



Craving the Fight (Gloves Off: Next Generation)

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Category: Romance, Adult, Action, Suspense, Sports

Description: Fame. Money. Status. An infinite number of women standing ringside in hopes of one night with him. These are all the things Carter Reynolds loves about being MMA royalty. As a UFC Heavyweight champion, and the son of the illustrious Matt Reynolds, Carter thinks he has everything he could ever want.

Until he comes face to face with Emma Jameson—the one who got away. The pair are bonded by a secret from their past, one that none in their inner circle can ever know about...

Thanks to her father, Emma is no stranger to the MMA world. UFC Middleweight champion, Ryley Jameson, is known far and wide for his scandalous antics in and out of the ring. His fame put her in the spotlight at a very early age. It even led to her lucrative modeling career and the opportunity for her to travel the world. Now Emma is back with the family of fighters she left behind and quickly discovers a darkness that has wriggled its way into the MMA fold.

Someone demands retribution for the sins of the past, and they've chosen to make Emma their first target. Determined to keep her safe, Carter will do whatever it takes to protect her, even if that means putting his life on the line.

As hidden truths are revealed, Carter and Emma find that no one in their circle is safe... and this is only the beginning.

No cheating. No cliffhangers. Just hot, dirty-talking fighters who want to take you down to the mat.

Total Pages (Source): 77

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:11 am

CARTER

“It’s about time you get out here!” Kase shouted, bouncing on his feet and punching the air. “I thought for sure you’d pussy out.”

I barked out a laugh as my dad and I made our way to him. “Not on your life, cocksucker.” Beside Kase and grinning wide as we approached was Tyler Rushing, Kase’s father and coach, and former heavyweight champion just like my dad. They used to compete against each other over two decades ago. Now it was mine and Kase’s turn to battle it out.

Kase threw his head back, his laugh so loud it was heard above the music in the arena. “Figures. No worries, though. You’re about to get your ass handed to you.”

We fist-bumped, and I slapped his shoulder. “Yeah, keep wishing that, buddy. Let me know how it works out for you.” The shit-talking was my favorite part with him; I was going to miss it.

Kase Rushing had a similar muscular build as his father, and they could even pass for brothers since they had the same blond hair and gray eyes. The same went for my dad and me. We both had dark hair, and our eyes were green, but the only differences were that I was about an inch taller, and my eyes were more of a greenish amber. The similarities between our fathers had garnered Kase and me much attention over the years, mostly from people in the MMA world wanting us to continue with their legacies. It was a lot of pressure, but I think we’d done a pretty damn good job of it. Not only was I about to fight Kase for the UFC heavyweight title, but he was a good friend.

Tyler and my dad caught up for a quick few minutes while Kase and I waited for the announcer to call us out to the ring. Kase smacked his fists together and continued to bounce from one foot to the other. I was already warmed up and ready to fight. The heavyweight title was mine. I won it from Jason Abernathy four years ago, and I've defended it ever since. I just had to keep Kase from getting it.

"We need to get them in the ring for a reunion match," Kase said, nodding toward our fathers. Looking over at them, they were both still in immaculate shape despite being in their mid-fifties. I had no doubt Tyler could kick Kase's ass, just like I knew my dad could put me through a beating. But if I had to bet on either my dad or Tyler Rushing, it'd be my dad, no doubt whatsoever. He was MMA royalty, a legend, the best of the best. I'd spent the past ten years living up to the Reynolds name.

Kase bumped me on the shoulder, his sly gaze still on his dad. "What ya think? An epic Reynolds and Rushing showdown?"

Even though Tyler and my dad were paying us no mind, I knew they could hear us. "Nah, one of them might break a hip," I let slip out. "They're getting kind of old." Tyler flipped us off, and my dad chuckled, both shaking their heads incredulously.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it's time for the main event of the evening!" the announcer shouted into the microphone. "Tonight, here in Las Vegas, we will watch as two legendary fighters compete for the heavyweight title. Are you ready for this!"

The crowd went crazy, the ground trembling from the excitement. I loved the sound, craved it even. It was a high that I looked forward to at every fight.

Kase held out his fist. "Here we go. Don't hold back."

I pounded my knuckles on his. "Never."

Kase joined his father by the curtain, lifting his green and black hood over his head. “Coming out first,” the emcee continued, “is KASE ‘THE BADASS’ RUUUSSSHHHIINNNGGG!”

Kase winked back at me and pushed through the curtain as his song “Survival of the Fittest” by Mobb Deep boomed through the speakers. Tyler stopped and smiled at my dad and me. “Good luck, you two.”

I nodded, and my dad replied, “Same to you,” before Tyler took off to walk with Kase toward the octagon while the people screamed and cheered for them.

My dad squeezed my shoulder. “Give him one hell of a fight. It’s his last one.”

After stretching out my arms, I rolled my neck from side to side. “Which fucking sucks. I was looking forward to the rivalry.”

“Yeah, so was Tyler,” my dad revealed, “but Kase made a promise to their family friend. Besides, he’ll be making a whole hell of a lot more money running the club than fighting.”

Which was true.

Once Kase hopped into the octagon and made his rounds, the emcee announced my introduction. “And now, ladies and gentlemen, I give you the four-time heavyweight champion, CARTER ‘THE MAN OF STONE’ RRREEEYYNNNOOOLLDDDDSSS!”

The adrenaline pumped through my veins as I listened to the loud cheers mixed with the energizing beat of my walk-out song, “California Love” by 2Pac and Dr. Dre. Born and bred in California, I had to represent my state.

Lifting the red and black hood over my head, I walked out, the crowd wild and cheering for both my dad and me. Even though it'd been over twenty years since he competed, it was great hearing people holler for him. He'd left his mark in the MMA world, and I wanted to do the same.

