapping his hand over the lever, he shut off the water. Joseph carried her, dripping wet, out of the bathroom and into the bedroom. They fell on top of the bedspread, never breaking their intimate contact. With his hands now free, he caressed her breasts again while he leaned down to take her nipple into his mouth. When he began his slow movements inside her once more, she arched her back, rocking her hips in blatant invitation.

“Harder,” she groaned.

He looked at her, not grinning and kissing her like he usually would have. He increased his tempo until they both panted and moaned, sweat intermingling with the wetness from their shower. He licked his thumb and caressed her clitoris until she exploded against his fingers. Thrusting once, twice more, he withdrew from her to spill himself on the sheets.

She reached up to pull him down on the mattress with her, but he hopped out of her reach, and her hands flailed in the air. Striding into the bathroom, he shut the door and latched the lock, the sound echoing through the room like a gunshot. Eva flinched, sensing the bolted door symbolized his feelings for her. They were now behind lock and key—away from her.

While she contemplated the closed door, she realized he hadn’t kissed her.

Not even once.

Joseph leaned against the cold porcelain sink, his breath coming fast and hard. He didn't know what had come over him. When he'd returned to the room to find her missing, he'd panicked. What if she'd gotten angry and left him in a fit of fury? What if the Cartel had come in the short five minutes he'd been gone?

Just when he'd been about to leave, gun in his hand, he'd heard the shower running. He'd rushed into the room—eager to find her alive and well. He'd seen that, indeed, and much more. His c**k had hardened when he saw her. Sure, she'd broken his heart, rejecting his love without a second thought. Even so, his body demanded more.

He'd locked the door, placed his gun on the counter by the sink, and climbed in with her. In one split second, he'd gone from mad to maddened with desire for her. She wanted him. He didn't need to look at her erect ni**les to know how much. He'd give her what she wanted. Sure, why not? They'd have sex, not make love. Simple enough, right?

He'd done it like the hookers did. No kisses, no love. Just a good lay. He'd accomplished keeping himself distanced, managing to hold a tight control over his emotions. Now, however, anger at her refusal give him her love ate at him while he mopped up the excess water off the floor and turned on the faucet. Time for a real shower.

Yeah, he'd remained cool. Calm. Collected.

But why the hell did it have to be so hard?

Eva dressed, crawled under the covers, and pulled them up to her chin. She didn't

want to be naked in front of him again. Didn't want to seem as if she taunted him into submission by using her body.

Ha. As if he'd ever be subservient.

She'd hurt him more than he let on if his hasty retreat behind a locked door could be counted on. His refusal to kiss her spoke louder than words. He'd removed himself emotionally from her, she assumed he remained by her side because he'd been assigned to guard her. And, of course, for the sex.

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The shower turned off. Something hit the floor, clattering across the linoleum, and he cursed. Probably the toothbrushes. Biting back a sob, she rolled to her side, putting her back to the door. She squeezed her eyes shut, concentrating on keeping her breathing even.

Maybe if he thought she was asleep, he would crawl into bed with her to hold her tight, like he used to. If he thought she was asleep, maybe he would feel safe caving into his emotions.

The door opened behind her. She counted to three between each breath, careful to keep her face relaxed even when she sensed his shadow over her. Any second now, he would kiss her forehead or tuck a stray hair behind her ear.

Like he used to.

He shut off the light and crawled into bed behind her—as far away from her as he could manage without falling off. On top of the damp covers.

She fought back the tears stinging behind her closed lids.

Joseph lay on his side, propped up on his elbow, resisting the urge to awaken Eva. The morning sun filtered in past the shades, bathing her in a soft glow. Her hair lay across her pillow. Her eyes looked swollen, as if she'd fallen asleep crying.

Had she?

Anger still controlled his emotions, helped him feel as though he hadn't had his heart crushed by the woman sleeping peacefully across from him. Why should he care if she felt the need to be upset? He'd treated her like she wanted...a good lay.

Fuck it all to hell and back. She asked for it, she got it. If she found the sex lacking, she had herself to blame. Sighing, he left the bed and pulled on his jeans, eager to make a phone call in privacy. He grabbed his gun and his prepaid cell, and after ensuring the key remained in his pocket, he crept out the door. Shirtless and barefoot, he padded out to the hallway to punch in Hugo's cell number.

After three rings, Hugo picked up. "Hello?"

"It's me. I'm not staying on long for fear of being tracked. How is the timeline going?"

"Is she okay?" Hugo asked, ignoring his questions.

Joseph ground his teeth, taking a deep breath. The man couldn't even answer a f**king question when asked directly. No wonder Eva frustrated him so much. She'd learned from the best.

"She's fine. I don't know how much more I can take of being stuck in one room with her, though." She's breaking my heart each time she opens her pretty little mouth.

"Suck it up, boy. This isn't about you," Hugo snapped.

Joseph gripped the phone tighter. "You're the one who wouldn't let me explain what happened last month. It's your fault she can't handle being around me."

"I'm glad I did, too. She doesn't need a loser like you in her life," Hugo retorted.

He ground his teeth together, resisting the urge to plow his fist through the wall. What an arrogant ass**le. “Listen, Hugo—”

“The meeting got moved up after all the violence,” Hugo continued in a no-nonsense way. “I told the frontrunner I demanded to speak to his boss, or I’d send my file of all our secretly recorded conversations to the authorities.”

Joseph whistled through his teeth. “Why don’t you just paint a target on your forehead?”

“Anything to move this along quickly. I need Eva to be safe. From them...and you.”

The door to their room clicked closed, and Joseph jerked around toward the sound. He ran a hand through his hair and grimaced. Shit, she’d heard him. “I have to go,” he told Hugo on the phone. “Too dangerous. I’ll call later.”

“Wait! Can I—”

Joseph hung up, smiling at the mental image of the man glaring at his phone, sputtering in anger. The small things in life felt too damn good to give up.

With a sigh, he entered their room. She sat on the edge of the bed, glaring at him.

Why did she have to look so damn good?

