



Alpha On Top

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Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: Tall, dark, and handsome. . . His eyes were heart stopping, his hands possessive and fierce, touching me as if I belonged to him. We met by accident. My blind date never showed up and this muscled god was all alone. It was the perfect one night stand; no names, no expectations, just unbridled lust. Until a stranger barges in with a gun and everything changes. My night of passion quickly turns into a bad dream I can't escape. To my surprise, the man I had just been kissing, the guy I was about to let have me anyway he pleased, had done the unthinkable... He killed the guy.

He tells me everything will be alright, and for a second I believe him. Except he won't call the police, taking me against my will instead. This man claims he's protecting me, he claims he won't let anyone hurt me. But I don't know if he's the good guy or the bad guy. What I saw scares me, and what I know makes me question everything about him. I want to hate him for what he's doing, but I don't. I'm falling in love with a killer. What the hell is wrong with me?

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Chapter One

Emery

Sitting at the bar, I swirled the straw around, forcing the ice cubes to twirl and dance in the liquid. Resting my head on my hand, I watched the vortex as it dissolved the ice layer by layer.

Why the hell did I agree to this?

Passing by me for a third time, the bartender stopped to ask me if I needed anything, but I brushed him off, shaking my head no with a partial frown.

“You sure?” he asked, leaning in closer so he could hear me speak over the music that was only there to ensure bodies rubbed and no one could have a real conversation.

“Yeah, I'm sure.” Looking over my shoulder, I glanced around, searching the crowd for my so called date. “I'm waiting on someone.”

Smiling, the man placed a shot glass on the bar. “This one's on the house.” Grabbing a bottle of vodka, he filled it to the rim. “Tastes like raspberries, and hopefully it'll help you feel a little better. If it doesn't, at least it'll make waiting less boring.” Winking, he nodded his head for me to take it.

Eyeing the small glass, there was a moment of hesitation. I wasn't much of a drinker, and the last thing I needed was to get drunk while I did something that pushed me

completely out of my comfort zone. I was already on drink two, that was more than I usually had in a month.

I had already started to get the signature warm and fuzzies in my belly, and my muscles felt loose and tingly as the buzz traveled my body like hot water.

What the hell am I doing here?

You promised Della you'd give it a shot, that's what you're doing.

My best friend Della had basically talked me into this, using her famous puppy dog eyes and pouty lips to push my decision. Add in a little bit of begging and I reluctantly agreed against my better judgment.

So here I was, waiting on a guy—who in her words—was God's gift to mankind. His name was Simon, a local guy who came into her coffee shop every Thursday for years now.

Supposedly, he was six feet tall, with dark red hair and a killer smile. She said he was built like a house, with thick muscular arms and a tattoo on the side of his neck.

That last detail made me second guess her choice, but I was going to keep an open mind, while I held my promise to see this date through. My only problem now was there weren't any men around that resembled her description at all. Tapping my nails against the cold glass, I watched the alcohol as it sloshed from side to side. Pursing my lips, I took in a deep breath, exhaling it hard and fast.

Fuck it.

Raising the glass to the bartender, I rested it against my lips, and threw my head back to drink it quickly. There was a slight burn as it skated down my throat and warmed

my belly. My mouth tingled, sizzling like I had just sucked on a ghost pepper.

Coughing slightly, my voice came out scratchy and harsh. "Thank you," I said with a cringe, as I wiped my lips with the pads of my fingers and took a long sip of my drink to ease the fire in my mouth.

"Hope your night gets better." Clearing the shot glass off the bar top, he walked off to tend to the other patrons, and I couldn't help but feel more alone than I had the entire time I had been sitting there.

At first I was nervous, even a little excited for this date. There was something sensual and dangerous about meeting a mystery man. But that feeling had faded, creating doubt and uncertainty, leaving me bitter and cold to everyone else there having a good time.

The people around me were talking and laughing, men and women were dancing and having a fucking ball. And here I was, alone, frowning, and talking to myself inside my head.

A part of me wanted what everyone else had; I wanted to smile. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to leave reality behind and forget the shit that made me ponder how my life ended up the way it did.

I suppose my reality was the same as everyone else. I worried about money, debt, the need to feed myself in this economy where prices went up and wages seemed to stay the same. From the looks on everyone around me, no one else seemed to have a care in the fucking world.

Jealousy was a fucking bitch, regardless of whether it was justified or not.

I knew it wasn't rational for me to feel that way, I didn't know any of the people there.

I knew a hell of a lot more people had it worse than me, I wasn't the only one dealt a shitty hand. But I was jealous of the fun they were having while I fell deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole.

There was anger for being stood up, there was hurt and pain for feeling unimportant; like Simon had found something better to do than follow through on his word to be there.

Why am I surprised?

Men suck.

Sitting solo and deflated, I began to feel really dumb for agreeing to a blind date with a man I knew nothing about. What the hell was I thinking?

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I had convinced myself that maybe Della was right. Maybe I did spend way too much time alone. Maybe I was avoiding the intimate needs I craved just to escape the fear of being hurt.

Was it wrong to find more comfort curling up with a good book on a Friday night than going out to get shit-faced? Was it wrong to not put myself through the pain relationships caused?

Because that was my experience. No one ever stayed, no man had ever really given me butterflies or made my toes curl.

All I ever found was one let down after another. Why should I put myself through that?

I wasn't this person; the girl sitting in a slinky black dress that showed too much cleavage and flaunting my assets like some cheap perfume commercial. Della had dolled up my face and thrown me into one of her fuck me dresses with pumps that made my calves hurt and the arches of my feet cramp.

This is fucking stupid.

He's not coming.

I had been waiting for over an hour for this guy, and so far, he was a no show. How much longer was I supposed to sit and wait?

He's definitely not coming.

It's been long enough, I'm out.

Grabbing my phone, I shot Della a quick text. 'Your pick is a no-show, I'm leaving.'

Dropping my phone into my purse, I chugged the rest of my drink, pulling the clutch up my arm, and onto my shoulder. Throwing down some money, I thanked the bartender with a smile and nod.

My phone buzzed against my hip, and I knew instantly it was Della. She had probably been holding her phone by her side all night just waiting for some sort of update about how it was going and what I thought.

Digging it out, I read her message. 'I'm texting Simon now, don't leave yet.'

Rolling my eyes to myself, I huffed under my breath.

Seriously? Ten, even twenty minutes is one thing; an hour, there's no excuse for that.

Tapping the buttons, I told her he obviously didn't want to do this, and I wasn't going to sit around and wait for him any longer.

'This was a bad idea. I'm going home, I'll call you tomorrow.'

The whole blind date thing just wasn't for me. I gave it a try, it didn't work out, there had to be some credit thrown my way for that. I knew she would end up giving me the third degree tomorrow for not sticking it out and giving him a chance.

I just didn't care.

I loved my best friend, and I knew her intentions were good. She had a boyfriend, she had a life outside her home and work. Della was happy. That's all she wanted for me.

She just had a hard time seeing that we weren't the same person, and I was completely fine with the life I lived.

I didn't need a man to be complete or whole, or to pamper me with compliments so I felt good. I liked who I was. I enjoyed being home, I enjoyed wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt and sitting down to eat an entire container of ice cream, without worrying about what my thighs might look like after.

I don't need to do this.

Facing the crowd, the music blared overhead, pounding and thumping with so much bass, I could feel my ribs vibrate. Attempting to work my way through the mass of people, I was elbowed and shoved, ping ponged between strangers. It was impossible for me to get to the front door.

Alright, I need a different way out.

Turning around, I walked past the bathrooms, scanning above my head for another exit. The tight hallway was filled with couples, all of them kissing and groping each other in the darkness.

Get a fucking room, jeez.

Spotting two people against the wall that looked like they were about to get it on, I turned around quickly, and slammed into the wall.

“Ahh, shit.” Huffing under my breath, I ran my fingers through my hair and took a step back.

Wow, I am buzzed.

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“You alright?” a man asked, lifting his hand to my arm and cupping my elbow.

Looking up, I was shocked and embarrassed that it wasn't a wall I had driven myself into, but a guy. As my gaze settled on his face, I had trouble catching my breath.

His eyes were almost black, so dark I couldn't tell the difference between his pupils and iris'. His jaw was hard, covered in a light stubble, with angles so sharp they looked like they could cut diamond.

Tilting his head, jet black hair fell across his brows, tickling his lids. Brushing his hair from his face, he smiled down on me, and my heart skipped inside my chest. Thick muscles firmed beneath his shirt as his biceps tightened with each move he made, making my stomach tumble into knots.

He was beautiful. . .

Darting my eyes away, I was suddenly extremely nervous, like a school girl in the presence of her boy crush. “Uh, yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Sorry about that, I didn't know you were right behind me.”

He looked slightly anxious as he glanced over the faces around us, his eyes wide and serious. I could feel the tension around him, like a hot air balloon about to burst. “Not a problem.” His thumb swirled over my elbow, drawing invisible designs against my skin. Lowering his eyes to mine, his voice came out smooth as cognac. “Can I buy you a drink?”

Fiddling with the strap on my purse, I looked down at the floor. “I was actually just

leaving, but thank you anyway.”

Why are you saying no?

Emery, what the hell is wrong with you?

Relaxing his body, whatever had concerned him before seemed to disappear as his muscles loosened and his eyes drew me in. Licking his lips, he smirked. “Come on, let me buy you one drink. It can be my apology for almost knocking you off your feet.”

Pursing my lips, I debated his offer. I had been ready to hightail it out of the fucking place, thinking I had wasted my time and the night was ruined. But wasn't this the point? A night of forbidden thoughts, a mystery man in the darkness to make me feel good, to help me let loose for once in my life?

What the hell, it couldn't hurt anything to stay a little bit longer.

“Alright, one drink.”

The man slipped his hand down my arm, braiding our fingers together. My skin tingled, buzzing and zipping with electric shocks that crawled up my arm, curling hard into my chest.

I was feeling him, all of him with just one touch. Strong and confident, his shoulders stiffened as his long legs strode with determination back towards the crowded room.

Guiding us around people and between clusters of dancers, he led me back to the bar. Pulling out the stool, he helped me up and asked, “What's your poison?” Leaning against the bar, he stared down at me, wearing a smile that made my brain turn to mush.

“I don't really have a poison, I'll have whatever you're having.”

Grinning, he waved the bartender over. “Two Manhattans.” Licking his lips, his eyes rode my body. “You here with friends?”

“Not exactly.” Hanging my head, I picked at my nails. “Blind date.”

“Ah, gotcha.” Raking his fingers through his hair, he watched me curiously. “I'm guessing it didn't go well since you were trying to sneak out of here.”

Chuckling, I smiled up at him. “It didn't go at all, he never showed up.”

“Dick,” he said, rolling his eyes while laughing. “He doesn't know what he missed out on then. I guess that works in my favor.” Winking, the bartender slid the drinks in front of us and the man picked his up. “Here's to a fresh start.”

Clinking our glasses together, I took a small sip. “Thank you for this.”

“It's my pleasure, beats drinking alone, that's for sure.” Chuckling, he turned against the bar, resting his elbows on top. “So, what do you do?”

“What do I do?”

“Yeah, for work, what do you do?” The corner of his lip lifted as he draped a single finger over my wrist and stroked my skin.

His touch was tender and sensual. The gentle motion created waves across my flesh, making my cheeks blush and my sex throb with delirious need.

Flicking my eyes away, I stared into my drink. “I'm a vet tech.” Pushing the tip of my finger against the small napkin, I moved it around aimlessly over the bar top. “What

about you?”

Thinning his lids, he rocked his head on his shoulders. “Let's just say I used to be a bodyguard. . .” Pausing, his lips pursed as he lifted his cup, wrapping the rim of his glass. “Kind of.” Taking a sip of his drink, he swallowed and I watched the lump in his throat.

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This man was mesmerizing. It was hard to take my eyes off of him.

“What's your name?” I asked him, leaning a little closer to make sure he could hear me.

The scent of his cologne swirled around my face as he shifted against the bar. Musky and sweet, the mix made my thighs quiver and my lungs crave more. I wanted to stuff my face into chest, I wanted to breathe him in and let his aroma fill my body.

What the hell is going on with me?

Sitting quietly, my nerves were going wild. My body had never reacted this way before, not like that. The subtle notes of sandalwood filled my senses, making my muscles tense and alert.

He was so close, I could feel him on my skin. The tiny hairs prickled on the back of my neck as he hovered mere centimeters away. I wanted him to touch me, to brush the surface of my skin with his hands again, to stroke me, to massage me, to make my body sing for him.

Temptation was crawling all over me like a thick mass, eager and ready, needy and thirsty. I was losing control, completely and utterly surrendering to this man inside.

“You dance?”

“Hm?” I asked, lost inside my own head, unable to focus on his words as my entire being was consumed by just his presence. I didn't even notice that he ignored my

question, replacing it with one of his own.

Leaning closer, he lowered his mouth to my ear. “Do you dance?”

“Yeah, a little.” Fiddling with the glass, I took a long, heavy swallow. “But it's been a while.”

Holding out his hand, he nodded his head. “Come on.”

“I don't know, I'm not sure—”

“Come on, don't be shy.” Wrapping his fingers around mine, I let him pull me from the chair and walk me to the dance floor.

I gave in easily, allowing him to take control. It didn't matter if my brain had wanted to run screaming, because it wasn't in charge right then. My heart was beating hard, my stomach was doing flips, and there was no way for me to stop whatever was brewing between us.

“Don't be nervous,” he said, letting his lips brush the shell of my ear. Goosebumps darted down my neck, covering my arms as I felt the heat off his breath on my skin. “Just listen to the music, feel it, let it in.” Firm fingers traced my ribs, gripping my hips hard, and swaying me side to side.

He started to roll his body in ways I had never seen a guy move. His hips bucked as his hands greedily held onto my waist. Lifting my hands to his chest, I softly touched his rock hard pecs, floating them down his corded abs.

My insides started to electrify, veins scorching like they were filled with lava. I wasn't sure if it was the alcohol or just this man that was affecting my body, but whatever it was it felt good. Too good to ignore, and too good to turn off.

I needed this, I wanted this. I wanted to feel free and excited, to lose my inhibitions for once. Let the world outside stay right where it was. This was for me.

Turning my back to him, I wrapped my arm around his neck, grinding my ass into his cock. Arching my back, I felt his thumbs as they ran down my spine, fingers digging into the curves of my hips.

The music beat in the background, there were people all around us, dancing and spinning. But right then, it felt like it was just the two of us. Everything around me was a blur, a mesh of faces mixed in blackness.

Rolling to the tones floating out of the speakers, my body was a wave. Sliding up and down, twisting and rocking, sweat trickled over my ribs. This man was making me go crazy, creating a fire that ignited fireworks across my brain.

The mysterious man ran his hands over my sides, just barely tracing the edges of my breasts. Every piece of me was screaming for him to touch me harder and firmer, longer and less controlled.

Whatever had come over me, I embraced it. I let it take over, I gave it permission to steal me away for the night.

Turning to face him, my fingers danced over his stomach, riding the stairway up to his throat. Driving my hands into his hair, I tugged him into my face. Our eyes connected and I did something I normally would never do. . . I kissed him.

Our lips pressed together, tongues wrapping wildly around each other. I didn't know his name, I didn't know a fucking thing about this man. And right then I didn't care. I felt alive, I felt dangerous, I felt everything I would normally shy away from.

Have you ever wanted to be that other person? The person who wasn't afraid to take a

risk, or try something that might seem scary or wild?

We all have those thoughts, of being the complete opposite of who we are. If you're shy, you want to be bold, if you're quiet, you want to be loud. There are millions of people in this world who at some point in their life wished that for once they could try on the other shoe.

So here I was, wearing a glass slipper and taking that step forward, not allowing myself to over think a damn thing. I didn't question his past, I didn't question his personality or if he regularly frequented bars looking for a fresh piece of ass.

Right then I just lived for the moment.

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Adrenaline purged my veins, forcing any and all rational thoughts from my brain. All I saw was this man, all I saw was his muscles and beauty.

Pulling away, he brought his lips to my ear and whispered. "Come on, come with me." Holding my hand, I let him lead me away.

I had no idea where we were going or what he was planning. And for the first time in my life that excited me.

My pussy was wet, soaking my thighs in silky bliss. My nipples had beaded, tight and hard, tingling with need. Right then my body was in charge, ready to feel him inside me, to let him have me, to allow him to give me goosebumps and make my knees weak.

Forcing his way through the crowd, he threw the bathroom door open, charging in with determination in his steps. "Get the hell out," he barked at a guy who was at the urinal.

The man gave us a dirty look, zipping up his pants quickly and leaving us alone. My heart was racing as the door closed, dulling the music outside. It was just the two of us, hot and bothered, turning from human into horny animals.

I can't believe I'm doing this!

My stomach began to swarm with butterflies as my veins turned cold as ice, making me shiver. Droplets of sweat beaded up on the back of my neck, and my muscles began to tremble.

Is this really happening? Am I really doing this?

Pulling me in front of him, he stalked forward, forcing my back against the wall. “Fuck,” he muttered under his breath as he scooped my face in his palms. Kissing me hard, I closed my eyes and went numb to everything that wasn't him.

This was an entirely new experience. There were no expectations, no reason to exchange numbers or talk about what we wanted in the future. This was all about sex and the intense attraction that sparked between us.

Slipping his tongue into my mouth, he tasted so sweet, like honey and bourbon. Our breathing was heavy and ragged, coming out fast as our mouths parted to take in air.

His fingers slid down my ribs and onto my ass, digging in with a firm grip. In one quick swoop, he lifted me off the floor, pushing his waist against my mound.

Curling my feet behind his back, I ground my hips against his belly. Holding on tight, I raked my fingers through his hair and clasped them around his neck.

Yes, I need this. This is my night.

His eyes glinted, sparking with carnal hunger. Throwing his head forward, his lips found my neck, teeth nibbling and nipping at my skin.

It stung, forcing me to inhale a sharp breath as the sensation floated down my chest, making my pussy pulse. The pain was subtle but arousing, twisting the sharp pinch into a desire that made my clit throb.

Closing my eyes, I laid my head against the wall and moaned. His hard cock pushed against my sex as he gyrated his hips and rubbed my clit.

The dress slinked up my thighs, leaving my panties as the only barrier between us. All he had to do was push them to the side and he'd have full access to my most delicate part.

I didn't know why, but the thought of that made me hotter, it turned me on in a way that made me feel dirty. And I loved it.

“Take me,” I moaned, pushing the words out on thin air. I could barely think straight anymore, and was lucky to even find the words I wanted to use.

The man growled, snatching my wrists from behind his neck, and forcing them up over my head. Suspended in the air, with my legs around his waist and my wrists captured in one of his hands, he started to unzip his pants.

The metal teeth bit the air, causing my heart to slam around inside my chest and my lungs to hold still. I was ready, I was needy, I was excited for him to feed the growing hunger I felt.

“Fuck, yes. I'm yours, take me.” Biting my lip, my lids hovered half open, seductively tempting him to do whatever he desired to me.

This was freedom, freedom from everything I wanted to escape. Tomorrow would be just another day, another repeat of the cycle I had been stuck in for so long.

But right then I wasn't me, and I didn't want to be.

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Chapter Two

Emery

I was alive in the best way, feeling everything; my chest as the air went in with each breath, my legs as they clung to his hips, his hands as they touched and caressed my body like I belonged to him. . .

It was amazing.

The door to the bathroom opened, and my seducer growled. "Get the fuck out." Stopping, his body stilled as he listened intently, waiting for the intruder to leave.

Whoever it was was still there, lurking in the background. I could make out the silhouette of a man over his shoulder, standing stone still, his breathing heavy and raspy.

Ducking my head, I tried to stay hidden from view. I was sure it was more than obvious to anyone coming in what was going on, but for some reason I didn't want them to see me.

Maybe it was a little hint of shame and embarrassment that came over me. This wasn't something I ever did, I didn't frequent bars and run off to get fucked in the bathroom by strangers.

Keeping my head down, I buried my face in the man's chest and stayed quiet.

Twisting his head over his shoulder, he barked. “I said get the fuck out!”

“I heard you the first time.”

Taking in a gulp of air, the man unfurled me from his body, slowly turning to the face the voice. He didn't say anything, not a fucking word. He just stood there, his back snapping square as his arms hung by his sides, fingers dangling with poise.

I was trying to catch my breath, holding onto the wall for balance, as I grounded my feet. Closing my eyes, I took in slow breaths through my nose, trying to calm my heart rate down.

“I didn't think he knew what he was talking about, but here you are.” The strange voice spoke calm and even, and I knew instantly that these two men were obviously not strangers to each other. “He was right, he knew you'd come back eventually.”

“Turn around and leave, that's the best thing you can do right now.”

An evil laugh echoed around the room and off the tiles, causing my heart to stop. “Are you really fucking threatening me right now?”

“Frankie, this isn't going to end how you want it to.” Holding up his hands, he took a small step forward. “I don't want to do this right now, not here. Hurting you is the last thing on my mind right now.”

“Hurt me? You honestly think you're the one who will hurt me?” The man named Frankie barked, his tone thick and low. “You know it's out of my control, you know exactly why I can't just turn and walk away from you.”

“I know, but I can't—I won't let you do this. You can leave right now and no one has to get hurt.”

“Are you fucking serious?” The man laughed, short and annoyed. “Is that what you really think? Who's going to stop me, you? You screwed yourself, you fucking deserve this.”

“Look, I'll let you live for now, but only if you go back and tell him I have other plans, tell him I'm coming for him.”

Let him live??

What the hell is going on!?

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“I'm not telling him shit. We all have our orders, and boy did he make sure we knew what to do with you if we found you.”

I couldn't see the other man, and I wasn't sure I wanted to. Whatever was going on between them, I didn't want to get in the way. This had nothing to do with me, so staying out of it was my only option.

“Just tell him—”

Cutting him off, Frankie snapped. “You don't get it, you just don't fucking get it. There's consequences, you know that. You knew that when you got into this, this is how it fucking goes.”

Long shadows moved against the wall on my right as the man I was about to screw in the bathroom used his arms as he spoke. “No! It never had to be this way!”

“It's too late, it's already done. You had your chance and you chose to walk out. I have no more patience for you and your shit.” A faint click rang out in the silence, forcing my heart to seize.

The shadows on the wall stood still, and I held my breath, afraid that one exhale would remind them that they weren't alone, that there was someone else spying in the background.

He's got a gun. . . That guy has a gun.

I knew what that sound was, it was hard to mistake it as anything else, even if my

brain did its best to alter my perception. But I was in tune with that noise, the heavy click, the croaking of metal as it was pinned back.

That sound was now burned into my brain, a nightmare that I knew I'd relive every time I closed my eyes.

“Don't make me do this right now, you can walk away from this, it's your free pass. But it's the only one you're getting.”

Peeking around his shoulder, I saw a tall, thin man blocking the exit. His eyes were black as hell and a thick scar ran down his cheek. He had short hair, buzzed on the sides, and a little longer on top.

But his eyes, his eyes scared the piss out of me. There was nothing in them, no remorse, no shred of compassion. They looked dead.

“You aren't going to do a fucking thing. You should have listened in the first place, but you didn't.” The scarred man tipped his head into his shoulder, lifting the gun higher. “This is your fault, you fucked up.”

“I did what I had to do. I thought he understood that, it wasn't done out of disrespect. I just couldn't do it.” I felt a protective hand on my side as the man in front of me stepped back. “Let her go, let her out and then the two of us can talk.”

The angry man prowled closer, bringing the gun eye level with my protector. Baring his teeth, he snarled. “There is no talking. As far as I'm concerned, she's here, she's a part of you. Did you forget how this shit works?”

Instantly I wanted to vomit, the heat filled my cheeks and I had to do everything I could to not drop forward and hurl. Choking as I swallowed the lump in my throat, I covered my mouth with the back of my arm.

I don't belong here, not for this.

I need to go, I need to leave right now.

Desperately I looked around for another exit, but was met with nothing but brick walls. All I wanted was to go back inside the club. I shouldn't have been there, I wasn't meant to be a part of any of this.

I'm fucking trapped, there's nowhere to go.

I had one way out of that fucking death trap and it brought me right past the man with the gun.

Taking in long slow breaths, I raked my fingers through my hair and pushed deeper into the wall, anxiously wishing for a new escape to emerge and grant me a free pass.

Maybe he's just trying to scare him. Maybe he wants to make a point.

Closing my eyes, I dug my nails into the brick, listening to the man as he threw down threats and last words.

“Nothing will ever make this right—not now, not ever again. You know what I have to do, don't pretend you don't. This wouldn't be happening if you had just done what you needed to do in the first place. But you didn't, you fucking left like the pussy you are.”

“You weren't there, you have no fucking clue. I'm asking you to walk away, just leave. I know you, Frankie, I've known you for a long time.” He was pleading for a solution, doing his best to keep his voice level and calm. “Is this worth it, man? Am I worth all this trouble?”

My body tensed up as I heard his plea floating through the air like a thin sheet of paper, splitting apart with every word. He had no way out, no way to stop whatever was about to happen.

We were trapped like caged animals, the predator a stone throw away, eager and ready to end it all.

“You want the truth?” The man asked, his voice eerily collected. “You ain't worth shit. . .” There was a moment of silence, a single second where all I could hear was my heart hammering inside my chest. “But none of us are, we're all disposable.”

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My phone.

A light flicked on in my head as a little voice took charge, reminding me that I wasn't completely helpless. I had a way to stop him, something that could get both of us out of this mess.

My pocketbook hung around my shoulder, dangling at my side. Lowering my hand inside as quietly as possible, I tugged out my phone. My fingers were shaking, quivering so violently I could barely keep the phone steady in my palm.

Dialing the police, I lifted the phone to my ear, as anxiety filled my veins like boiling water. The ringing seemed to go on forever, ring after ring, it was an endless torture against my eardrum.

A loud pop rocked my chest, the flash so bright it ignited like a lightening bolt during a thunder storm. Jerking my body away from the blast, I turned to face the wall, pushing the phone so hard against my ear it hurt. My heart was racing, pulse kicking so intensely I thought my veins were going to burst out of my skin.

No! He shot him!

Pick up! Pick up the fucking phone!

Tensing up, I stood stagnant, waiting for a second shot, anticipating a bullet in my back as I begged for help to answer my call.

“Hello, Wallingdale police department.” I heard the dispatch clear as day, and yet I

was mute, unable to connect my brain to my mouth. Nothing was working, my voice, my lips, the tumbling words that were thrashing around inside my skull; I was a quiet ghost in the receiver.

“Hello? This is Wallingdale police, is anyone there?”

I'm here! I can hear you! I need the police, send the police!

The screams went on inside my head, an endless barrage of noise that couldn't be heard by anyone else but me.

“Can I help you?”

Help! Yes, I need help!

“Hang up the phone.” A man's voice cut through my head, slicing my brain into numb slabs of meat. Inhaling a sharp breath, I could still hear the woman on the line, her questions demanding and concerned.

I should have screamed for help, I should have made some noise to let the police dispatch know that I was in serious trouble.

But I didn't. My jaw hung open, my lids shot to my brows, wide and afraid.

Oh, shit. . .

A heavy hand fell on my shoulder, spinning me around. “I said hang up the fucking phone.” Yanking it from my hand, the man threw it to the ground and crushed it under his foot.

Everything around me fell silent. There were no voices, no subtle music; all I could

feel was my body convulsing with spastic movements I couldn't control.

Staring up at him in shock, the white of his eyes lit bright, as a heavy scowl dressed his face. I could see the rage in his glare as his pupils expanded and thick lines creased his forehead.

But it wasn't the man that had held the gun, it was my stranger that had seduced me. With wild eyes and fear in my voice, I asked, "What happened? What did you do?"

"I warned him, I fucking warned him." Raking his hand through his hair, he dragged his fingers down his face. "It's alright, everything will be fine."

I wanted to believe him, but how could I? There was a dead guy on the floor.

"Fine?! Fine?! How is this fine?! You killed him, you fucking killed him!"

Flaring his nostrils, he gritted his teeth and snarled. "Let's go."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," I said, taking a step to the side and eyeing the door.

Inching closer to me, he attempted to reach out and grab my arm. "We need to leave now, let's go."

"Get away from me." Backing towards a stall, I tried to slink inside and shut the door.

Lunging forward, he curled thick fingers around the back of my neck, and pulled me out, forcing my feet to move with him. "I'm leaving and you're coming with me."

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The scarred man was laying on his back, eyes wide open, a bullet hole in the center of his head. Shock was the best word to describe what I felt. You can't prepare yourself for something like that, seeing a dead person laying in a pool of blood on the floor.

His face was frozen, his hand still twitching at his side. Gasping, I cupped my hands over my mouth as tears began to stream down my face. "He's dead, he's really dead."

"He didn't listen, he should have listened." Stepping around his body, the man yanked me along behind him.

Throwing the bathroom door open, the club was still moving, the room around us completely unaware of what had just happened. The music was too loud to hear the shot, and the alcohol was flowing so freely the bang went unnoticed.

With firm fingers around my neck, the man pushed me down the hall towards the back of the club, exiting out a door that dumped us into an alley behind the building. The cool air filled my lungs as a shiver ran through my body, making me realize I had lost all control.

I didn't like the feeling coming over me. I felt vulnerable, exposed, completely at the mercy of the man holding me hostage.

Why did I let him seduce me like that?

Why did I do this alone?

Why didn't I make Della come along?

The idea was there when she was dressing me up like her personal Barbie doll, but I didn't ask. And right then, I wished I had. None of this would have happened if I had someone else with me, Della would have never let me go off to screw some guy I didn't know.

What the fuck did I get myself into?

Who the hell is this guy?

Listening to my heels echo off the buildings, the sound drew me in, filling my ears with white noise. Every step was louder than the next as my heels clicked like a clock inside my brain.

The only other sound around me besides my feet and pulse was the soft and muffled music finding its way out through cracks in the thick brick wall.

I wanted to speak, I wanted to calm him down and let him know I would be on his side. He was threatened, he had no choice. That other man had a gun, and he looked like he had no problem using it.

Was he really threatened? Was that man the bad guy?

There was this moment of question that balled up in my chest. How the hell would I know who the good guy actually was?

This man was as much a stranger to me as the guy he killed.

My lips parted, tongue licking the dry skin so the words could come out easier. "I . . . I know you had to do it. That's all we have to say, that's the truth."

"I don't give a shit, that doesn't matter," he snapped, twisting around and holding my

arms. His eyes were crazed, filled with so many emotions I could never understand. “Who did you call? Was it the cops?”

I didn't answer, I didn't want to tell him the truth. I was trying to think of something else, something quick and believable so I didn't piss him off anymore than he already was.