As I marched down the aisle to the octagon, women reached out to touch me, demanding my attention. It was one of the things I loved about winning; I could get anyone I wanted. A beautiful blonde with thick pink lips and a curvy ass caught my attention in the crowd. I winked at her, hoping she understood the gesture. Most women did when I showed them my favor. After the fight, the sexy blonde would be fun to play with, a chance for a much-needed release.

Once I got down to the cage, I took off my robe and handed it to my dad. "Hurry up so I can end the fight," Kase goaded, waving for me to enter.

Stepping into the ring, I pounded my fists together. "I'm here, pansy-ass."

Smiling, the ref walked up to us, knowing it was all said for fun. It was well known that Kase and I were friends. "I see you two aren't going to play nice."

Kase smacked his gloves to mine, his gray eyes twinkling playfully. "Of course not."

We moved away from each other and the electricity in the air spiked the second I heard the much-anticipated sound of the bell.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:11 am

Ding, ding, ding. Round one.

I knew Kase's fighting style; it was much like my own. We always attacked first, and today was no exception. He came at me, and I dodged his right hook, which allowed me to punch him with mine.

Kase's head snapped to the side, and he cackled. "Weak. Who's the pansy-ass now?"

He psyched me out by making me think he was going for my legs, but then he righted himself, and his fist connected with my side, the zing of the blow exploding through my ribs.

"Fuck," I hissed, not letting the pain distract me.

Instead, I charged at his midsection and slammed him down to the mat. Kase was quick, so it didn't surprise me when he rolled away from my hold. We went at each other hard, both landing blows on the other. The surge of energy in the crowd fueled my desire, my will to win. However, ending the fight wasn't going to be easy. Kase was by far the strongest out of all the opponents I'd had over the years.

Ding, ding, ding. Round one over.

I marched over to my dad, and he squirted water into my mouth while wiping the sweat off my forehead. "You're doing good, son."

Sucking in a deep breath, I let it out slowly. "Thanks. Kase is one tough bastard."

“That he is,” Dad agreed.

Ding, ding, ding. Round two.

We fought hard in the second round, but neither got the upper hand. If it came down to points, I’d say we were even. But, all too soon, round two was over, and it was time for round three.

“This is it, Rushing,” I taunted as I circled the cage. He mirrored me with his fists at the ready.

Kase winked. “Round two was mine. I dominated that shit.”

Instead of replying as he expected, I went on the offensive and lunged for his waist, knocking him back against the cage. There wasn’t much time left to take the fight, so I had to act fast now that I had the advantage. The split second of surprise was all I needed. Once I had Kase on the mat, I wrapped my legs around his chest, securing his arm between my thighs with his elbow against my hips.

“Dammit, Reynolds,” Kase grumbled, trying his hardest to resist what I was about to do next.

I pulled his forearm against my chest, using every ounce of my strength to straighten it. To secure the armbar, all I had left was to lean back and arch my hips. The intense pressure would make him tap out.

A rumble of laughter escaped my lips. “You have no choice. I got you fucker.”

Kase shook his head, his face redder than fire. “Not yet, you don’t.”

With those words, I leaned back, his growls of pain echoing in my ear. A few seconds

later, he hissed out the word fuck at least twenty times before tapping out and collapsing onto the mat the moment I released him. The crowd went insane, the lights flashing all around the arena. My dad and Tyler shook hands, posing for the cameras that snapped all around them. Kase was still on the mat, so I grabbed his hand and hauled him up.

With a big smile on his face, Kase hugged me. “Congrats, man. You deserved it.”

I slapped my hands on his back. “Thanks.”

As soon as I let him go, the referee held my arm in the air while the emcee joined us in the cage. “And the heavyweight title winner for the fifth time in a row is none other than your favorite fighter, CARTER ‘THE MAN OF STONE’ RRREEEYYNNNOOOLLLDDDDSSS!”

Kase threw his arm over my shoulders as we exited the ring. “You’re the only person I’m okay with beating me. So enjoy this victory because you won’t get someone as nice as me next time.”

“Don’t worry,” I said as we walked away from the octagon together, “I’ll be ready.”

* * *

After a quick shower in my private locker room, I changed into a pair of jeans and one of my dad’s black MMA pride T-shirts from back in his time. Tonight was going to be wild. A knock sounded on the door, and in walked Tyler and Kase. The whole left side of Kase’s face was red and slightly swollen. I could feel mine starting to swell, especially when I bent down to slide on my boots. The rush of blood to my head made my face pulsate and throb, but I didn’t mind the ache. Kase was a worthy opponent. It was nothing a little bit of whiskey couldn’t fix.

Tyler slapped a hand on Kase's shoulder, and he beamed at us. "I'm proud of you, boys." But then he focused on Kase. "It's not an easy feat to beat a Reynolds. I know from personal experience. The only way I was able to get the heavyweight title was because Carter's father retired."

Kase waved him off. "I'll still get plenty of fighting time at the club." He lifted his brows at me. "You are coming to the club tonight, right? It's my first official night as owner."

I held out my hand and Kase shook it. "Wouldn't miss it. And as a reward for kicking your ass, I think I'll stay in Vegas an extra day."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:11 am

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, rub it in shitdick,” Kase grumbled with a sly grin. “You’re lucky I’m such a good friend. I got you all the liquor and an abundance of women eager to do your bidding.”

It was an important night for Kase, and I wanted to be there to celebrate with him. He and his father inherited the Labyrinth, a well-known club in Las Vegas, from a close family friend who passed away. However, a choice had to be made. The Rushings also owned Rushing’s Gym and Fitness, and when they took ownership of the Labyrinth, someone needed to take over. Tyler had decided to stay with the gym, while Kase chose to give up fighting competitively to run the club. Luckily, his decision didn’t make him have to give up fighting ultimately. The Labyrinth was like a whole other world, and was a dancing nightclub with a fighting arena in the back. It was where many MMA fighters got noticed for the first time, including Kase’s father. I’d heard Tyler say multiple times how he loved fighting at the Labyrinth more than in competitions.