Eva scowled. He smirked and slipped his phone in his pocket. Her gaze dipped to admire his bare chest before she reined her wayward thoughts in. Still, she couldn’t help but remember how good his skin felt against hers. Asshole. She watched his muscles ripple when he closed the door.

He turned and studied her with a resigned expression. “What did I do now?”

“If you’re so miserable, why don’t you sit in the corner and ignore me? Go in time-out or something.” She tried to hide the hurt feelings behind a snide tone, but feared she’d failed. If only she could find the right words to make him see she wasn’t rejecting him. She just needed some time to process all the new information he’d shoved down her throat.

Was that so much to ask for?

“If I needed to, I would.” With a blank expression, he leaned back, one shoulder resting against the wall, his arms crossed. “If you don’t want to hear a private conversation, then don’t eavesdrop.”

“I wasn’t spying.” She shot to her feet, advancing on him. “I wanted to see if you were still here or if you’d left.”

“You should know better than to think I’d shirk my duties.”

“Is that all I am to you now, a duty?” She shoved his shoulders, and he stumbled a bit before righting himself. “Some stupid assignment you’re forced to handle?”

Stubborn silence. Reaching toward her, he picked her up, placed her out of his path, and walked to the pile of clothes resting by the door.

He shrugged on his T-shirt and faced her. “What am I supposed to say, Eva? What do you want from me?”

“I don’t like you being so cold. So distant,” she said as she fiddled with the hem of her nightie. “Why does it have to be all or nothing with you?”

He growled and stalked toward her, seeming to double in size the closer he got. With her chin tilted up and her face squared to him, she stood her ground.

“I haven’t been anything but what you asked for. You asked me to make love to you. I did. You told me you didn’t want a relationship. I said fine. I give you sex. You complain it isn’t enough. It seems to me you’re the problem here, not me.” He snatched his shoes off the floor, shooting her a dirty look.

“Are you running out again in the middle of another fight?” she taunted, not wanting him to leave. So, she’d spat out the first thing that popped into her mind, sure to make him angry enough to stay. Maybe he’d be so angry he’d shut her up with a kiss. And she could continue the pretense of her not wanting him. Or his kisses. “I don’t remember you being so cowardly before.”

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He clenched his fists, pivoting to face her. His face darkened even more than before, the muscle in his jaw ticked in warning. “First of all, you have to care about someone to have a fight. You already decided we weren’t supposed to have those feelings for each other. Second, the only coward in this room is you. You’re too scared to love me and too scared to let me go.

“Well, pumpkin, you can’t have both. You might be happy in limbo, but I’m done with this shit. I’m moving on with my life. Until then, I’m stuck with you and your drama. So, I’m going to go get us some breakfast. In case you hadn’t noticed, we have no food. I’ll be back in five minutes.”

The door slammed behind him.

God, when had she become such a bitch? She burst into tears. Why did she continue to yell at him, blame him for everything? He was right—she’d done nothing except tell him everything he’d done wrong. She’s driven him further away with each jab she took. Maybe this time she’d struck too hard. She’d called him a coward. He, who served in the war in the Marines, worked for the ATF. She’d never felt so ashamed in her life. She couldn’t even find the courage to apologize. She should run after him, stop him.

She dashed to the door, heedless of her pajamas and bare feet, and jerked the door open only to skid to a halt in the hallway. Joseph was gone. A man stood right next to her door, dressed in black.

“Antonio? What are you doing here?” she asked. “How did you find me?” Why would he be in the same hotel? He couldn’t have tracked her down. Unless...

He's Cartel.

She spun and ran for the room, but he'd latched onto her hair and stopped her short. Antonio dragged her to him until her back crashed against his chest and his hand slapped over her mouth. The tip of a knife pressed on the side her throat.

"Hello, darling. You're going to come with me, or your precious agent will be dead before he knows what hit him. Even as we speak, I have a man following him, simply waiting for my cue. Come with me like a good girl, or he dies."

Foul breath dusted her ear, and disgust rolled down her spine to make her shiver. She bit down on his hand until he yelped and released her mouth. "You son of a bitch, you'll never outsmart him. He's probably already shot your man and is heading here as we speak. You'll be nothing but a bloody carcass once he's done with you."

She tried to hide the tremor of fear at his words. Could Joseph be caught off-guard, distracted by their fight? Maybe he wouldn't see the attack in time to stop it. When she pictured him lying dead in an alley somewhere, her heart skipped a beat. How could she go on with her life knowing she'd been the reason he died? Knowing her stupid temper had shoved him away, making him forget to watch his back. Even now, he could be dead. Because of her.

But he'd never be so careless, no matter what she said, would he? He was a professional. He wouldn't leave himself open to attack.

Antonio grabbed her hair and jerked until her neck arched backward and she was forced to look in his eyes. "I wouldn't be so sure. He looked awfully handsome in his green T-shirt...and missing gun. He had quite the scowl on his face, as well. Did you fight, perhaps? Make him angry enough so he forgot his protection? Such a shame for him to go out unarmed in this town."

He twisted the hair in his fist, pressing the knife deeper. Blood trickled down her neck, and she moaned. A bluff? Or had Joseph left without his gun? She'd never seen him be so careless. Of course, she'd never seen him so upset before, either. She had to save him, or she'd never forgive herself.

“Why don't you just kill me and be done with it? You've tried twice already.”

“The game plan has changed. Your father is getting too cocky. You're our leverage. If he fails to do as I demand, then you'll be dead soon enough. But, I might need to have a little fun first.” He used the knife to trace a path down to her breast, and he groped the globe, squeezing hard. The handle dug into her skin almost as much as his fingers. Eva squirmed.

“Weakling. Is this the only way you can get a woman? With a knife and threats?”

“Oh, don't worry. You'll see exactly how I treat women.”

He slammed her face into the stucco and groped her ass from behind. He bit down on her neck, and she flinched at the pain. The wall scraped her cheek raw, but she refused to whimper.

“Now, here's how it's gonna work, sweet cheeks. You follow me without a fight and look happy to be doing so. Any word out of you, and he's dead. Got it?”