Baring his teeth, his lips curled high as he growled. “Answer me.”

Nodding yes, I forced my eyes to the ground, not wanting to see the reaction on his face. I couldn't lie, I couldn't think of one fucking thing to say to him.

The way he said it, the command in his tone and seriousness in his voice, it drove me to speak the truth, to not let my mouth spew false claims of calling a taxi or a friend.

Even if I had come up with the best lie in the world, I still think the way he spoke would have been enough to keep me truthful.

“Then it doesn't matter.” Whipping his head forward, his fingers tightened around my nape. “You're coming with me.”

Digging my heels into the pavement, I tried to force him to stop. “No! Let me go!” screaming as loudly as I could, I reached back and attempted to pry his hand off my neck. “Just let me go!”

I wasn't sure what came over me. Adrenaline had kicked in, the need to survive and keep going forged its way to the front of my mind. I wasn't going to go anywhere with him, not now, not ever.

I was kicking myself in the ass for even allowing myself to drop my walls and let this man coerce me into the idea of having sex with him.

And knowing he had just killed someone, that he had a weapon of his own, at the mercy for him to use, all I wanted was to be as far away from him as possible.

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Fight or flight, it wasn't just a saying, it was a real thing. At first I wanted to flee, I wanted to hide and vanish, pretending that I had never been there.

Now all I wanted to do was fight to get away from him. Even if he was protecting himself and me, he had killed that man, and he didn't even seem phased by it. That was the scariest part of it all, there was no remorse.

He wasn't pulling his hair out, upset that some crazed person had just held a gun to his face. He wasn't spewing statements of regret and sorrow for the man that had just lost his life. He pulled the trigger and stepped around his body without blinking.

He's done this before.

I could feel it, I could sense the danger surrounding this man. Everything around me seemed so small and insignificant. I was in the presence of a monster, a man who could kill without thought or feeling.

“That's not happening, not now.”

“No!” Dropping to my knees, the man stumbled forward, causing his hand to shift up my neck and tangle in my hair.

Huffing under his breath, he grunted in frustration. “Fine, you don't want to walk on your own, then I'll do it for you.” Before I could react, he wrapped his arm around my waist and threw me over his shoulder. “We can do this my way.”

“Help! Help!” Screaming at the top of my lungs, I slammed my fists against his back

and kicked my legs. “Someone help me!”

A devious chuckle escaped his lips as he tightened his grip around my waist. “No one can hear you, Princess, not back here.”

“You can't do this! Let me go!” My legs flailed, arms slapping and scratching. I just wanted to hurt him so he would drop me. I knew if he dropped me, if I could just get my feet on the ground, I'd fucking run.

“I can do this, because I don't have a fucking choice.”

Growling, I let out a screech that sounded more animal than human. Rocking and jerking my body, I refused to give up and let him just take me.

“Fuck you! I won't go with you!”

“You can try to hurt me all you want, it won't work.” Shuffling me up higher on his shoulder, he strolled through the darkness with me hanging over his back like dead weight.

Lifting my head to look behind me, I could see we were getting closer to the street. A few cars drove by, the streetlights creating a lighthouse effect with the parked cars.

When we get to the road I'll scream again. Someone will hear me, there are too many people around for no one to notice what he's doing.

Keeping my muscles braced, I waited for my moment. I had it all planned out in my head. Once we were at the street I'd scream for help, I'd kick and yell and I'd force someone to notice us.

Peering from the corner of my eye, I anxiously waited for the road as his feet pressed

on without pause. The streetlights grew brighter and brighter, slowly engulfing the darkness around us. Without warning, the man took a hard left, pulling a solid metal door open and slipping inside.

No! No, no, no!

Freedom was right there, it was right there and now it was gone.

“What are you doing? Why are you taking me in here?!” Pushing my hands against the top of his shoulder, I attempted to wriggle myself free. “Go back to the road! Take me back to the road!”

“Sorry, that's not how this is going to work.”

“I just want to go home.” Tears filled my eyes as I felt the safety I longed for slip between my fingers and disappear. “That's all I want to do, I just want to go home.”

“Yeah well, I'm sorry, I can't grant your wish.” Laughing again, his voice raked my spine and turned my insides into a bubbling inferno. “Home isn't an option, and it might never be.”

What the hell does that mean?

Why wouldn't I ever be able to go home?

Oh my God. . .

Is he going to kill me too!?

The thought crushed my heart, stomping it into a million tiny pieces. I didn't want to die, I wasn't ready for that.

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“Please, just let me go. You don't have to kill me, I'm not a threat to you.”

Firm fingers dug into my hips, slinging me around and placing me back on my feet. But he didn't let go, slipping his hand up my arm, he dug his nails into my bicep.

“Kill you? Do you think I just. . .” Pausing, his eyes fell over my face. “I'm not going to kill you, at least not if you don't make me.” A slight smirk teased his lips as his lids hooded. “Sit.” Forcing me down into a chair, he took a small step back. “There's nowhere for you to run, so if you really don't want to die, then I suggest you stay put. Running. . .” Pausing, he pushed his shirt back to show me the handle of his gun in his waist. “Running will get you a bullet to the back of the fucking head.”

Curling my fingertips under the chair, I squeezed hard, cutting my nails into the cushion. “Look, I don't know who you are, and honestly, I don't care. What happened was between you and that other guy, it doesn't involve me.”

“It didn't involve you, but the second you stepped foot in that bathroom with me, you dragged yourself into this.” Tugging his phone out of his pocket, he thumbed the screen and held it to his ear. “It's me. . .”

The man turned slightly, keeping me in his peripheral vision. I couldn't hear everything he was saying, only catching quick phrases I had no way to make sense of.

“It didn't work, I'm still here.”

“I won't stop—”

Growling, the man dragged his hand through his hair. Going quiet, he listened to whoever was on the other end of the line, scratching at his jaw. “You're a fucking dead man.”

Hanging up his phone, he turned back to face me. His eyes were sad, glinting like liquid metal. He didn't speak for a long second, just staring at me as if he suddenly felt sorry for me.

“Okay, let's go.” Waving his hand, he held out his arm, trying to signal for me to get up.

“Where are we going?” I asked, kicking my legs back and forth nervously. As far as I was concerned, we were good right there. My car was nearby, there were people all around us, people who could get me help, people who could save me from this killer.

Rolling his eyes, he stepped forward and snagged my arm, yanking me to my feet. “You don't get to ask questions, you just follow orders and do as you're told. That's how this shit goes, so come on.”

Taking a giant step, the man dragged me behind him as he made his way through the empty building and to a small garage. Pulling keys from his pocket, he clicked the button and the headlights of a car flashed on.

No, no, no. Where is he taking me?

Guiding me to the passenger seat, he opened the door. “Get in.”

I'm not going anywhere with you!

Holding the edge of the roof, I resisted his attempt to push me into the seat. “I . . . I don't want to. My car is right outside, just let me go and you'll never see me again.”

Leaning in close, he brought his nose to mine so he could stare directly into my eyes. “This is your last warning. Do as I say or my next move won't be so kind.” Pulling the gun from his waist, he shook it back and forth. “I'm not playing this game with you. I already told you what you need to do, so do it.”

“Okay, alright, I'm getting in.” Holding up my palms, I dropped into the seat, and tucked my hands under my thighs.

I wasn't going to fight him. Not yet, not without better protection for myself or a place to run to. For now I was going to listen to him. I would do as I was told, but not because he wanted me to.

I was doing it so I could keep going and not end up in a communal grave with that other man.

I was doing it to stay alive.

Chapter Three

Emery

“You know you never answered me before, what's your name?” I asked, watching the trees pass by us like a giant blur. We were on the highway, and I had no fucking clue where he was planning on taking me.

But I wasn't going to let my fear take control and ruin what might be the last chance I had to talk him out of whatever the fuck he was doing.

We had been driving for about forty minutes, moving away from the city, and into the desolate growth of wilderness. The trees had thickened, the sky growing brighter as the sharp lights of skyscrapers and businesses faded into the distance.

Looking up, I could see stars and smoky gray clouds as they rolled and tumbled across the skyline. I couldn't see that in the city, there were no stars to watch, twinkling as if they were playing a symphony for the eye.

It was amazing really, and I wasn't sure if I suddenly found the sky so intriguing because of how I ended up beneath the glittering notes, or if it was just something I had taken for granted.

When I really thought about it, I don't think I ever really took the time to look up before, to examine and speculate what star I was looking at or what constellations I could find.

Drinking in every last drop it had to offer, I stared in awe at the sky, because I had no idea if I would get the chance to see it ever again.

The cars around us had thinned as he sped down the road, further and further away from the life I knew. Away from my friends, away from my home, away from the normalcy I had grown to know.

Everything was about to change—everything.

My life would never be the same. I knew that on some level, even though I didn't want to accept it at that moment. I couldn't and wouldn't think about it; because I was still breathing, because I wasn't on my knees with a gun to my head. I still had time to change the future.

If I let my mind wander, taking full hold of what was happening, I was afraid I'd give up. I didn't want to give up. There was a small flame in my gut, a single flicker of strength that was keeping my head from imploding on itself.

And I was going to nurture that light, holding onto it for as long as I possibly could. Every last ounce of strength I had would be used, until weakness starved my muscles, refusing to let me take one more step forward.

“You don't have to give me a real name, just give me something I can call you.”

No answer.

He wouldn't talk to me, refusing to acknowledge that I was even sitting beside him. I couldn't understand that, why he took me the way he had and left me with so many questions.

We were about to have sex an hour ago, now I was sitting beside a killer, a man with

no soul, a man who had changed before my eyes from a thrill into a fear.

If he was going to kill me, I wished he would just say it. If he planned on keeping me chained up someplace, then he should be man enough to tell me. At least then I wouldn't have to wonder, I wouldn't have the heavy weight of not knowing my future making my heart ache.

“Nothing? You won't answer me?”

“Shut up. I'm not going to answer your fucking questions.

“What? Why not? It doesn't hurt anything, it doesn't change anything.”

“You haven't earned my answers.”

What the hell was that suppose to mean?

I didn't deserve this, I hadn't done anything wrong. The only thing I was guilty of was being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Why didn't he see that? Why was he making it seem like I did something to cause all this?

“Fine, be a dick about it and don't answer, but you can't stop me from asking.” Folding my arms over my chest, I lifted my chin high. “Like it or not, I've got questions.”

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Keeping his eyes on the road, I could tell he wasn't happy about the situation either. He didn't want me there, no more than I wanted to be there.

Then why fucking take me?

His hands gripped the steering wheel tight, both arms deadlocked straight, as his mouth twitched and curved in every direction but up. I could barely see the white of his eyes as his lids turned into thin slits and his brows furrowed in angered thoughts. He looked fucking pissed.

“You don't belong here, but I didn't have a choice.” Growling, he spoke through clenched teeth. “I didn't have afuckingchoice.”

The man appeared to be talking more to himself than to me, as if saying his thought out loud helped to convince him that taking me was his only option. It wasn't, he had other choices, but he settled on the first one he thought of.

Flaring his nostrils, his hands twisted back and forth as his lips moved with soundless words.

“I'm not a part of this, we both know that.” Shifting in my seat, I tried to force him to look at me, but he still wouldn't.

Crooking his jaw, his lip twitched at the corner. “Well, you are now. You just added a whole other level to this shit.”

“Why?” I asked, fumbling with the hem of my skirt. It was a stupid question, and

even as I asked it, I already knew the answer.

Of course shit changed for him, I had been a fork thrown into the mix. A new set of eyes meant a new obstacle he had to overcome.

Because of me he couldn't vanish into the night. Because of me he wasn't able to escape undetected. I had turned witness to a savage incident that he owned, and it was easier to scapegoat me then blame himself for his own actions.

“Damn it!” Slamming the wheel with his fist, his foot pressed harder on the gas, forcing the car to speed forward. “You don't fucking belong here!”

“Why won't you just let me go? Leave me here, you'll never see me again. I promise.”

“I can't do that.” His gaze flicked to the rear-view mirror, eyes meticulously watching the darkness behind us. “I don't know who else saw you.”

What the hell are you talking about?

“I was telling you the truth before, about how I know you had to kill that man. So ask me anything, and I'll be honest with you, I swear.” Holding up my hand, it looked like I was about to take an oath before the court. “You didn't do anything wrong. Go on ask me anything you want.”

I meant what I said. If the cops came to me, I'd tell them he had no choice. I wouldn't lie about it, there wasn't a reason for me to, the other guy was aiming a gun at his head.

I just couldn't understand why he wouldn't want to call the police, why he would choose to run away, forcing me to go with him, instead of staying there and doing the right thing.

Who is this guy?

A part of me was wondering who the real bad guy was? Was it the dead man in the club or the man beside me?

“I don't need to ask you a fucking thing, and I don't want to know a damn thing about you. I want this night to be over, that's it.”

“Sounds like we want the same thing.”

“You don't have a fucking clue.” Flicking his eyes in my direction, his lips drew taut, his silence returning easily.

What do you want from me?!

Kicking my heels off, I curled my legs up into my chest, laying my head back and angling my face to look at him. I wanted to keep him talking, I wanted him to let down his guard and just give me something, I didn't care what it was.

My hope was that he'd see me as a person, that if we could connect on some common ground, if I could remind him of where we were before that man showed up, maybe he'd pull over and just drop my ass off, telling me to get the fuck out before he changed his mind.

“How about family? Do you have any family?”

“It's none of your business.” Squeezing the steering wheel harder, his knuckles turned bright white.

“My name's—”

Cutting me off, his brows hardened. “I don't give a fuck what your name is, it doesn't matter.” Shaking his head, he looked back at the road. “Look, I know what you're doing, and it's not going to work.”

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Thinning my lips, I let my eyes float to the window. “I don't know what you're talking about, I'm just trying to make conversation.”

“Don't play games with me, we both know that's bullshit. You want to try and get to me, you want to try and reach my human side. Do you think I haven't seen it before? Do you really think that you're the first person to try that shit?” Glancing between the mirrors, he changed lanes. “I've got news for you, there isn't a single part of me that's humane, it doesn't exist. I don't care about what you want, or if you think going to the cops is the right thing to do.” I felt him look over at me, the heat off his glare melting me to the seat. “What ever happens after tonight isn't up to me, I can only do so much. But the cops, they can't fucking help you, and they definitely won't help me.”

Fuck you it's not up to you. You have a choice, you always have a choice.

Twisting my face to his, I tilted my head. “Right now it is up to you. You could pull over and let me out, no one would know.”

“I would know.”

“But that's it, just you. You didn't tell that person you called that someone else was with you.”

Flaring his nostrils, he gritted his teeth. “You don't know what they know, you couldn't hear what they were saying.”

“You're right, I don't.” Holding up my hands, I nodded in agreement. “That doesn't mean you have to tell them the truth. You could pretend we never met, you could tell

them that I got away, fuck you could even tell them you killed me. No one would know if you were lying or not.”

Letting out a cynical laugh, the man arched his brows. “You don't have a damn clue. Do you really think it's that easy? Do you honestly think that I can just play pretend?” Slamming the steering wheel with a heavy fist, he yelled, “Fuck! Why did this have to happen?! I didn't need this shit! I have enough to worry about, and now I have you.”

Cowering in my seat, I was afraid he might strike me. There was so much anger in that man, a deep dark anger that I had never seen before in anyone else.

My eyes grew big, muscles trembling. I knew he had the power to kill someone, what would stop him from hurting me?

Curling up into a ball, I wrapped my arms around my legs, wishing I could dissolve, wishing I had the ability to transform into air and float away.

The man glanced down at me, his face falling flat and emotionless. “Relax, I'm not going to hit you or something.” Sighing, he looked away, pulling his hands down the wheel. “I might be a monster, but I'm not a complete fucking asshole. I just don't want you expecting a happy ending, I can't promise you that.”

Unfurling, I slid my feet off the seat and placed them on the floor. Fiddling with my fingers in my lap, I looked down. “I don't know what you want me to say. You won't tell me anything. Why don't you tell me what's going on so I know then? Why did that man want to kill you?”

“Trust me, you're better off not knowing. Once we get back, then I can figure out exactly what to do with you.”

“I don't want to die,” I said right back, no pause or thought put into my response.

There wasn't a single portion of my soul that was ready to give up. I wasn't ready to lose my life over something that had nothing to do with me at all. I wasn't connected to the man beside me or the man he killed.

All I wanted was to be freed, to be released back into the world I knew. Why was that so much to ask for? He chose to take me, I didn't ask to be here.

“Yeah, well, unfortunately that's not up to you.”

My lip twitched at the corner as my skin flushed with frustration and anger. “I'm going to have a say in this, I can tell you that. It's my fucking life—mine. No one can take it from me.”

I should have been terrified, I should have been cowering and pleading for my life. But I wasn't going to beg for something that was mine to begin with. And I would be damned if I was going to let this man think he could control me with fear.

“Sweetheart, your control is gone, you have none. So you better make peace with that now.” The car began to slow down as he pulled off the exit. Reading the sign, I made sure to take a mental note of where we were.

Exit seven, Coventry. Repeating the city over and over in my head, I watched for more street signs so I knew how to guide help my way when I had the chance.

“Yeah, we'll see about that.”

His eyes jerked in my direction, lids squinting with curiosity. “You know for someone that has no fucking clue what they're up against, you have balls. You should be fucking scared, this isn't a damn joke.”

“I won't give you that.”

“Give me what?”

“My fear.”

“Even that's not yours anymore. You might lose everything; your past, your name, your very existence.” His lip curved high, cutting into his cheek. “Whatever you thought your future would be, it's all gone if you don't listen to me.”

His smile coated my body like liquid hell, smothering my chest and making it hard to breathe. I thought a smile would be a good thing, but it wasn't. There was pleasure on his lips with a hint of satisfaction.

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Why the hell are you doing this to me?

Tears smeared my vision as I took short quick breaths, trying to force any mercy out of this man “We can fix this, you know we can. All you have to do is let me go. Do you really want to be responsible for what happens to me?”

“You're not the first, not by a long shot.”

My body buzzed with rage as his callous nature gleamed like a spot light. Balling my fists, I straightened my legs and pulled myself off the seat.

Gritting my teeth, I snarled at the man like a rabid dog. “And you're proud of that? Are you telling me you don't care at all? That it doesn't matter to you if I live or die? How can you be so cold?”

“It's nothing personal.” Stroking his jaw, he dipped his head into his chest and thumbed his bottom lip. “Look, I haven't cared about a fucking thing for as long as I can remember. Do you honestly think that I'll suddenly have a change of heart? Because I won't, you don't mean shit to me, you're more of a fucking hassle, that's it.”

“Fuck you!” I screamed, throwing my arm out to swipe at his face. Clawing his cheek with my nails, he yelled in pain, jerking his arm up to block my attack.

“Fuck!” he yelled, using his arm to hide his face. “I'm trying to help you!”

“Pull over.”

“No.”

“PULL OVER.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “If I pull over you're definitely dead.”

I was done sitting by and waiting to see what was going to happen. I was done allowing this man to drive me to my death. If he couldn't see that what he was doing was wrong, then it was time for me to take charge.

If I was going to die, then I was going to do it by my own hand, not his.

“I said pull over!” Lurching over the man's arm, I snagged the steering wheel and yanked it hard. The car swerved, wheels squealing loudly as it took a hard right and jumped out of the lane.

The quick movement threw me back, crushing my spine against the handle of door. The seat belt locked against my chest, keeping me pinned in place as the man tried to gain control of the vehicle.

His hands moved and turned, countering the erratic motion of the car. But it was no use, he had lost control, unable to steady its direction.

Spinning wildly, the car screeched like an owl as the rubber tried to grip the pavement. My head was twirling, ears ringing as I clutched anything I could for protection. I felt the car tip up onto two wheels, and in that moment, time seemed to slow down.

We floated on our side, riding the white line until the car finally rolled over completely, tumbling out of control.

Closing my eyes, I threw my hands up and pressed my palms against the ceiling. The world around me began to warp as glass shattered and broke, piercing my skin like razor-sharp thorns.

The blood rushed to my head, making me woozy and tired as the car seemed to roll with no stop in sight. Pinching my eyes closed tighter, I did my best to keep my head level and steady.

But I couldn't stop the blackness from coming in.

I couldn't stop the world from disappearing.

And as I prayed for someone to help me, as I begged the heavens to allow me to stay here on earth, everything just vanished.

There was nothing but black.

Chapter Four

Emery

Am I dead?

Faint crackling filled the void in my head, drawing me back from the darkness and into the world of the living.

My lids shot open as a stabbing pain zipped up my back, curling like sharp talons into my ribs. Gulping for air, I was only able to take in short quick bursts of oxygen.

I can't breathe!

Why can't I breathe?

Coughing hard, I held my ribs and tried to roll onto my side. But I couldn't move.

I wanted to move, I had the urge to jump up and take off running. Wriggling my legs and adjusting my hips, I couldn't break free from the bindings holding me hostage. I felt confined, like I was tied up and bound so I couldn't escape.

What the hell is holding me still? Why can't I move?

Every inch of my body ached, it hurt and throbbed no matter which way I turned. My face felt swollen and all I could taste was metal as I swallowed.

Something's wrong. . . Something is really wrong.

Fuck!Where the hell am I?

Through hazy eyes, I felt around and realized that I wasn't tied up, but was pinned between the ceiling and the seat, hanging upside down with my seat belt keeping me in place. Sitting dazed, I tried to clear the foggiess in my head and get a grasp on what had happened.

The car crashed.

I'm still inside.

And I'm hurt, I'm definitely hurt.

But I'm alive.

A buzzing noise made its way into my thoughts, drawing my attention back to my surroundings. Lifting my head, I glanced around the inside of the car and realized that the driver's side door was open and the man was gone.

Where is he? Did he leave me here to die?

Shifting my head from side to side, it was too dark to see out the windows, so I wasn't sure if he was still nearby or if he had abandoned me all together.

It doesn't matter, I need to get the hell out of here.

Fiddling with the belt, a strong scent of gasoline swept in, burning my nostrils. Pausing for a second, panic began to set in as I imagined the car bursting into flames with me inside.

Fumbling wildly with the belt, I tried to find the metal clasp that would set me loose. Anxiously, I poked and squeezed the button, using all the strength I could find, and begging it to let go.

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Come on. . . Come on!

Just let me go! Open the fuck up!

In one fast motion, the buckle popped free, and I dropped out of the seat onto my back. “Ahh!” Screaming, I bit my lip and painfully rolled onto my stomach.

There was creaking and popping coming from the engine as it gurgled to keep the motor running. The scent of gas kept growing, filling the cabin with toxic air.

I have to get out of here.

Acid tears stung my face as they slipped over raw skin. My chest was on fire, cutting me from the inside as I tried to keep my breathing steady. But I didn't care, I had to get the hell out of there before it blew me to pieces.

Where can I go? How the fuck do I get out?!

Searching, I saw the rear windshield was broken, allowing plenty of room for me to crawl through. Using my nails, I started to drag myself towards the back of the car, but a fierce stabbing pain sliced through my body, causing me to stop.

Every time I moved my arms it hurt, every attempt to pull or crawl was hindered by such immense pain that I couldn't focus on anything else. I had never felt anything like it.

Am I dying? Is that what's happening to me?

I didn't want to think like that, I didn't want to imagine that this was where it would all end for me. Trapped in a car, slowly bleeding out, punctured and maimed in places I couldn't even see.

Getting out, running away, finding help and safety; it seemed impossible then, an intangible goal that I would never achieve. Hanging my head, the scent of burning rubber mixed with the musty smell of gasoline and I knew it wouldn't be long before something sparked and I was blown into the stratosphere.

Swallowing the lump that had formed in my throat, I let my body relax. It didn't matter anymore what was about to happen; I wasn't getting out, not like this.

Closing my eyes, the urge to go to sleep became strong and powerful. No matter how much I tried to keep my eyes open, my lids were so heavy they kept drooping, as if tiny anchors were suspended from my lashes, making the choice for me.

Sleeping could be my saving grace. . .

If I was out cold, then I wouldn't see the flash when the car ignited, I wouldn't feel the few seconds of agony as my body split apart from itself and coated the ground like fresh fertilizer.

I could die peacefully. I could die dreaming of the life I had and loved.

I could die and not know it.

All the sounds around me started to dull, fading into that void in your brain that appears right as sleep takes over. The buzzing, the cracks and snaps, it was all so quiet as my eyes lowered and unconsciousness was about to steal me away.

The sound of glass shattering pierced the air as strong hands wrapped around my

upper arms. In one hard pull, my body broke free from the car and fresh air filled my aching lungs.

Icy cold grass tickled my legs as I was dragged across the ground, further and further away from the wreckage. The night air was crisp and quiet, the dinging of the ignition morphed into nothing more than crickets chirping in the background.

“Let me look at you.” His voice forced my eyes wide open, and the urge to scramble away fluttered through my head. But there was no strength left in me, no amount of adrenaline was enough do to shit, not right then.

“I'm fine, don't touch me,” I barked, attempting to push myself up. “Ahh!” I yelled out, as excruciating jabs fanned over my body, hitting so deep my bones screamed. Clenching my ribs, my head fell back as I groaned.

“You're not fine, you're hurt.” Hard fingers dug into my shoulders, pushing me back to the ground. “Don't try to sit up yet, you might make it worse.”

I wanted to tell him to go fuck himself, the words were there, hanging on by a thread, only I couldn't. The man was right, and I didn't have the energy to argue with him about it.

“Where does it hurt?”

“My chest, my chest hurts a lot.” Gently touching my sides, I applied a little pressure. “I feel like I can't breathe.”

“You might have a broken rib. Take slow even breaths, don't try to force it.” I felt his hands as they roamed my frame, touching and moving my legs and arms delicately. “Does it hurt anywhere else?”

“You expect me to believe you really give a shit?” Sighing, I laid my hands over my face and shut my eyes. “Don't try and act like a fucking nice guy.”

“You know I could have just walked away, but I didn't. You're the one who caused this, you and that little fucking stunt of yours. But I'm still here, trying to figure out how bad you're hurt—trying to help you.” The weight of his body shifted, causing his shadow to creep in over my face. “So how about we start this again. Does it hurt anywhere else?”

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Drawing in air through my nose, I dropped my hands from my face and opened my eyes. He was looking down, serious and stern, with his hands resting on his thighs as he knelt beside me. His eyes flittered in the sockets, jaw crooking to the side as he waited for an answer.

We stared at each other, the silence between us thicker than water, tethering me to the ground like a weighted blanket. I felt compelled to speak, to tell him the truth the same as when we were in that alley.

“It hurts everywhere.”

“Alright, that's better. What hurts the most?”

“My chest.”

“Okay.” Pushing up off the ground, he started to turn and walk away.

“Wait, where are you going?”

“I'll be right back, just try not to move.” Disappearing into the night, I could faintly see his shadow as he ducked back into the car through a broken window.

Laying on my back, I stared up at the sky, trying to do what he said and take in slow breaths. It was hard to do. I wanted to drink down the air, I wanted to feel it feed me its life blood so I could stop the heavy weight that sat on my chest. It felt like I was drowning even though I was above water.

His feet scraped over the grass as he came back to my side, holding a small white box.

“What's that?”

“A first aid kit.” Dropping back to his knees, I heard him open the box and rifle around inside. “Let me know if I hurt you, but you have a pretty bad gash on your forehead, and I need to do something about it.”

Who the fuck is this guy?

I wasn't sure what to think. He had literally killed a man, taken me by force, and I had expected that he was either going to kill me too or leave me for dead. But here he was, holding a damn first aid kit, about to dress my wounds like a fucking paramedic.

“This is going to sting,” he said, pouring a clear liquid onto a white gauze pad. Dabbing it across my forehead, my skin began to tingle. “You alright?”

“It's not too bad, my chest hurts more. And I'm fucking tired, I feel like I could pass out right here.”

“No,” he snapped, his eyes opening wide. “You can't sleep, not yet. You probably have a concussion, you hit your head pretty hard.”

Eyeing him, I asked, “How do you know all this? Did you work in a hospital or something?”

“Something like that.” Dropping his eyes back into the box, he pulled out some thin clear strips. “Hold still.” His fingers gripped my skin and pinched the cut closed. Applying four of the strips, he sat back on his heels. “Okay, that should stop the bleeding.”

Touching the cut with the pads of my fingers, I stared at him intently. “Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?” Closing up the kit, he pushed it to the side and let his eyes connect with mine.

“All of this. You pulled me out of the car, you're taking care of my injuries. Why? Why do this? Why not just leave me here and take off? You could have left me to die, why didn't you?”

Licking his lips, he cupped his knees, allowing his eyes to flirt with the ground. “Maybe you're not meant to die here like this.”

“I don't understand.”

Clenching his jaw, he darted his eyes away and looked up at the sky. He didn't give me an explanation to what he had said, leaving me to wonder where his bad side ended and his good side began.

How could he decide between one life and another? Why was I worthy of living after almost killing us both, but not that other man?

“Come on, lets try to stand you up.” Slipping a hand under my shoulders, he took my hand with his other one and guided me up. “Go easy, not too fast.”

“What about my ribs? Can we wrap them or something?”

“No, you don't want to do that. It won't really help, it might actually make it worse.”

I watched him curiously as his face softened and his features changed. My brain was trying to remind me of what he had done, it was screaming at me not to trust him and

to try and get away.

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But right then, I didn't see that man. I saw a man who meant well, who wanted to help instead of hurt. It didn't make sense. It was as if he was two different people, an angel and a demon living in one body.

Was that possible? Was there a way for someone to be both?

How can you kill and give life? Who was he and what the hell was his purpose on this earth?

I have to decide for myself what this man is, if he's good or bad, if he means well or wants to do harm.

In my heart, I believed he didn't really want to hurt me, regardless of what he had done. In my heart, I trusted him. There was no way for me to explain why or how I could feel such things. It was crazy, it was beyond fucking stupid for me to see any good in him, and yet I did.

What is wrong with me?

I can't trust him, why would I even think I could?

Because right now I don't have a choice.

“So, have I earned your name at least? Will you give me that?”

Thinning his lips, his eyes glazed in thought. There was a long pause before he spoke, his hard glare burrowing into mine as his hand tightened around my palm. “Porter,

my name's Porter. Now come on, we have a long walk ahead of us.”

Lifting me to my feet, I grunted and groaned as my chest ached and cracked with each move I made. Hunching over, his fingers braided in mine, arm protectively cradling my back, making sure I didn't fall.

“I know you said you don't care, but my name is Emery.”

A loud bang rang out from the car, causing both of us to jerk our heads up. There was a faint flicker of orange under the hood, followed by another giant pop.