A light tap sounded on the door, and I smiled at Kase. “Ah, the fun’s getting ready to start. I need to get primed up for the main course tonight.”

Kase bellowed out a laugh. “Yep, you’re definitely a Reynolds. I’ve heard stories of the shit our dads used to get into.”

My dad pointed a finger at us. “Hey, I gave up that mess a long time ago when Carter’s mom came back into my life. You will, too; it’s only a matter of time.”

Shaking his head, Kase snorted. “Nah, I’m enjoying my life the way it is.”

Tyler placed a hand on my dad's shoulder. "Come on, let's get out of here. Kacey's at the restaurant waiting for us."

Dad pinned me with his serious stare. "Stay out of trouble."

"Don't I always?" I countered. That couldn't be further from the truth.

They opened the door, and the blonde I winked at as I walked down to the cage was standing outside, chewing her lip with anticipation when our eyes locked.

Kase snickered under his breath and grinned. "Have fun. Don't be late, though. You know what's waiting for you."

Beckoning the girl inside with a wave of my hand, I focused on Kase and smirked when she happily complied. "The night is young, my friend," I told him. As soon as Kase shut the door, the blonde-haired vixen pushed me back toward the seat in the corner, settling herself between my legs when I sat down.

"What would you like?" she asked, her voice sultry and smooth like honey.

Sitting back in the chair, I smiled as she unbuttoned my jeans. "I think you know."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:11 am

EMMA

For the first time in who knew how long, I could finally relax. Drawing in a thoughtful breath, I let it out slowly as I admired the Hudson River from my New York apartment balcony with a crème brûlée iced latte I'd made myself with the specialty coffee maker I bought last week. Now I could have one anytime I wanted without leaving my apartment. Resting my feet on the balcony railing, I smiled and took a sip, relishing in the sweet taste of the crunchy sugar topping.

For the first time in four years, I was not working next week. Ever since I finished college and pursued my modeling career, it had been go, go, go. Not that I was complaining; it'd been heaven to get out and travel the world. What did sadden me at times was my lack of chances to visit California. Luckily, my parents were always thrilled to pack up and visit me in New York. If someone had told me ten years ago that my life would be like this, I wouldn't have believed them. I loved staying busy, but I haven't had much time for myself.

It took a while to get a name for myself without living in my dad's shadow. He was known as one of the UFC's favorite fighters—a middleweight champion—and loved by everyone both in and out of the ring, especially the women. I'd seen videos of his wild days, and he still had that spirit, but my mother tamed him a bit. It was apparent he needed it. I was grateful for the opportunities he gave me, even though I was practically forced to attend college before pursuing my modeling career. It turned out it was the best thing for me. Being a model wasn't going to last forever.

On the brighter side, I really liked the fundamentals of weather and looked forward to the day I could utilize my skills. I still remember the day I told my parents I wanted

to be a meteorologist and how pleased they were because they'd expected something different from me. Honestly, I was surprised they didn't see it coming because all I watched when I was younger was Storm Chasers. Tornadoes always fascinated me. Sadly, I hadn't seen one in real life.

The wind whipped past me, and I closed my eyes, breathing in the city smells. The breeze was cool for a mid-May morning, and it reminded me of my family's cabin in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The smell, not so much. Nothing compared to being in the forest and having the scent of pine and earth all around me.

Opening my eyes, I smiled as a vision of my parents came to mind, along with my brother and sister. I'd left so many friends behind in California. If I was being honest with myself, I left a lot more than that. I took another sip of my latte, hoping it would distract me from thinking of that one person, but I got a flash of his emerald eyes in my mind before I forced it away.

"Good morning, sexy," Ava called out as she opened the glass patio door.

Thank God for the distraction.

The last thing I needed was to think about him. I looked back at Ava. Her hands were full of various things she tried to wrangle around so she could sit down. The giant brown bag crinkled as she peered into it. Her makeup and sleek blonde hair were perfect, but that was how she always was. She never left our apartment without being expertly manicured. We met about three years ago at a fashion shoot and moved in together after we quickly became friends. Ava was skilled at navigating her way through the bustling streets of New York, and I needed that guidance. Now I was a pro.

"I bought you a blueberry scone from the café. Also, we forgot to check the mail yesterday." She tossed the pile of mail onto our small, round patio table.

My stomach growled with hunger so I snatched the paper bag from her, and pulled out the blueberry scone. “Oh my God, thank you. It’s been ages since I’ve had one.” I took a bite and chewed it slowly, loving how it burst with flavor in my mouth.

Ava giggled. “Yeah, I figured as much. You’ve been so busy.”

“Got that right,” I replied, hoping I didn’t spew crumbs out at her. “Not that I’m complaining, but it’ll be nice to relax for a while.”

Nodding, Ava pinned me with her concern-filled brown eyes. “Just don’t burn yourself out, okay?”

Burn out? I’d never thought about it that way. The words felt like there was some truth in them, that it clarified the feelings in my stomach. Maybe I am burnt out. It’d gotten to the point where I cringed every time I got a phone call from a number I didn’t recognize.

As I finished off my scone, I turned to her and smiled. “I have next week off. I’ll recoup, I promise.”

Ava nodded. “You better.” She reached for the bag of scones and breathed them in, sighing with contentment. “I’m going to sneak these bad boys onto the plane, since I won’t be getting them for a while.”

Glancing down at my phone, I couldn’t remember when she had to leave. “Don’t you need to get to the airport soon?”

“Yep,” she answered, reaching in the bag to grab a scone. She took a huge bite and moaned. “I can’t believe that I’m going to be in Paris for two weeks in less than twenty-four hours.” I watched in fascination as she finished the rest of the fruity triangular bread in three bites.