She nodded and mumbled a question into the wall. He spun her by her hair until she faced him, and her back rested against the rough stucco.

“What did you say?” he rumbled.

“I said, won't it look odd for me to be walking around in my pajamas in broad daylight?”

He laughed. “Not my problem. They’ll just think you’re a slob.”

She spit in his face, smiling when he growled and wiped his cheek clean using his free hand. He slapped her hard, making the room tilt at an odd angle before her eyes. She flinched, fighting the pain. The hell if she’d show him any weakness. The bastard might kill her, but he wouldn’t break her.

He released her hair but kept the knife at her throat and brought the phone to his ear. “Pedro? Are you still on his tail? Good. I’ll let you know when I secure her in the car.” He turned to Eva and gave her a mockery of a grin. “Okay, your man is still alive...for now. Come with me, and he’ll stay that way.”

She hesitated. “How do I know you won’t kill him?” She knew she would leave with him no matter what if it kept Joseph safe, but she also needed to stall. The longer it took her to get in his car, the less time she would be in his possession. And the less time he would have to rape and mutilate her. “Why should I trust you?”

He laughed in her face and shoved her toward the elevator. He jammed the down button with his free hand, yanking on her hair in the process. She bit back a cry.

“You don’t. And you can’t. But it’s the only choice you have.”

She tried not to think of Joseph being attacked without his weapon as Antonio shoved her inside. She tried not to picture him shot in the head like the men in her building had been. All brains and blood—sightless eyes. She hit the button for the bottom level with a shaky finger. Eva slipped her hands behind her back in an attempt to hide her weakness from her captor. Joseph would be all right. He’d survived war and countless missions. He knew how to stay alive.

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And he'd save her before Antonio killed her. She had to be brave and bide her time. The elevator opened, and Antonio led her into the lobby and outside into the daylight. She scanned the lobby, examining any men who lurked in corners. Maybe Joseph would jump out and rescue her. When she realized she had no one to help her, her heartbeat sped up.

More time. She needed more time. Then he would come. "I have to go to the bathroom," she said in a rush.

"Not a chance," Antonio hissed in her ear,

"Would you rather I go on your car seat?" she asked.

"Do so and die. You are coming with me, now. No breaks, no stalling. Or he's dead."

He pushed toward a black car that awaited them. Antonio grabbed her hair and shoved her face first into the backseat. She tumbled inside, smacking her head on the seatbelt clasp. Eva scrambled away from him, scooting until she rammed into the rear passenger door. He seated himself beside her, his gaze following all the way up the length of her bare legs. Caressing her thigh, he pursed his lips.

She flinched and shoved his hand off. "Don't touch me. And call off your man. I cooperated as I said I would."

Antonio laughed and pounded on the headrest in front of him to tell his driver to go. Once they pulled onto the highway and accelerated, he picked up his phone and dialed a number. "Pedro? We have her in the car."

Eva breathed a sigh of relief and sagged against the seat. She'd done it. She'd saved Joseph from an ambush. Antonio traced an invisible path from the bottom of her leg to the top and inched her hem up further, peeking underneath. She slapped his hand away once more and met his gaze.

He smirked at her, digging his fingers into her thigh until she squirmed. "You can kill him now, if you haven't already. We don't want him coming for her."

Chapter Six

Joseph had a tail. He'd suspected it a block ago. After a sharp right turn, followed by a left, he knew his suspicions to be true. It appeared the Cartel had tracked them down. The question that burned in his mind, however, was whether they'd found Eva. After he lost the shadow, he would ascertain whether her whereabouts had been compromised. He dipped into an alleyway and drew his weapon, not waiting long before the man who'd followed ducked into the dimness. He pistol whipped the fool on the back of the head with a quick, decisive swing and stepped over the unconscious body.

Sprinting back to Eva, heart racing in fear, he called his superior and informed him to send two uniforms to pick up the unconscious f**ker and hold the man for questioning. Doubtful the Cartel's soldier would give them much, but it would be worth a shot. He holstered the Glock 22 and rushed to the hotel.

Their room door stood open, and a quick peek inside showed all of Eva's belongings still in her bag. If she'd left out of anger instead of force, she would have grabbed her purse.

"Fuck!" he bellowed and kicked the door. Damn it, they had her. If she wasn't dead already, she would soon wish she were.

He sprinted out of the hotel and hopped in his car to speed to Hugo's house. When he arrived, he marched past the staff and guards, who all rushed out of his way and shot him horrified looks as he swept by. If they hadn't recognized him from his numerous past visits, he knew they would have taken him to the ground within seconds of his entry. He stomped into Hugo's office without bothering to knock and found him sitting at the conference table, reading the paper with a mug of coffee at his side. Upon seeing Joseph, the old man leapt to his feet, peering over Joseph's shoulder.

Hugo paled and, grabbing Joseph's shirt, he shoved him against the fireplace. "Where is she, you son of a bitch?"

Gritting his teeth, Joseph didn't bother to fight back, even though his head slammed against the brick. He needed to be reprimanded, to have someone in his face. How could he have let the Cartel take Eva right out from under his watch? What the hell had he been thinking, leaving her alone in the hotel? She was his responsibility, and he'd failed her like a piece of shit rookie. If Hugo felt the need to try and kick his ass, so be it.

"They got to her when I went for breakfast. She's been gone no more than an hour."

"You left her alone?"

"At the time, it seemed better than bringing her out in public or ordering delivery. I didn't want to risk discovery." Joseph's heart pounded, and the roaring in his ears oddly reminded him of the ocean during a storm. He needed to stop explaining and find Eva before they ran out of time. He brought his hands up between Hugo's forearms and shoved out, breaking the old man's grip on his collar. "Tell me everything you know. Now."

"You're off the case. I'll bring in someone capable of finishing the job. You, obviously, were not the best option." With a scowl, Hugo turned to grab the cordless

phone on his desk.

“Son of a bitch!” Joseph grabbed a clock on the mantle and catapulted it across the room. It shattered into hundreds of pieces.