Porter took a firm step backwards, tugging me closer to his chest. We both stood stagnant, watching the flame as it traveled across the front of the hood like a snake.

In one quick burst, the flames exploded in a giant funnel of fire, blasting pieces of the car into the air. Throwing his arms around my body, he cradled me, using himself to protect me from any falling debris.

As the inferno fizzled into normal flames, Porter lifted himself back up, and we both watched the car, mesmerized by the orange and red tassels dancing against the black backdrop.

The entire vehicle was burning, hot glass was crackling, the seats sizzling and melting into liquid. And as I stared at where I had just been laying, watching the same spot that I had almost gone to sleep in turn to ash, I was grateful for what Porter had done for me.

Looking up at him, his eyes were sparkling, the reflection of the fire bold and strong in his pupils. His skin was glowing, creating hard and soft angles. I was awestruck, finding beauty in the beast beside me.

“Thank you, Porter.” Managing a faint smile, I lifted my hand to his chest and touched him.

That single touch, it sent shivers racing down my spine. Our eyes connected, and I was pretty sure he felt it too. His chest jumped, a small hiccup of movement that brushed my fingertips.

I wasn't sure how truthful he had been with me before when he said he didn't have feelings. Because right then he felt something, what it was, I didn't have a clue. But if he truly felt nothing, then his body wouldn't have reacted the way it did.

Something happened between us at that moment, a connection that could only be made when two people survive together. We shared that, we shared the feeling of new life.

Clearing his throat, he adjusted his arm, moving it lower. “Yeah, well, save your thank yous for someone who deserves it.”

“You don't think you deserve a thank you for saving me?”

“I deserve a lot of things for some of the shit I've done. But a thank you—no, not a chance in hell.” Taking the first step, he guided me forward, walking us around the smoking and mangled car. “Besides, this shit ain't over yet. Don't thank me for saving you when I still don't know what's going to happen or how this will end.”

“It doesn't matter, you saved me, that means something. Whether you like it or not, I'm grateful for what you did.”

Looking at the wreckage, seeing what we had just lived through, it gave me a sliver of hope. If the heavens had wanted to save me from whatever this man might do, it could have just taken my life right then.

But it didn't.

I was allowed to live. I was allowed to have another day, another sunrise, another chance to keep going. . . We both were, and Porter had been the reason for that.

That had to mean something.

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We should have died right there in that crash, and yet we were walking away. . .

Together.

Chapter Five

Emery

“I can't keep going, I need to sit and rest.” Huffing under my breath, my feet slowed as I placed my hand on my chest and checked the rate of my heart.

It was beating so fast, working way harder than it should be to keep me going. All I wanted to do was take a short break, my body needed it.

“We don't have time for that,” Porter said, keeping his head facing forward, eyes set on the horizon. “We need to get off the road, it's not safe.”

“Not safe? I figured you're the one I should be afraid of.” Chuckling, I groaned as my lungs expanded a little too far, causing the bones in my chest to shift and pop.

Growling, Porter flashed me an angry frown. “You think you're funny, but you're not. I have enough to worry about, I don't need this shit. I'm not even sure how the hell I'm going to explain having you with me.”

Stopping, I bent over and grabbed my knees, listening to him ramble on and on about a man he hated, who had ruined his life and destroyed everything he touched.

Watching Porter, he seemed to be oblivious of the fact that I wasn't beside him as he continued to walk the moonlit road, mumbling gibberish to himself.

I was trying to make sense of his behavior, trying to understand why he would go back to someone he seemed to despise.

“Then why are you going back?” The night air carried my voice easily as it echoed off surrounding trees. “Why go back to something you hate?”

His body came to a halt, head ticking over his shoulder. The hard angles of his jaw shone under the silver sky, his jet black hair turned dusky blue as strands fell into his eyes.

Porter had this look to him that made my toes curl and my heart beat faster. He looked devious and dark, he looked hard and confident. But his eyes, the way they glossed with fire and smoldered with pain; he was a man with a past.

“I'm not going back to him, but I can't just run away either. I did that already; no more running, never again.” Rocking his jaw back and forth, he rubbed the back of his neck. “Come on, keep walking.” Stiffening his shoulders, his arms hung by his sides as he turned his back to me and started forward.

There was something in what he said, a feeling, a hatred, a subtle hue of meaning that I didn't and might not ever understand. I watched his face as the words took shape, his voice seething, wanting an end to whatever the fuck he had landed in, but not sure how to get there.

And as I stood there, debating if I should follow him into the darkness or sit still and tread the water still holding me hostage, I knew whatever his issue was, it really had nothing to do with me.

I'm not doing this.

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“No.” Standing up straight, I wrapped an arm around my midsection. “I’m not going, I won’t.”

“You are and you will.” His voice crushed the air, firm and demanding. “I’m not giving you a choice.”

“Look, you do what you have to do, but I’m not going. You don’t want to hurt me, no matter what horrible things you’ve done in the past. If you did, I wouldn’t be standing here right now.”

“Horrible? Sweetheart, you have no fucking clue what I’m capable of.” Stalking towards me, Porter stopped inches from my face. “Are you still hurting?”

Nodding, I put more pressure around my ribs. “I need a hospital, Porter.”

His lips curled up, lids hooding. “Do you think you can run or fight right now if you had to?”

Glaring at him, my brows dipped into my nose, wondering why the hell he would ask me that. He could see how badly I was hurt, he knew there was no way I could do either of those things.

“Well, can you?”

“You know I can’t. I’m fucking hurt, how the hell could I?”

“That’s what I thought.” Wrapping an arm around my back and one under my legs, he

lifted me off the ground and cradled me against his chest.

“What are you doing? Put me down!”

“I will. . .” His voice fell silent as a light smile teased his lips. “When we get there.”

Cringing with pain as he adjusted me in his arms, Porter pressed me tighter to his chest. There was nothing I could do and he knew it.

He had just used my injuries against me, taking advantage of the pain stopping me from doing anything to protect myself.

“This isn't fair,” I said, giving him an angry glare as I looked up at the underside of his face.

“Life isn't fair, you're old enough to understand that. I suggest you get used to it.” With heavy strides, he started walking. “It could always be worse you know. Besides, you're the one who said you couldn't walk anymore, so I'll take that burden off of you.”

“Don't tell me what's fair and what isn't. Because this, this is fucking bullshit. The only burden I have is being here with you, I'd rather you just leave me.”

“Call it what you want, I don't really care. You're coming back with me, that's it. So you can either whine about it like a fucking child, or suck it up and deal with it.”

“Who do you think you are?”

“I'm the guy who's going to make sure you live through the night, how about that?”

“I don't know if I'd call this living.” Huffing under my breath, I tucked my arms

under each other, wishing this horrible nightmare was over already.

Bobbing and rocking in his arms, he strode down the side of the road like he didn't have a care in the world. I could feel him taking in deep breaths, I could hear his heart beating against his ribs as it pumped the blood through his body to keep him going.

I half expected this man to not have a heart at all. How could he?

But it was there, lulling me into a trance as the wind blew against my hot cheeks and my body succumbed to the aches and pains. My eyes began to shut, and I found it harder and harder to stay awake.

Sleep was calling me, taking me away so my muscles could heal and my mind could clear. And I allowed it, giving it full control to take me.

I had no other choice. I couldn't walk, I couldn't run or fight, not without giving my body time to mend.

Porter's heart thumped in my ear as my lids closed one last time, soothing me into blackness.

Until I saw the sun.

I had a dream. It was one of those dreams where you know you're sleeping, but you can't wake up. You're dug in like a tick, trapped in the unconscious world your brain had created.

I was walking down a road in a small country town. It was a place I had never been to and never seen, but in my mind I knew it existed. There were dusty old buildings, all of them abandoned and desolate.

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I was all alone.

Birds were chirping in the trees, butterflies were wisping by my face, and I could feel the wind off their thin, brittle wings. The sun was coming up over the horizon, so I stopped to watch it.

It was beautiful. The giant orange globe appeared to sizzle as long tendrils of fire whirled and swooped like thin arms.

In my dream I was calm, everything was perfect, it was exactly the way life was supposed to be. There was no weight on my shoulders, no pains in my body, no water in my lungs.

I was free.

But that freedom didn't last as the sky turned dark and ash began to rain down. The heat off each dust drop burned my skin, and all I felt was the intense need to get away.

I started running, trying to escape the searing pain the sky was delivering. Only there was nowhere for me to go. It didn't matter which way I turned, it didn't matter how fast I ran, I couldn't find shelter to protect me from above.

I was never getting out.

I was never getting away.

I was slowly dying.

Chapter Six

Porter

Fuck. . .

Her body was limp in my arms, legs dangling and bouncing off my thigh with each step I took. Looking down at her, she appeared to be sleeping peacefully, but I knew that couldn't be true.

Every so often she would mumble inaudible words, her face scrunching up in terror as dreams turned to nightmares she couldn't escape. Nightmares that I was probably the center of.

I took her. I can't believe I fucking took her.

I didn't have a choice.

That was my argument with myself, my rationale for abducting this woman off the street. I wasn't sure exactly what to do with her, I didn't know if anyone else had seen us together, all I knew was I couldn't take the chance that someone else was there with Frankie.

What I did know was that I had taken part in the ultimate sin, I had stolen the air from someone else's lungs, I had stolen any future he might have had. I knew I should feel some sort of remorse for what I had done, that's what any normal person would experience.

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But honestly, I didn't give a fuck. Why?

My goal from the beginning had been to stay under the radar, to be a ghost in the night, slip in, slit their throats quietly and disappear. That didn't work.

All I wanted was one man, but to get to him, I had to go through others. I was tired, drowning in this life.

I had come to the end of the road, needing to choose a path. Left would lead me back into hiding, into pretending like I was an abandoned child, trying to find their way in the world. But I went right, I decided I was done, it was time for me to take control and finish this shit once and for all.

He deserves what's coming for him.

He stole everything from me.

I wasn't going to run anymore, I wasn't going to let them use fear to rule me. I had already lost my family because of what I had allowed him to turn me into. The past few years were horrible and lonely. I was done living by their unspoken rules, done watching over my shoulder every second of every day.

Enough was enough.

Emery had gotten far too close for me to let her walk away. She saw my face, she knew I killed him. She feared me, I could see it in her eyes, in the way she looked at me.

But I didn't really give a shit what she thought about me or what truth she knew. She had bigger problems to worry about than me.

Who knows who else was there watching, no one was ever all alone. There were always eyes everywhere; spying, learning, waiting.

I was tempted to tell her who I was and what was going on, but I couldn't.

Emery wouldn't understand why. How could she?

Even I had a hard time still grasping the situation I was in. It wasn't fair for me to burden her with the shit storm my life had become. It was going to be hard as hell now to keep her from getting killed, and I couldn't make her any promises that she wouldn't end up dead.

Her hair tickled my arm as she moaned and turned her head into my chest. She really was a beautiful little vixen. Emery's hair was the color of gold, gleaming like metal under the sun as we passed beneath poorly lit street lamps. Her skin looked soft and dewy, cheeks slightly pink from the cold breeze.

Her legs bent up as she tried to snuggle further into my arms to stay warm, forcing her dress to slink higher up her thighs. The edge of the fabric danced with the crest of her mound, and I found my gaze drifting over her pink panties peeking out.

Shifting her body, I gripped the hem with the tips of my fingers and tugged it back down. I didn't know why I did that for her. I had been seconds from fucking her brains out before everything turned to shit around us.

Decency was a void, caring was an empty bag that blew weightlessly around inside my gut. But for some reason, I felt for her.

What the hell is wrong with me?

If I had the ability to feel bad for others, I'd feel awful for taking her in the first place. But I didn't feel bad, I felt angry and frustrated that I had brought this down on her.

This wasn't supposed to happen and I reacted the only way I knew how; I took control. This woman had taken me by surprise in so many ways. I felt a weird sensation in my gut, a heavy feeling that made my cock thicken and my body ignite.

What am I going to do with you Emery?

Turning up the driveway, the front door opened and my mother stepped outside, crossing her arms as if she was going to lay into me for being late like she used to when I was younger.

“Port—” she started to say then cut herself off. “Who's that? Is she alright?”

“Her name's Emery, we got in an accident, the car's about five miles back, off of Breakneck road.”

Waving her arm, she held the door open. “Here, bring her in. Are you alright?” Her eyes ran up and down my body, hands reaching up to touch my face.

She doesn't hate me, even if her eyes say she does.

“I'm fine, but she hit hard.”

“Bring her to the spare room, I'll get my stuff.” My mom quickly walked off down the hall, heading towards the bathroom. “Try not to be too loud, Dad's sleeping. I'll wake him after and let him know what's going on. For now, just leave it be.”

“Yeah, fine, just hurry. I don't know how bad she's hurt.” Carrying Emery up the stairs, I went into the bedroom and flicked on the light with my elbow. “Okay, you're going to get some real help now, better than my hack job,” I said quietly, whispering into her ear.

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Laying her down gently on the bed, she moaned softly, but didn't wake up. Sitting down beside her, I pulled the covers up over her legs and lifted her head to add another pillow.

She looked so innocent, laying there in a deep sleep, unaware of what was going on around her. A peaceful glow emanated from her face, causing a twinge in my heart. Stroking my jaw, my fingers itched to touch her skin, to feel the softness against the pads of my fingers.

I couldn't explain why I had the urge to touch her so badly, but it was there, eating me alive as I watched her from above.

Maybe it was her innocence, or maybe it was my emptiness and eagerness to have those normal feelings like everyone else. It wasn't that I wanted to be cold, I just didn't have a pot of feelings to draw from.

“So what happened?” My mother's voice filled the room as she walked up beside me. “Is it just her head?”

“I lost control of the car and we crashed. I did what I could for her head, but she complained about her chest hurting before she fell asleep.”

Gently, my mother touched her arms and belly, feeling around her neck and the bottom of her skull. Pulling out her stethoscope, she listened to her breathing, slipping the metal bell down to her stomach.

“Her lungs sound good, stomach too. I don't think she has any internal bleeding, but

she definitely might have a broken rib or two.” Standing up straight, she rested her hands on her hips. “I’ll take care of the cut tomorrow, we’ll let her rest for now.”

I felt my mother’s eyes as they bore a hole into my head. She was glaring at me, brows hard, lips taut.

“What?” I asked, letting my eyes connect with hers.

“Where did you go tonight?”

“I went out to grab a drink. Why?”

“Mm,” she sighed, obviously doubting my explanation. “You really expect me to believe that?”

“I told you to stop with that shit. Stop worrying about me, stop thinking that I’m going to go running back to him, because I’m not.”

Laying her hands flat against her thighs, she tilted her head as she spoke. “Look, I know that this has been hard on you, it’s been hard on all of us. But you can’t be out there, you know that. Stop going to look for trouble.”

The skip in her voice told me she was trying not to cry, that she was doing her best to stay strong. It was typical of my mother to try and pull out my emotions, to read too much into something or look at me like she had lost me along the way.

She wanted so badly to have the boy she had raised and not the person I had become. I suppose it was natural for a mother to try and protect her son, to give helpful advice and nurture her child.

I just wanted her to stop and leave it alone. I wished she would just be happy that she

still had one son, a son who was trying everything to right his wrongs.

“Mom, don't, not right now. I know—”

“Porter, I just worry, that's all. I'm afraid for you and what this is doing to you. You're not the same person anymore, you're different. You show up with a strange woman and tell me you crashed the car. You're distant, you're angry. I can't do this, if I lose you too. . .” Her words trailed off, eyes welling up.

“You won't lose me, I'm not going anywhere. I promise.”

Frowning, she closed up her bag of medical supplies. “Don't make promises you're not ready to keep, Porter. Not when I know you're going out there trying to fix what you can't control. You need to change, you need to stop getting in over your head.”

“I'm not doing anything.” My voice came out short and firm.

This wasn't her concern. I understood that I was her son—her only son, but that didn't change the fact that something had to be done.

I couldn't live the rest of my life waiting for them to find me. I couldn't live with myself if I just sat back and did nothing to get justice for Zander.

The police weren't going to do shit, they didn't care about a lowlife thug who had gotten in over his head.

Those people weren't going to stop, not until I was dead. That's how they worked. They gobbled up lost and broken souls, only to destroy them in the end. I would never be free unless I took control.

That's what I was doing, I was taking my life back.

I wish I hadn't waited so long to do it. . .

“You want what you'll never get, Porter. You can't fix what you broke.” Grabbing her bag, she started for the door. “It's late, she'll be alright, just let her rest. We'll figure this out tomorrow. You can stay on the couch for tonight, but I don't know what your father is going to say about all of this.”

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I heard my mother go back downstairs, but I didn't get up to leave right away. Staring down at Emery, I started to feel something. My heart began to hurt, it ached in a way I had never felt before.

Pushing that feeling away, I forced it down into the box in my gut. It wasn't even something I had to think about anymore. It just happened naturally.

Cold and emotionless was easier, it gave me the strength I needed to do what I had to. No feelings meant no hurt. No feelings gave rise to the killer that had been built inside me.

I was out for blood, and nothing would satiate my hunger until I had devoured every last asshole that held me stagnant, keeping me a prisoner in my own existence.

If you don't care, why did you take her?

Even I couldn't believe my own lies anymore. Because the truth was I did care about what happened to this girl, she was too innocent to just walk away from.

Touching her cheek with the back of my hand, I ran my knuckles over her delicate skin. "I won't say I'm sorry for taking you, but I can't let you go until I know you'll be safe."

Emery turned her face towards me, her eyes fluttering behind her lids as she let out a quiet groan.

I don't want to hurt you.

I just hope you can feel that.

Chapter Seven

Emery

I felt the warmth on my face, and could see a brightness against the back of my lids. Opening my eyes, I blinked hard as the sun burned my pupils.

The room around me was fuzzy, but I could make out the walls surrounding me, and a window right beside the bed. Turning my face to the window, the sun was coming through in thick long streams, lighting up the particles of dust like tiny sparkles.

My body was cradled in the most delicate way, wrapped up in blankets and cool sheets. The softness of a pillow curled around my skull, but it did nothing to stop the slamming headache that pierced my brain.

Clutching my forehead, I moaned and rubbed my temples. I felt like I had been hit by a fucking truck, and dragged for miles underneath the wheels. Rocking my jaw back and forth, I dragged my hands down my cheeks.

It hurt to keep my eyes open, but I forced them wide, refusing to let them close. Looking around the room, there was a tall dresser against the back wall, and a door beside it. Pictures of flowers and old fashioned cabins decorated the cream colored walls.

Long shadows crawled over the bed, causing my eyes to follow the black iron bed posts, twining up like metal vines above my head. Confused, I tried to figure out where I was. I couldn't remember anything after he swept me off my feet.

Is this his house?

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Pushing my hands into the mattress, I clutched the blanket and sat up. My chest was still aching, every inhale was agonizing and every exhale was just as horrible. Dropping my hands into my lap, I just sat still, unsure if my body could handle anymore than that.

I was afraid to move, afraid that the pain would grow worse as my muscles worked between burning tendrils of fire that snaked around my chest.

Fuck, this is horrible.

There had been this expectation in my mind that sleep and rest would cure me, that when the sun came up in the morning, I'd have my strength back and I'd be able to fend for myself.

That wasn't the case. I felt worse than I had the night before, every inch of my body was just as sore, the pain still vibrant and alive in all my muscles.

The door creaked open and I expected to see Porter. To my surprise, a small woman with dark red hair and thick framed glasses stepped inside. Wearing a fitted blue blouse and jeans, she shuffled her feet across the plush blue carpet.

Carrying a wooden tray and wearing a bright smile on her face, she said, "Good morning, how are you feeling?" Walking to the bed, she set the tray on the end and leaned against the post.

The scent of pancakes and syrup filled the room, mingling with the deep aroma of hot coffee and subtle perfume of sunflowers.

My stomach grumbled, eager and ready to devour everything that tray had to offer. Clenching my belly, I tried to smile at her, but even that hurt. I just wasn't sure if it was because of the accident or because I didn't have a damn clue who this woman was or why she was here.

Where the hell am I?

Waving her hand to brush off my silence, she stood at the end of the bed and cupped her hips. "Don't worry, no need to answer that. You look like shit, I'm sure you feel the same." Her laugh was tender as she walked to my side and looked over my face. "From what I hear, you're lucky to be alive. Let me take a look at your head." Cupping my cheeks, she turned my face in her hands as she inspected the wound on my forehead. "He did a good job with it, but I want to look at it closer. You might need stitches, and I won't know until I take off the sani strips."

"Okay," I said, unsure how to respond. My stomach gurgled again, and my eyes darted to the food. "Is that for me?" Pointing at the tray, I angled my head so I could look up at her.

"It is, go on, eat up." Leaning over me, she pulled the food closer. "Eat what you can, but don't worry if you can't finish it. I put a few aspirin on there too, it should help with some of the pain." Smiling, she hugged herself and started for the door. "I'll let you relax a while longer and eat, then I'll be back and we can take care of that cut."

Not waiting for an answer, the woman shut the door, disappearing as quickly as she had arrived. Instantly, I had the urge to call her back. I wanted to know who she was, where I was, and what was going to happen to me.

She had a sweet nature to her, I didn't feel threatened or scared when she came in and stood beside me. She didn't make me nervous or anxious in any way. After everything I had been through, it was relieving to be in the presence of someone who

seemed so kind.

Eating as much as I could, I sat back against the pillow with a full stomach and finished the cup of coffee. My headache was starting to dull, becoming more of an aggravating throb than anything else. Rubbing my ribs, I felt each one gently, trying to figure out if there was a crack in any of them.

There was no way for me to tell, they all fucking hurt. Closing my eyes, I laid my head back and groaned. I still wasn't in any shape to try and get up, or to try and sneak away unnoticed like a mouse in the wall.

Laying back, I snuggled into the blankets, allowing myself to get comfortable. I wouldn't say I felt safe, I wouldn't tell you that my worries had disappeared and there was no fear of what would come next.

But I could tell you that right then, all I wanted to do was lay back and let my body repair itself. It was a natural instinct, like when you're sick and could sleep for hours. My body needed this, and I had no choice but to give it what it wanted.

“Emery, Emery sweetheart, wake up.” A gentle hand brushed across my forehead, rousing my eyes open.

Startled, I scrambled to sit up, clawing at the blankets with my nails and kicking my heels against the mattress. Frantically I looked around, unsure of what I was searching for. I must have had a nightmare, because I felt like I had been running. My heart was racing and a cold sweat had dampened my forehead, but I couldn't remember what I had dreamed about.

“It's just me, you're alright.” The woman's smile soothed my nerves, relaxing my muscles. “I didn't mean to frighten you, I just want to clean your head and put a new bandage on.”

Nodding, I ran my hands up and down my thighs. “I’m sorry, it was a long, strange night. I don’t really feel like myself, I’m not usually this jumpy.”

Pulling the chair out from the desk under the window, she placed the seat next to the bed and sat down. Flapping her fingers, she waved me closer.

“It’s fine, really.” Slowly she reached for my face, her eyes tender as tiny wrinkles breached the corners. “May I?” Shaking my head yes, I leaned forward into her palms. “Good, let’s see just how bad this gash is. I’m going to peel these off, it might sting a little, but I’ll be as gentle as I can.”

“Alright.” Watching her, her eyes set on the wound on my head, fingers tugging and tearing at the firmly glued strips. “Can I ask you something?” Glancing between her face and my hands, I waited for her to answer.

“Sure, ask away.” Grunting slightly, she grinned as she freed the small bandage. “One down, three to go.”

Fiddling with my fingers in my lap, my eyes drifted between the woman and the bed. “Who are you?”

Giggling, she sat back, letting her hands fall loosely against her thighs. “My name’s Josephine, but you can call me Jo.” Grabbing the end of another strip, she repeated the process to remove it.

“Jo, where am I?”

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“You're in my home, Sweetheart, safe and sound.” My head joggled on my shoulders as the bandage took a small piece of skin with it and I gasped from the sting. “Sorry, I'm trying not to hurt you. You're doing great.”

“So this is your house?”

“Mm hm, that's right.”

Biting the inside of my cheek, my voice was low as I asked, “Why am I here?”

It was a question that soured the air around me, hanging there like a baited hook. I wanted to know, I had to know what the hell was going on.

Pursing her lips, she tore the last strip off, her eyes never leaving mine. “I know you have questions, but I'll be honest, I'm not sure I'm the one who should be giving you answers. I don't even know if I'd be able to answer any of them at all. Porter should be getting up soon, I think it's best if you ask him.”

Frowning, I nodded in agreement. I couldn't blame this woman for not wanting to get involved. I didn't know her and she didn't know me. The curiosity was there though, wondering if she had any clue about last night and how I landed here like this.

Who is she to him?

Maybe she was afraid of him too, maybe she wasn't here by choice but had been forced like I was. Parting my lips, I was about to ask her, until I noticed the similarities between them.

Her chin reminded me of Porter's, the almond shape of her eyes and long boxy nose—identical. Even the way she talked had flares of his tone.

They're related, they have to be family.

The thought made me nauseous, forcing me to question just how kind this woman really was. Was she sweet like she was portraying? Or was this all an act?

“You alright?” she asked, squinting her eyes at me down the bridge of her nose. “You're turning ghost white all of a sudden. Do you feel dizzy?”

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I smiled warily. “I'm fine, just exhausted.” My stomach swarmed with a million locusts as I got lost in my head, wondering if I should trust her gracious nature at all. “Are you a doctor?” I asked, quickly changing the subject.

I had to stop thinking about it. There was no way I could handle the idea that she could be a cold blooded killer too. Even if they were family, that didn't mean she followed the same path as Porter.

“I was a nurse, but not anymore.” Her face went distant as past memories flooded her mind. “That's a story for another day.” Smiling, she wiped the wound with a cloth, then pushed away to look at me.

“How's it look?” I asked.

“You're going to need a few stitches, there's no doubt about that.” Twisting, she pulled a small bag onto her lap and fumbled around inside. “Have you ever had stitches before?”

“Once, when I was eleven.” Bending my arm, I pointed out the scar on my forearm.

“Got sliced sledding, it was awful.”

“Then you remember it stings like a bitch when they numbed it?”

“Yeah, it wasn't fun.”

“Well, this is going to be like that, only worse. I don't have anything to numb it completely, just some lidocaine. You'll be able to feel it, sort of like a really bad bee sting.”

“How is she?” Porter's voice caused us both to snap our heads in his direction.

“She'll live, I'm going to stitch it up, then she needs to just rest until everything else heals. I don't think there are any broken ribs, they're probably just bruised. She's moving too smoothly for them to really be broken.” Rolling out a long black cloth, she straightened up the metal utensils. “Have you seen your father this morning?”

His father?

Is this. . . his mother?

Porter sighed and rolled his eyes. “No, thank god. And stop calling him that, you know how I feel about it.”

Arching a brow, she shifted her eyes from him to me. “He got the car towed here—or what's left of it, you should thank him for that.” Her thin fingers pinched the cut on my forehead in a few different directions, eyes never leaving her work. “If you remember what it means to thank someone anymore.”

Staying quiet, I just listened. I didn't have a clue what the relationship was like between these two. If it was good or bad, strained and cracking. I wasn't sure if she

had any idea about what he was capable of, or if she was blind to who the person standing in the doorway truly was.

People have their social side, the side they want you to see and know, the person you expect them to be every day. Then there is the real person, the man behind the thoughts and actions that they keep hidden and secret.

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I was trying to figure out which person was here with us. Was it the killer or the kind boy this woman had known and loved?

My previous uncertainty about her had vanished as the realization set in that she wasn't just his cousin or sister, but his mother. She held herself with poise, sophisticated and gentle, she was definitely not a killer, not the root of evil that her son had been subjected to at some point in his life.

Whatever demon had caused Porter to cross over to the dark side did not resonate from that woman.

“Thank you go to people who deserve it, he doesn't deserve shit.” Stalking to the bed, he kept his eyes on his feet. “Do you need help?”

“Do I need help?” she asked back sarcastically, pushing her hands into the tops of her thighs. “What I need is for you to occupy her, talk to her so she doesn't focus on what I'm doing. Can you do that?”

Dragging his hand through his hair, Porter looked up at me, uncertainty sitting in his dead glare. “Talk, you want me to talk?”

“Yeah, talk. You remember what that is, don't you?” Threading a needle, Jo took out a small bottle of alcohol and dipped the sharp tip inside. “I don't care if you talk about the weather, just make sure she stays still and doesn't move her head too much.”

“Alright.” Stepping to the bed, Porter sat down and placed his large hands on either side of my face firmly. “I'm going to hold you tight so you don't move. You don't

want her accidentally poking your eye or something.”

“Porter,” Jo snapped, scowling at him. “I said occupy her, not scare her.”

Chuckling, his smile grew wide as he winked at me. “I’m kidding, she knows what she’s doing. See the scar above my eyebrow?” Wriggling his brow, I spotted a thin strip of white skin, hidden almost beneath the hair. “When I was about thirteen, my brother and I were out in the yard throwing rocks at each other. It sounds stupid now, but back then we thought it was fun. The fucker hit me with one and split my head wide open. My mom was the one who fixed it up, she took great care of me.”

His mom giggled, and I felt her fingertips as they held my skin shut. A sharp pinch jolted the nerves in my face, causing my eyes to water. A slow burn radiated across my forehead as she slid the needle through my skin.

“Ahh,” I groaned, closing my eyes tight and biting the inside of my cheek. “Yeah, that’s not what I remember feeling as a kid.”

“Sorry, Honey, I wish I didn’t have to do it this way.” Tugging on the string, she grabbed a pair of small scissors and cut it loose. “There’s one, I’m going to do two more.”

“Okay,” Porter said, drawing my attention back to him. “See this scar?” he asked, turning his head so I could see the thick scar on the back of his neck. “I tried to jump off the roof into our pool, I ended up missing and hitting a sharp metal corner on the edge instead. I thought that one was going to kill me.”

“You—ahh,” I said, hissing as the needle pierced my head like a nail in wood. “You really made some poor decisions as a kid, huh?”

“I guess you could say that.” Rocking his head on his shoulders, he shrugged. “And I

guess some might say that hasn't changed.” His eyes met mine, and we stared at each other for a long second. Neither one of us said anything as voiceless words were exchanged.

I knew what he was getting at, how he was pointing out last night and what had happened. I just wasn't sure which part he was talking about. Was he referring to me and taking me? Was he talking about what he had done to that man?

“All done,” Jo said, slicing the silence into bits and forcing us to break our stare. “I'm not going to cover it, it should be fine. They can come out in a week or so, I'd give it at least five days. But right now, you need to rest. I can't do anything for your ribs, those need to heal on their own.”