“You’ll love it there,” I claimed. “My mom took my sister and me five years ago. It was a girls’ trip.” We visited the Eiffel Tower, went to all the museums we could find, and ate at every quaint little café. Of course, shopping was a big thing too, but it wasn’t the highlight of the vacation. My favorite part was being able to be with my mom and sister.

Ava stood and brushed off the crumbs from her pants. “All right, I need to finish packing. I have no doubt my suitcase will be over the weight limit.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “That doesn’t surprise me.”

“Ha-ha,” Ava teased, picking up the paper bag. “I was going to leave you another scone, but I might have to rethink that now.”

Oh, Ava, I love her to death. Once I finished my scone and latte, I picked up the pile of mail Ava tossed onto the patio table. Most of it was junk, mainly ads and coupons for the various businesses around town. However, a thick white envelope caught my attention when I sifted to the bottom. It was the size of a greeting card and on the front was my name and nothing else. No postmark or return address. Whoever sent it had to have just dropped it off in the mailbox.

Sticking it on top of the other mail, I carried it inside along with my phone and my empty glass. I set my dirty glass in the sink before grabbing the mysterious card and turning it around so I could slip my finger underneath the flap to break the seal. The envelope ripped, revealing a black card inside, but I couldn’t see anything else on it yet. I walked into the living room and flopped down on the couch, before sliding the card out of the envelope. That was when I saw the jagged, crimson-colored writing inside. Chills pierced my skin like tiny knives all over my body as I read the words. Fear gripped me; it took over my body in one fell swoop.

I’d never felt fear like that before.

“Emma? Are you okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Ava uttered, her voice filled with worry.

Jerking my head up, I closed the card, my chest clenching tight around my lungs to the point I could barely breathe. I handed it to Ava. “I have to go home,” I rasped out.

Ava opened the note and read what was inside, her eyes widening in outright terror. “Holy shit, Em. What does this mean?”

My gut contorted and twisted with despair. “I don’t know. That’s why I have to go home.”

The people who will know how to help me are there.

EMMA

After quickly packing up my things, I headed to the airport with Ava. I didn't care if I had to wait for hours for a flight to California; I had to get away from my apartment. Thankfully, I was able to find one, and was in the terminal, waiting with a crowd of people to board the plane to Los Angeles. It relieved me to know that Ava would be gone for the next two weeks, away from the possibility of danger. Whoever left the note had been in our apartment building, which meant they were close.

It could be nothing, but it was wise to be careful after what I read. I shifted my gaze to my purse, where I could see the corner of the white envelope taunting me. I reached for it and opened it up, slowly sliding the black card out of the envelope while my heart raced, only to stop with a gasp when my phone rang.

Reagan's name popped up on the screen.

"Hey, sis," I answered, trying to keep the overwhelming sense of fear out of my tone.

"Hey, I was asleep when you called. I don't run on New York time here." She yawned and then snickered. With everything that happened, I didn't stop to think that she was three hours behind me. Although, it was good to hear her voice. I missed her.

"I'm sorry," I apologized. "It's just I wanted you to know I'm headed your way. Can I stay with you and Peyton?"

Reagan gasped. "You're coming home? Oh my God, does Mom and Dad know?"

“No,” I blurted out, wishing I hadn’t sounded so desperate. “I want to see you and Ethan first.”

“What’s wrong? I can hear it in your voice. And don’t lie to me, Emma.”

I gulped down a steady breath. “I don’t know yet. You haven’t got a strange letter in the mail by any chance, have you?”

“No,” Reagan drawled out slowly. “What exactly would be in this letter?”

Glancing down at the black card, a rock formed in my stomach. “Something bad, Reagan,” I whispered, keeping my voice low so the other people around couldn’t hear. “I think it has to do with what happened to our parents a long time ago.”

“You mean that crazy shit about how dad and the others had to fight at the Dark Side?”

The whole thing had been pretty hush-hush except for the news articles we found on the internet. It was apparent our parents didn’t want us to know all the details. They talked about some of it, but I’d always had a feeling it was way worse than what they’d let on.

“Yes,” I confessed. “I think there’s more to the story.”

Reagan blew out a frustrated breath. “It’s possible. Are you going to ask them?”

“Not yet. I want to talk to the guys and see what they say. They might know more than we do.” Which was a possibility, considering our father was uber protective of us.

The line went silent for a few seconds, but Reagan’s voice soon returned. “Do I need

to be concerned? Because right now, I'm getting some weird vibes about this."

"I wish I knew," I answered honestly. "People always say your first instinct is usually the correct one."

"And yours was ...?"

"That something bad is about to happen." The terror I felt earlier still resided in my stomach, like the feeling you'd get walking through a haunted cemetery at night, only worse. "It's like an ominous cloud is slowly creeping over me," I added.

"Then it's a good thing you're coming home. When will you be here? I'll pick you up at the airport."

I snuck a peek at my smartwatch. "My flight leaves in two hours. I'll be there around seven your time."

Excitement made its way back into her voice. "Perfect. We'll head over to Ethan's when you get here."

We said our goodbyes and I slid my phone back into my purse but kept the note in my other hand. I didn't want to reread it, but I thought there might be a clue somewhere. So, opening the black card slowly, I read the words, and they filled me with as much foreboding as they did the first time I laid eyes on them.

Emma,

The time for retribution has come. The sins of your family have gone unanswered for far too long. Everything was taken from me, and now it's my time to take back what I lost. I won't stop until I get what I want.

~ You know who I am. And if you don't, you soon will.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:11 am

CARTER

“Dude, I don’t see how you can walk right now.” Kase sat down across from me and shook his head, his grin wider than the Cheshire cat. He had to be at the club later, so he was dressed in a Labyrinth T-shirt and jeans with his blond hair perfectly gelled. “Seriously,” he said, pointing down at my groin. “I’m surprised your balls aren’t shriveled up like raisins. How many women did you fuck last night?”