“What the hell?” Hugo spun to face him, astonishment on his features and the phone in his grip, the dial tone sounding.

Joseph stared at the broken pieces of the clock in shock. How the hell had he allowed his temper, his agony, to get the better of him? He needed to focus on saving Eva. Gritting his teeth, Joseph flexed his fingers and faced Hugo with renewed determination. He wouldn’t allow his emotions to get the better of him again. He couldn’t afford any more stupid mistakes.

“Get a hold of yourself, agent,” Hugo warned.

Joseph strode over to him, grabbed the phone, and disconnected the call before tossing the receiver back onto the table.

“You’re way out of line,” Hugo snapped.

Joseph seized his shoulders and shook him. “No, you’re out of line. I will not sit idly by while the woman I love is mutilated and murdered. You’re going to tell me where to go, and now, because I intend to blow their goddamn heads off, one by one, until I find her. Do you f**king understand?” He shook Hugo one last time for emphasis and stared him down.

Hugo opened his mouth, closed it, and nodded. He pushed Joseph off. “Fine. But you better not screw it up this time.”

Joseph gave a tight nod before pulling his gun out to count bullets. He had thirteen

left, and an extra magazine on the other side of his belt. He switched out the partial magazine for the full. Jaw clenched, Joseph replaced his pistol and turned to Hugo. “I’m ready to kick ass. Where am I going, and who’s the target?”

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Reaching under his fallen paper, Hugo withdrew a picture and handed it to Joseph. “This intelligence came in ten minutes ago. We believe he’s the man threatening Eva and me. The head-honcho. His name is—”

“Antonio Soto.”

“How the hell do you know him?” Hugo’s eyes lit up at Joseph’s knowledge. “Do you know where to find him?”

He crumpled the paper in his fist, chucking it at the wall. He couldn’t wait to get his hands on the sick ass**le. And to think he could have had him, could have ended this before it even began. God damn it. “Fucking piece of shit. I could have shot the bastard. He had a date scheduled with Eva, showed up at her place. Shortly after, we were attacked.”

“He had a date with her? He would’ve kidnapped her then, to be sure.”

“Probably. Where is he?”

Hugo handed him another sheet of paper and grabbed an identical one off his desk. He headed to the door, speaking over his shoulder as they exited. “Here are his last known properties. You check the first three with a team of men, and I’ll check the last three. Take no chances, and waste no time. The longer she’s in his hands, the less her chances of walking away.”

“Send them after me. I’m leaving now.” Joseph didn’t wait for Hugo’s response. He strode out the door and got into his car. If the man wanted him to have backup, then

he'd take care of it. But he would be damned if he'd wait.

Eva lay on her belly, face pressed into a bare mattress, panting while she jerked her arms...a wiggle here, a twist there. Ugh, she'd almost gotten free that time. They'd secured her wrists and also her ankles, but the person who'd tied the knots had no talent with the task, so she'd just about managed to free her left hand.

Sun shone through a clear spot on the filthy window overhead, casting a beam down to the ground and illuminating with disgusting detail just how dirty her prison was. A steel pot rested in the corner, and she suspected it had nothing to do with cooking.

Rats scurried in the shadows, looking as if they'd like nothing more than to dine on her rather than whatever scraps they fought over. She shuddered and yanked harder, ignoring the sticky liquid running down her hand. Maybe the blood would prove a godsend, loosening the knot by lubricating her wrists and the fabric. She watched one brave rat approach and stared at the beady-eyed varmint until it backed down.

Her glower had made the creature retreat, but she didn't think her intimidation tactics would work much longer. She fought with renewed fervor, and bit back a triumphant shout when she slipped her hand loose. When she freed her other hand, Eva reached down and untied her legs, only to freeze at the door to her cell opening. Antonio swaggered in, biting an apple.

He shook his head while clucking his tongue. "You're going to be more trouble than I'd thought. Who'd have believed you had so much spunk in you?"

She shrugged, trying to appear casual as she leaned back on her hands, grabbing the strips of material they'd bound her with. "I take after my father, one could say."

He laughed and stepped closer. “You’ll end up like him...and your little boyfriend. Dead.”

She paled at the reminder of Joseph’s assassination but lifted her chin and tossed her hair behind her shoulder. “Have you heard from the man you sent after him? Has he returned to boast of his skills in bringing down one of the best agents in Mexico?”

He hissed and stalked toward her. Raising his hand, he slapped her hard across the face. Pain radiated from her cheekbone and across her face until the agony seemed to throb throughout her entire body. The coppery taste of blood met her tongue, and she rotated her jaw to survey the damage. The bone didn’t seem broken, thank God.

Her heart sang at his rage because it meant one thing—Joseph had escaped. He would come for her. She knew it with every breath she took. Fear made her tremble, but she would be damned if she let him see it.

Turning to face the bastard again, she grinned and spat blood at his feet—all over his shiny shoes. “I take it that’s a no?”

Antonio shoved her shoulders, and she hid the scrap of bloody linen under her hair. He straddled her and held her arms over her head with one hand. “Your voice grates on my nerves. Someone ought to teach you your place in this world, Eva.”

He crammed his lips to hers and shoved his fingers underneath her nightie, wrenching it up to her neck. Panic made her moves erratic as she arched her hips, trying to buck him off. When nothing she did seemed to work, her heart sped up painfully. Oh, God, this would be how she died. Raped and bloody.

She squirmed in his hold, trying to free a limb to do some sort of damage, but he held her too tightly. He shoved his tongue in her mouth, and gagging, she jerked on her hands. She bit down, but he seemed to sense it coming, retreating before she snapped

onto meat.

He laughed, pressing his erection hard against her. “You women. You all think alike.”

“Go to hell,” she snarled, bowing her back while squirming to get her legs out from under him.

His face loomed over hers, distorted in its rage and evil state of mind. He released her hands long enough to rip her gown, leaving her panties as her only clothing. She screamed and grabbed the cloth she’d been tied up with earlier from beneath her hair and twisted the fabric taut between her hands. Looping the bloody material around his neck, she jerked it tight using all her strength, throwing her body weight into it like Joseph had taught her.