“When can I go home?” Glancing between Jo and Porter, my hands nervously tumbled around each other.

I had been holding onto that question, waiting for the right moment to ask. I knew that Porter would probably have a different answer than his mother. But this was the perfect time to try and get the truth, when the answer would show me my future.

Jo stood from her seat, giving me a small grin. “Soon, Sweetheart, let's get you a little better first. But you can call home and let them know you're alright. Porter will get the phone, and I'll bring you lunch in a bit.”

She's not the bad guy here.

Jo has no fucking clue how I ended up with her son.

Rocking his jaw, I could hear Porter's teeth grinding against each other. He didn't say a thing as he followed his mother to the door and watched her leave.

There was a tension in the air, I could feel it the second she said I could call home. Porter took in a deep breath, his shoulders snapping square as a shudder ran through his body. I might not have noticed it except he had been sitting right beside me when it happened, and I felt it.

Leaning his head out the door, he waited for her to be gone, then softly closed the door, making me more than aware that we were all alone now.

Turning on his heels, his eyes had changed, the glow now dull and dark against his pupils. His face was flat, still and sullen as his eyes held me in place.

A tremor ran up my spine as his long legs brought him to the side of the bed in two steps. I couldn't breathe as he glowered at me, angry that I had asked such a question to someone who held no control over the situation.

Curling his lip, his brows shot down as his jaw crooked. "You're not leaving and you're not calling home."

"But your mom—"

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Slicing a hand through the air, he snapped. "My mother doesn't have a damn clue about what's going on. And it needs to stay that way. She can't know, you understand?"

"So you want me to lie to her if she asks? Do you really expect me to just let you do this? She seems like a good woman, you're going to ruin her when she finds out."

"Ruin her. . ." he said with disbelief. "I'm not doing anything to ruin her, I'm doing it for her. But she doesn't need to know, she's already been through enough."

"And if I do tell her, then what?"

"Do you really want to test me?"

Thinning my lips, I didn't want to look at him straight on. Darting my eyes around the room, I gripped the blanket and pulled it up my chest. "Fine, that's fine, I can do that. I can keep your secret. But you don't need me, so why keep me here?"

"I need you here so I can keep an eye on you. I'm not going to risk you getting hurt or even killed. When I know it's safe, then and only then will I think about what I'm going to do."

Arching a brow, the confusion swept in, stirring something deep inside my belly. He won't risk me getting hurt or killed?

It didn't add up in my brain. He had been the killer, he was the one who had pulled the trigger and stolen me in the night.

So who is he hiding me from?

“I don't understand. What am I supposed to do then? What if your mom wants to send me home? How the hell are you going to explain to her that I can't leave?”

Raking his thick fingers through his hair, he shook his head. “You don't need to worry about that. As far as she's concerned, we met at a bar and I crashed the car on accident. That's the story, that's what you say if she asks you. Don't worry about the rest.”

“So she thinks I'm some bar whore? Is that the story you're telling? That's what you think of me? Because last night, that wasn't something I would normally do.”

“I didn't tell her anything like that, and even if I did, does it matter?” Porter didn't wait for me to answer. Gripping his jaw, he said, “Look, either you play along or I send you out into the world and you get killed. Which one do you want?”

Thumbing at my lip, I looked up at him. “Those aren't good options.”

“At least you have options right now. I can't promise those options will stay. Right now you're safe here, no one will be able to find you.”

“Safe? You call this safe?!” Tensing up, my nails clutched the blanket, diving into the fabric and holding on like talons. “I hate you, you know that? I fucking hate you. I hope you rot in hell.” Baring my teeth, I shook my head. “How can you tell me I'm safe? How the hell is this safe, Porter?”

“Sweetheart, my life is already shit, going to hell would be doing me a favor. But until then, I need you to just listen to me. I'm not asking you for much, just keep your mouth shut about what really happened.”

Tucking my feet under my legs, I snuggled up deeper into the blanket, wishing that I could just disappear. “I don't know if I can just pretend, I'm not good at lying.”

“You better get good at it, because until this is over, you're going to do what I tell you to do.” Stalking closer, he sat on the bed and ran his hand around my face. Resting his fingertips against my throat, his mouth pursed tight. “If you don't, you can kiss your life goodbye.”

Holding my breath, I felt the pads of his fingers dance over the thick vein in my neck as his thumb traced my chin.

“Are you going to kill me?”

“No. But the men that are after me, they'll kill you just because you were there with me. I'm trying to help you, Emery, I really am. I just need you to trust me on this.”

How could I tell him no?

He held my life in his hands, he had the power to destroy or save me .

What choice did I have?

If the men that came after him would kill me too, then I had to trust him.

And that trust, it had to start somewhere. I'd like to think I saw the good in him last night.

He helped me when he could have left me.

He carried me when I grew weak.

He saved me once already.

Chapter Eight

Porter

Closing the door behind me, I stood in the hall, staring blankly at the floor. I felt like a fucking scumbag for what I was doing. That poor girl hadn't done anything to deserve this, not a fucking thing.

She wanted to leave and I couldn't blame her for it. But I wasn't going to just let her go, there wasn't a bone in my body that was willing to send her to her grave.

It was hard for me to try and explain it to her, to make her see how dangerous it was for her now, knowing it was all because of who I was and what I couldn't do. But she would never believe me. Her mind was already set, the look in her eyes had already laid the foundation; I was just a cold-hearted killer.

The second that car flipped I should have called an ambulance and let them take her away. If they found her, I'd never know. If they already knew who she was and where she lived, she'd be dead in less than a week.

It would have been easier than what I was about to do, I could have washed my hands of her and moved on.

Except I didn't.

I carried her home because a piece of me felt responsible for her. I wanted to make sure she was alright, I needed to make sure she was safe. And the only way to do that was to have her with me.

I hated that I was acting like I didn't give two shits about her, because the truth was, I did care. But my hatred for the men that were dead set on killing me, and my fucking ego was more important than her sanity.

Without me, she didn't stand a chance in hell.

She wouldn't be in this mess if I hadn't gone out of my way to talk to her. She would be safe at home, waking up to start her day; nothing would have changed for her.

That made me angry, it pissed me off and made me furious that I had been so fucking stupid to let my guard down at all.

But that's what happens when you're flying on pure adrenaline and lust. You don't see the things that can make or break you; and this woman was going to fucking break me.

“Porter,” my father said, causing me to sway on my heels and look up. “We need to talk.” Nodding his head for me to follow him into his study, he walked inside.

Taking in a long breath, I rubbed my face and tried to get my head together. Stepping in behind him, I closed the door and waited for him to speak.

“What the fuck did you do? And why the hell did you come here?”

“There was a deer, it ran out in front—”

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Holding up his hand, he cut me off. “Not the fucking car, I'm talking about the girl. What the fuck did you do?”

“What are you talking about?”

Growling, he leaned against his desk, his eyes black as tar. “There's a girl in our home, and she doesn't belong here—you don't belong here.” Tapping his fingers against the desk, he let his eyes settle on mine. “What the hell were you thinking, what did you do this time?”

“What are you talking about? I didn't do anything, I met her at a bar, and I thought—”

“You thought what? You'd get a quick piece of ass after taunting Disesto?” His mouth folded into an angry scowl, brow arching high. “You said you were done, you swore you'd never come back here. Is she one of theirs? Is that how you got her?”

“What? No, she's not.” My jaw hung open as my eyes widened, baffled at his words. “What the hell do you think I did? Do you think I stole her from them? Do you really think I'd do something like that? Why would you say I was taunting them?”

How did he know that I was out for Disesto?”

I had been so careful, doing everything I could to keep this secret to myself. Emery was the only person that could tear down the wall and expose me for what I had done. And that put her in danger, it nailed a target to her back.

Fuck! I did it again!

It was like I carried some fucking black magnet that dragged people into the war zone around me. And no matter how much I tried to fix it, I only made it worse.

Sighing, my father dropped his gaze to the floor and shifted against his desk. Pulling out a piece of paper from his pocket, he handed it to me. "It was on the car." Folding his arms, his eyes hardened. "We moved to get away from this, to get away from you and the shit that follows you. But you just can't help yourself, can you? You keep bringing it back. This is why I told you not to ever come here."

Unfolding the paper, the note was quick and to the point. You don't get to walk away, not now, not ever. You and your girlfriend are dead. We're coming for you.

"You need to get rid of her and get the hell out of here. Your mother has had enough to worry about because of you. She doesn't need this shit too. You just keep fucking up, it's like you can't help yourself. It's not over, is it, Porter?"

"It never was over." Crumpling the paper in my hand, I threw it into the small garbage beside his desk. "I'm trying to end it for good, but it isn't as easy as moving away. I can't run anymore, I'm sick of it. And after what they did, after what they did to our family, I can't let them live. They won't stop until I'm dead, so why shouldn't I take matters into my own hands? I'm done hiding."

Standing up straight, Franco stepped to the small bar he had against the wall, and poured two short glasses of scotch. Picking them up, he walked to me and handed me one of the drinks.

He didn't speak for a moment as he took a long sip and watched me through the glass. Smacking his lips together, he asked, "Is that right?"

"Yeah, it is right. After what happened to Zander, after they tried to pin all that shit on me, did you really think that I'd just let it all go? I couldn't, someone had to do

something.”

“She isn't theirs? You're not lying to me?”

“No, she's not. I met her at the bar, but it's complicated now, I can't explain it.”

Pointing at me with his cup, he smirked. “Did I ever tell you about the first time I saw your mother?”

Shaking my head no, I threw my head back and downed the alcohol in one gulp. “That's one of those stories you left out I guess.”

“We met in a bar. You know they say you can never find love in a bar, but they're wrong. I did, I found your mother, and I knew the second I saw her that she was the one.”

“Why the hell are you telling me this? What does this have to do with anything?”

“I'm telling you because your mother said she saw something in your eyes last night. She said you looked different, that there was a gleam in your eye she had never seen before. She told me that when you were sitting beside that girl on the bed, you looked at her the same way I used to look at your mother.”

“Used to?”

Rolling his head on his shoulders, he closed his eyes. “I say used to because time changes things. Back then, we were young and our relationship was new. That fades after awhile, eventually you find yourself standing in the background, wondering where the hell your life has gone and why it ended up the way it did.”

“I get it, I fucked up your life. Thanks for the reminder.”

“I'm saying, don't lose sight of what matters. Right now, that girl might look good, you might feel a tingle in your chest and a jerk in your pants. But that will change, especially with your past. If you do feel something for her, don't drag her into this, she'll have to spend the rest of her life looking over her shoulder. Forget about what you feel right now and do what's best for her, send her away.”

Rolling my eyes, I laughed. “Are you serious? Franco, you think I like this? Do you think I want to have to worry about her?”

“I just want to make sure you understand. You didn't think about us when you jumped into this shit, and I never could have imagined when I met your mother that we'd be living on eggshells because of her damn son. I never expected to lose my son because of you. Don't fuck up her life too.”

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Taking a step closer, I held his eyes with mine. “Just so we're clear, I didn't fuck up your life on purpose. He was your son, but he was my brother too, or did you forget that?”

“You say it like that makes a difference. Where were you when he needed you? Where were you when he was out there and they took him?”

“I thought I was doing what I had to. But for you to think I knew that would happen, that I willingly let them kill him. . . That's fucking bullshit. When are you going to realize that?”

Scowling, he tilted his head. “When you're out of our lives for good.”

“I'm not doing this right now.” Grinding my teeth together, I chewed up my words and spit them in his face. “I know what I did. How many times do I have to apologize for it? I'm trying to make it right, I'm trying to end it all.”

“Porter, I don't think you realize that this is bigger than you. You said it yourself, they won't stop till you're dead. Imagine the life you'll give that girl; constantly paranoid someone is out there waiting, no freedom to come and go as you please. You're dragging her into hell.”

“That's right.” Chuckling, I stroked my jaw and stepped back. “And that's why I need to get to them before they get to her.”

“You just can't see it, can you? You think you're fucking unstoppable.” His voice was dark and harsh as his eyes turned to pinpricks. “Didn't you learn anything from your

brother's death?"

Slicing a hand through the air, I threw my finger in his face. "I tried to get out, but they wouldn't let me go. They always told me if I wanted out all I had to do was say it." Turning towards the door, I started to walk away. "Maybe it's time for you stop criticizing me for my mistake and treat me like a real son. Stop hating me for what they did, I never meant for it to happen. I didn't know."

"Mistake? You call that a mistake? We had to uproot our lives because of you, we had to start over. Zander was innocent, he was still a fucking kid, Porter. You failed him, you failed all of us."

Holding the handle in my hand, I kept my head facing forward, refusing to look at him. "Yeah, that's exactly what I set out to do. . ." Pausing, I tugged the door open. "I'm a fucking horrible person, aren't I?"

Slamming the door, I stormed down the hall and headed downstairs. Being judged, being told over and over again how you're a disappointment to the family, how you're the cause of all the problems they faced—it fucking hurt.

I already felt like shit, I was already well aware of how my actions affected the people around me. I didn't need my father constantly throwing it in my face.

Doesn't he see I'm trying to make it right?

Can't he see that I'm doing what needs to be done?

Not once did I think getting involved with Disesto would come back to haunt me like this. I was a lost kid, a boy who needed guidance and wanted to be seen as something other than the problem stepchild. Disesto gave me a chance, he taught and trained me, he made me his angel of death.

He was more of a father to me than Franco had ever been. I was pushed aside when Zander came along, treated like I was the black sheep, like I held no value.

When I met Marcos Disesto and found my calling, nothing was more important to me than riding the ranks and becoming a made man. That had been my goal. To become the best, to be the danger and the fear that kept all our enemies up at night.

And now they're my enemies.

My nightmares, my sleepless nights, my life of solitary confinement, they did that to me. And all of it was because I couldn't pull the trigger one fucking time.

"Are you hungry?" my mom asked, sneaking up behind me and placing her hand on my shoulder.

"Not really." Closing the fridge, I stepped back and leaned against the kitchen island. "I don't even know why I'm looking in there anyway."

"What's wrong?" Running her hand across my forehead, she smiled. "Come on, spill it, I can see the wheels turning. Talk to me, don't shut me out."

Gripping the granite in my hands, I shrugged my shoulders. "I'm trying, Mom, I'm trying to fix this shit."

"I know you are, Honey, I know you want to fix it." Turning away from me, she opened the fridge and took out some items to make a sandwich. "You thought you were hiding it, but I've known. I could always tell, even after you took off."

"Then why did you let me go?"

Laying her hands flat on the counter, her shoulders rolled forward. "This isn't my

fight, Porter. I want you to be here, I don't want to lose you, but I can't fight this for you either." Lifting her eyes to mine, she smiled and asked, "Is there anything I could say that would change your mind?"

Thinning my lips, I shook my head. "No, not a thing."

Her eyes softened, tender and understanding. "Here," she said, handing me a plate with a turkey sandwich on it. "Take that up to Emery for me, I've got a few errands to run with your father. And don't leave her alone, understand? The last thing I want is for her to try and get up, fall, and hurt herself even more."

Tipping my head to show her I understood, I took the plate and started to head upstairs.

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“Oh and Porter,” she called out, causing me to look over my shoulder. “I don't know how that girl ended up with you, and I'm not sure I want to know. But be nice to her, I kind of like that one.” Winking, she grabbed her pocketbook, and threw it over her shoulder. “Franco, I'm heading to the car!”

I heard the door to my father's office open and close, his steps echoing between the walls as he approached the top of the stairs. Fixing the cuffs on his sleeves, he stared down at me, his face still cured in resentful hate.

My mother wasn't able to keep me at arms length for too long, deep down she still loved me. Despite the hell I rained down on her, she knew I hadn't done any of that shit on purpose.

But Franco, he never looked at me with anything but hate in his eyes.

Stepping to the side, I made room for him to walk by. “Don't do anything stupid while we're out, I'd hate to come home and find the house in flames because your little friends figured out where we live. You can't stay for long, I want you gone,” he grumbled as his shoulder brushed my chest.

“Franco, that's enough.” My mother rolled her eyes as she dug around in her purse for her keys. “You have to stop doing that to him, stop treating him like he doesn't belong.”

Smiling to myself, it was nice to finally see my mother standing up to him. She wasn't bowing her head like she used, she wasn't sitting quietly and letting him take the lead. For the first time in ages my mother wasn't just a pretty bag hanging off his

arm, she had found her voice.

Walking to her side, my father and her started bickering back and forth about me as they stepped outside and closed the door.

You'd think by the way they sounded that I was still sixteen years old and they were leaving me home alone for the weekend.

Shaking my head to myself, I sauntered upstairs, stopping outside her door. Knocking softly, she didn't answer, staying quiet.

Opening the door slowly, I poked my head in and saw her sleeping. As quietly as I could, I walked to the bed, setting the plate down on the nightstand. With my hands at my sides, I watched her.

It might sound strange, but I liked watching her while she was sleeping. She was beautiful, small and fragile, but perfect.

Her hair was fanned out around her head, her cheeks and lips tinted the faintest shade of pink. She had a small button nose with freckles that spanned just beneath her eyes, stopping at the very edges.

Tilting my head, I sat down beside her and placed my hands in my lap. I could stare at her for hours and never get bored. There was something about this woman that sent prickling hairs down my arms and made my insides twist and turn.

Following the bend of her shoulder, my gaze licked her body, taking in all she had to offer. I watched her chest rise and fall with even breaths, and the delicate skin of her neck as she swallowed peacefully in her sleep.

Her curves were perfection, shaped like an hourglass, with hips I wanted grip and an

ass I could ride for days. The warmth I felt flowed through me, moving through my veins and around my body. It reminded me of when I was a kid and would drink hot chocolate after coming inside from the cold.

Intricately it hit me in every crevasse, every pore and strip of muscle, seeping through my stomach and into my pants. My cock thickened as her perfect raindrop-shaped tits pushed against the tight black fabric of her dress.

She looked like sleeping beauty, a princess that had been poisoned by the apple I handed her. Running my hand over the surface of her face, I didn't touch her. I was afraid to wake her, afraid to sour the moment with the anger and hatred she felt for me.

I would hate me too for what I've done.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her voice soft and quiet as her eyes scanned my face.

Jerking my hand away, I rubbed the back of my neck. “I'm checking on you.”

Emery watched me cautiously, shifting her body so she could push herself up. “Where's your mom? I thought she was going to do that.”

“She had to run out, but she made you lunch.” Flicking my eyes to the plate, I nodded my head. “I hope you like turkey.”

Cupping her hands in her lap, she licked her lips. “Is your father here?”

“He's not my father.” My voice came out quick and firm.

“But your mom said—”

“I know what she said, but he's not my father, he's my stepfather.” I tried to hold back the anger from my tone, but it was hard. “I used to call him that, but things haven't been good between us.”

“Well, I can only imagine why.” Her voice went faint, the words weightless and delicate as she turned her head to look at the window. “Does he know what you're capable of?”

Taking in a deep breath, I closed my eyes. “You can't see it, it's not what you think it is. You think you understand what's going on and who I am, but you don't.”

“So I'm wrong?”

“Yeah, you're wrong.”

“Wow,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Does that work on other people? Deny, deny, deny. I know what you did, you killed that man. And then you took me, I told you no, but you took me anyway. You can't deny that, those are the facts.” Her hand swept through the air, eyes cutting me open as they pierced my heart and left me exposed. “I get that he threatened you, but you didn't have to take me, you could have let me go.”

“You're right,” I said, my voice scratchy and cold. “And I'm sorry you think I didn't have a choice, but the truth is, I would have killed that motherfucker regardless. I just didn't want to in front of you. I didn't want you to get involved, but here you are.” Drawing in air through thin lips, I kept my gaze on hers. “You don't know why, that's the piece you're missing.”

Huffing under her breath, she snuggled back into the blanket and rolled over. “I don't really care, it doesn't matter. It's not like you're going to tell me.”

“The less you know, the better. I'm not telling you for a good reason. I don't want you involved in this, I'm trying to make sure you don't get hurt.”

“It's a little late for that don't you think?” Twisting to look at me over her shoulder, she furrowed her brows. “I'm here, I'm fucking broken—literally, I'm not allowed to leave, I can't call home; but you don't want me getting hurt? How does that make sense?”

Braiding my fingers in my lap, I dipped my head into my chest. “If I let you call home, can you make me a promise?”

Her eyes lit up as she shot up in bed, moving faster than I had seen since the accident. “What is it? What do you want me to do?”

“Promise me you won't tell your parents anything. Act totally normal, pretend like everything is the same as usual.”

Dropping back down, she pinched her eyes shut tight. “I don't have parents to call.” Breathing slowly, she lifted her hands to her face and rubbed her eyes. “They've been gone for years.”

“I'm sorry.” Those were the only words I could find and I felt stupid for even saying that. It was an automatic response, the two words everyone says when they hear that someone had lost a loved a one.

I had heard that same comment a million times over the years. After my birth father died when I was little, that was the only response I ever got from anyone when I told them he had passed.

And I hated it. I didn't want people to apologize to me for it, I barely remembered the guy. The only thing I could remember was his face, that was it. I wouldn't say I didn't miss the idea of him, of having a real father to look up to, but that's all he was, an idea. I had no real memories, nothing I could draw from that was my own.

It was like I had blocked it all out because it was too painful to think about. Every boy needs their father, and when he's gone, no one else could ever fill their shoes.

All the shit that was in my head about who he was, it was nothing but a fabricated story that I had heard. My mind put those images there, I had no clue what was real and what was fake anymore.

“Don't be,” Picking at her nails, she shrugged her shoulder. “I'm not telling you so

you'll feel bad for me, I'm telling you to be honest.”

“Can I ask what happened?”

Her lids turned to slits, mouth turning down. “You don't care why, so why are you asking?”

Cocking a brow, I rocked my jaw back and forth. “You're right, I don't care, I'm curious. I know what it feels like to lose someone, I've been there.”

“How the hell could you know what it feels like, you don't have any feelings, remember?”

Smirking, I couldn't stop my lips from turning up playfully. “Sweetheart, I have feelings. They might not be the ones you want, but I have them.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means that I'm not completely soulless.” Leaning towards her, I rested on my elbow and traced a single finger up and down the blanket. “I feel things, I've just learned how to hide it, and how to bury it. The only thing I can't seem to get rid of is how fucking angry I still get.”

Emery's face softened as her eyes darted between mine. “I can't understand you, nothing about you makes sense. None of this shit makes sense at all.”

“I never said it would.”

“So why does your mom seem so normal? How are you a product of her?”

“She is normal I guess, she's a great person. But I wouldn't say I really had any family

growing up, I've always been on my own in a way.”

“But you have a stepfather and a brother, it's not like you were completely alone.”

“Franco doesn't count. That man has always seen me as tarnished, because I'm not his biological son. My younger brother was his pedestal baby, he held him so much higher than he did me. I never did anything right, I had always been a fuckup, those were his words. Who says that to a seven year old child?”

Twining her fingers together, she bit her lip in thought. “I . . . I don't know.”

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“I was never his child, and even now, he still doesn't see me as anything but the kid who screwed up his perfect family.”

“Porter—”

“No, it's fine. I got into some really bad shit and it fucked up their lives. That's why I took you, because I don't want my past to come for you too. I'm trying to save you. Can you understand that?”

Her eyes searched my face, trying to peer deep into my soul. “Then why were you so cold towards me last night? You acted like I wasn't worth all this trouble, like I didn't matter at all. How can I believe that you're trying to save me?”

“I know, I just. . .” Taking in a deep breath, I hung my head. “I was just pissed that I had dragged you into this world. I like you, Emery, and I wouldn't have even said a word to you if I had realized that guy was there.”

“Is that why you were looking around like that before?” Nodding my head, I kept my eyes on my hands. Emery leaned in closer, placing her hand on mine. “Why did he try to kill you? What happened, Porter?”

“I need you to know I'm not the same man I used to be, but the men that are after me, they don't give a fuck. I betrayed them in their eyes, so they took something from me. They took my brother. I shouldn't be here, I never planned on coming back, but when my brother was killed, I don't know, I guess I wanted to stay close for my mother.”

Emery parted her lips, as if she was going to speak. Holding up my hand, I stopped

whatever she was about to say. “When I was at the bar and I saw you, there was something about you that drew me in. I had to talk to you, I felt compelled to. I wish I could take it back now, I wish I had just let you walk out the fucking door, because then you wouldn't be here, you wouldn't be in this fucking mess with me.”

A small smile tugged on the corners of her lips. “You mean that? You felt like you had to talk to me?”

“You didn't bump into me by accident.” Chuckling, I scrubbed my jaw. “I had been watching you all night.” Bouncing my hand in the air, I arched a brow. “But not in a stalker kind of way, I just mean I couldn't take my eyes off of you, you're so damn beautiful. And that ass. . .” Biting my knuckles, a deep throaty growl hit the back of my throat.

Her cheeks blushed, turning bright red. “I don't know if I should thank you or slap you.” Giggling, her smile grew wide.

My heart skipped inside my chest, careening around like a caged bird. She really was stunning. Everything about her was perfect, from her velvet smooth skin to her firecracker personality.

What the hell are you doing to me?

Cupping her jaw, I stroked her chin with my thumb. “I need you to know that I'm not keeping you here because I want to hurt you. I'm doing this to keep you safe. Those men will stop at nothing to get to me, and they know you were there too. They'll take you in a heart beat, I won't let them do that, Emery.”

I couldn't stop myself from touching her. I wanted her to feel my words, to understand that everything I was doing came from someplace good. She was my innocent muse, torn into shreds that I wanted to fix.

And she had no fucking idea what was waiting outside for her. That was the worst part. Emery couldn't see who I was dealing with, all she knew was what she had seen, what was tangible for her to try and make sense of.

I wanted to help her, care for her, do anything and everything I could just to ensure that she had a tomorrow. Because it was my fault that she was in this mess to begin with. It was a risk I should never have taken.

Her hand came up and covered mine, lashes fanning her lids like canopies. “Thank you,” she said, tipping her head into my palm as her tongue traced her lips.

“I told you not to thank me yet.” Smirking, I wanted to kiss her. I wanted to kiss her and taste her and finish what we had started. But I held back, not wanting to push her if she wasn't ready.

She was still hurting, her injuries fresh and new, her mind wandering aimlessly over and over from what she had been through. Now she had facts to dwell on, information about who I was and what was happening around us.

See me for me, not the monster I once was.

Her eyes glazed over as her head nuzzled deeper into my hand. “You can if you want to.”

“I can what?”

Smirking, she pushed herself up, leaning in closer. “Kiss me.”

“Who said I wanted to kiss you?”

“I can see it on your face.” Arching her back, her head rolled to the side, lids hooding

seductively. “You better do it now, before I change my mind.”

Biting my lip, I smiled. “I won't say no.”

Gently, I brushed my nose against hers, our lips barely touching. The sensation of her skin on mine, of the warmth of her face, her breath, her beauty, it ignited the fire deep inside my soul.

This was why I needed to keep going, this was why I needed to stay alive. To find the person that could make me feel, the person who could help me smile and laugh, help me be complete.

For years all I wanted was to be a part of a family, and I could never see it until now. It wasn't what I had that would make me who I was, it was what I would find that would make me the man I wanted to be.

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And I found it in this woman.

Call me crazy for believing that this woman was the one who could hand me everything I ever wanted. But it's not about what I knew about her, it's about what I felt.

This wasn't love at first sight, this was so much more.

Emery closed her eyes, exhaling against my face, and parting her lips. The tip of her tongue teased the entrance, softly licking my bottom lip.

That was it, I had lost it. I lost my control, I lost my will to be gentle and kind. All I wanted was to make her mine over and over again.

Because that was what she was going to be.

She was mine to save, mine to protect, mine to enjoy.

Chapter Nine

Emery

His tongue swept inside my mouth, devouring me like I was the air he needed to survive. And I wanted him to.

What are you doing Emery?

Every ounce of my being needed this man. When he spoke, I felt it. When he touched me, I felt it. I knew who this man was, and he wasn't the bad guy. I didn't need to fear him, he wanted to protect me.

That was all that mattered. Not how we got here, but who he was when he took me. And for all the reasons I should talk myself out of what was happening, there wasn't a damn muscle in my body that would let me.

Kissing me harder, Porter drove his tongue into my mouth, tasting and dancing over the ridges. Swooping his hands around my face, he pulled me in, holding me tight.

I didn't want him to let me go, I wanted to be as close to him as possible. My insides twisted up like rope, afraid of what it would feel like if he suddenly released me and pushed me away.

His hands felt too good, his arms felt too comfortable, this man was filling a void I didn't know existed.

Loneliness.

For that small space in time, I was whole, everything was perfect. I wasn't drowning, I wasn't suffocating with wonder and concern. I couldn't feel any of the pain anymore as our lips sealed and our breathing turned into labored gasps.

With firm fingers, Porter raked his hands through my hair, tugging my head back. For a split second, the slightest of moments, his eyes connected with mine, hesitant and worried that he might have hurt me.

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Nodding, I moaned, giving him all the response he needed to know I liked what was happening. Savage and unhinged, his mouth thinned into a tight smirk as he glided flat hands down over my shoulder-blades.

His touch was hard and gentle, it was fierce and sensual. He was touching me as if we had a history together and he knew exactly how I liked it.

“Does your chest hurt?” he asked, delivering a tender nibble on my shoulder.

“A little, but I'm alright.” Running my hand up his stomach, I felt the sharp stone as he clenched his muscles. “I don't want you to worry about me, I can handle it.”

Letting out a breath of air, he whispered. “If I hurt you, you need to tell me. I don't ever want to cause you pain.” His lips brushed my forehead as he spoke, cheek slipping effortlessly against mine. The sharp edges of stubble scraped across my skin, making my pussy throb.

“I will,” I said as his fingertips traced my spine, forcing my skin to prickle. “But I'm not worried about you hurting me, not on purpose.”

“Good, because all I want to do is make you mine.” Growling, Porter dug his fingers into my hips as he bit my neck.

“I want you, Porter, I need you.” Working my fingers back down over his chest, I tugged at the hem of his jeans. “You have to finish what you started.”

“Fuck yeah I do.” Climbing onto his knees, he pressed forward, forcing me to lay

back. “Princess, you have no idea what I could do to you. I'd fucking corrupt you if I could.”

Arching my back, I twisted my head into the pillow. “You already have.” My lids lowered, eyes twinkling with lust and hunger. “You corrupted me the second you touched me.”

Porter groaned, crawling over my chest and staring down at me. Positioning his arms on either side of my head, he used his knee to spread my legs open. My stomach tumbled, filling with corded knots. He had me trapped in the best way possible.