My brain was still foggy from all the alcohol. I tried to picture the women in my mind, but they all blurred together. I remembered two blondes, a brunette, and maybe a redhead? Or was it two brunettes? Shaking my head, I realized it was best not to remember. Hell, I was twenty-eight years old and enjoying life. That’s all that mattered.

“Not sure. I think I lost count.”

Kase hooted a laugh. “Lucky bastard. I was too busy running the club.”

Carrying a tray with our drinks, Quinn climbed up the last two steps and made her way over to us. She was Kase’s younger sister by two years, making her twenty-five. Her long blonde hair was the same color as Kase and their father’s, but she had her mother’s sea green eyes and beautiful face.

“I think last night went amazing, Kase,” Quinn said, setting down our beers and a whiskey bottle with two shot glasses. She smirked at me and then focused back on her brother. “And I’m talking about the club, not the fight.” She patted Kase on the shoulder. “You lost that one, brother. Big time.”

Rolling his eyes, Kase took a giant gulp of his beer. “Rub it in, why don’t you?”

Quinn snorted with laughter and slid the tray underneath the table before sitting down with us. “Someone has to give you a hard time.”

“Hey, what did I miss?” Thea called out as she climbed up the spiral staircase, carrying plates with our stuffed mushrooms and crab dip. “I heard laughing.”

Hurrying over, she set the food down on the table and sat beside Kase, pushing her chocolate-colored hair behind her ears with her delicate fingers. Kase snuck a glance at her, and I noticed the spark of wanting in his eyes. He'd been exceptionally protective of her in all the years I'd known him. Thea Bennett was a gorgeous woman, her eyes strikingly exotic. They were a bright blue with a golden ring around the pupils. Kase noticed my smirk and glared at me as he took another swig of his beer, obviously not wanting me to say anything. I didn't believe his excuse of not getting any pussy last night due to being too busy with the club. His focus was on someone else.

“You didn’t miss much,” I assured Thea, scooping up some crab dip on a pita chip. I tossed it in my mouth and glanced around at the restaurant. We were in the private loft at K & B’s Bistro, owned by Kacey and Bree, who were the mothers of Kase and Quinn, and Thea respectively. It was my last night in Vegas, so I had to end it with a fabulous meal. K & B’s Bistro was the hottest spot in all of Nevada.

“Are you two excited about owning all of this one day?” I asked Quinn and Thea.

Quinn beamed as she peered around the restaurant. “More than excited.”

Thea picked up a mushroom and set it on her plate. “It’s crazy how it all worked out.” She smiled over at Quinn. “Our mothers are best friends, and here we are the same. Hopefully, we can continue the tradition.”

Quinn nodded. “Definitely.” She ate a mushroom and then focused on me; her eyes narrowed in curiosity. “How are the guys in Cali? It’s been forever since I’ve seen them. I miss how our parents used to get us all together when we were younger.” A hint of sadness passed across her face when she shrugged. “I mean, I still catch up with the girls on social media, but it’s not the same as seeing them.”

“The guys are good,” I answered, scooping up another pita chip full of crab dip.

Kase chuckled. “You’re damn right they are. I have to say, we all turned out just fine, maybe even more successful than our parents were at our age.”

Quinn agreed with a nod. “Yeah, you have Carter’s sister, Aleah,” she said, pointing at me, “who took over her mother’s position at Physique magazine. Then, you have Reagan, Ethan, and Ripp Jameson who all fight for the UFC.”

“It’s awesome Reagan wanted to compete,” Thea added, her voice full of awe.

There was one Jameson they had yet to mention, and I didn’t want to hear her name. Reagan and Ethan were her siblings, with Ethan being her twin brother. I’d tried my best to forget about her to no avail; I doubted I’d ever be able to.

“Oh,” Quinn blurted, waving a hand excitedly in the air at Thea and Kase, “Brooks is about to be part of some special FBI group. I don’t think you guys knew about that.”

Kase’s eyes doubled in size when he glowered at me. “What the fuck, man? You failed to tell me this.”

I held up my hands. “Don’t blame me.”

He shot his attention back to Quinn. “How did you find out?”

Quinn snickered. “Unlike you boys,” she said, flourishing a hand between me and Kase, “who only talk once in a blue moon, I actually keep in touch with my friends.”

“Well, damn,” Kase replied, sitting back in his seat. “Guess we shouldn’t be too surprised. His mother was an undercover detective.” Brooks and Ripp Jameson were twins, the sons of Camden Jameson, a cutthroat fighter with a dark past. He had a scar down his face to prove it.

After taking a sip of her water, Quinn patted Kase on the arm. “Not all of us wanted the fighter life, brother. Although, I do have to hand it to Reagan and our cousin Kali. They’re killing it in the ring.”

Out of all the females in our inner circle of friends, only two decided to fight: Reagan Jameson and Kali Andrews. Kali’s father, Kyle Andrews, a former heavyweight champion, was my dad’s worst enemy almost three decades ago. It took a couple of years, but my parents forgave him for the shit he did to them. To this day, I still didn’t know all the details.

“The girls are definitely dominating right now,” I affirmed. “Reagan won the featherweight title.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:11 am

Kase held up his beer. “And Kali has the bantamweight title.” We toasted on their behalf and downed our drinks.

Thea rolled her shoulder at the mention of Kali. “Remind me never to spar with Kali ever again. My arm still hurts.”

Quinn pursed her lips at her. “I warned you. You never listen.”

Thea’s father, Cole Bennett, was a damn good fighter, only he never won the light heavyweight title; that one belonged to Paxton Emerson for the longest time.

Kase slid his empty beer bottle to the center of the table, and it clanged against the bottle of whiskey. “You know who I want to get in the ring with?”

I was pretty sure I knew the answer to that. “Who?”

Kase’s eyes lit up. “Braden Emerson. He’s a fucking beast.”