He tugged at the cloth, slow at first and then with a twinge of desperation. He grabbed her hair and yanked an enormous chunk out, but she refused to let go. He punched her on the side of her head. Stars exploded in her vision, throbbing through her head until her hands slipped from the fabric. He slammed an elbow into her ribs, and she crumbled onto the mattress, gasping for air.

While he bent over, struggling to get some air into his swollen throat, she attempted to pull herself into a sitting position, seeking out the fabric. His lungs made a wheezing sound when he inhaled. He stared at her with murder written in his eyes, and she laughed. With a growl he leapt on her, pounding her in the nose.

The pain was the only thing she knew and then the world faded to black.

Joseph approached the entrance to the abandoned building and motioned for the team

following him to fan out on either side. This place had been the last on his list, and the frustration and anger consuming him grew with each passing moment. He cracked the door, peeking inside. Adrenaline pumped through his veins at the sight of a man standing guard at a closed entry. If a man stood guard, chances were something of value rested behind said man.

Something like Eva.

He slipped inside, motioning for his team to follow, creeping closer to the guard. He head-locked the unsuspecting man from behind, tightening his grip until the ass**le crumpled to the ground. He caught the man's AR-15 before it could crash onto the floor and alert anyone to his presence. He holstered his own weapon, raised the AR-15 and pointed down at the guy on the floor to the closest team member. The teammate nodded and grabbed the guard's arms, dragging him outside.

He moved to the door and, testing the knob, found it locked, of course. He pressed his ear to the cool metal and heard a scuffling sound on the other side, followed by the unmistakable echo of fist meeting bone. His hand tightened on the grip of his gun, and he took a deep breath. Time for some action.

He kicked the door open to find Antonio breathing harshly, and Eva dressed in nothing but her panties—covered in blood and unconscious. She clutched a strip of material in her left hand, and her face was swollen. Her br**sts had bruises forming on them, and she seemed far too pale to still be alive.

Joseph's heart skipped a beat and a hollow whooshing sound reverberated inside his head. Roaring in anger, he rushed into the room. He pointed his gun at Antonio to shoot the bastard, but a movement behind him and to the left caused him to hesitate. At the doorway, his team's feet pounded the ground as they crowded into the room, so he knew the other sound couldn't be one of his men. He dropped to the ground, rolling and shooting in the same breath. His bullet hit the attacker right between the eyes, killing him instantly.

After all, a close-shot to the head with a .9mm didn't often leave survivors.

He raised the business end of his weapon and pointed it at Antonio, stepping to the side of the door so that the only way out of the room was through him and his team.

The f**ker has nowhere to go but down.

Antonio's hand inched toward his pocket, and Joseph growled, "Don't do it. Hands up."

Antonio laughed and raised his hands in a mocking surrender. "I only wish I'd killed the bitch before you got here."

Joseph let out a breath at the man's words. "If you had, you'd be in hell right now. Instead, you get to spend the rest of your life in jail. I heard the men in prison love ra**sts."

He lowered his weapon, motioning his team forward as he stepped out of the way. If Joseph so much as laid a finger on the f**ker, he'd kill him, so it would be best to keep his distance. The team members rushed forward, but in the same moment, Antonio lifted the knife over Eva.

Joseph raised his weapon and fired three quick shots, each hitting Antonio in the back—right between his shoulder blades.

Antonio jerked where he stood and then dropped to the ground like the garbage he was. Joseph rushed to Eva, swallowing down bile at the sight of her naked and covered in this disgusting monster's blood. He grabbed her ripped nightgown, wiping her off the best he could. Wrapping her in a dirty comforter, he cradled her in his arms and strode out of the room.

She moaned, and he cuddled her closer. She looked even worse up close than she had from across the room. Swallowing heavily, he searched her face, trying to decipher the extent of her injuries.

Her nose pointed to the right side, so swollen and abused she looked like a different person, with blood smeared all over her face. In addition to the discoloration on her br**sts, she had several bite marks on her neck.

“Fuck,” he snarled. He wished he could kill Antonio over and over again. Daily.

As Joseph exited the building, Hugo arrived and rushed toward them. He examined the naked bundle in Joseph’s arms, his expression pinched.

“Is she...?” He reached toward his daughter’s face. “Is she dead?”

“No, but she needs help right away.”

“Thank God. The ambulance is on its way.” Hugo stepped to his side while men rushed all around them. He held his arms out. “Give her to me.”

“No! I’ve got her. Just get the f**king ambulance here faster.” Joseph pulled her closer to his chest, eyes narrowed on Hugo’s face.

After a moment’s hesitation, Hugo nodded. “Okay. You can hold her, but I’m coming, too.”

“Fine.” Joseph turned his attention back to Eva, kissing the clean spot near her temple. The only clean spot, from the looks of it.

“She never stopped loving you,” Hugo mumbled.

Joseph scowled at Hugo. If only love were enough to make her want him back. “And I never stopped loving her, sir.”

Sirens sounded in the distance, and Joseph stalked toward the approaching vehicle. He’d failed to keep her safe from Antonio. Sure, he’d rescued her in time, but did that count?

His gut said no.

Chapter Seven

Four days later, Eva stumbled through her doorway and kicked off her flip-flops, assaulted by memories the moment she stepped foot onto the cool hardwood. Her nose still throbbed, complete with stents stuck up her nostrils and gauze taped over the bridge. Her father had managed to wrap up his assignment, but even so, they had been forced to move. If the Cartel decided to get revenge against him, she and her dad were now too easy to locate.

Eva studied the boxes stacked against the living room wall and sighed. She tried not to dwell on the fact she’d not seen Joseph since the day he’d saved her from Antonio. When she’d awoken in the ambulance, he’d been holding her hand with a haunted look in his eyes. He hadn’t been back since then, and it hurt more than she cared to admit.