Strong arms cradled my skull, thick muscles protected my body, and a firm bulge pressed angrily against my mound. My sex was wet, seeping liquid desire like his cock was thirsty and my pussy was going to quench his needs.

Pushing the loose strands of hair away from my face, Porter held himself up, not allowing his body to put an ounce of weight on me. “Are you sure you want to do this? Because if not, now's the time to tell me. I can't promise I'll be able to stop if we go any further.”

Tugging on my bottom lip, I bit it hard. “Fuck me, just shut up and fuck me.” Squeezing my thighs against his waist, I wrapped my legs over his calves. “Or do you need me to take over? Because I can if you can't handle it.” Giggling, I smiled, running my nails up and down his back.

Letting out a quick chuckle, he tilted his head. “You just sealed your fate, Princess.” Driving his lips onto mine, Porter kissed me as he slid his hand over my breast.

Snapping my eyes shut, my mouth opened, exhaling fast as he teased my nipple. Plucking and twisting the perked bud, I felt his hips thrusting, rubbing his cock against my pussy.

It felt so good, that subtle motion, as slight as it was, was enough to light my skin on fire and make my pussy yearn for more. Pressing my heels into the bed, I pushed my ass up, forcing my hot center to hit his cock.

Growling, he glided an open palm down my ribs, and ran his fingers across the hem of my skirt. Shifting my dress up my waist, he gripped my hip, pushing in hard with his thumb. The thin edges of his teeth grazed my collarbone, making me shiver.

Everything that had happened suddenly didn't seem important. There was no fear, there was no threat; not here, not with him.

Flicking my panties to the side, he stroked a single finger up and down my folds, spreading my juice. Moaning louder, I drove my nails into the mattress and tore at the sheet. A rush of tingles coursed through my muscles as my back arched hard, bowing instantly.

I had lost control of my body. This man was able to manipulate me in ways I couldn't understand. His fingers made me dance, his hands made me wriggle, and his eyes. . .

Fuck, those eyes did things to me I knew I'd never be able to live without now.

“That's so pretty,” he said, his tone warm and thick as he found my clit and kneaded the swelling button. “Sing for me, Emery, don't hold it in.” Harder and faster the pad of his finger rubbed quick firm circles against my clit.

My thighs were trembling, clutching his hips, doing their best to keep me grounded. I wanted to scream for more, the words were tumbling around inside my head, but I couldn't collect my thoughts enough to let them out.

All I could do was moan louder, groan with need, coo and sigh as Porter would bring me right to the edge of coming, only to pull away and leave me breathless, craving

more.

Tearing at his pants, I rocked my hips, grinding into his hand. I couldn't wait anymore, I had to feel him inside me. If he didn't fill me with his cock right then, I knew the next move of his finger would send me spiraling off the edge.

“Get these fucking things off,” I barked between inhales, trying to unbutton his pants and tear them down his legs. “I can't take it anymore.”

Biting his lip, his eyes gleamed, twinkling with satisfaction. “Is that right?” Shimmying his waist, Porter kicked his pants off, letting them fall to the floor as if they were worthless.

“Now fuck me before I lose my damn mind.” Tangling my fingers into his hair, I tugged at the roots, my patience a mere thread that was ready to break.

We didn't get fully naked, neither one of us took the time to remove all our clothing. Because in that moment, we were both giant balls of hormones and greed. My pussy was begging to be tamed, his cock was rock hard and angry, threatening to burst through his boxers.

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My eyes lit up at his massive erection as his cock bounced free, busting out the hole in the front. Thick, firm, shiny and throbbing, his dick was engorged. Palming his shaft, I ran my thumb over the crown, smearing the pre-come that glistened at the tip.

I knew I should have asked about using protection, but my brain wasn't functioning properly. The thought would pop in, then get smacked away by the arousal in charge.

Just ask him. . .

Biting my tongue, I stopped the question from coming out.

Fuck it. . . I don't care, it doesn't matter.

Yes it does. Don't be so foolish.

Porter started to push his hips forward, and then he stopped, peering down at me. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Pursing my lips, I tried to smile. "I don't want to ruin what's happening between us, but should we. . ." Chewing the inside of my cheek, I glanced around his face. "Should you use protection?"

"Protection?" Eyeing me for a moment, I could see the wheel turning in his mind. "Oh, protection, yeah I have one." Leaning over the side of the bed, he fiddled with his pants. Popping back up after a second, he held a shiny gold wrapper. "Got it covered." Tearing the package, he rolled the smooth condom over his cock.

Relief coated my thoughts, his reaction exactly what any girl would expect and hope for. He didn't get flustered and huffy, offended that I had asked. He was calm, agreeing without pause or trying to convince me that it feels so much better natural.

Adjusting on his knees, his hands pushed into the mattress as the tip of his cock pressed my entrance. Opening my legs wider, I felt the pressure of his crown as he slipped inside with ease.

“Uhh, fuck, mm,” I cooed as my lips parted and my lids sealed shut.

Starting off slow, Porter thrust in and pulled out, each piston of his hips a little harder than the last. My pussy clenched around his shaft, hands raking his spine as he slammed my clit.

I was lost right then. Lost in the moment, lost in the feelings taking over my body, lost in him. We were all moans and heavy breaths, all hands and lips, kisses and light bites.

And that was enough for me to know there was something special about this man. It was how he made me feel, how he took his time to make sure I was alright, even while he fucked my brains out.

His eyes would scan my face, his hands would stay clear of any area he thought might be tender or sore. Porter held himself up on his forearms, refusing to put any pressure on my chest.

The only sound around us was his balls slapping my ass and the wet kiss of my pussy devouring every inch of his dick. Pump after pump, he ground his hips into mine, going so deep I could feel him in my lower belly.

My clit was pulsing, beating in tandem with my heart, sending wave after wave of

tingles through my body. I could feel them in my chest, in my lungs, in my brain as they exploded like fireworks.

With my eyes closed tight, I could see colors light up behind my lids. Bright pinks and blues, sharp greens and hot reds, it was an orgasm that swam in the blackness of my mind like the aurora borealis.

Slowly I peeled my eyes open, and our gazes connected. His eyes had changed, morphing from the blackness I thought I had seen into the prettiest shade of dark brown. There were bursts of gold, highlights of bronze and copper, each sparkle a beauty in its own right.

This man was stunning; too stunning to be so bad, and too gorgeous to be so angry. But right then he wasn't any of those things. Porter was just a man, a boy who had fallen victim to a shitty hand, and was doing what he thought was right.

He was trying to save me from his own demons.

The orgasm surged across my core, making my stomach clench and my legs weaken. Groaning, the intense pleasure coated my small frame, turning me from rigid to limp.

I had gone numb, delirious with the power this man could draw from my body. I was standing at the thin edge of a cliff, holding my arms out wide, ready to plunge into the darkness below.

Porter threw his head into the crook of my neck, biting down hard. Slipping a hand into my hair, he gripped the roots and pulled as his body stilled. His cock jerked inside my pussy, pulsing against my walls.

“God damn.” Whispering against my skin, Porter's grip hardened in my hair as his muscles relaxed. His eyes settled on mine as the very tips of his fingers barely stroked

my cheek. “You ever want something so bad that you can't think about anything else until you have it?” Watching me, his fingers teased the edges of my hair, brushing it off my forehead. “Because that's what you do to me. You make me forget my purpose, you make the world disappear.”

Strong lips possessed my mouth, taking me to a new level, a new high that I could never explain. I was floating, getting carried away by the sheer presence of the man above me.

I wasn't broken anymore, I wasn't in crippling pain that held me hostage. I was melting, bleeding from all my pores, exposing every weakness I had.

“You make me weak, Porter. In my muscles, in my legs, in every bone in my body. I can't run away from you, even if you shoved me out the door, I wouldn't want to go. Is it wrong for me to say I want to be here? Even after everything, I want to be right here with you, I need to be here with you.”

Smiling, he ran his fingers across my forehead, gently touching the stitches. “That makes all of this a whole lot easier then. I can protect you better if you stand beside me.”

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Tickling his back, I twisted my head away from his. “Will you tell me why this is happening? I know you think it's better that I don't know, but I need to know what you're protecting me from. Please, just tell me what happened so I can understand.”

Rolling off of me, he peeled the condom off his cock and dropped it into the small trash can beside the bed. Laying down beside me, he pressed his palm to his head and held it up.

His eyes darted around my face, concerned and afraid of the words he needed to use. “I want to tell you, I just don't want you to be scared.”

“I'm not scared, Porter, I want to help. Whoever it is, they don't frighten me.”

“It's not them I'm talking about. . .” Pausing, he dropped onto his back and looked up at the ceiling. “I'm talking about me. I don't want you to be afraid of me.”

“You're never going to know if I will or not unless you tell me. Let me decide if I should be scared of you.”

Sighing hard, he stuffed his hands under his head. “I was a hitman for the mob, Emery.”

“A what?”

“I killed people, a lot of people. But I'm done with that, and I have been for a long time. The problem is, those men—my boss, they want me dead. That's how it works, you don't just decide you're done and walk away. I tried to leave, and now they're

after me and anyone they think I care about. Which includes you too now.”

“But we just met, and I didn't do anything to them.”

“They don't give a shit about that, it doesn't matter. That's why I have to protect you, that's the whole reason I took you.” Turning onto his side, Porter softly touched my ribs, tracing one bone at a time. “If I had let you go home, you'd either be dead already or held captive as bait.”

“What are we going to do?”

“We're not doing anything. You're going to rest and get better, and I'm going to kill each and every last one of them. They've already taken so much from me, I won't let them take you too.”

“So last night, you were at the club—”

Cutting me off, he blurted out the truth. “I was hunting, but I didn't think anyone was there.”

The way he said it sent shivers up my spine. The hate had returned, the coldness revived and growing as he thought of the men who were after him.

“And your family? They know about all this?”

“I had kept it a secret for a long time, until the night it all came crashing down. I left, I tried to hide, leaving and going invisible with the hopes that they would just move on. But it doesn't work that way. They went after my family trying to get to me. They killed my brother, Emery, they destroyed my life. Now they have to pay.”

Scrambling to sit up, I nervously played with my fingers in my lap. “So they know

we're here, they can find us?"

"No not here, my parents moved away, they did everything they could to stay safe. But my brother wouldn't give up on me. Franco told me he had gone out one night to look for me, that he needed to know I was alright. They found him, they were waiting for one of us to make a mistake."

"Oh my god, Porter, I'm so sorry."

Shaking his head, he tilted to look up at me. "Don't be, it's not your place to be sorry. You didn't do anything wrong."

"I know, but that's so sad. When did it happen?"

"I took off about a year ago and went into hiding. I thought that would stop all this, I thought that if I was out of the picture that they'd leave my family alone. But it didn't work that way. My brother died three months ago, and it still doesn't feel real. This all feels like a bad dream, but it's not, it's my life."

"What happened?" Holding up my hand, I said, "I'm sorry, you don't have to tell me, that was a dumb question. I'm sure it's hard to talk about."

Pushing out his bottom lip, he shrugged his shoulder. "It's fine, I've already told you more than I had planned on. I was five when my mom met Franco. . ."

Using my hands, I turned on the bed so I could look at him as he told me his story.

He started in the beginning, about how his stepfather had been a dick and treated him like an outcast. There was so much verbal abuse from his stepfather, it stung. I felt for him, I cried for him.

The tears rolled down my face, falling weightlessly onto the blanket and disappearing into the cotton.

How do you deal with that?

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How do you keep breathing when your family hates you and you've lost so much?

I had a new respect for this man. He was stronger than I could ever be.

Porter wasn't a man who backed down, he didn't plan on giving up.

And now he wanted to protect me.

I was lucky to have someone like him looking out for me.

Chapter Ten

Porter

Three months earlier

Ring Ring

Glancing down at my phone, I didn't recognize the number lighting up the screen. Picking it up, I hit the button and answered. "Hello?"

"Porter?" The sound of my father's voice rattled my ears, forcing a cold shiver to glide up my spine. "Something's happened and I thought you should know."

"What? What happened? Is Mom alright?" Keeping my voice steady and controlled, I waited for an answer.

My father would never call me, he knew better than to ever try and pick up the phone and dial my number. Hearing his voice at the other end of the speaker, I knew whatever had happened had to be serious.

Waiting as patiently as I could for him to spit it out, my heart sped up as a nervous sweat dampened my forehead. The tips of my fingers pierced the phone, pushing it harder against my ear. His silence was killing me.

If something happened to my mother, I didn't know what I would do.

There was only one feeling that I knew better than I knew myself—anger.

Anger was what made my blood flow and my heart pound. It was the only feeling I truly understood. For too long I kept it locked up, allowing it to brew inside, to live silently, growing and waiting for the moment it could be unleashed.

If they fucking hurt her. . . If they did anything to my mother, I'll fucking kill them all.

“Well,” I snapped, balling my fist so tightly the skin on my knuckles struggled to not snap open. “Is she okay?”

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What the hell happened? Just say it already!

“Your mother is fine.” His breathing was ragged and deep, the soft waiver in his words made me understand completely that he wouldn't be calling me if he didn't feel he was obligated to.

Sighing with relief, my body relaxed a little, re-cementing my feet to the floor. Sitting on the small couch in my apartment, I hung my head, waiting for him to continue.

My father was quiet, his exhale loud and audible, scratching its way through the speaker. Holding on to what patience I had left for this phone call, I calmly asked, “Then what's wrong? Why the hell are you calling me? This is really fucking ballsy of you, calling me out of the blue like this.”

“It's Zander.”

“What's wrong with Zander? Did he get in trouble? Arrested? What the hell happened?” Sighing, I pinched the bridge of my nose and grunted. “You know what, it doesn't matter. There's nothing I can do to help, you know that.”

Didn't he understand that just picking up the phone was enough to lead them to me? Was he that fucking blind to the danger he was calling to his doorstep?

If they knew he talked to me, if they thought for a second that my family had any idea about where I was; they would all be dead.

My father growled, his voice deep and hollow. “I'm not calling for your help, Porter,

that's the last thing we need from you. You've already fucked up enough for us.”

Taking in a big gulp of air, I closed my eyes, trying not to let him get under my skin. “What happened? What the hell did he do?”

“It's not what he did. . .” Pausing, I heard my father take a sip of something, slurping against the speaker. “You know what, forget it. I was wrong to call you, it doesn't matter. Nothing matters anymore.”

The phone went dead and I sat confused, wondering what the hell was happening back home. He had called me for a reason, and yet he wouldn't actually tell me what it was.

Throwing myself back, I dug my fingertips into the back of my skull and clutched my head. The urge to run home clawed its way through my chest, inserting the idea in my head.

I can't go back, it's too dangerous.

If I go home and they find out. . .

Fuck! What the hell did he do?

He got arrested, the fucker got himself arrested.

That was the only thing that made sense to me. Zander had done something stupid and had gotten caught. Don't get me wrong, I was far from innocent. The both of us had been wild, running the streets and causing hell.

We used to be close, but he went his way and I went mine. That's what happens with siblings, you eventually grow apart, changing as the world either drags you down or

pushes you up.

I got into some shit that even the baddest prison asshole would probably run from. The thing was I was actually really good at it. I didn't blink an eye when they asked me to jack a semi or rough someone up who owed them money. And as I got better, as I got stronger and my conscience seemed to dwindle down to nothing, my jobs became darker.

I could kill any man, no questions asked. The money was good, but the notoriety was better. It got to the point that the boss would personally ask for me to make the next hit. I felt really good, I was high on the power surging through my veins.

Until the day it all changed.

I was easily swayed back then, a gullible young man who trusted too easily and gave too much for someone who didn't care. My boss never gave me a reason before to not trust him, I thought we were a family.

That was the picture he created. He made me feel like I was important, like I truly meant something to the organization.

But I was blind to the truth. We all have limits, it doesn't matter how bad you are. They crossed the line, and for the first time ever, I told him no. I couldn't pull the trigger.

I thought Marcos Disesto was alright with it. After going to him myself and telling him I couldn't do it, that I was done with all of this, he shook my hand and smiled. He told me that he understood.

“Don't worry about it, it's alright,” he said, cupping my hand in his and squeezing. Patting the back of my palm, he lifted his hand to my face and gently slapped my

cheek. “You do what you need to do, and I’ll do the same.”

I walked out thinking that there was no bad blood between us.

I was so fucking wrong.

He set me up, threatened my family and tried to have me killed. What he didn't count on was me coming out alive. So I ran, dead set on never looking back, confident that if I was gone my family would be safe.

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He didn't want my family, Marcos wanted me.

I thought Zander knew that, I expected him to understand. But he never did.

Raking my fingers through my hair, I dragged them down my face and stared out the window. I never planned on going back; not if I didn't have to.

Miles had been put between us for a good reason.

I couldn't promise to keep them safe if I was there. I couldn't be sure the crew wouldn't find out and come seeking revenge. I wasn't even sure they ever stopped looking for me.

Not that any of that mattered, because my family wanted nothing to do with me anyway. My father told me I was dead to him, that I was a disgrace and he never wanted to see my face again. My mother looked at me like I wasn't her son, like I had been replaced by some vile creature she didn't recognize.

The rumors had spread and I could see it in her eyes that she wasn't sure anymore about me. Nothing hurt more than that, it stabbed my heart like a serrated blade.

She doubted me. And I couldn't blame her for it.

I had lied to her over and over again about what I was doing for work and where I had been. When the truth came out, everything changed between us.

Was it worth the risk to go back?

He's your little brother! If he needs you, you should be there!

Zander was family, that was all that mattered. Because that's what big brothers do, they take the high road and help the ones they love. . .

I'm helping them by not being there. I'm saving them by staying away.

What the hell do I do?

* * * *

The car idled quietly in the driveway, and I stared up at my parents new home. It took me a little while to find it, having to go off bad directions from my grandmother.

Biting my lower lip, I contemplated just turning around and leaving. I wasn't sure how being there was going to help anyone.

Fuck, why did I do this?!

You know why; Zander needs you.

He's the one I'm here for.

Turning off the car, I climbed out, sinking my feet into the dirt driveway. Standing with my hands in my pockets, my face was blocked by my hood, just to keep a certain level of protection to my identity.

Looking around, I didn't see anything that seemed out of place, there was nothing but trees for miles in every direction. There were no strange cars parked on the road when I drove in, no random people trolling the sidewalk.

But I still felt frozen in place, afraid that there were eyes lurking in the shadows. I had driven around for over an hour already just to be sure no one was following me.

It's been a little while now, they're not expecting me to come back.

Pushing all the air out of my lungs, I jogged up the steps, and tapped the back door with my knuckles as I opened it. "Hello? Is anyone around?"

Stepping inside, I glanced around the entrance. The same small bench my mom had in the house I grew up in was set against the wall on my left, with Franco's shoes tucked all neatly underneath. The wall was lined with portraits of my brother and I when we were kids. A poorly designed wood key holder I had made in junior high shop class was pinned to the wall above the long seat.

They didn't erase me completely.

Taking in a deep breath, I could smell my mother's sunflower scented candles that she insisted on using every day. It was strange, the smell of the air was soothing and upheaving my nerves all at once.

My muscles twitched with anxiety, fingers shaking subtly by my sides as I did my best to control my body. Being here was enough to get them all killed, and yet I put their safety aside to try and help my brother.

God I hope no one saw me.

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Turning to the pictures, I examined them one by one. There was one of my brother smiling as he rode his bike up our driveway, and another one of all of us that my grandmother had taken outside of the beach house we rented every summer on the Cape. There was even one of me with our old dog, Daisy, laying on the floor watching TV.

The memories of my childhood started to flood my mind, and I could hear the sound of past voices, good and bad as they replayed in my ears.

The people in the pictures looked so normal, like this was the home of a typical American family. And for all outward appearance, it was, we were just like any other family on our street.

But that the was magic of plaster and wood. No one could see inside, no one could see the truth. They didn't see the boy who grew up to become a mafia hitman, they couldn't see how lethal my hands had turned and how these walls had laid the foundation for a killer.

Running my fingers over the last picture, my mother came around the corner, her eyes swollen and red. She was nervously rubbing her hands in front of her chest, lips turned down in a sullen frown.

Stopping in the doorway, she stared at me blankly as her breaths jumped, trying to hold back her tears.

Furrowing my brows, I quickly walked to her side and cupped her elbow. "What's going on? Where's Zander? I want to know what the hell he did." Looking around

behind her shoulder, my mother suddenly slapped my face without warning.

“Ahh! What the hell was that for?” Scrubbing my jaw, I glared at her.

“This is your fault!” screaming, she hit me again. “This is all your fucking fault!” Slapping wildly, her hits came in hard and fast, an endless barrage of sharp stings I couldn't understand.

“What is? What's going on? What the hell did I do?” Blocking my head, I took a step back, trying to create some space between us.

But she wouldn't let up, stepping forward she smacked me again and again. My mother kept striking me, her hands not really aiming at anything, coming in rapidly and chaotic.

“Why did you come back?! Get the fuck out! You don't belong here!”

Snatching her arms, I held her wrists, trying to get her to focus on my eyes. “Mom, stop! Stop! Tell me what's going on!”

She was shaking wildly, her entire body a vibrating machine in my hands. Yanking her in, I hugged her tightly, trying to stop her from going into full blown convulsions as she started to weep.

Her hands came up and clenched my shirt, tearing at the fabric. Her face pressed into my chest, rolling side to side as tears flooded down her cheeks, soaking through to my skin.

Rubbing my hands up and down her back, I kissed the top of her head. “Mom, what's wrong? Tell me what happened.”

Through heavy tears, her voice crackled in broken words. “Your brother. . . your brother isn't. . . Porter, he's gone.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Gripping her shoulders, I pushed her off my chest so I could look in her eyes. “What do you mean he's gone? Where is he?”

Sobbing uncontrollably, the water streamed down her lips as she tried to speak. Her sentences were all mangled, a mix of gasping for air and finding her voice between shredded thoughts. “He. . . I don't know what happened. He was—Zander. . .” Swallowing hard, her eyes froze on mine. “He's dead, my baby is dead.” Falling back into my arms, she wilted in a pain that she should never have to experience.

Holding her close, I brushed my palm down her hair. “Shh,” I soothed, doing my best to calm her. “I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.”

Her body trembled as she cried, her moans growing in volume as she lost herself to the unspeakable hurt of losing a child. My mother's legs began to shake, losing their strength to hold her up anymore.

Bracing her to my chest, I kept her from falling, refusing to let her drop to the ground as her knees grew weak and her muscles began to shut down. Every ounce of her turned brittle and broken, crumbling into pieces before my eyes.

I felt for her, for what she was going through. No mother should ever have to experience that type of heartache.

The last time I saw my mother this distraught was the day I left. Her eyes were giant saucers, swirling with disappointment and regret. She screamed at me to get out, she begged me to stay and get help, she slapped my face and told me she never wanted to see me again.

That hurt, to see the pain I had caused her, it hit me in a way that I never expected. I never meant to disappoint her, I never set out to destroy her very existence.

She didn't raise a monster, I transformed into one.

But this, this was something entirely different.

My brother wasn't being held behind bars, he wasn't a phone call away or a three hour drive. He was lost forever.

Damn it! Why didn't I come home sooner?!

Regret caved in around me, making me wish I had done things differently. But isn't that how life goes? You make a choice, one that you think will solve all your problems, only to see it wash your very existence out to sea.

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I could barely breathe, suffocated by the harsh reality that nothing could mend this. I couldn't fix Zander, not now, not ever again. I couldn't take back what I had done or erase the time between us and fill it with memories.

My mother had inevitably lost two sons.

No. I'm here, I'm back.

There were no tears in my eyes, they were as dry as the desert. I knew that most people would be inconsolable at a time like this, but I wasn't normal. Even if I tried to force myself to cry, it wouldn't work. I didn't have any tears to shed for my brother, there were none to give him.

That didn't mean I wasn't sorry he was gone, it didn't mean that I lacked empathy for what she was going through or felt some form of sadness that he was dead. What it did mean was all the anger I lived with finally had a function, it had a purpose.

Revenge was bittersweet. It was time for me to open Pandora's box and let the world know I was back with a vengeance.

If Marcos has anything to do with this, he's fucking dead.

My heart stopped, returning to beat with hatred and rage for whoever was responsible for taking my brother from this woman—from this family.

I'm going to kill them all.

The sound of feet thudded behind her back, drawing my attention up. Lifting my head, I saw my father standing in the doorway of the living room, holding a small glass of alcohol. In khaki pants and a button-up plaid shirt, he watched me with that same dead stare I had seen when I walked out that door.

You still haven't forgiven me, even after all this time.

Our eyes locked as the battle of testosterone fueled the air, bringing back all the angst I felt when I was around him as a kid.

My father and I didn't get along, we never really had. My mother used to tell me that we butted heads because we were so much alike. I refused to think I was anything like that man. He wasn't my birth father, none of his blood flowed through my veins.

All he cared about was his alcohol and control. He treated my mother like a fucking slave, and me like I had been put here on earth to serve him.

Pushing herself to stand up straight, my mother smoothed her hair out and cleared her throat. Pulling a small cloth from her pocket, she wiped her face dry.

I felt sorry for her, even more so now with the death of my brother. It was sad that even in this state, with all the grief she felt, she couldn't show it around my father.

Fear and sadness wasn't allowed, it wasn't a part of our vocabulary when I was growing up. You took whatever shit was thrown at you like a man, regardless of what it was.

He used to tell me when I was a kid that if he saw a hint, a flicker, a damn pause in my fucking muscles—he'd make my mother a happy woman and give her the daughter she always wanted; by cutting off my balls one by one.

His tactic had worked. I didn't cry, I never whined or fussed about anything he ordered me to do. To me that was normal; all the anger, the demands, I didn't know anything else.

I did as I was told, period; no questions, no second guessing what he said. My head would bow and I would run off to complete whatever medial task he assigned me.

He might not want to admit it, but he helped create the monster I had become, the empty pit of a man that walked around without a purpose, with no skills but how to kill a man with his bare hands.

I remember being really little one time and asking my mother why he treated me like I was his soldier. I never did get an answer because she never had the chance to give it.

My father walked in, his face red, the thick vein in his neck pulsing like it was its own entity, like a parasite that had taken control of his body. He smacked me so hard across the face for questioning who he was that I never asked again.

I wouldn't say it out loud, but his hands molded me like clay into the perfect mafia soldier. I was cold, calculated, and good at following orders. I learned to be that way because of him. I didn't give a shit about the people I had killed or the suffering I brought on their families.

At least not at first. That changed, it all changed in one single night. A night that I still had nightmares about, a single moment that will haunt me forever.

“Why are you here?” he asked, taking a small sip from his cup. “I didn't ask you to come.”

“Yeah, but you wouldn't have called me if it wasn't something really bad.” Gritting

my teeth, I tried to stay calm. “You should have told me, why didn't you? Why did you just hang up?”

Not letting him answer, my mother cut in. “I'll go make you something to eat.” Sniffing, she glanced at my father, then back at me. “Chicken parm, how does that sound? You always loved chicken parm.”

“Mom, no, you don't have to. You should relax, take some time to your—”

Resting her hand on my chest, she stopped me from speaking. “It will help me relax, help get my mind off all of this for a little bit.” Giving me a soft smile, she lifted her hand to my cheek and thumbed my face. “I'm really happy you're here. I've missed you, Porter.”

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“Really, Mom, I’m fine. Why don’t you go upstairs and lay down for a little while?”

Swirling his glass in the air, my father dipped his head to look into the cup. “The woman said she wants to cook, let her go cook.” Veering his stare at my mom, he nodded his head. “Chicken parm sounds good about now.”

My mother bowed her head, looking between us. The tension in the air was dense and thick, making the small standing room hot and stuffy. I knew they fought about me and my place in this family.

For my father, I was dead to him. He wanted nothing to do with me, he hated everything about me. But my mother wasn’t as harsh, she couldn’t cut me out completely and he resented her for that.

She still loved me in her own way, even if she hated the man I had become.

Forcing another small smile, she started down the hall towards the kitchen, and I stood quietly, watching her leave.

When my mother was out of view, I looked back at my father. “What the fuck happened?”

Stuffing a hand into his pocket, he jerked his head for me to follow him. “Your brother wouldn’t listen and he did something stupid. He got shot Porter, and it’s your fault.”

“Who shot him?” I asked, my voice trembling with pent up rage.

You know who it was.

“Oh, so now you suddenly care? I highly doubt that.”

Gritting my teeth, my fingers curled into my palms. “I didn't come here for you to play mind games with me. Just spit it out, who killed him?” Walking behind him, I stopped in the center of the living room as my father kept walking towards the fireplace. “Who? Who did this, Franco?”

“Franco? So what? Now you're too good to call me Dad anymore? Porter, I didn't ask you to come here, you decided to come on your own. We were fine this long without you, we don't need you now.” Waving the glass in the air, he stared up at a picture of my brother from grade school. “Your mother is the only reason I called you at all. If I had it my way you'd be clueless still, living in whatever fucking hellhole you crawled into.”

“Look, I fucked up, I know that. But I meant what I said before, I never meant to hurt any of you. I did the right thing in the end, you and I both know that. So why can't you let it go?”

“Right, you never meant to hurt us. You never meant to hurt your mother or your brother.” Pointing his finger out to the side, he eyed me over his shoulder. “But the choices we make affect other people, Porter, even if you think they won't.”

“I'm not playing these fucking games with you. All of that is in the past, it's not who I am anymore. I just need you to tell me who did this.” He wouldn't say, simply staring off into space, leaving his thoughts a mystery. “Tell me what the hell happened, I need to know.”

My father was quiet for a long moment, hanging his head as he touched the picture of my brother. “You would know if you had been here. . .” Pausing, his head slowly

clicked over his shoulder, eyes black as death. “He went looking for you, Porter.”

“No—why? But he—”

Downing the rest of his drink, he slammed the glass on the mantle. “He did this because of you.” Flicking his eyes back to the picture, he said, “You drove him right into the barrel.”

People don't choose to be evil, evil chooses the form it wants. And right then, I felt the evil as it turned my blood to tar and harnessed all the hatred I had kept bottled up all this time.

How could he blame me for this? I didn't ask Zander to come looking for me, I told him to stay away. I tried to explain how dangerous those people were so he could stay safe.”

I failed him. He didn't listen, he didn't believe me.

But I didn't kill him.

“How can you blame me for this?”

“Look,” he said, turning to face me with his palms up. “I know you think that you did the right thing.” Taking a step forward, his hands danced in the air as he spoke. “And I know you might have convinced yourself in that fucking brain of yours that everything was over. The truth is, it's not, it never was. We were here, we've always been here, living in your fucking filth. We didn't leave you, you left us. And that didn't fix the problem you created.”