“No shit,” I laughed. “I thought for sure he broke my jaw the other day.” Braden was my cousin and had the strength of his father and the fire of my aunt Gabriella. I rubbed my chin where Braden pummeled me the last time we fought.

Quinn waved a hand in the air. “Oh, oh, oh, what about Peyton? Isn’t she filming another movie? I liked the romantic comedy she was in last year.”

“She is,” I replied. “In Charleston, South Carolina, actually. My aunt went with her.” Peyton was the spitting image of my aunt and a Hollywood starlet now. I thought for

sure she'd want to be a fighter when we were younger, and I knew Gabby wanted her to, but Peyton had other aspirations. She was known far and wide, just like ...

"Emma," Quinn called out. And there it was, the name I didn't want to hear. Quinn clutched a hand over her heart. "Talk about beautiful. She's in every magazine on the shelf."

Visions of Emma's face flashed through my mind. Dammit! Why do I keep thinking about her? Emma Jameson. I'd tried to fuck around to get her out of my system, but my mind always drifted to her.

"Reynolds, you okay?" Kase asked, snapping his fingers in my face.

Laughing, I smacked his hand away. "Yeah, I'm fine. Tell me about Hunter. Isn't he going to start competing?" We needed to get off the topic of Emma.

Kase's smile flattened. "Not sure. He gets a lot of shit because of who his dad is. It kind of gives him a bad rap."

I could see that. I may not know what Hunter's dad did to my parents, but I did know that his father cheated his way to the top, even drugged someone so they'd fail the drug test before their fight. People don't forget.

With his grin lifting, Kase tapped the table. "I do know something you don't, Reynolds."

"Oh yeah, what's that?" I countered.

He leaned over on his elbows. "Ripp's going to have to fight hard to keep that light heavyweight title."

Thea gasped excitedly. “That’s right! Andon just moved up from middleweight to light heavyweight.” Andon was her older brother and a force to be reckoned with.

“Good for him,” I said. “Guess we were all a little too busy last night to talk about fighting.”

Kase snorted under his breath while Quinn shook her head, her green eyes piercing through her brother and me. “Keep the sordid details to yourself, please,” she added quickly.

Kase and I cackled at the disgusted expression on her face. “Getting back to Andon,” I announced, “it’ll make Ethan happy to know he doesn’t have to fight any of his friends for the title.”

“You mean, like us?” Kase asked, winking slyly. “Although, it was fun smashing your face in a few times.”

Gasping, Quinn looked down at her watch. “All right, Thea, we gotta get back downstairs before our mothers fire us.”

Thea stood and sighed. “We have been gone a long time.”

Quinn grabbed her glass of water. “I think I’m going to plan a girls’ trip soon, get back together with the crew if we can all get away.” Her smile expanded. “What would be even better is to have all of us get together.” She stared at Kase and me, and all I could do was nod.

“Maybe,” I replied.

Our parents stopped planning trips about eight years ago when we started getting older and having our own lives. Out of all the vacations I’d gone on with everyone,

there was one that always came to mind. It was in Oak Island, North Carolina, at my family's beach house. Something happened there I'd never forget.

Forcing it from my mind, I stood and hugged Quinn and Thea. They walked away, leaving me alone with Kase. "What are you going to do when you get back to California?" he wondered. "Your title is safe for a while, so you don't have to worry about that."

Sitting back down, I smiled. "Not exactly sure yet."

Kase poured two shots of whiskey and slid one to me. "The sky is the limit, my friend. Feel free to come to Vegas anytime you want. I'll hook you up like I did last night."

"I might have to take you up on that."

The night was a blur of alcohol and sex. At the time, I enjoyed every minute of it, but every time someone mentioned Emma's name, it took me forever to get her out of my mind. It's a good thing I have an endless supply of whiskey to make me forget for the night.

Grabbing my whiskey, I brought the glass to my lips and let the amber liquid glide down my throat. The burn felt good, and I needed more ... a lot more.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:11 am

EMMA

When I got my luggage and headed out of the airport, it was precisely seven o'clock. There were hundreds of people around, chattering and carrying on with their business, but I could hear Reagan's voice above it all.

"Emma!"

The second I saw her weaving in and out of the crowd, it was as if something clicked in me. Reagan was twenty-five, two years younger than me, and we looked nothing alike. I was a couple of inches taller, and I had our mother's dark hair and green eyes. On the other hand, Reagan inherited our father's blond tresses and blue eyes. I'd tried not to miss her so much over the years, but I did. She was my best friend. Eyes burning, I gripped my suitcase and ran to her. She flung her arms out wide, and I hugged her so hard she gasped.

"I see you missed me," Reagan teased.

I let her go. "More than you know."

She nodded toward the walkway. "Come on. We got a little walk before we get to my car." We shuffled through the crowds of people and finally managed to get away from them all. Reagan smiled over at me. "Since Peyton's gone, you can sleep in her room. Unless you want to stay with Mom and Dad."

"I might stay with them a couple of nights to catch up," I decided, "but I want to talk to Ethan, Ripp, Brooks, and Braden to see what they think about the letter." My goal

was to make it look like a surprise when I saw my parents. That way, they would think it was planned. “Are the guys still at the gym?” I asked.

Reagan nodded. “Yep. They usually leave around eight.”

“What about Dad? Will he be there?”

Her smile spread wide when she looked over at me. “No. He was taking Mom out on a date tonight. So he skipped out early.”

A sense of relief washed through me. Out of all the years my parents had been together, I admired how much they loved each other. I wanted to tell my dad what was going on, but I didn’t want to drag him into it. Being able to handle things on my own was something I should be able to do. Also, knowing my father, he’d hire me a bodyguard, which was the last thing I wanted.

Reagan pointed to a parking lot not too far away. “We’re almost at the car.” We took a few more steps and I could practically see the wheels in her mind turn. “So, I’ve been thinking,” she said.

“Okay,” I drawled out. “About what?”