She’d thought he would have come by to check on her or maybe a dutiful follow-up since she’d been his assignment. But no. Nothing. Not even a freaking phone call or e-mail. The nurses caring for her had said that he’d called the hospital each day to check on her. But he hadn’t bothered to show his face.

In the hotel, he’d told her he’d given up on their relationship, cursed her out, and left after swearing he’d moved on from her warped heart. But, she hadn’t allowed for the

chance he'd meant his words. People often said things in anger or fear they didn't mean.

She'd told him she didn't want to be with him. That had been a lie spoken out of panic. She'd been caught off-guard by his confessions that he was innocent of being a cheater all along.

But she craved his touch. His love. She needed him. With her. And now, it was too late.

She and her father were relocating tomorrow, and she had no idea where Joseph even lived. Nor did she have his current phone number. She swallowed past the throbbing in her throat and shoved off the door to head into the bedroom. Had the movers packed up everything in her room, too?

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She entered and nodded. Yup, all boxed up. The closet doors stood open, and she went to the one on the left side of the room and closed it. Turning to Joseph's closet, she frowned.

Empty. Just like her life. Why hadn't he called?

She wished with all of her heart that he hadn't come back and made her remember how much she loved him. She wished she could go back in time and say the right things in their damn hotel room. Wished she could make him forget her angry words and kiss him until he threw her on the bed and made love to her. Or she'd let him explain the circumstances behind him and the stripper long ago.

But, really, who wouldn't have thought he'd cheated when he lay naked in bed with another woman? She'd asked her father if he'd done all the things Joseph had accused him of doing six weeks ago. Turns out, her dad had done even more. He'd gone so far as to threaten Joseph with a drug test—and a sure failure of said test—if he didn't leave her alone.

Yet, Joseph had kept attempting to get to her—until her father had pulled some strings with his buddies in the US and had him sent to Afghanistan on a covert mission requiring deep undercover activities with no access to phones or Internet. He'd left Joseph to suffer over there until he had use for him in Mexico—protecting her. Ironical that Joseph had been sent away so that he couldn't see Eva but brought back for the very opposite reason.

She hadn't spoken to her father since he'd admitted the truth to her. He'd left her a message, letting her know he'd checked into the story about the stripper, and it turned

out she was in jail right now for drugging and robbing over twenty unsuspecting men all over the country. Just as Joseph had deduced she'd done to him. So, he had told the truth about that, as well.

But why the hell hadn't he called now that the truth was out?

She stalked toward the closet door, ready to slam it shut, but a shadow caught her eye. There, in the corner of the closet, a floorboard stuck out of joint. She tilted her head and bent her knees, prodding it slightly. The wood plank lifted, and she hesitated before reaching a hand into the dark space below.

Her fingers closed over a square shape, and she plucked it out. When she saw the small, velvet box that unmistakably held jewelry, she gasped. Had Joseph hidden a present for her long ago and left it behind? In her mind, an image of his guilty face emerged as he hovered in front of the closet, and how he'd shut the door when she'd entered. Had he been checking on his secret hiding place?

Dare she open it? Her fingers itched to do just that...but her conscience screamed not to invade his privacy. She sighed and slipped the box in her pocket before searching for her cell phone—the replacement cell phone Joseph had sent her just as he'd promised.

She dialed her father.

“Hello?” he said, picking up after the first ring. “Are you talking to me again?”

“For now.”

“Eva!” His voice bellowed at her through the phone way too cheerfully. “What a great surprise! Are you finished packing all of your stuff for our move tomorrow?”

“Dad,” Eva moaned. “I’m not deaf, remember? And you know I hired movers to handle all of the hard work.”

“You’re all ready to leave, then?” he barked in her ear.

She flinched and held the phone away from her head. “Yes, like I said.”

“Great! I’m pretty much ready, too.” He cleared his throat and lowered his voice. “Sorry, must have had a frog in my throat. Anyway, what’s up, dear?”

With caution, she returned the phone to her ear. “Do you know how I can contact Joseph? I have something of his, and I’d like to return it before we leave.”

“Joseph?” he yelled.

She frowned and held the cell at a safe distance once more. Why did he continue to shout? “Yes. I know you don’t like him, but I have to get a hold of him. Help me, please?”

“I have his number, but I have to talk to someone first. I’ll give it to you in a few minutes. Love you, bye.”

He hung up on her, and she shook her head in confusion. That had to be the weirdest conversation she’d ever had with her father. And they’d had a lot of odd discussions over the years.

Joseph entered Hugo’s study, eyebrow arched in amusement. “I take it your sudden need to speak as if you were deaf was for my benefit?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, son.”

“Yeah, okay. Eva called? How is she?” Joseph had avoided asking this question, but damn it all to hell, he missed her. He’d sworn to her he would leave her alone, promised not to press his unwanted attentions upon her, but he hadn’t expected it to be so damned hard. Maybe it seemed so hard because this time he knew he couldn’t get her back. He’d told her the truth, and she’d still pushed him away.

Now, he had to ask random people how she had been doing. Had to rely on secondhand observations of how well she recovered from the attack. He knew if he dared to approach her, he would grab her and never let go. No matter if she agreed or not. He’d tried to make it through the whole day without approaching Hugo about Eva, and had almost accomplished it. He’d been on his way out the door when he’d heard Hugo on the phone with her.

Unable to stop himself, he’d approached Hugo’s office, needing one last bit of news about Eva before she moved away from him.

“She’s okay....”

Joseph tensed. “What’s wrong? Is she having headaches? I heard headaches after a concussion are fairly common. Maybe she should lie down and rest instead of worrying about moving.” He ran a hand through his hair, pacing. Images of Eva sitting down, rubbing her temples and grimacing in pain, flashed before his eyes. Her nose probably remained black and blue. “She needs to take it easy. Tell her to calm down and rest.”

Hugo laughed, and Joseph scowled at the man’s obvious enjoyment.

“Joseph, perhaps you should tell her yourself.”

“I told you, she wants nothing to do with me. I would think you’d be happy about it.”

“A few months ago, I would have been. However, I’ve changed my mind. It’s obvious to any idiot—which I am not—the two of you are in love. You only have to make her see it.”