“So you really think this is my fault?” Shaking my head, I gawked at him in disbelief. “I did what needed to be done. If I stayed they would have killed us all. I left to keep

everyone safe, I left to keep Zander safe, I did that for him.”

Bobbing his head up and down, his voice went soft and thin. “Of course you did, you did it for him. Obviously that didn't work in his favor.”

Veering my stare, I wanted so badly for him to just understand that I didn't do anything on purpose to hurt our family. It hurt so much when he looked at me like I was garbage. All I ever really wanted from him was his acceptance, to feel like I belonged. And he never gave me that.

“If I had stayed, all of us would be dead right now. Don't you understand that?”

He hated me for everything I had done. But the thing was, it just felt good to be accepted and wanted, to feel like I was a part of something bigger than myself. I found something I excelled at, and that drew me in like a moth to a flame.

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It wasn't right, none of it was. But maybe if he had loved me better, if he hadn't treated me like I was beneath him, like his blood born child was a gift and I was just a burden; maybe I wouldn't have looked for acceptance elsewhere.

You can't blame him for all of it. . . You made your own choices.

“Porter, we don't need to bicker over the shit you and I will never agree on. You did what you did, that's the end of it. Your brother is dead and it's all your fault. Why don't you just go, leave now before you cause any more problems.”

Drawing my lips taut, I inched my way closer to my father, bringing us chest to chest. “Don't you dare try and put this on me. I'm here now and I'm not going anywhere. Mom needs me, so I'm not leaving.” Leaning into his ear, I spoke clear and firm. “I will always be a part of this family, you can't change that. You never could change that.”

Leaning back, a part of me wanted to turn and walk out that door, leaving him to drown in his own alcohol-induced hatred. I didn't need him to remind me of what I had done, I did that to myself every damn day already.

Taking in a deep breath, his nostrils flared wide, eyes cutting into my soul. “You left us, that was your choice. You could have stayed and done the right thing, stood tall and faced the executioner like a real man. Instead, you abandoned your family, your brother got killed, and your mother is a fucking mess.”

The right thing?!

Where was he when I needed him?!

When I went to him for help he told me to get fucked. When I asked him for advice on what I should do, he told me I wasn't his son and he didn't care.

“Are you fucking serious? Don't you dare start throwing out shit about doing the right thing! You gave up on me long before all that shit went down.”

“Shh.” he quietly said, holding his finger to his lips. “Your mother doesn't need us arguing, not right now.” Stroking his chin, he rocked his jaw. “You're only a part of this family because your mother can't let you go. But just because you left doesn't mean you're a changed man, Porter. I know what you became, I know what those fucking pricks created. You mean nothing to me anymore.”

“When did I ever? You've always hated me, why don't you just admit it?”

As much as I tried to not think about it, I couldn't ignore the fact that I was a heartless monster, and nothing I had done was able to fix that. The distance, the time I spent trying to rebuild myself as someone else; I remained empty and cold.

For so long I blamed who I was on him. That was wrong. I made my own choices, I decided to climb the wall and drop in on the other side. My father might have laid the tracks, but I climbed on the train.

How could I blame him for the choices I made? It wasn't until I abandoned my family and left to fend for myself, that I saw the real man behind the mask.

Children are malleable, you can mold them into anything you want. Marcos had groomed a killer, taking me in and giving me everything I thought I was missing from my father. I thought he cared for me. I thought he saw me like a son.

I was so fucking stupid.

And when it was over, I went looking for something that I would never find. I searched for a new home, a new life, a new me. . . but I realized fairly early that I was out there searching for something that didn't exist; I didn't fit in this world.

There was no such place, not for me. I was tarnished, crafted into a machine that was meant for destruction. I couldn't find happiness when I had no clue what the fuck it looked like.

A small flicker of guilt gnawed at my gut, making me wish I had never left. Guilt for not ever picking up the phone to call my brother, guilt for not being there to protect him. Maybe if I had been there things would be different. . . maybe he wouldn't be gone and my mother wouldn't be suffering the way she was.

We never stopped being brothers even though I stopped being his. Dead at eighteen years old, he hadn't even had the chance to start his life yet.

It was time for me to do something for him. It was time for me to step back into this family, if only for a little while.

I know what I need to do.

My mind was made up. My brother was dead and nothing would ever bring him back.

I'm going to make this right.

I'm coming home.

Chapter Eleven

Porter

“Well, don't you twolook cozy?” My father's voice slipped into my ear, rousing me awake. “Get up.” His fist hit my shoulder, nudging me hard.

Pushing myself up, I rubbed my eyes, trying to clear the fog. I must have fallen asleep beside Emery, because the last thing I could remember was pulling her into my arms and laying my head on the pillow.

“What time is it?” I asked, swinging my feet off the side of the bed and planting them on the floor.

“It's time for you to get your head out of your ass.” Franco wrapped firm fingers around my arm, yanking me to my feet and dragging me across the room. “Come with me.”

“What the hell!?” I yelled, stumbling forward, still suspended in that half awake half asleep vortex.

“Porter, what's going on?” Emery sat up in bed, her eyes frantically watching Franco drag me away.

“It's fine, don't worry.” Through slit lids, I curled my lip. “Right, Franco? Everything's fine.”

Stopping short, he bared his teeth and glanced between us. “It's not fine, none of this is fine. So don't try and act like it is.” Zeroing his gaze on Emery, he barked. “Evenyouknow it's not fine, don't play stupid. You can't be that fucking dumb. Are you that dumb, little girl? Obviously you must be if you'd sleep with a piece of shit like this.”

“Hey!” I yelled, tearing my arm from his hand. “Don't talk to her like that, she's been through enough.” Taking a step back, I growled. “She's a victim here, she doesn't need you treating her like she's done something wrong. Don't you ever talk to her like that again.”

Balling my fists, I spread my feet to gain more balance. If he said one more fucking thing to her in that asshole tone of his, I was going to lay him out.

I could take him talking to me like I was dirt, I would shut my mouth and let him call me every name in the book if it meant he'd never step foot in this room again until this was all over.

The one thing I wasn't going to do was stand by and let him talk to her like she was beneath him, as if she deserved to be in this mess.

Franco's fingers tapped against his thighs, the vein in his neck going crazy as his blood boiled. “Do not tell me what to do in my own home, Porter. Now let's go, we need to have a little chat.” Fanning out his arm toward the door, he dipped his head. “After you, Asshole.”

Looking over at Emery, I forced a tender smile. “I'll be back in a few minutes, try to just relax.”

What the hell are you trying to do?

It was hard for me to find that balance between understanding the position he was in and my hatred for who he was to begin with. No matter what I had done to cause all of this, I still fucking hated that man with all of my being.

When he was around, I instantly became irritated and annoyed. Anything he said, even if it was constructive in some sick asshole way, bothered me. I would argue with that man just for the sake of arguing.

That wasn't the smart thing to do, but after years of verbal abuse, after dealing with him day in and day out, his dickhead ways had just stuck with me. I felt like a soda bottle, shaken violently with the cap still on, ready to burst.

Closing the door behind me, I followed Franco downstairs. Stopping at the island in the kitchen, he whipped around on his heels, his eyes hard as rock. He didn't say a word, not one fucking word.

“Well? What the hell do you want? What the fuck was that all about?”

Pulling his arm back, he threw himself forward, socking me in the jaw. It caught me off guard, making me wobble on my feet as I grabbed my face.

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“What the hell was that for!?” Rocking my jaw back and forth, I rubbed the sore muscle.

“I want you gone. Not tomorrow, not three days from now, I want you gone now. Get the fuck out and don't ever show your face here again.”

A devious chuckle escaped my mouth as I clenched my jaw. “I'm not going anywhere, Franco. Not now, not like this.”

Lunging forward, he threw his finger in my face. “You are going to get us all killed. I won't let you drag us down with you! Not again! Take your fucking whore and get the hell out!”

Gritting my teeth, all I could see was red. Digging my nails into my palm, I had my arm back, ready to strike. “I warned you, I fucking warned you not to talk about her like that.” Through clenched teeth, I felt my stomach tighten and my muscles convulse, eager to launch all their strength into his face.

“What's going on?” My mother came flying into the room, her eyes wide and concerned. “What happened?” Stepping between us, she pushed me back. Her eyes fell on my mouth as I wiped away the light trickle of blood. “Did you hit him?” she asked, glaring over her shoulder at her husband.

“He deserves it! Your damn son, Jo, that's what happened. What else is new?” Franco opened and closed his hands at his sides repeatedly, his muscles shaking as he tried to maintain some sort of control. “He was upstairs fucking that girl, after everything that happened, after everything we've done for him, he doesn't care. All he cares about is

himself, same as always.”

“Porter, is that true?”

“Does that really matter? I don't understand how it's any of your business what I do with her. I'm not a damn kid, I don't need your permission to be with someone.”

Curling her arms around her chest, my mother started rocking side to side. “You're right, you don't need our permission. But this isn't going to help you, Porter. Get your head out of the clouds, you're only going to hurt that girl.”

“I'm not going to hurt her.”

“I know you, and you will. That's what you do, you destroy things that are good. I'm sorry, Honey, I'm not trying to be cruel. I don't understand why, but you sabotage anything good that comes into your life.” My mother's brows crept knowingly to the hairline, her chin falling into her chest as she eyed me. “You've done it since you were a kid, this will be no different. It's not fair to her, not one bit.”

“You don't know me, I'm not that man anymore.” Holding up my hands, deflated and at a loss, I said, “Fine, you want me out, you want me gone, I'll go then.” Throwing my arms in the air, I took a long step towards the stairs. “Let me go get Emery and we'll be out of your hair.”

Reaching out for me, my mother's face softened. “That's not what I meant, I don't want you to leave. I just meant don't lead her on, especially when you know you'll never stick around.”

“You don't know that!” I yelled, dragging my hands down my face. “I've changed, things are different now. Stop expecting me to be him, stop acting like people can't change, because they do.”

“Honey, I want to believe you, I really do. But the past is the best indicator of the future. You've only proven your father right—”

“He's not my father! No matter how much you say it, it doesn't make it true!”

“Okay, alright,” she sighed, pinching her bottom lip as her eyes searched my face. “Franco has been there for you though, he's been here since you were a little boy. We don't want you to go, Porter. We want to help, but you have to work with us here.”

“What?! No! He can't stay here, Jo. Do you really want those people coming back? Do you really want to worry about who's going to knock at the door one day?”

“Franco, he's my son. I won't just abandon him, I did that once already and it was the worst mistake of my life.” Twisting to look at me, my mother held out her hand. “Come on, don't go. Besides, she's not ready for that. Emery needs to rest, she needs to get better, she can do that here.”

“Jo!”

“Shut it, Franco!” Snapping her shoulders square, my mother glared at her husband. “I won't just turn my back on the only son I have left. We did it your way and it didn't work. I'm not pushing him away again.”

“Jo—”

Slicing her hand through the air, my mother's voice was the firmest I had ever heard it. “Enough! If you don't like it, if you don't want to be around him, then you can pack your shit and leave. But my son needs me, that's the only thing that matters to me right now.”

Turning away from him, she jerked her head for me to go up stairs, quickly following

on my heels.

“Mom, you don't need to do this,” I said over my shoulder as my feet hit the landing.

“It's alright, I won't make you choose between us.”

“Porter, it's not even a choice. Zander stood by your side since the very beginning, and I should have too.” Walking past me, she kept her head straight. “Come on, I want to go check on Emery and see how she's doing.” Her hand struck the door as she opened it simultaneously. “How are we doing?” she chirped, her voice upbeat and casual.

I knew she had just switched from mom mode into nurse mode. I could see the shift, I could watch the visible transformation as her entire demeanor changed.

Emery sat up quickly, grabbing the blankets and holding them tight. “Is everything alright? I heard yelling, what's going on?”

“Everything is fine, Sweetheart, I don't want you to worry.” Sitting on the edge of the bed, she began to touch her neck and around her head. “Are you alright? How's your chest feel?”

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“Better actually, it still hurts, but it's better.”

“Good, I'm glad. And your head?”

“I feel like I got hit with a baseball bat, but other than that, I'm doing okay.”

“And you ate, that's good.” Emery shook her head with a smile. “Well, I'm thinking you're going to be just fine.” My mother scooped her hand down Emery's hair, smoothing out the frizzled strands. “Did you call home yet?”

“Oh, no, not yet, but I will. I live on my own, so no one is really waiting for me anyway.”

Thinning her lips, my mother placed her hands on her lap. “Okay, well, make yourself at home. I'm going to go grab you some of my clothes so you can shower. But feel free to go downstairs and get some food if you're hungry, anything you want. My house is your house.”

“Thank you,” Emery said.

Pinching her chin, my mother smirked. “Absolutely, it's my pleasure.” Getting up, my mother walked by me, giving me a grin and poking me in the gut. “I'll be right back with clean clothes for her.”

Emery's eyes were on me as I turned away from my mother and looked at her. My lip twitched high, head falling into my chest. “See, she's great.”

“She is, you were a lucky kid.”

“Yes and no. She was great when she was here, but when she was a nurse, her hours sucked. Sometimes she'd work full twenty-four hour shifts and I wouldn't see her for days. She had to work on birthdays and holidays, she worked nights and would sleep all day. It took a lot out of her and it created a rift between us.”

“Well, she had to do to what she had to do, right? A lot of parents have to sacrifice for their kids.”

Shrugging my shoulder, I said, “I guess.”

“Okay, here's some stuff for you to put on after you clean up.” My mother cut into the room, and we both stopped talking. Her eyes darted back and forth between us as her feet slowed. “And this is how you know when people were just talking about you.” Placing the clothes on the bed, she grabbed her hips.

“I was just telling Emery how you used to be a nurse. She was curious is all.”

“Mm hm, sure you were. You probably barely remember that, you were three when I stopped working.” Pointing her finger between us, she started to giggle. “You know this makes me feel really old. It reminds me of that time when Porter was about fourteen, and he had this 'girl' friend over to study.” Her fingers made quotations in the air as she rolled her eyes playfully. “I came in to find them making out on his bed, not one book open. Porter's eyes were so big like saucers, and he ended up shoving the poor girl off the edge of his bed.”

“Really?” Emery laughed, covering her mouth with her hands. “You shoved her off?” she asked me, still unable to control her laughter.

“I didn't mean to, I just wanted to stop us from kissing and I guess I didn't really think

about how hard I pushed her. It was a reflex, that's it. My mom surprised the hell out of me because she was home early from grocery shopping.”

“I wasn't home early, you just weren't paying attention to the time.” Waving her hand in the air, my mother let out a heavy breath. “Alright, I'm going to go smooth out what I can downstairs. Why don't you two come down once you're all done showering, I've got something to show the both of you.”

When my mother was gone, Emery asked, “Is everything really alright? I could hear your stepfather yelling, he sounded really upset. Is he angry that I'm here? I don't want to cause any trouble.”

“No, he's not angry at you, he's angry at me. He hates that I'm here, and he wants me out. I get it, I really do, but I won't leave unless I know you'll be alright.” Picking up the clothes off the end of the bed, I held out my hand. “Come on, let's get you in the shower. It'll probably feel great and help any tension in your muscles.”

“Will you help me?” Tilting her head, she smiled and winked.

Fuck I loved that smile. She wasn't scared of me anymore, she didn't look at me like she hated me, and that meant everything now.

I didn't have to pretend to be something I wasn't. She knew how we got here, she knew the truth, and that was all that mattered. I didn't give a fuck what Franco or my mother said about who I was or what I would do.

I wasn't leaving this girl, I wasn't going to just turn my back and walk out that door. There was no way I could, because she meant something to me. There were no words to explain why or how she had clawed her way into my heart, but there she was, digging a spot just for her.

“Of course I'll help.” Tangling our fingers together, I helped her to her feet. “If by help you mean touch your tits and rub your cunt.”

“Porter!” she yelled as her cheeks blushed and her eyes went wild. Smacking my chest, her jaw hung open. “Dirty, dirty boy.”

Chuckling, we took small easy steps towards the bathroom. “Yeah, dirty is how I like it. Does that bother you?”

“No, it just surprised me is all. Especially after how Franco reacted earlier to us being in bed together.”

“Ah, forget about him.”

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Opening the door, I flipped on the lights and helped her to the toilet. Emery closed the lid and sat down, softly rubbing her lower back. “I feel like an old lady, everything is so sore.”

“Some hot water should help work those kinks out.” Turning on the shower, the steam started to billow out from behind the curtain and fog the mirror. “Can I help you get your dress off?”

“Actually, yes.” Twisting her torso, she pointed over her shoulder. “Can you unzip me?”

Tugging down the small metal tab, her sexy back emerged. Lean muscles contoured the supple skin as she pulled the thin straps down her arms, letting it pool around her waist.

“Oh wow,” I said, gently running my fingertips over her back. “Does it hurt over here?”

“A little. Why?”

Thinning my lips, I didn't want to tell her that the area around her ribs was dark purple. “There's a pretty big bruise, but it probably looks worse than it feels.”

Standing up, she wiped the mirror with her forearm and turned to see her back. “Fuck, huh? Yeah, it doesn't hurt too bad, but it looks horrible.” Peering at me through the mirror, her lips turned into a deep frown. “I'm sorry I did that, I'm sorry I caused us to crash.”

Grabbing her arms, I turned her around so I could look in her eyes. “Don't apologize, you had no clue what was going on. I should have told you from the beginning, but I didn't. If anything, it's my fault. I had no right to take you the way I did, I should have been honest from the start.”

Emery brought her hands to my face, cupping my cheek and stroking her thumb up and down. “We both made mistakes, neither one of us is innocent in this. I won't let you take all the blame, it's not yours to carry alone.”

Holding the sink, she glanced at the shower. “Are you ready?” I asked, taking her arm in my hand and grabbing her at the elbow.

“Yeah, I need to get wet.”

“We don't need the shower for that. . .” Drawing out my words, I bit my bottom lip.

“I set myself up for that one.” Rolling her eyes, Emery giggled.

“You really did, how could I not take it there?”

Shaking her head, she pushed back the curtain and stepped into the tub. Steam poured out, filling the room. The air was thick and hot, making me sweat easily.

“This feels so good.” Hanging her head under the water, she let it roll down her shoulders.

I stood in awe, my cock hard and throbbing as I watched her skin glisten from head to toe. Even with the bruises coating her body, the scratches and cuts, all the dirt and debris that hadn't washed away yet, she looked stunning.

Arching her back, the water pooled in the small dimples above her ass. Absorbing the

erotic woman in front of me, I licked her body with my eyes.

Her nipples were hard and firm, her ass was plump and enticing, calling me in. Grabbing the bar of soap off the holder, I held it under the water.

“Get against the wall, I’ll wash you down.”

Resting open palms against the tiles, she laid her face on the wall. Her eyes were shut, legs spreading to make room. Scrubbing the soap in my hands, I sudsed them up, and began massaging her back.

The feel of her skin, slick and hot against my hand sent my head in a spin. Every muscle in my body exploded, filling my cock with need.

Pressing my thumbs up her spine, I wrapped my fingers over her shoulders and squeezed her neck.

Emery let out the prettiest little moan as she pushed her cheek against the tiles and kept her eyes closed. “That feels incredible.” Bending at her waist, her ass dipped higher, spine curving like a rainbow on a hot summer day.

Stroking her flesh, my hands drifted over every curve, curling around her stomach and slipping up her tits. Pinching her nipples, I rolled them between the pads of my fingers, watching the goosebumps as they jumped across her body and made her shiver.

“You like that?” I asked, gliding my hand down her belly and cupping her mound. “Does that feel good?”

“Yes,” she groaned, parting her thighs and rocking her waist.

“Good, I like making you feel that way.” Trapping her lips between my fingers, I squeezed the wet folds around her swelling button. Back and forth, I wriggled my fingers so her pussy teased her clit, making her body jiggle and move.

Flipping her around, Emery's head tipped back as I ran my hands up and down her stomach, thumbing her hardened beads, she let out a moan that was music to my ears.

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I was tempted to charge her, tearing her off her feet and fucking her right there. My control was weak, it was barely grounded as my head lost sight of what I was doing and my dick decided to take over.

Peeling her eyes open, Emery's lids hooded as she pressed her palms to her sides and bit her bottom lip. Seductive and alluring, the tips of her curly blond hair dropped water over her chest.

I watched the drops, following their path as some slipped down the center of her chest and others trickled over her tits, hanging dangerously off the edge of her nipples. Dragging my tongue over my lips, my eyes glazed over as I allowed the carnal feelings raging inside to come to the surface.

I should have been tender, I should have been easy and gentle with her. But that was gone, there was nothing left for me to grasp.

My touch was impulsive, my muscles no longer under the control of my brain, but driven by something stronger. The starvation I felt painfully delved deeper into my body, shutting down the world around me.

Emery's eyes anchored on mine, caressing my heart into soothing beats. Her lashes swept up as she blinked, her gaze blazing bright like torches.

Covered in soap, with drenched hair and prickles running up and down her arms, she stretched her hand out and grabbed my wrist. Pulling me into the shower, Emery tore my shirt over my head, driving her lips onto my chest.

The hot water splashed around us, washing her naked frame clean. My boxers stuck to my legs as I tried to slide them down. Shifting my hips, I worked the soaked material down to my knees.

My cock throbbed painfully, ready to take this woman again and again. In one quick swoop, I lifted Emery off her feet and curled her legs around my waist. Our eyes were locked on each other, never breaking away, never losing each other as our bodies pressed together and sheer desire became the driving force.

Cupping her ass, the tip of my cock hit her wet entrance, slipping inside with ease. Groaning hard, I dropped my head into her neck and bit her throat. Her walls tightened around me as my shaft filled her up, spreading her wide.

Thrusting hard and fast, I dug my fingers into her ass and pushed her back firmly against the wall.

Emery let out a loud moan, grabbing my neck and pinning her thighs to my hips. She was holding on tight, bouncing her ass to my rhythm. I would slam in, she would slam down, I would pull back and she would clench her pussy so my cock stayed inside.

“You need me, don't you?” Whispering against her shoulder, she cooed. “You need me in that cunt of yours, don't you?” Expelling a breath, her nails raked my scalp. “Fuck, that's sweet.”

Harder and harder, I buried my cock in her pussy all the way up to my balls. My fury base tickled against her skin, while her smooth wet lips milked my shaft.

She couldn't speak as every inch of her shuddered, shivering from head to toe. I could feel the shake as it radiated through her muscles and coursed through her body. With one final thrust, I came.

And in the end, as her eyes fluttered up to mine, and her fingers raked through my hair, she had stolen all of my heart.

I was hers and she was mine.

There was no room for anything else.

Chapter Twelve

Emery

Pulling up the sweatpants Jo had given me, I tugged the purple t-shirt over my head, and let it drape around my waist.

“You look incredible,” Porter said with a smile, his eyes twinkling like stars against a lusty background.

Turning my lips up into a disbelieving grin, I tempt some truth out of his comment. “In your mom's clothes . . . you think I look incredible?” Giggling, I sat down on the edge of the bed, tucking one leg under my thigh and running my bare foot back and forth against the carpet.

Porter was leaning against the door frame of the bathroom, arms wrapped over each other, forcing the muscles in his biceps to thicken and bulge like rocks under the surface.

My heart fluttered, knowing exactly what it felt like to have those strong arms curl around my body, touching me in all the right places. Everything about this man replaced my nerves with shivers and uncertainty with desire.

I stared at him, tracing the muscles I could see with my eyes, wondering if it would always feel this good to be with him. I felt safe, I felt adored, I felt things I had never experienced before with anyone else. Those flutters were magic, they were mind altering, because Porter had drawn them out.

All I wanted now was to be with this man. I thought I didn't need someone by my

side to make me feel special; but I was wrong. Having someone didn't mean I had to change who I was, it didn't mean I would suddenly crave acceptance and not know how to be myself.

Having this man meant I could share the best parts of who I was with someone who would cherish me. And everyone deserves to have someone like that in their life; even him.

Running his hand through his hair to pull it off his eyes, his head tilted into his shoulder. "It's not the clothes, it's the person in them." Stepping forward, he leaned down and thumbed my jaw, placing a tender kiss on my forehead. "Ready?"

"Yeah, I guess." Knitting my brows, I fiddled with the strings on my pants. "What if your stepfather says something? What if he goes off again?"

"Don't worry about him, he might not even be here. My mom basically told him to get lost if he was going to keep being a dick." Taking my hand, he helped me to my feet, letting his hand settle on the small of my back.

"What does your mom want to show us?"

Crooking his jaw, Porter shrugged. "I have no idea, but knowing her, it's probably something that's going to embarrass the hell out of me." Laughing, his hand massaged the dip in my spine.

Another wave of arousal washed over my body, reigniting the heat in my core and the throb in my sex. His touch did things to me; great, wonderful, intoxicating things. Gentle or rough, my entire being only wanted more.

If I had the energy, I'd mount him again, straddling his waist and devouring his cock for a third time. Porter was the best kind of drug. A high that never ended and never

left you alone.

The house was really warm and homey. It felt like a loving, caring family had lived there for ages. I knew that wasn't the truth. This wasn't the home Porter had grown up in, these weren't the walls that watched his childhood unfold, but you could still feel him here.

All the furniture looked used and worn, just like you would expect in a house with boys. I could see dings in the table as we walked through the kitchen, and light tears on the cushions from years of abuse. There were pictures of flowers all around us, mingling with happy faces of Porter and his brother when they were kids.

“Look at you,” I said with a smirk, glancing at him over my shoulder. “Weren't you a cute little kid.”

His lips crept up his face, igniting a bright smile. “Don't sound so surprised.” Pointing at himself, his jaw hardened, eyes holding steady. “Look at this face, as if I'm still not cute.”

Laughing, I turned back to the picture. “And this is your brother?”

Nodding, he stepped up to my side, his eyes set on the small boy, with dirty red hair behind the glass frame. “Yeah, that's Zander. Shit, I think I was ten and he was five in that picture.”

Looking up, there was a small frame with a picture of Jo, Porter, and Zander. They were on the beach, squinting with crooked smiles as the sun blinded them. “Where was this taken?”

“The Cape.” Porter plucked the picture off the wall and held it close to examine it. “We had a beach house there for years when I was kid.” Stroking the outside of the

frame with his thumb, he kept his eyes on the image.

“Your mom said she used to be a nurse, how come she's not anymore?”

Porter stretched his arm up over my shoulder and placed the picture back. “My real dad died when I was three. My mother was working in the hospital at the time when the call came in that there had been an accident. Adult male, car veered off the road, major injuries. . .” Pausing, he stared off into space as he talked. “She had no idea it was my father. When they brought him in she froze, she couldn't think, she couldn't function. She watched him die on the table and she did nothing to help him. It changed her, she was never the same after that. She couldn't go back to work, she couldn't even look at me for months because all it did was make her cry.”

Touching his shoulder, I tilted my head. “That must have been so hard on her, to go through that, and then to lose your brother too. . .” Sadness crept over my face as tears swelled in my eyes. “I'm so sorry, Porter.”

Nodding, he ran his thumb over his bottom lip and looked down at the floor. “It hasn't been easy.” I watched him as he buried the emotions that were trying to take over his body. He wasn't going to allow himself to cry or be sad, and that hurt me.

He shouldn't have to hold it in, that wasn't fair. If he never let it out, he'd never be able to let it go.

Taking in a big breath of air, I decided to give him something from me. We came from different worlds, but we shared the same sadness. We weren't that different in a way, there was a common thread between us, braided in hurt and pain.

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“When I lost my parents, my entire world crumbled.” Porter lifted his face to mine as I started speaking, and laid his hand against my cheek, tracing the curve of my jaw. “They went out to dinner for their anniversary, and on the way home some drunk asshole hit them head on.” His eyes were intense, making my heart stumble on itself. I didn't like talking about my parents, the sheer sadness of the story was usually too much for anyone else to hear.

I hated the look people gave me when they learned I was an orphan. I hated the guilt they somehow placed on themselves and the need they felt to give me handouts.

So I stopped telling people what happened, leaving it open for them to wonder and draw their own conclusions.

But sharing this piece of my life with Porter felt right, it felt like he was the only one who could even understand what I went through.

“It all came out of nowhere; one day they were here, the next they were gone. Just like that, I never saw them again. But I was lucky I had my grandmother, she made everything alright.”

Porter didn't speak, he simply held my face in his hands and kissed me. His kiss was soft and tender, filled with all things he couldn't say out loud.

His kiss said he was sorry I had to go through that.

His kiss told me that he understood.

His kiss told me not to worry about what I lost, but to focus on what I found.

“Oh good, they fit.” Jo popped in from behind us, causing us to jump and break apart. Smirking, her loving smile made me feel right at home, and I wanted to thank her for that.

It felt nice to have a mother figure look at me the way she did. It reminded me of my own mom; the caring eyes, the light smile, the words she was thinking but kept to herself.

“The one in the middle is my favorite,” she said, folding her arms over her chest and not picking on us for making out in her kitchen. “You'd never know it took me almost an hour to get that, neither one would cooperate.” Squinting her eyes, she looked off in the distance, lost in a memory. Shaking herself back into the present, she glanced between us. “Come in the living room, I have something I want to give you, Porter.”

Porter took my hand in his and we followed his mother. Fanning out her arm, she flicked her head for us to sit on the couch.

“What's going on, Mom?” he asked, pulling my hand into his lap and holding it tight. “Where's Franco?”

“He took off for a bit, went to cool down. He'll be back after, and hopefully he'll have his shit together.” Sitting in the chair to the left of her son, Jo clasped her hands and smiled through thin lips.

“Okay, so what's this all about?” Scrunching his brows, he leaned closer to Jo and touched her arm lightly. “Is everything okay?”

Taking a deep breath, she pulled a thin folder out that she had tucked between the cushions. “When you were little, I always wanted you to grow up and become

something. A doctor, a lawyer, maybe a pilot like your father. I wanted you to be a man with status, someone who would change the world. . .” Pausing, her eyes drifted around the room. “Life doesn't work that way, and neither do wishes.”

“Mom, if this is some sort of intervention or something, I don't need it.”

“No, no, it's nothing like that.” Brushing him off, she opened the folder and pulled out a single sheet of paper. “You had your own ideas, your own life you wanted to live. I hated it, I hated that you got into the shit you did. But I'm not saying this to upset you, I just want you to understand why it took so long for me to give you this.”

“Okay,” Porter said, his voice unsure and cautious. “Give me what?”

“Franco is against me doing this, but it's not up to him. You're my son, it's my decision.” Passing the paper to Porter, she rested her hands in her lap. “When your father passed, this was left for you, and up until now, I never thought you were in the right place to have it. That being said, I want you to take that and go. I want you to run far far away and start your life over. There's no reason for you stay here, and I can't stand the idea of losing another son to those men.”