We made it to the parking lot, and I could see her car toward the back. “Your profession is competitive and kind of cutthroat, right?”

I shrugged. “It can be. I’m not like that, though. A lot of the women can be catty.”

“Exactly,” Reagan agreed. “What if someone came across the news article about our parents and wanted to start shit for the fun of it? You are popular. I’m sure you have a lot of competition in the modeling world who’d love to mess with your head.” Many years ago, my parents were interviewed for a huge article about their part in helping

the FBI take down an illegal fighting ring. All you had to do was type in my dad's name on any internet search engine and it'd pop up.

While contemplating her words, we arrived at her little silver Mini Cooper convertible. Yes, I had a lot of enemies, ones who were jealous of my success. I'd never understood the rivalry, especially if someone got a modeling job over me. I'd assume that I wasn't the right one for the position. Never would I deliberately hurt someone because of it. If you worked hard, you could achieve your goals. I'd worked my ass off to get where I was today. Some would say my father paved the way for me, but it'd been all me for the past four years. Many agents have tried to seek me out, but I preferred to handle my jobs myself. I liked making connections and networking.

Reagan unlocked the car doors with her key fob, and I opened the passenger's side door. "If this is someone trying to screw with my head, they're really messed up. The letter truly freaked me out. I'm alone in New York. Here, I have you and the guys. Don't get me wrong, I'm sure I can do some damage if I was attacked. Our dad didn't teach me to fight for nothing."

Reagan doubled over with hilarity. "You haven't been in the ring for years, sis. I could wipe the floor with your manicured ass."

Rolling my eyes, I tossed my suitcase into the backseat. "I have no doubt. Fighting wasn't my passion. Besides, we're the same weight. If I were to compete, we'd be fighting against each other. We both know what that did to Dad and Uncle Cam."

Reagan frowned. "Yeah, we've all seen Cam's scar. Sibling rivalry was no joke between them."

"Got that right," I said, sliding into the passenger seat. Reagan hopped in, and we started on our way. Thinking of our uncle, I wasn't sure how he got the jagged scar

that ran down his face, but I knew it was from fighting my dad. Our parents had been super secretive about their pasts.

Reagan put her foot to the metal as soon as we got on the highway. The apartment she shared with Peyton Emerson was super cute and beachy. It was completely different from mine in New York. I looked forward to the laid-back atmosphere. However, I was bummed that Peyton was out of town. She was more of a sister to Reagan and me than just a friend. Both Peyton's parents were former UFC champions, and our mothers had been best friends since college. My mother said it was fate that she and Gabby had girls around the same time, that we were destined to be best friends.

Ironically, it didn't end there. My brother, Ethan, lived with Peyton's brother, Braden, who also happened to be neighbors to my cousins, Ripp and Brooks. It was like one big happy family. I was excited to see them all, well, except for ...

My phone rang before I could ask Reagan if Carter would be at the gym. And what do you know, my caller happened to be none other than Aleah Reynolds, Carter's sister. "It's Aleah," I said, showing Reagan my phone.

Reagan beamed. "Tell her I said hi. Ever since she moved to San Francisco, I haven't seen her much." That made two of us.

Curiosity piquing, I pressed the accept button. "Hey, Aleah."

"Hey, girl. How's it going in New York?"

The ocean passed us by quickly with Reagan's driving. "Good. But I have to say you can't beat the view here in Cali."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:11 am

Aleah squealed. “Are you home?”

My gaze dropped to the ominous card sticking out of my purse. “For a little while. Thought I’d fly in for a visit and see everyone.”

“Perfect. That makes what I have to ask that much easier. Do you think you can head to San Francisco next weekend for a photoshoot? I want to see you, but I also have a modeling job for Physique. It’s for a story I’m writing. The pay will totally be worth it.”

My body thrummed with exhilaration. “Seriously? You want me to model for a spread in Physique?”

A trill of laughter resonated through the phone. “You have a killer body, Emma. I have the booty shorts and sports bra picked out for you. What do you say?”

I wanted to scream with excitement. “Hell, yeah, I’m in. I’ll book a hotel and drive up Friday.”

“Perfect,” Aleah replied happily. “But you’re more than welcome to stay with me. It’d be nice to catch up.”

Grinning widely, I could feel the burn in my cheeks. “Sounds great. I’ll talk to you more this week.”

I hung up just as we pulled up to Reagan’s beachside apartment. “I see you got yourself a gig next weekend,” Reagan pointed out, her excitement matching my own.

Opening the door with my purse in hand, I climbed out and grabbed my suitcase out of the backseat. “Which is awesome,” I said. “Guess it helps when you’re good friends with the lead journalist.” This was one instance I didn’t mind having a personal advantage. It felt like I was on air; I was so happy. I’d posed for numerous magazines but never Physique. This was going to be a perfect addition to my resume.

Reagan and I walked up the stairs to her second-floor apartment, and I tried my best not to let my suitcase bang against the steps. “Aleah didn’t say what the story’s going to be about?” Reagan wondered.

Shaking my head, I couldn’t stop smiling. “No, but I’m sure it’ll be with some big-time athlete she wants me to pose with. The magazine’s been doing that a lot lately. I think they’ve found it drives up more sales.” Of course, having a female and a male in the pictures appealed to both parties.

Reagan unlocked the door and pushed it open for me to walk in. The place smelled like coconut and pina coladas, and all around the living room were succulent plants. Very earthy and calm.

“Come on,” Reagan said, taking my suitcase and waving for me to follow her, “I’ll show you to Peyton’s room.”

I already knew which one was hers, but it was nice having my sister welcome me into her place. We walked past the kitchen to the hallway, and Peyton’s room was the first door on the left. Reagan opened the door and set my suitcase on Peyton’s aqua-colored comforter. The walls were beige, but that was typical for an apartment. Peyton was the one big on succulent plants, and her room was full of them.

“Now I know what to get Peyton for Christmas,” I joked.