Joseph tried to ignore the hope rising within his chest. Could it be possible she believed him? “She still doesn’t trust me. Even after I told her the truth about that night. Did she tell you?”

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“Yes, she told me you were innocent.”

“Imagine that,” he drawled, raising an eyebrow.

Hugo ignored Joseph’s sarcasm, shooting him an amused look. “She asked to see you. She says she has something of yours.”

“Of mine?” Joseph racked his brain but could think of nothing he’d forgotten at her place. Had she used the excuse of a forgotten object to get him to go see her? If so, maybe he hadn’t lost everything. Excitement pumped through his veins, and his voice came out rushed. “Oh, okay. Is she home now?”

Hugo nodded and smiled. “Good luck.”

Twenty minutes later, Eva sat, scowling at her phone. She’d been waiting for her father to call her back, and each second she held the box, the urge to peek inside grew. If she didn’t see Joseph, and soon, she would cave to the temptation. The small size suggested it held earrings...or a ring.

God, how she longed to go back in time. If only she’d not kicked him out that night and let him explain. If only she’d noticed the stripper stealing her unconscious boyfriend’s belongings, or how sick he’d looked.

Holy shit. Could he have been planning to propose?

Her heart sped up, and she set the box on the coffee table to wipe her clammy hands on her jeans. They'd been happy enough to warrant such an action—until she'd found him in bed with the whore. But, before that, he could have bought the ring and tucked it away. They'd made plans to go out to a “special” dinner before the incident that had ruined their relationship. The memory of their plans had long ago faded in the face of his betrayal—or rather, of what she'd thought he'd done.

A knock sounded at the door, and she jumped to her feet. Her father had men stationed outside her apartment, so the chances of it being a murderer were slim...but then again, it hadn't stopped the Cartel before.

Her voice shook as she inquired, “Who is it?”

“It's Joseph. Can I come in?”

She sucked in a deep breath, and once again wiped her hands on her pants. How were they so darn sticky? “Um, yeah. Hold on.”

Rushing to the door, she smoothed her hair and unlocked the bolt. When she opened the door, she fought the urge to fling herself into his arms, forcing a calm expression to her face, despite her racing heart.

He studied her from head to toe, clearing his throat and shoving his hands into his pockets. After several moments passed, he said, “Are you going to let me in, or what?”

Eva realized she blocked his way and stumbled backward. “Yes, of course. Come in.”

She smiled at the guards and shut the door firmly. After a moment's hesitation, she locked the deadbolt again for good measure. She faced him and strode to the couch, perching on the edge. Her fingers shook, nervousness threatening to overcome her, so

she sat on them. Joseph had made it clear he was done with her. She didn't need to embarrass herself any further.

“Um, sit.”

He grinned and sat down beside her—far too close. He smelled of aftershave and Old Spice deodorant. And his warmth beckoned to her. She groaned aloud her frustration, shifting on the couch and feeling incredibly turned on. He toyed with a piece of her hair and her scalp tingled, sending shivers down her spine.

“You look gorgeous, even with a broken nose.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I'm sure I look fabulous.” Avoiding his gaze, she stared down at her lap. “I mean, um, thanks. I'm sure I look horrible, but it's nice of you to lie.”

He scooted closer. When he tugged on a lock of her hair over her ear, she trembled.

“No, you're still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Will ever see.”

With a sigh, he released her hair. He rubbed the back of his neck, and she glanced up in time to see his jaw flex. Could he be nervous, too?

“So, what did I leave here? Your father said you had something of mine?”

“Oh, right.” She cleared her throat and motioned toward the table in front of them.

He glanced where she'd indicated and returned his attention to her, staring at her face a mere second before his gaze shot back to the table. With a muttered curse, he reached out, grabbed the jewelry case, and tucked the box inside his pocket.

“Did you look at it?” he barked, his cheeks red.

She shook her head. “No, of course not. It didn’t seem right.” She blinked back tears and looked out the window. “I just thought you should have it.”

His arm resting against hers tensed, and he shot to his feet. His sudden movement drew her attention.

“Right.” He rubbed his jaw. “Well, I guess that’s it. G-good luck with your move. And with, uh, life.” He rolled his shoulders and looked down at her. Resignation and sadness stared her down and her heart wrenched. “Yeah. Okay, bye.”

Turning away, he strode to the door. Tears slipped over Eva’s cheeks, and she bit her lip. If she wasn’t mistaken, she’d seen his hand tremble. He never showed any signs of weakness.

“Wait!” She rose, taking an awkward step toward him only to stumble. She caught herself on the arm of the couch. “Can I ask you something?”

He stopped, but didn’t face her. “Yes?”

“Was it...is it...a ring?”

“Does it matter?” He pivoted to her, a frown wrinkling his brow. “Either way ends with me leaving and you moving. You made it quite clear what you wanted of me a few days ago.”

“I...I was scared. I didn’t mean—” She flailed her arms, struggling to find the right words.

“What?” His eyes narrowed, and he stalked to her. “Don’t f**k with me. Do you

want me to stay or go?”

“Stay!” she cried. “I want you to stay, damn it!”

He swept her into his arms. “Do you believe me now?”

She nodded, tears running down her cheeks. “I-I should have listened to you earlier. I shouldn’t have told you I didn’t want you anymore. I was just...scared.”

He smiled, kissing every inch of her face. “God, I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

He kissed her forehead—a little too close to her nose—and she flinched.

“Ow.”

“Oh. Sorry.” He examined her nose, his eyes darkening. “I wish he was still alive so I could go kill him right now.”

A strange sound bubbled from her throat, half-laugh and half-groan. “Yeah. Me too.”

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He lifted her into his arms and carried her into the bedroom. The bed had been disassembled, but the mattress lay on the floor. He laid her gently on it and lowered himself to cover her body. His weight pressing against her made her heart feel whole again. She'd missed him so much, even more so than when she'd kicked him out. Knowing she loved him—and he still loved her—had made their separation unbearable. She'd never let go of him again. Groaning, she wrapped her arms around his neck.