Jo's eyes teared up, hands twining nervously around each other in her lap. She tried to smile, but her lips lingered in this awkward position, half up, half down, trembling slightly as she tried to hold in her tears.

“You were supposed to get that when you turned eighteen, but back then, you were—well you know.” Shifting her gaze around his face, she shrugged her shoulder. “You weren't ready, I didn't think you'd do the right thing with it.”

“Mom, I can't accept this.” Trying to hand the paper back, his mother refused to take it. “I won't take your money.” Shaking the paper hard, Porter leaned into her. “Here, I don't want this.”

“It's not my money, Porter, it's yours, it's always been yours. Your father left that to you. You told me earlier that people can change, and you're right. You are different, you're not the man I remember, you're not the boy who lost his way anymore.”

His eyes popped open wide as he looked back at the small black font. “Sixty thousand dollars?”

Jo leaned over, rubbing her son's shoulder and squeezing it hard. “I want you to have a chance in this world, Porter. I want you to live to be old and give me a million grandbabies to adore.”

“Whoa, babies? Now we're talking about babies? Slow down, Mom, let's not get ahead of ourselves here.”

“I know, I know, but the way you look at her,” she said, tossing me a smile. “I could see it in your eyes last night when you showed up here with her. You care, you were afraid for her, I've never seen you so worried about someone else like that. You deserve a second chance, Porter, in every way possible; with me, with Franco, with yourself. Don't let Zander's death stop you from moving forward, you deserve better than this life.”

“I don't know what to say.” His mouth was open, eyes lost and confused, happy and excited.

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“Yes you do.” Smirking, his mother pushed his shoulder lightly.

“Thanks, Mom.”

“There it is.” Standing up, she kissed the top of his head. “I want you two to stay here until Emery is all better, then you can go where the wind takes you.”

Leaving us alone, Porter turned to face me, his lips taut. Wrapping an arm around my back, he rubbed my side tenderly. “I don't know what to think, I'm not sure what to do now.”

“What is there to think about? She's giving you an out, why wouldn't you take it?”

“Because I'm not done here.” Massaging his temple, he pursed his lips, dropping his head into his chest. “I set out to end it, I made a promise to my brother the day we buried him. I can't break my promise, and I don't want to spend the rest of my life sleeping with one eye open. And I don't want that for you either.”

“What I decide to do, is my choice, it doesn't fall on you.” Lifting my hand to his chin, I forced his eyes to mine. “Sometimes we have to make choices, I get that. But this isn't a choice you have to make, it's not a promise that has to be fulfilled. You said you changed, you said you weren't that man anymore. . .” Kissing him on the cheek, I ran the pad of my thumb over his bottom lip. “So don't be that man, it won't bring your brother back.”

* * * *

The next two weeks were a combination of sleeping, eating, and fucking any chance we had. I felt like a damn teenager, strung out on this man, unable to get enough of him.

What we didn't do was talk anymore about what was running through his head and the choice he thought he had dangling in front of his face.

He didn't want to talk about it, he kept saying he still had time to figure it out. But every day I grew stronger, I could move easier, and that meant our time was coming to an end here.

Franco had been a ghost in the house. I had seen him a few times, but he'd hang his head and go the other way. He hadn't said one word to Porter since their fight, and I wasn't sure where I stood with him.

I had called work after the second day here, explaining to them there had been a family emergency and I needed to take some time off. Della was a bit more frantic, but I told her I had lost my phone after leaving the club and that I had to go out of town for a few awhile for work. I expected her to start asking me a gazillion different questions about when I was coming back and why I had to go for so long.

But she didn't ask me a damn thing. Della believed my little story because why would she think I had any reason to lie to her?

Maybe I am better at this lying thing than I thought.

I felt weird not telling my best friend the truth, and in the same breath, I was happy she wasn't asking me a barrage of questions I might not be able to answer. I would tell her the truth eventually, just not yet, not until things settled.

Porter's nose nuzzled into my hair as his arm fell over my chest. "I can't get enough

of you,” he said, whispering against my head. His finger circled my breast, coaxing my nipple into a stiff peak. “I could spend every single day like this.”

Arching my back, I pushed my ass into his morning wood, feeling the thick muscle as it jerked. “Me too,” I said, shamelessly rubbing his cock between my ass cheeks.

The sexiest growl spilled over the back of my neck as he bit me with vigor. “Someone is ready for a little morning cock.” Shifting his hips, he ground in harder, pushing his firm erection against my asshole. “I just didn't realize you liked anal.”

“You never asked,” I said playfully, stroking his dick as I clenched my cheeks around his shaft. The soft cotton of his boxers folded over his length as I dry fucked his muscle until he moaned like he was going to come in his briefs.

His hand swept across my chest, cupping my tit, and pulling me closer against his body. It felt like we couldn't get close enough, like no matter how much of our skin was touching, it just wasn't good enough. His pecs flexed against my back, and a wave of arousal wildly spread over my body, making me feel numb to everything else.

I couldn't focus on anything but him. His cock moved up and down, fucking my ass cheeks like he'd never had sex before. He seemed almost feral, like an animal in heat with only one goal in mind.

We hadn't been as careful as we should, neither one of us had really thought of, or mentioned protection since that first time. But it hadn't really crossed my mind, because I couldn't think straight when he held me like that, I couldn't grasp reality when he touched me like I was the only woman he had ever been with.

I'm not the only one. . .

It would be naive of me to expect that this man had been a virgin before we hooked up. His hands knew my body too well, his finger knew my pussy too well. His lips and cock, they knew just how to draw out my moans and enhance my pleasure.

No virgin would have the ability to do that. Porter was experienced, and that experience showed. A twinge of jealousy hit my heart, twisting it into a knot for a short time, but I pushed the thought away.

It didn't matter what his past looked like, because now he was mine. That was all that mattered, Porter was my man, and that was how it was going to stay.

“Do you want that, Princess?” he asked, twisting and plucking my nipple.

Biting my lip, I decided not to give him the satisfaction of an answer. Slowly, I peeled my panties down my legs, kicking them off as if they meant nothing. Porter grunted, softly dragging his lips over the back of my neck.

“I'm going to take that as a yes.” Slipping his hand down the center of my chest, he dipped a finger in my pussy. “You're fucking soaked.” The sharp edges of his teeth pierced my shoulder, forcing a delicate coo from my lips. “God, I fucking love that.”

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Wetting his fingers, he used my juice to coat my asshole, drawing salacious circles around the tight entrance. I was completely gone at that point, loose and relaxed, ready to succumb to this man.

If he wanted my ass, he could have it. If he wanted to fuck me until my legs went numb and my voice went soundless, he could do that. I was at his mercy, charged and willing to explore his sexual prowess.

Placing his palm on my belly, the tip of his cock tempted my asshole, pushing in just a little, then pulling away swiftly. “Have you done this before?” he asked, pressing against my puckered hole again and massaging it softly.

“No,” I said through heavy breaths, lifting my arm above my head and wrapping his neck.

“I’ll be gentle, I’ll take my time.” His crown popped inside my ass and a slight burn radiated around my behind, shooting through my thighs. Porter stilled his hips, just letting the head of his dick rest inside me. “And I’ll make you come so fucking hard.”

Moving his hand up over my chest, he curled it around my throat. His fingers tightened around my neck, thumb skimming over the vein and under my jaw. My mind was a total mess of need and sexual desire, I couldn't think of anything but slamming back just to end the torture.

I wanted to come, I needed to come, I had to come. My muscles were tensed, shaking and trembling as I waited for him to keep going.

“Why are you stopping?” I asked, scratching the back of his scalp with my nails.

Porter chuckled, a devious, dirty chuckle as he kissed the base of my neck. “Patience, Princess. If I move too quickly, this won't be fun for you. I need to work you, I need to make your ass crave me as badly as your pussy wants me.”

Clenching around his engorged crown, I wiggled my hips. “What if I don't want to be patient?” Tearing at his roots, I pushed my ass back, taking another inch of his dick. The burn returned, and I hissed, not expecting it.

“See, I don't want to hurt you. Let me do this, I'll make it so good you'll come over and over and you won't be able to stop.” His hand moved to cup my pussy, finger flicking my clit.

“Is that right?” My heart skipped, and a rush of tingles coursed through my belly and down my legs, making my toes curl.

“That's right.” Licking the shell of my ear, he went deeper with his cock as his hand worked my clit.

The burn was gone, and all I was left with was a buzzing sensation as he worked my sex. Moaning, I rocked my waist, grinding mindlessly against his hand. Porter started to thrust, pulling back to his ridge and gliding back in with ease.

The tip of his cock was hitting a spot inside and I couldn't stop myself from letting out a loud moan. My lungs struggled to take in air as his hips piston and each thrust speared that special place inside my ass.

Closing my eyes, I rode his hand as he fucked me, building the orgasm up, only to have him slap it down before it stole me away.

“Uh, uh,” he tisked, splitting two fingers around my pussy lips and removing his touch from my clit. “Not yet, not until I'm ready.”

Tipping my head back, I tucked myself under his chin, groaning with frustration. “You're mean, that's not right at all.”

“If you come now, then this won't feel as good. I want to come with you, I want to feel your clit as it spills over my hand and I blow my load in your ass.”

“Fuck, you're dirty.” The words came out on nothing but air as I grounded my ass down on his cock. “I want to feel you come in me. I want to feel your cock pulse as you fill me up.”

Porter let out a savage grunt, curling his arm up under mine, and holding my shoulder. Using his other hand, he stroked my clit with the pads of his fingers, sending wave after wave of ecstasy through my muscles.

He wanted me to wait, he wanted us to come together, but if he didn't come soon, there wouldn't be anything I could do to stop myself.

His furry base tickled my ass cheeks as he plowed deep, so deep I could feel him hit the entrance of my pussy from inside. Faster and faster his finger worked my swollen nub, and I couldn't stop.

The orgasm was right there, it came and it took me, it surged through my veins and caused my lungs to hold still. I didn't inhale, I didn't exhale, I just held my breath until I felt his cock begin to throb.

Porter stopped moving, his body hard as stone as his dick exploded, spilling hot come deep into my ass. My body was warm, tingling all over, and I didn't want to move.

Our legs were tangled, knotted in such a way that you couldn't tell whose leg was whose. Our breathing was in sync, chests rising and falling in unison as he snuggled his face into my hair.

“I don't know what to do, Emery. I just don't know now.” Holding me close, he squeezed me tight. “I don't want to risk my life anymore, but I don't know how to walk away.”

Unfurling himself from my back, Porter pushed on my shoulder, rolling me over so he could look at me. His eyes were serious, hardening as he stared down. “Before you, the only thing on my mind was killing those men. But now, now you're all I can think about. I know it's not worth it, and you're right, nothing will bring back my brother. . .” Pausing, the tips of his fingers tickled across my forehead, tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “My life wasn't important, it meant nothing to me if I died trying to fix what I broke.”

I didn't speak, I just let him say what he needed to. My mouth was closed, my eyes were full, listening as intently as my ears.

“But then I found you and everything changed.”

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He said it with such conviction. He said it without any hesitation in his voice or uncertainty in his tone.

He said it and he meant it.

“Somehow we found each other.” Lifting my hand to his face, I cupped his cheek, running my thumb over the hard curve of his jaw.

And as our voices went soundless and the only noise around us was the faint beat of our hearts, I knew that together we found something special.

We found love in this fucked up world.

I've fallen in love with a killer.

Chapter Thirteen

Porter

Standing in front of the picture window, I looked out at the trees surrounding my mother's new home. It would have been nice to grow up in a place like this. And for a second I was sad that I never had the chance.

How different would shit be if I had spent my childhood running around in the woods, instead of running around in the streets?

I wouldn't be this way.

Not like this.

No one else was home except for Emery and myself, my mother and Franco had taken off at some point; which was still dangerous for them to do. Moving an hour out of the city was nothing.

I had tried to convince them when everything fell apart to get the hell out of the state. They refused, believing that it would all blow over and their lives would return to normal. There was nothing I could do to change their minds, neither one believed it could be as bad as I was saying.

Look where we are now.

They had been lucky so far that Disesto's men hadn't found them. Then again, maybe I was wrong. For all I knew the crew was watching from a distance, waiting for the green light.

Emery stepped up behind me, wrapping her thin arms around my stomach. "What are we doing today? I feel pretty good, better than I have in a long while. Want to go for a hike or something?"

"A hike?" Twisting around, I hugged her back, looking down onto her beautiful face. She was smiling up at me, her gaze youthful and excited as if we were just two people living normal lives. "I don't think that's a good idea, not yet."

"Yeah, I figured, but I wanted to ask anyway." Laying her head on my chest, I brushed my fingers through her hair, untangling the small knots. "Maybe one day," she said, whispering quietly, and rubbing her cheek against my shirt.

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Kissing the top of her head, I could smell the lavender shampoo, so I took another deeper breath. I wanted to hold onto that scent, embed it in my brain so I never forgot this moment.

This was one of the good times, the calm before the storm. I knew our time together was limited, that keeping her for myself or setting her free was a choice I'd have to make.

As much as I wanted to have her by my side, the danger was imminent. I couldn't knowingly hold onto her while my head was on a chopping block. It wasn't fair to her at all.

Staying in this place meant certain death for me. But running away meant never being able to stop. We'd have to run forever, hoping that we could outlive the legacy my name had left us with.

Traitor, miscreant, disloyal. . .the list that sealed my fate goes on and on in their eyes. They would never stop looking for me, not ever.

Looking back out the window, I tried to stare through the trees and see just how many miles there were between us and the city.

“You know what, let's do it.”

“Really?” she asked, rubbing my back and letting her eyes settle on my face. Her big blue eyes glistened like the ocean, sparkling under the evening sun. “Are you sure?” The tone in her voice was sharp, and I knew she was aware now of what was waiting

for us outside our small protected oasis.

Fuck it. What's life if you can't live it?

“Yeah, really. You want to go for a hike, and I want to do anything to make you happy.” Holding her tighter, I placed my chin on the top of her head. “Your happiness is all I care about.”

A giddy squeal escaped her lips, high-pitched and ecstatic. “Let's go, let's get out of here for a bit. Do you think your mom has any sneakers I can borrow?”

“I'm sure she does, the woman loved shoes just as much as she loved her kids.” Tangling my fingers in hers, I led her up to my parents room. “They'd be in here.” Sliding the closet door open, I rummaged around the floor, and tugged out a pair of sneakers. “Here, try these.”

Emery slipped her foot inside and grinned. “These will work.”

The tall grass at the edge of the treeline tickled against my ankles. Staring into the wooded shadows, I kept my guard up and my ears open. I wasn't an outdoor kind of guy, but the idea of roaming freely, of walking without borders or fences caging me in, felt good.

I hadn't felt this free in years. I had been living with unwritten rules placed on my shoulders by a man who didn't give a fuck about what happened to me. His word was law, his orders the only task you ever needed to heed.

I was done living for someone else.

Reaching out to grab her hand, I squeezed. This woman had given me so much in such a short time. She showed me what it meant to feel, to breathe, to need nothing

more than to have her as mine.

“Which way should we go?” I asked, glancing left and right.

“I don't know, have you ever been in these woods before?”

“Nope.” Smirking, I tightened my grip on her hand and started forward. “Let's hope my sense of direction is as good as I think it is.”

“That's comforting,” Emery said with a chuckle.

Our feet crunched over dead leaves and dry sticks, crackling and popping like fireworks. The silence was unworldly, it was a quiet I didn't think I could ever get used to.

After an entire lifetime of listening to vehicles driving into all hours of the night, people and their voices that were carried through the air like white noise, it was almost unsettling.

The wind was blowing, rustling the tree limbs overhead. I could hear birds chirping around us and small critters as they scampered away when we got too close.

“So, tell me something about yourself, Emery Flores.” Stopping at a huge fallen down tree, I wrapped my arms around her stomach and lifted her up. “Where did you grow up?”

Grunting lightly, she pulled her legs over the top and dropped onto the other side. “I actually spent a large part of my childhood in Maryland. But I had to move here when I turned fifteen to live with my grandma.”

“Was that because—”

“Yeah,” she said quickly, cutting me off. “It was fine though, my grandma was really nice.”

Hopping over the log, I let out a tender huff of air as I hit the soft the ground on the other side. “Is she. . .” My words trickled off, and I tried to stop myself before I sounded inconsiderate of her past.

Death was a normal thing for me in my life, and because of that, I often forgot that most people hated even talking about it.

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“No, she's not, she's just. . . old.” Her lips folded in the prettiest smile as she dipped her head into her chest. Bending down, Emery picked up a leaf that looked charred. Twisting the tiny stem between her fingers, she peered at the leaf as she spoke. “She lives in a nursing home now, I couldn't keep taking care of her anymore.”

“Oh, wow, that must have been hard.”

“Hard—no, draining—yes. She has dementia, and it got to the point I couldn't leave her alone without worrying that she might hurt herself.” Dropping the leaf, she watched it float back to the ground. “What's hard about it is that she doesn't recognize me anymore.”

I watched her body as she wilted. Her shoulders rolled forward, eyes dulling and hurting at the loss of someone who was still here. Her grandmother was still alive, but in a way, she was already gone.

There were no words for me to say to her that would comfort whatever sadness she was feeling. Her parents were gone and the woman who had cared for her was mentally unaware of the one person who loved her more than anything.

“Emery, what do you want?”

“What?” she asked, her eyes popping wide, the blue shading over like a lake at night.

“From me, what do you want?”

“I. . . I don't know, Porter.” Stepping backwards, she leaned against the tree stump. “I

don't know what you want me to say.”

Lumbering forward, I hovered over her, allowing my presence to rock her nerves. “I want you to tell me the truth, to say the first thing that comes in your head when I ask.” Swooping my hand in, I rested my palm against her cheek and dug my fingers into her hair. “Let me ask you again. What do you want from me, from this, what do you want?”

My eyes were locked on hers, refusing to let her look away. Her lips opened slightly as if she was ready to speak, but she didn't say a word.

I could see it in her eyes that she had an answer, but I didn't understand why she just wouldn't spit it out.

“Don't be afraid to be honest, just tell me.”

“That's the problem, I really don't know. It's all so confusing, and I don't know how to make sense of it.”

Smiling, my lids hooded and I held her face so she couldn't do anything but look up. “Let me tell you what I want then.” Licking my lips, I inched closer, bringing my chest to hers. A shiver scaled her body, the tremor running through my palm and shaking my muscles. “I want you, that's it. I want us, I want to feel this fire in my gut every damn day, and I don't want to ever let it go.”

Emery's eyes glazed over as her stare deepened. She was looking at me, but not just looking at me, she was seeing into me. Her thick, long lashes fanned her lids as she blinked and her lips sat partially open.

I wanted to kiss her, but I wanted to hear her answer first. I had to know what she was thinking, what was running through that pretty little head of hers.

“What do you want, Emery?” Thumbing her jaw, her skin was clammy and warm under my touch. “Just say what you're thinking so I can hear it.”

“I love you.”

Her words crashed against my chest, tearing my heart open and sealing it shut. I didn't expect that, I never thought she would hit me with such a violent force. Stunned, I stood quiet, just letting those three words sink in.

She loves me. . .

Could she really mean that?

“I. . . I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that.” Taking a firm step to the side, she pulled away from me, pushing my hands off her face. “It's crazy, I know. We know almost nothing about each other, we met under circumstances that are definitely not ideal and not the foundation for a strong relationship. You probably think I'm insane or one of those girls that are super clingy, but the truth is I'm not. I avoid relationships like the plague, I hate the idea of being in a relationship at all. I don't know what the hell I was thinking—”

“Stop,” I said firmly, holding up my hand. “Just stop.”

Emery dug her toe into the soft ground beneath her feet, twining her fingers together in front of her waist. She wouldn't look up at me, simply staring at nothing with wide open eyes.

“Do you mean it?” Taking a long step, I grabbed her elbow and drew circles over her skin. “When you said it, did you feel it?”

Nodding, she still wouldn't look up at me. “I can't explain it, Porter, it's just there.”

“I feel it too.” Smiling, I pinched her chin between my fingers and lifted her face up.
“You're not crazy, not if I feel the same thing as you.”

“You do?” Her eyes held this softness, this allure that I could fall into, that I could live in if she would let me.

“I love you, Emery.” The words came out easier than I expected. I had felt it since day one, from the first time I laid eyes on her. But I never actually thought I'd speak them out loud. “That's all we need, the rest will come in time.”

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Placing her hand over mine, she climbed up on her toes and kissed me. There was nothing around us, and that quiet that made me uncomfortable before, now encased us like a bubble, sealing us off from the rest of the world.

Her breath was my breath, her heart was my heart. I knew what I had to do now.

Between kisses and inhales, I spoke quietly into her mouth. “I’m not doing it, I won’t risk myself another second. Will you come with me?”

Pushing away, Emery’s eyes drifted around my face. “Come where?”

“Wherever the wind takes us. Come with me, we can leave tonight.”

“Are you serious? I thought you wanted—”

Silencing her with another kiss, I threw my arm around her waist. “What I wanted doesn’t matter. You were right, it won’t bring Zander back. But what I have, that’s worth living for—you’re worth living for.”

Twisting her on her heels, I walked her back against the giant fallen tree. Her hands swept up and trapped my face, lips greedily stealing kisses. Her breathing was ragged and heavy as a delicate moan spilled out from the back of her throat.

There were no more words left for us to say. Right then all we had were the emotions draining us to the core.

Slipping her hand down my chest, Emery grabbed my swelling cock. Her fingers

stroked the firm muscle, tender and hard, savage and with patience. She was a musician, plucking the strings that worked my heart.

Growling, I couldn't stop myself from wanting to burn our love into the woods around us. Raking my fingers through her hair, I wrapped a thick lock around my palm and tugged her head back.

“Mm,” she moaned, sucking in a sharp rush of air. Biting her bottom lip, she palmed my cock still hidden under my jeans. “You like when I touch you, don't you?”

“Fuck yeah I do. Can't you tell?” Thrusting my hips into her hand, my cock jerked hard. “You do this to me, you make me so fucking hard it hurts.”

I felt like a wild beast, lost in the forest, stumbling upon the last woman on earth. I was going to take her here, just like this, with nature surrounding us like a warm blanket.

Feverishly, I flipped Emery onto her stomach, bending her body over the tree. The curve of the wood made her ass perch up, giving me the perfect position to fuck her.

With a hand in her hair, I worked her pants down her legs. I half expected her to stop me, to tell me that she didn't want to do it out here like this. But she never uttered a word in protest. Her hips swayed, her eyes snapped shut, and her fingers clutched the thick cracks in the bark.

Spreading her legs with my knee, I popped the button on my jeans and freed my cock. Emery groaned with anticipation as she pushed her ass up higher, ready to take my dick deep and hard.

The sun was shining down on us, my skin hot and sweaty as I got lost in my woman. She had told me she loved me. She had said the words I never expected to hear after

all I had put her through. She had been broken, she had been exposed to the worse kind of people in this world.

And here she was, baring it all, opening her heart to a soldier from hell.

Slamming my cock inside her with one quick thrust, Emery let out a moan that sent a quiver down my spine. Her pussy was wet, swallowing my length as if she couldn't live without it.

We made love for the first time. Not sex, not a one night stand where years later you'd forget their name. It was love, real love.

Laying over her back, I whispered into her ear. "I'll always love you, you saved me, Emery, in more ways than you'll ever realize."

Her hand dug through my hair, scraping my scalp as she looked at me over her shoulder. She didn't need to say anything for me to know I had done the same for her.

I saved her, and I would continue saving her for the rest of my life. It didn't matter where we went or what place we ended up. It didn't matter who might come looking for us, I would always be there to protect her.

She was worth the risk of running away, because I knew that no matter what, home would always be wherever she was.

Chapter Fourteen

Porter

Opening the door, I fanned out my arm for Emery to go in first. Stopping for a second, I looked back at the woods where we had just been and smiled.

I'll never look at trees the same again.

There was this moment of peace, a feeling like nothing bad could ever happen to us. That would never be true, and I knew that. But right then, all of that; my past, the uncertainty of our future, it didn't matter.

Because I was happy.

“Porter!”

Her scream sent my heart into my throat, making me react without thinking. Running into the house, I saw a man holding Emery around the neck with a gun to her temple.

At first I couldn't see his face or any distinguishing features. I saw the gun, I saw the fear in Emery's eyes, I saw my blood as it boiled and turned everything around me red.

“Long time no see.”

I knew this man, and the realization killed me inside. I had drinks with him and

dinner at his home, we had shared a few dirty laughs and once considered each other family. Dean Finch, a guy who was just like me. Or should I say, who I used to be like?

He was an assassin, a lethal set of hands with only one job; to kill.

That was all we had to do. We were given orders, we were never told why anyone had to die, and we never asked questions.

Now he was here, holding a gun to my woman's head, his eyes black as tar with death in his pupils. I felt the rage twist my insides, making my heart slam inside my chest like a trapped raven, ready to escape and claw his eyes out of his fucking head.

How dare you put a hand on my girl!

My eyes met Emery's and she looked so terrified. I wanted to rush over to her and take her in my arms, whispering to her that everything would be alright.

And it killed me that I couldn't do that. With my hands up, palms facing out, I started to side step to my right. Like a fucking idiot, I had left my gun upstairs. I was completely defenseless, like child on their own.

I'm not thinking straight, I'm not using my fucking head. . .

I fucked up again.

This woman had my head in knots, tied up so tight that I had forgotten the one weapon I never left home without.

Dean smiled at me, shoving the gun harder into Emery's temple. "Don't try a fucking thing or I'll blow her brains out right here."

“Why? She has nothing to do with this, just let her go.” My heart ached to see her like that. Her eyes frozen on my face, begging and pleading for me to take charge, to be the alpha on top.

But I couldn't do a damn thing. He had the upper hand, and it tore my insides into shreds. I was suppose to protect her, I was suppose to keep her safe.

Laughing, he tilted his head into her hair and inhaled a long breath. “Tell me you don't actually believe what you're saying. You have your head in the fucking clouds man? You haven't been gone that long to forget how this works. Leave no witnesses, not a single fucking one. . .” Pausing, he smirked, eye's glistening like he was enjoying everything about this. “Oh wait, you can't do that because you have no fucking balls. Should I check her purse? Is that where you left them?”

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“Fuck you, Dean.” Growling, my fists balled at my sides, ready to take the risk and charge him. I wanted to tear his fucking head off, make him regret ever stepping foot in this house. “I’m going to fucking kill you.”

The last hitman that Marcos sent out for me didn't make it back alive, neither did Frankie at the club. But I was prepared for them, I wasn't prepared for this and I should have been.

This took me by surprise. In the back of my mind I knew no place was really safe, that eventually the wrong person would see me and it would get back to Marcos. But my guard had been down, my head had been in the clouds. And the one person I would die to protect had a fucking gun to her head.

This wasn't suppose to happen!

I'm suppose to protect her!

I'm suppose to keep her safe!

Baring my teeth, my nails dug into the center of my palms, feet trembling, ready to take off in his direction. “You're a fucking dead man.”

I didn't even have the chance to step forward. A hard crack ricocheted through my skull and the room around me went black.

Time had stopped. There were no dreams, no thoughts, no pain.

There was only silence.

I had lost.

Chapter Fifteen

Emery

With my hands tied in front of my waist, I leaned against the wall and dropped to my haunches. The room was small, but it didn't look much different from any other room I had ever been in. It looked normal.

There weren't any torture devices hanging from the ceiling, or weird chairs that looked like they would split you apart if someone kept turning the wheel.

I didn't know why I expected to find such things in this place, maybe I had just seen too many movies.

There was a mahogany colored leather couch against the far wall, and a coffee table littered with magazines and crossword puzzles. A large oval rug was on the floor under the table, its spiral cords a mixture of sapphire blue and opal white.

The walls were bare, but the tan paint had a texture to it. Long swooping swirls cascaded down behind the couch, fanning out on the lower half of the walls. If I wasn't here by force, I'd probably want to know who helped design the room.

Hanging my head between my legs, I clutched the back of my skull. So far, no one had actually hurt me. The man with the gun had been a little rough when he dragged me from the house, but nothing I couldn't handle.

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He made it clear that he'd shoot Porter without a second thought if I didn't cooperate. So I listened, I followed orders so this asshole wouldn't hurt the only person I've ever loved.

There had been a second man hidden in the pantry, Porter didn't stand a chance. After he knocked him out cold, Dean dragged me to a car they had parked in a remote clearing in the woods and stuffed me in the trunk.

Porter's alive, that's all that matter.

“I see you prefer the floor to the couch. I'm not sure what that says about you.” A man's voice sliced through the air, forcing my head up. Smiling through thin lips, he asked, “Do you know who I am?”

My heart began to race as anxiety filled my veins. This man was too confident to just be some jerk taking orders.

This must be the guy in charge.

Shaking my head, I snarled. “No, should I?”

“I suppose not, but you will now. Marcos Disesto,” he said, resting a hand on his chest. “And you must be Emery.” His feet clicked against the hardwood floor as he walked through the room. “Porter finally had something that made all of the shit he put me through worth while.”

Swallowing hard, I didn't say a word. I let him talk, he looked like a man who

enjoyed hearing himself.

Tall and slender, his hair was bright blond and his eyes were green as grass. He was dressed in a charcoal gray suit, with shiny black shoes that looked like they were made from some sort of snake skin.

“I run things around here, and your boyfriend, well he owes me for fucking shit up. He cost me time, money, and my fucking reputation. He made some really big fucking mistakes, he had to pay for them.”

“How is that my problem?” Arching a hard brow, I glared down the bridge of my nose. “I have nothing to do with any of that.”

“Didn't you hear me? Porter owes me.”

“What did he do?” Flopping down onto my ass, I stretched out my legs. “What could have happened that you'd go out of your way just to hurt him?”

“You mean he didn't tell you who he is?”

“He told me about his past. I know who he used to be.”

Standing above me, the man rested his arms behind his back. “Used to be?” Looming over me, his body cast a shadow over my face. “Porter is a killer, he killed an entire fucking family. Women, children, it doesn't make a difference to him. He's a cold-blooded killer, and he always will be. There is no used to be, you're in this till the day you die. Porter wanted out, so he should be dead.”

Flaring my nostrils, my lids thinned. “Is that suppose to scare me? I don't believe a fucking word out of your mouth. He's not a killer anymore, and he wouldn't kill innocent people.”

He could try and frighten me all he wanted to. It wouldn't matter what he said, nothing out of his mouth was true. Porter had told me killed men, but did I think he could kill kids? Not a chance in hell.

“You're a fucking liar, he wouldn't do what you're saying.” Shaking my head, my lips pursed tight.

“No?” Stepping to the coffee table, he sifted through some papers and pulled one out. Holding it up in front of his face, he started reading. “Police are putting out a massive manhunt for Porter Blaise. He's wanted in connection with the deaths of two adults and two children.” Throwing the newspaper across the room at me, it floated down, landing on the floor at my feet. “Here, read it for yourself.”

The words were there in black and white, big and bold. I couldn't even find the strength to reach out and touch it.

No, he wouldn't do that.

Yes, he's killed people, but a whole family? It's not possible.

“It's not true, I don't believe it.”

Desperately, I wanted to force myself to believe my own words. He had been too kind to me for him to be that evil. Porter couldn't do that. . .

Could he?

Tipping his head back, he laughed hard. “It's all right there, but it doesn't matter what you believe, because now you belong to me.”

Pinching my lips, I snapped. “Fuck you, I don't belong to you. Porter's going to come

for me, he won't let you keep me here.”

“Porter is dead, sweetheart.”

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My heart stopped, there was no beat, no movement, just silence.

“You're lying.” I said the words before I had time to really challenge him. The guy that took me there said if I listened they wouldn't shoot him. That they would just walk away and leave him on the floor.

And you believed him?!

How fucking stupid are you?!

“I'm not.” Taking a step back, he stalked across the room and sat down on the couch. The leather squeaked as he lifted his leg to rest it on his knee and leaned back, letting his hands settle by his sides. “I wouldn't lie about something that makes me so happy. I've wanted him for a long time, and now I got him.”

Tears filled my eyes, turning the surface to glass. I could feel the water as it balanced on the edge of my lids, ready to drop if I made any sudden move.

“Awe, are you going to cry?” he asked with a sick smile on his face. “Go on, you can cry, I won't stop you.”

“What did they do to him?” It was a question I wasn't sure I wanted an answer to. I wanted to know what had happened, but the truth could break me apart.

Had they shot him, had they ended his life quick and painlessly?

Or did he suffer?

I didn't want to think about it, but it gnawed at my insides, making me feel ill. We didn't drive off right away after they put me in the trunk, and that small frame of time, those few minutes where the world was quiet and I was all alone, that would have been enough to silence Porter forever.

“Porter got what he had coming to him, that's all that matters.”

My entire life flashed before my eyes. It had been one horrible thing after another. The only good that had come from any of this was meeting Porter.

I didn't care if he was considered a bad guy. I didn't give a shit if he had a past that was riddled with death and destruction.

Because I had fallen in love with a different man. I had fallen for the man who tended to my wounds, who swept me off my feet and made me feel whole.

He had stolen my heart and made it his.

Even if he was gone, my heart would belong to him.

There was nothing this man could ever do or say to change that.

Chapter Sixteen

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Porter

Aloud voice yelled in my ear, familiar and firm; it was my father. "Porter, wake up!" Slowly, my eyes began to open, but I couldn't see his face.

Where is he? I know I heard him.

He wasn't there, it wasn't even possible for him to actually have been there in the first place. That's happened to me a few times over the years, where I thought I saw him in a crowd or heard his voice in my head.

When it happened the first time, I was four years old and it was a year after he had passed. My mother and I were at the St. Patrick's Day parade and I thought I had seen him walking past us. I called out to him, abandoning my mother to chase him down.

It wasn't him.

I remember crying, I remember feeling like all my hope had been crushed and I had lost him all over again. My mother swept me in her arms, hugging me tightly and brushing her hand down over my hair.

That was the last memory I had of crying, I hadn't shed a tear in sadness since.

Shaking my head, I grabbed my temples and groaned. The worst headache I had ever felt was hitting me right then and I couldn't understand where the hell it came from.

My lungs burned as I tried to breathe in air that was hot as fire. Coughing hard, I

rolled onto my back, swallowing the taste of ash and metal. Touching the back of my head, I pulled my fingers away to find them covered in blood.

What the hell happened?

An intense pinging pierced my ears as I pushed myself up off the floor and sucked in another wave of burning oxygen. Blinking rapidly, the air was smokey and gray. A thick haze blanketed the kitchen, so I rubbed my eyes to try and make it go away.

I wanted to make sense of what was happening. My thoughts were a mess of past and present, hidden memories and lost images.

Emery. . . Where's Emery?

Is she still here?

I could picture Dean's face, another soldier just like me, sent here by the boss to remove a problem. His eyes, his gun, the fear in Emery's stare, it all glowed bright inside my mind.

How the fuck did he find me? How did they know we were here?

Crackling and snapping filtered into my ears, forcing my brain to wake up and see what was going on around me.

There's a fire! The house is on fire!

Flipping onto my hands and knees, I could see the blaze as it crawled across the ceiling and down the walls. Scrambling on all fours, I started to yell.

“Emery! Emery!”

There was no answer. I wanted to hear her voice so bad, to have her call for me so I knew she was alright. But the house was silent except for the voice of living flames as they cackled with delight. Walls screamed as they turned black, paint melted as it was eaten away from the heat.

Where is she?! I have to find her!

I tried to crawl into the living room, but the fire was too much. I couldn't make it, not if I wanted to live and find my girl. I had no choice but to try and get outside.

Feeling the floor, I used the tiles to guide me to the back door. Yanking the handle down hard, the door swung open, exposing the fire to hoards of fresh air. A loud whoosh whisked past my ears, and I looked up to see the fire snaking out the door and up the side of the house.

“Fuck!” I yelled, tumbling out the doorway and onto the patio. “Emery!” Turning over, I looked up at the house, screaming at the top of my lungs. “Emery!”

The squeal of brakes made me jerk my head towards the driveway. My stepfather's car slammed to a halt, and my mother jumped out to run to my side.

“Porter! Oh my God, Porter are you okay!?” Dropping to my side, she hoisted me to my feet and helped carry me away from the house. Positioning me against the hood of the car, she asked, “Where's Emery? Is she still inside?”

“I . . . I don't know.” My voice was harsh and scratchy as I tried to breathe. “She didn't answer me when I called for her, I'm not sure where she is.” Sucking in huge gulps of air, I tried to catch my breath.

The pressure on my chest was insane. I could barely breathe, it felt like I had just drank an entire glass of hot powder. My throat was dry as fuck, my lungs felt like

they had shriveled up into nothing. It didn't matter how much I breathed in, I was struggling to find the strength I needed to go back inside.

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“Well she's not out here, where else could she be?!” Frantically, my mother turned and screamed at Franco. “Emery might still be inside! Call the fire department!”

“I'm going back in to look for her!” Stumbling forward, I clutched my head, trying to focus my vision.

“No, Porter! You can't!” my mother screamed, lashing out and snagging my arm to stop me.

“She's not in there,” Franco said, his tone dry and emotionless.

Flicking my eyes over my shoulder, I watched him as his hands twisted back and forth against the steering wheel, his gaze locked on the house.

My mother stopped moving, her eyes zeroing in on her husband. “How would you know that?” she asked, warily concerned at how he sounded so sure.

“She's just not.” Lifting his eyes to mine, I was met with a dead, cold stare.

“How. Would. You. Know. That?” Her voice was direct and firm. “Franco, answer me.” Scanning his face, she looked panicked and afraid of what he would say next.

Hanging his head, he rested his forehead on the steering wheel. “Because that wasn't his plan.”

“What the hell does that mean?!” My mother went into a rage, throwing her arms around as she spoke. “What do you know about this?! What did you do?!”

Shrugging his shoulders, he kept his face down. “I gave him what he wanted, but it doesn't look like they did what they said they would.”

“You—you did this?” Her jaw hung open as her arms fell weightlessly by her sides. “You gave them our son?”

“Your son. They already took mine, remember?”

Pressing my palm into the hood of the car, I stumbled over to his door. I didn't care that it felt like my chest was going to explode while I suffocated inside, this man had betrayed his family—he had betrayed my mother.

Reaching in through the window, I curled my fingers around the collar of his shirt and yanked him halfway out the opening. Pulling my fist back, I let it go, hitting him square in the jaw.

“Where is she?!” I barked, ready to hit him again. Even if he gave me the answer I was looking for, I wasn't sure I'd be able to control my anger anyway and stop myself from beating the shit out of him. I could feel my veins as they thickened and my heart as it turned to concrete.

“I don't know.”

Crack!

“Where did they take her?!”

“I don't know, Porter!”

Thud!

“Tell me what you did! Who did you talk to?!”

“Who do you think?” Chuckling lightly, he licked the blood off his lips. “I wanted this done for good, Porter, I wanted it to really be over. So I gave them the only thing they wanted to begin with. I gave them you!”

Smack! Crack!

Hitting him over and over, my knuckles turned raw, but I didn't care. I had to find her, I had to get her back. Emery was the only thing that mattered to me. And now she was in the hands of a vile, evil creature who would destroy her very existence.

“Tell me everything, I want to know what the fuck you said.” My voice was deep and hollow. I already hated this man, now I wanted to kill him myself.

“It's not that complicated, it's pretty simple actually. I went to Marcos, he was ready to kill me where I stood, and I thought he was going to. But when I told him I had what he wanted, and that you had a really pretty girl with you too, he was more than interested to hear me out. I told him where he'd find you, and I expected to come home today to find you both gone. Then your mother and I could have gone back to living our normal lives. It was supposed to be over.”

“Normal lives?! Are you fucking kidding me, Franco?!” My mother squealed as she threw herself forward, pushing me to the side, and pinching his cheeks in her hand. “How could you do this?!”

“I just wanted everything to go back to the way it was, that was it. I didn't know how to do it any other way!”

Throwing his face, my mother raked her fingers through her hair and snapped a hand to her hip as she stalked in a tight circle. “I can't believe you, I can't believe you'd do

this to us.”

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“He thinks I'm dead now?” I said it as more of a question to myself than to Franco. This could work in my favor, it could give me the upper hand.

If Marcos thought I was dead, he wouldn't be expecting me to show up. His guard would be down, his doors exposed and open to me. I could be a ghost, a shadow that could kill him without anyone seeing me coming.

Pointing at my mother, I shouted at her. “Go get some rope from the shed!”

She didn't ask me why, she didn't question me at all. My mother took off running without giving me any shit about where my head was going.

“Porter, you have to understand—” Franco started to say, until I hit him again in the throat, causing him to gag and cough.

“You can shut the fuck up! I understand, Franco, I always have. You don't give a shit about me or my mother, all you care about is yourself. I get that Zander's death was hard because he was your son, and I'm truly sorry that he's gone. But you don't see it, you've never been able to see it.”

His eyes searched my face, wondering what the hell I could mean.

“All these years, all I ever wanted was for you to see me as your son too. You never gave me that chance, you never let me in. You kept me on the outside, and that fucking hurt. You helped do this, Franco. I went looking for a father because you were too good to ever be mine.”

“Please, Porter, don't kill me.” Releasing his grip on the steering wheel, he sat back. “I was just trying to save your mother, to make her world better. I wanted to give her back her life. We couldn't live like this, not anymore.”

“No, you wanted something else—don't act like you did this for my mother, because she'd never want this. My mother would never have allowed you to do this. You did this for yourself.”

My mother ran back across the yard and handed me a bundle of rope. “What are you going to do with this?”

“I'm tying his ass up, I won't risk him fucking up what I'm about to do.”

“You're not going to kill me?” Franco flicked his eyes up, and I saw more life in them than I had ever seen before. He looked afraid, he looked anxious and unsure of what would happen to him.

He's afraid of me.

“You're not worth my fucking time, Franco.”

“What are you going to do, Porter?” My mother reached out and touched my arm, squeezing me gently.

“I'm saving my girl, like a real man.” Glaring down at Franco, I snatched his wrists and tied him to the steering wheel. “But you wouldn't understand what it means to be a real man. If you did, we wouldn't be here like this. Instead, you hand fed me to the fucking wolves. Look where that got you, you made more enemies than friends today.”

My mother stood stiff, her fingers plucking and pinching her lips. “What am I going

to do?" she asked as her muscles began to tremble.

"You're going to stay here and make sure he doesn't do shit. Give me a few minutes to get a head start, then call the cops. Tell them everything, I don't care. Whatever happens to me after this, I'll deal with it. But I have to save Emery before he hurts her."

"Okay," she said, wiping her hands down the front of her thighs and taking in big breaths. "Take my car, the keys are in the front pocket of my purse."

"Thanks, Mom." Kissing her cheek, I gripped her shoulders. "I will be back, I don't want you to worry about me. You won't lose me today, I promise."

Shuffling around in her purse, I found her keys and pulled them out. Giving my mother a faint smile, I jogged to her car and climbed inside.

I had finally found the only reason to live.

I wasn't about to lose that before I had the chance to truly appreciate it.

Love comes once in a lifetime, and my life wasn't over yet. . .

It was finally just beginning.

Chapter Seventeen

Porter

I could see Marcos' house in the distance. There were some faint lights glowing around a few of the windows, but aside from that, the place looked empty. That wasn't the case at all, and I knew it; Emery was in there.

My headlights were off, and the engine idled quietly as I sat trying to figure out how I was going to get inside. Marcos was never completely alone, because he wasn't stupid.

I wasn't the only asshole out there gunning for his head. He had enemies on all sides. But that comes with the territory, it's a part of this world. You can't climb to the top without pissing on others to get there.

He had his selected few, the men he entrusted his life to. From what I knew, there were always at least two or three other guys roaming the grounds, squatting in some hidden spot, jerking off to pass the time.

I was about to walk right into the lion's den, and most wouldn't be stupid enough to ever do that alone. Except for me. . . I was that fool.

Reaching for my gun, I felt the vacant spot where it was normally tucked away. Cringing to myself, I scratched my fingers through my hair, wondering how the hell I was going to go blazing in there to get Emery back.

I was going to have to be careful and really think about each step I would take. As much as I just wanted to charge in there like a raging bull, I couldn't. I wouldn't risk Emery getting caught in the crossfire, no fucking way. This had to be done as quietly and swiftly as possible.

Climbing out of the car, I popped the trunk and searched around inside. There had to be something I could use, something that would work as a weapon. Finding the tire iron, I held it in my hand.

This will have to do.

Clutching the metal, my knuckles went numb as all the blood drained out, leaving them white. This anger was going to fucking kill me. My heart was ready to implode, and my head was throbbing.

All I felt was this bristling rage that coated my body like a hard shell. There was nothing else inside, no fear, no worries, no regret. This woman had become mine, she had become a part of me in ways I couldn't understand, but wasn't willing to let go.

I loved her and I would do anything for her. Even if that meant giving my life for hers.

Using the shadows, I stalked through the night like the Grim Reaper, eager to suck the soul out of the next man in line.

Peering through the darkness, I could see two guys outside. One of the men was sitting in a chair by the front door, his gun resting in his lap. From where I was, I couldn't tell if he was sleeping or just relaxing.

The other guy was pacing the grounds, walking back and forth between the cars, his eyes constantly scanning his surroundings.

He's first.

Keeping myself low to the ground, I crept up behind Marcos' Hummer, silently waiting for asshole number one to come my way. The man kept stopping, periodically checking over his shoulder and searching as far into the distance as his eyes would allow.

I could feel the ground shake slightly and hear the soft ping of gravel as it was kicked up by his feet. Adrenaline surged through my muscles, forcing my fingers to tighten around the metal bar.

His shadow grew long and slender, his breathing audible as he approached where I was hiding in the darkness. The tips of his sneakers poked out from under the bumper and I didn't wait for him to take one more step.

Leaping up, I swung the tire iron, cracking him across the side of the head. Dropping to the ground, he laid motionless as a thin stream of blood trickled down his forehead.

I could have killed him right then, but I didn't. I wasn't there for that, even though every inch of my body was screaming at me to do it.

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But who would I be if I killed him? I'd be no better than the men I had set out to destroy. I wasn't like these men, not anymore.

Emery had been right, she reminded me that I wasn't that man, that I didn't need to do this. I was better than them, I was willing to stop when lethal force wasn't necessary. That guy was out cold, he wasn't a threat to me anymore, and by the time he woke up, I planned on being long gone.

Grabbing his ankles, I dragged him behind the truck so he was out of view. Looking down, I didn't recognize the guy, he had to be new, someone who had rode the ranks to qualify to be one of Marcos' personal protectors.

I know what you did to get here.

The guy looked to be about my age, twenty-four or so. Dressed in a thin white t-shirt and dark blue jeans, he reminded me so much of myself. It was as if I could see the pain on his face, of the life he had that led him there.

Checking him over, I patted down his sides and found his gun secured in a holster at his hip. Plucking it free, I stuffed it into the back of my jeans and picked up the tire iron.

It felt good to have a gun on me, there was a higher level of safety knowing I had the right kind of power to take these guys on. But right then, being a silent stalker was key.

I didn't want to start shooting if I didn't have to. That would only draw attention,

making my silent entry an all out war. I wanted to stay low, I wanted to get in and out with as little blood being spilled as possible.

I was trying like hell to stay true to my word. To not be a killer, to not live for the thrill of taking another man's life.

Because I couldn't lie and say I didn't enjoy it at one point in my past. I did. There was a high that came with that type of power, a rush that couldn't be replicated with anything else.

I was like an addict, walking into a drug-infested party and trying to stay clean.

I can do this.

I was going to do my best to not kill anyone, but I knew I would if I had to. And I wouldn't promise myself or anyone else that I wouldn't pull the fucking trigger. If push came to shove, it was going to be them dying, not me.

Peeking my head over the hood of the Hummer, the man stationed at the door had his arms folded over his chest and his head laid back. It was hard to tell if his eyes were closed, but he hadn't moved a damn muscle.

With quick feet, I darted across the driveway and ducked behind a tall, spiraling bush. Listening carefully, I could hear the gentle snore of the guy by the door.

The motherfucker is out.

They're making this too easy.

Standing over the man, I hit him just hard enough to keep him sleeping. His body flopped over, and I caught him before he hit the ground. Pushing him back up, I

positioned him the same as he had been, and slipped inside the house.

The halls were dim, the surrounding rooms dark and quiet. With tender steps, I gingerly walked through the foyer and down the hall, heading toward the back of his house.

Soft music echoed through the hall, so I followed the sound. Every room I passed was dark, there were no lights on in any of them. I was drawn deeper and deeper into Marcos' castle, pulled and tugged by the pain in my heart.

Emery was somewhere in here, and the thought of her being afraid was almost too much for me to bear.

I'm here baby, I'm coming for you.

The music was a symphony of violins and brass instruments that reached high and low tones in tandem. A cackle of laughter mingled with the sweet sound, ruining the beauty the orchestra had created.

“You really are so fucking pretty.” Marcos' voice whispered through the music, making my blood percolate under the skin.

“Fuck you!” Emery spat, her voice battling back tears.

My heart broke, it folded over and dissolved, turning into pieces inside my chest. Just hearing her voice was enough to send me over the edge.

A loud slap rang out, and I heard Emery let out a cry. Every muscle in my body reacted, twitching and tensing into angry strings of rope.

My entire plan to be quiet went out the window. He had put his hands on her, he had

caused her pain and that was something I wouldn't stand for.

All my control was gone, it was lost to the love I felt for that girl. She needed me and I wasn't going to waste another second. I didn't care if anyone knew I was there, there wasn't time for me to sit back and wait.

With one hard hit, I kicked the door open. My brain had silenced everything around me, creating this deep void between my ears and my mind. It was like the world was put on mute, and all I could hear was my pulse.

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Emery was the first thing I saw, her body curled up on the floor as she held her face. Giant raindrop-shaped tears were cascading down her cheeks, her eyes were open wide, glossed over like she tried to removed herself mentally from what was happening.

Marcos growled as his lids thinned and his eyes met mine. “You're suppose to be dead.”

“Looks like your guys failed again. Now it's your turn.”

I knew what I had said before, and to be honest, even I didn't believe myself. There was no way in hell I was going to get this far and not kill the fucker. He deserved to die, he deserved to die over and over for each life that had been lost at his hand.

I wanted him to feel it, I wanted him to suffer. There was a difference between innocent, stupid, and just plain evil. My brother was innocent, Emery was innocent. The men who worked and died for Marcos were stupid.

But he was just an evil bastard.

“Porter, what don't you understand about how this works?” Marcos stepped up beside Emery and started playing with her hair. “You need to just die like every other asshole who fucked me over. Stop avoiding the inevitable.”

“I can't do that, Marcos. I'm not that type of asshole, I won't just let you kill me.” The crowbar was still in my hand, so I held it out to the side like a baseball bat. “Let her go, and then we can talk about what's going to happen to me.”

“And if I don't?”

“If you don't, I'll have no choice but to kill you.”

Laughing, he wiped his face and looked down at Emery. “He's funny, I don't remember him being so funny. Why don't you ask Emery what she wants, ask her if she wants to be saved by a murderer.”

Emery's eyes glistened like glass, her lips turning down into a heavy frown. “Is it true? Did you really kill that family?”

“What? No, of course I didn't.” Taking a step forward, I softened my voice. “Don't believe what he tells you, Emery, he's a liar.”

“It was in the paper, Porter. The police said you killed an entire family, kids and all. Why would they say that if it wasn't true?”

“That's what he wants everyone to think. He wants everyone to believe I did that, but I didn't!” Yelling, I kept my eyes on hers, hoping she could feel I was telling her the truth.

Marcos let out another hard laugh. “She doesn't want you anymore, Porter. You're fighting for nothing.” Pulling a gun out from behind his back, he smirked. “It's time, it's time for you to just let go. You don't want anyone else to die, do you? Because I can kill her, it won't bother me.” Keeping his eyes on me, he placed his gun against her head and smiled.

Emery's eyes grew to the size of saucers, skin turning ghost white as he pulled back the hammer. She was shaking, trembling from head to toe as sweat dripped down her temples, and she tried to curl even deeper into herself. She looked like a porcelain doll, so fragile and breakable.

“You're making me do this, you know that, right?” Glancing down at her, Marcos brushed some of her hair out of her face with the tip of the gun. “I was hoping to fuck her before I had to kill her.” Biting his bottom lip, he eyed her like she was nothing more than a whore.

“You got this all wrong, Marcos.” Slipping my hand behind my back, I tipped my head.

“Is that right?” His smirk widened, eyes growing black as hell.

I could hear the faint ring of sirens in the distance. There was only so much time left before the place would be crawling with cops. If I was going to end this, I'd have to do it now.

“It is.” Yanking the gun out from behind my back, I pulled the trigger.

Emery was worth all of this. My life meant nothing if she died.

Pulling that trigger was the only option I had.

Chapter Eighteen

Emery

Curled up in a ball, I felt the wind as Marcos body fell to the ground with a thud. My eyes were sealed shut, refusing to see another dead man on the floor.

Strong arms wrapped my shoulders and hugged me tightly. "It's alright, I'm here, Baby, he won't hurt you anymore." Porter kissed the top of my head as he pushed my skull into his chest with his hand. "You're alright, it's all going to be alright."

I heard a long drawn out groan, and it forced me to peek out from the corner of my eye. Marcos was on his back with his hands covering his stomach. He was rolling around, his face scrunching up in anguish as blood began to seep up between his fingers and drip down over his knuckles.

Kicking Marcos' gun away from his hand, Porter stuffed his hands under my arms. "Come on, get up, we need to leave." Helping me to my feet, he looked me over. "We have to get out of here."

Marcos groaned again, so Porter turned on his heels swiftly. Dropping down to his knees, Porter cracked Marcos on the side of his head with the butt of his gun, forcing him into silence.

"He's not dead, at least not yet. I'm trying, Emery, I didn't shoot to kill, even though I wanted to." Swooping his arms around my back, he guided me towards the door. "But we need to go now."

“Was he really lying? You really didn't kill those people?” Stopping short, I flicked my eyes up to his. I wanted the truth, I wanted him to answer me either way.

I wasn't sure why I wanted to hear him say it. I knew I believed him, I knew by the tone in his voice that he wasn't lying. But hearing the words meant something to me.

Gripping my arms, Porter looked me straight in the eye. “I didn't do that, Emery. That's the whole reason this is all happening to begin with. I couldn't kill that family, there was no way in hell I was going to do that.” Dropping his head into his chest, he took in a deep breath. “I have killed people, a lot of fucking people. But I would never kill anyone who was innocent. And when I saw them, when I figured out that he expected me to kill all of them, I couldn't do it. But someone did, he had someone else finish what I couldn't. He tried to set me up, leaked info to the police that made me look guilty. But I swear on my brother's grave that I didn't do that. You have to believe me.”

There was so much weight in his voice, a pained hate that he felt and lived with. But I believed him.

Porter wasn't a good man, he wasn't a saint in true form. But he wasn't bad either, he had been misguided. A lost boy in a world full of evil. And that evil had attached itself to him, it brought him into its clutches and taught him how to kill.

But he wasn't meant for this life. This wasn't the man he wanted to be.

I didn't fall in love with a killer.

I fell in love with a man.

“I believe you.” Touching his chest, I held his eyes with mine. “I can feel your heart, Porter, and it's not black.”

His hands cupped my face, thumbs stroking gently back and forth against my jaw. “I love you, Emery, and I'll live every day showing you how much I love you. You changed me, you made me a better person. You helped me to see the life I can have, and not the one I thought I was left with.”

Porter pressed his lips to mine, and I knew. . .

We were meant to be.

I found love in the darkness.

And I'd do it all over again if it would lead me back to this man.

Epilogue

Porter

Waves crashed behind me, and I could taste the salt off the ocean as the wind blew across my face. It was a perfect day, the first perfect day I could actually remember.

Nothing was going to ruin this moment.

The sound of a Ukulele began to play, signaling that it was time. My mother reached out and touched my arm as she stood beside me, her smile warm and excited. She looked like years had been erased from her face in the last couple of months.

Everything had changed; literally.

Franco was out of the picture, my mother left him after all that shit went down. He was doing hard time with Disesto anyway for helping to orchestrate that whole damn thing.

I wanted to kill them both, and I wouldn't say I won't be happy when either one takes their very last breath. But I was glad that I had kept my control, I was happy that I didn't allow that evil to control me anymore.

Taking the stand to tell my story wasn't easy, it was one of the hardest things I ever had to do. But I did it, and through that I was given a second chance in this life. I was allowed to start over.

At first I thought my mother would be depressed that Franco was gone, but that wasn't the case. She looked lighter, like the weight that had been on her shoulders was gone. The mother I remembered from when I was a really young boy had come back to me. She was smiling all the time now, and was more than ready to start this new chapter of her life.

We were moved to the other side of the country, finding refuge with a new name in a new place, where no one would know who we were. As far as any of the assholes back home were concerned, we were invisible.

George Donovan. . . Can you believe that shit? That's the name the witness protection program gave me; fucking George Donovan. But at home, I was still Porter. I didn't think anyone would ever find us here anyway, but it was better to be safe than sorry—Emery's words, not mine.

Looking down at the small cluster of seats, Emery's grandmother was sitting in a white wicker chair at the base of the small platform, rubbing her hands back and forth nervously as she would periodically wipe her eyes with a tissue.

Everything was perfect.

The sun, the sky, even the damn air was exactly as it should be for today. Because today, I was marrying the woman of my dreams.

The minister, or as the locals call him, the kahu, cleared his throat and shifted his feet, positioning his small book in front of this chest. His eyes were set ahead, and you could see just how much time had passed through this man's hands.

Small creases crept out from the corner of his eyes, his smile was light and airy as a permanent twinkle kept shining in his pupils. The band of flowers around his head danced gently in the breeze as he lifted a conch shell to his lips and blew.

On the outside I looked calm and relaxed, but inside I was a mess. My nerves were running wild, my heart was racing, and my stomach was doing so many flips I thought I was going to throw up.

Taking in a deep breath, I let it out slowly as I stared at my feet. It was a strange feeling, to be standing on the beach, about to give myself to a woman who had become my world. I never thought I'd be here, not a chance in hell.

I expected my life to end, I never thought it would just be beginning.

Closing my eyes for a second, I touched the small locket in my chest pocket. My mother had given it to me a few days before I had gone into court to testify against Marcos Disesto. She told me it was a symbol of strength and love, filled with my brother's ashes. I've kept it with me ever since, refusing to put it down.

He was here with us today, standing by my side as my best man, silently smiling down on us from above. I had to believe that, because I could feel him.

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Opening my eyes, I started to lift my head, and I had to hold my breath. Emery was coming down the flower-covered aisle, barefoot and glowing. The biggest smile I had ever seen was on her face as she held her bouquet at her waist.

The orchids cascaded down over the back of her palms, flowing like water to her wrist. Her dress moved like silk against her skin, cradling the bump emerging from her belly. I tried to breathe, but I couldn't, she was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen.

Passing the flowers to my mother, Emery smiled up at me as a single tear trickled down her cheek. Lifting my thumb to her face, I swept it away.

I knew it was a happy tear, a tear built off of something special, made from the purest form of love anyone could wish for. But she didn't need to cry, not for this. This was all about us, about our life together.

Taking her hands, I braided our fingers together and stared into her eyes. I wanted to live in this moment, to hold onto it forever.

Because this was a new birth for me. I was no longer held back by the pain I had felt, or the anger that worked me from the inside. All of that was gone. I had finally found happiness.

The minster opened his book as he started to speak. "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous, it's not angry, or arrogant. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful. Love does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never

ends.”

His words coated my body, bleeding into me as our eyes held each other and the world around us faded away.

“You may speak from you heart,” he said, as his gaze settled on my face.

Stroking her fingers, I smiled. “Emery, before you I was no one. I was a lost boy, a man without a purpose. But when I found you, you changed me instantly. All I wanted was to protect you, to love you, to give you the world in the palm of your hand.” Dropping to one knee, I cupped my hands around her belly and kissed our unborn child. Standing back up, I scooped her face in my hands as I spoke. “I love you, I’ll always love you. I can feel you in every piece of my body, it’s like you’re a shade of me, and without you I’d be half of a person. You’re in my heart forever, you’re the love of my life.”

Emery’s eyes were glossy as she sniffled and wiped at her cheeks. Her smile was endless as it reached from ear to ear. Glancing up at the sky, she lowered her gaze to mine. “Porter, I can’t imagine what my life was like before you, and I don’t want to. You’re a part of me, you belong to me. I’m yours and you’re mine. And this child, this child is a creation of us. I want to grow old with you, I want to share laughs and tears. All I want is forever with you. I love you.”

Lifting her hands to cover mine, I leaned in and brushed the tip of my nose against hers. Emery bit her lower lip, and that was it, I kissed her. I kissed her with all the emotions I had finally freed.

I kissed my wife, the mother of my child, the love of my life.

We weren’t just two people getting married, we were a family binding our lives together as one.

One heart.

One love.

One life.