He brought his mouth to hers but hovered a mere breath away. “Are you sure you’re ready? I can wait—”

She grasped his neck and melded her lips to his. His tongue thrust between her lips, and he cradled her head in his hands. She tore free, smiling up into his green eyes. “I love you. There are no doubts.”

Growling, he crushed her lips beneath his, his hands fumbling with the hem of her shirt. He removed his mouth from hers long enough to rip the shirt over her head, and then nibbled on her lower lip before licking the sting away.

“God, I love you,” he whispered hotly in her ear. Removing her bra, he fondled her left breast while his lips closed over her right nipple.

Happiness twined with desire inside of her, making everything in her world shiny and perfect. She groaned and arched her back, tugging at his hair.

He lifted his head, and scowled. “Ow, that hurt.”

She rolled him onto his back, straddling his hips. “Well, I’ll have to make you feel better.”

Smirking, she yanked his shirt over his head and massaged his auburn locks. Closing his eyes, he sighed. When she licked his nipple, he jerked, groaning and threading his fingers through her hair. She treated the other nipple the same while she dragged her nails down his chest. Moving her hands lower, she unbuttoned his waistband, fumbling in her haste to peel his pants off. Once he had nothing but boxers on, she cupped his penis and massaged him until he squirmed beneath her.

“Eva!” he cried out, hands fisting.

She shot him a grin, slinking down his body while making sure to trail her br**sts along his chest and down his belly. Releasing his c**k from his boxers, she licked the tip, savoring his moan of delight, and closed her lips around his shaft, sucking while massaging his balls. When he lurched off the bed, she held his chest down with her free hand. Strong fingers laced into her hair and tugged. She stroked her tongue in circles around his sensitive tip.

“Fuck,” he mumbled, “I need to be inside of you. Now.” Picking her up, he tossed her onto her back, taking care to be gentle with her even though he looked as if he would explode if he didn’t have her that instant. He practically shredded her jeans in his haste to be inside her.

Once she was naked, he removed his boxers and stood above her. Her breath caught as his eyes took in every inch of her body. She held her arms out and, with a wicked grin, he leapt on her, crushing her lips beneath his and thrusting into her in one deep drive. She whimpered into his mouth, and wrapped her legs around his hips, meeting him thrust for thrust until she tensed and an orgasm exploded through her.

When he left her, pulling from her embrace and away from her body, she cried out in

dismay. He hadn't come. Why would he withdraw from her before he'd climaxed?

Rising up on her elbows, she realized he wasn't finished. He lowered his head between her legs, stroking her with his tongue. Pure pleasure made her mewl and dig her nails into the mattress. He gripped her hips and pulled her closer to his mouth, unwilling to let her escape his sweet torture. The pressure built inside her until, with a small scream exploding from her, she burst against his mouth, sagging to the mattress. Wonder washed through her, along with love. She couldn't imagine life without him by her side. Never again.

Joseph rose above her and brushed her clitoris as he entered her. She dug her heels into the mattress, trembling. With a surprised shout, she climaxed again.

"Jesus, Eva. I'm gonna come," he moaned, plunging into her a few times before he threw his head back and came inside her.

She groaned, trailing her fingers over his back, enjoying the feel of his weight on top of her. His breath fanned her ear, and she smiled. After a few minutes, he raised himself on one elbow, studying her expression. "You look awfully pleased with yourself."

She traced a finger along his eyebrow. "I am. I'm beyond happy. I have you back. No one's shot at me in the last week. Life's good."

He slid off her.

"Hey, come back!" she protested.

He shook his head and grabbed his pants, reaching in his pocket. Eva chewed on her lower lip, watching him strut back to her naked. The velvet box perched between the fingers of his hand. His muscles rippled as he lowered to the floor on one knee, and

his face held a touch of vulnerability she'd not often seen on him. He always seemed so sure of himself and what he wanted. To see him so nervous made her love him even more.

She gulped in air and held it, scrambling to sit up cross-legged on the bed. Closing his eyes, as if to steady himself, Joseph flipped open the lid of the box. Eva released her breath in a loud whoosh at the sight of the gorgeous ring resting within. Tearing her gaze from the treasure, she witnessed an even more mesmerizing sight—the love and tears in Joseph's eyes.

“I know I can be hard to handle. Bossy at times. An ass at others. But one thing I've always been good at is knowing what I want. And getting it.” He paused and steadied himself, never breaking eye contact with her. “I had everything in the world I could ever want. I didn't realize how much of that included you until you were gone. I ask you to be my wife, and in return I vow to be forever faithful. I will never leave you, Eva, or break your heart. All I ask is for you to wear my ring and love me in return. Will you be my wife?”

Her love for him swelled, making her laugh in joy. He'd actually asked her to marry him after all they'd been through in the past few months. He loved her—needed her. And, God, she needed him, too. Everything seemed to fit perfectly into place, all the pieces snug and tight.

Her life had come back together. She could breathe again.

She burst into tears and launched herself into his arms. He fell backward, the box holding the ring skittering across the floor. She kissed him full on the mouth, and cradled his cheeks with shaky hands to look down into his eyes.

“Yes. I will be your wife! And I will give you all those things and more. I promise!”

He rolled her beneath him on the cool floor. Leaning up on his elbows, he placed a kiss on her forehead. Reaching above her head, he grabbed the box and removed the ring from it, placing the band on her left ring finger.

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She rotated her hand, watching the diamond twinkle merrily in the light. “It fits perfect. I love it.”

He smiled and kissed her lips. She groaned and wriggled her hips beneath him, and in one smooth motion he was inside her once more.

“I get to make love to my fiancée now,” he whispered in her ear.

She shivered and met his thrust with a smile on her face. “I love you.”

“And I you,” he murmured. “And I was just kidding about me being an ass. I’m very easy to live with.”

She burst into laughter. “Yeah. Okay.”

In the warm sunlight, he tried to kiss her into silence, but he couldn’t stop her infectious laughter as they made love in front of the closet, where the ring had lay hidden for weeks.