Reagan cackled and shook her head. “I think there’s a new one here every time she

comes back from out of town.”

I sat down on the bed. “When is Peyton coming back?”

“Not sure,” Reagan answered, looking at all the little trinkets on Peyton’s dresser. “She’s in Charleston for a movie. Gabby went with her, which means I’ve been training with Dad instead of her.”

She shook her head incredulously, and I tried to keep from smiling, failing miserably I might add. I knew what that gesture meant.

“So, you haven’t had anyone go hard on you? Is that what I’m hearing?” I teased.

Reagan huffed. “Nope. I guess Dad thinks I’m going to break. Although, he doesn’t have an issue with Gabby beating my ass.”

I’d learned my lesson a long time ago, never get in the ring with Gabriella. She was more brutal than any drill sergeant could ever think of being. Pulling my phone out of my purse, I glanced down at the time. It was a little past seven.

“Who’s going to be at the gym?” I asked.

Reagan lifted her gaze to the ceiling as if she had to think about it. “Uh, let’s see. I’m pretty sure it’ll be our brother, Ripp, and Braden.”

A sense of reprieve washed through me. “Not Carter?” I wondered.

Shaking her head, Reagan walked to the door. “He’s still in Vegas. He just beat Kase for the heavyweight title.” I knew he’d won because I watched the fight. I’ve watched all of them over the years.

“Okay,” I said, getting to my feet. “Let’s go see the guys.”

I was safe from seeing Carter for now. All I had to do was avoid him until I could leave for San Francisco.

EMMA

It was hard to contain the joy flowing through me as Reagan drove us to Fightanium, the grandest gym in all of California. I knew the owners well. Fightanium was created seven years ago by none other than my father, my uncle Camden, Paxton Emerson, and Matt Reynolds; they were partners. Not only was it a state-of-the-art gym where anyone could join, but it was built to focus on MMA fighting, to aspire young fighters who wanted to learn more about the sport. My dad and the others set aside special training time each week to help train those who wanted to compete. The waiting list was ten million miles long a few years ago, so I could only imagine what it was like now.

We were almost to the gym, and my cheeks hurt from smiling so much. “I never thought I’d miss this place the way I do.”

Chuckling, Reagan glanced over at me and then focused back on the road. “Shocking. I thought the chic lifestyle of your fancy New York digs was more your taste.”

She couldn’t be more wrong. “It was at first, but there are days I just want to go to our family’s cabin and unwind for a while. Sometimes I wonder if I’ll ever see that place again. I’ve been so damn busy.”

We stopped at a traffic light, and Reagan turned her concerned gaze my way. “That doesn’t sound like much fun, Emma. Why do you take on so much?”

Why did I? It was a question I’d never asked myself before. But now that I thought about it, there were many reasons why I wanted to stay occupied, reasons I didn’t

want to discuss with her.

“I don’t know,” I lied. “The money is kind of nice.”

The light changed to green, and we only had two more blocks left to go. Reagan shook her head and laughed. “I bet it is. But, in truth, I can’t say much. I’ve been earning my fair share of moola these days.”

“I know,” I replied, pride filling me to the brim. “My sister is the featherweight champion.”

Reagan winked. “And don’t you forget it.”

We pulled up at the gym, and the parking lot was slammed. Wide-eyed, I stared at all the cars. “Is it always like this?” Not to mention it was late and not far from closing time.

Reagan snorted and drove around to the back. “Always.” She parked next to Ethan’s metallic blue truck and shut off her car. “Ready?” she asked, a grin springing across her face.

I didn’t want to wait any longer. “Let’s sneak in through the back.” Not only would I get to see my brother, but Ripp and Brooks were there, along with Braden. Even though Ripp and Brooks were my cousins, they felt more like brothers since we were all so close in age. Braden, however, was entirely a different story. He was a flirt and protective of my sister and me, but his actions were never brotherly. Sparring with him was always interesting.

Reagan used her key to open the back door, and we crept down the hallway where there were several empty rooms. They were used for various classes throughout the week, mainly yoga, self-defense, and meditation. When my dad and the others dreamt

up this place, they wanted it all.

Standing in the shadow of the hallway, I peeked around the corner to see Ethan in the ring with Ripp; Braden and Brooks were off to the side, watching them spar. Covered in sweat, Ethan and Ripp battled it out, trying to gain the upper hand. They hadn't changed much since the last time I saw them. Ethan was my twin, and the only thing similar about us was the brown hair we got from our mother. In appearance, he was all our father right down to his ocean blue eyes. I was the only one of my siblings who inherited our mother's green eyes.

Ripp and Brooks were wholly identical. It was scary how much they looked like my uncle Camden when he was younger. They had blond hair and bright blue eyes, but there was one thing that set them apart from their father ... they didn't act like him. I'd heard stories about how wild Camden was in his youth. Ripp and Brooks weren't like that. Maybe Ripp was just a bit, but Brooks had his head on straight.

My attention wandered over to Braden Emerson, who watched Ethan and Ripp spar with amusement on his face. His hair was dark as night, and if he were to turn and look at us, you'd be able to tell his eyes were a mesmerizing green. I'd heard he transitioned from the light heavyweight class to the cruiserweight so he wouldn't have to compete against Ripp. And if he got any bigger and moved to heavyweight, he'd have to fight against Carter. I knew he worked hard to move up a class, and it made me love him even more for it.

Reagan snickered under her breath. "Should we stop them before your brother and Ripp kill each other?"

I nudged her forward. "Lead the way."

We walked past all the people on the treadmills, but the room had slowly started to thin out since it was about closing time. Ripp had just slammed Ethan to the ground

when Reagan cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted, “Hey boys, look who I found at the airport!”

Braden and Brooks looked down at us just as Ripp rolled off Ethan. Their shocked expressions were priceless. Ethan jumped out of the ring first and rushed over, lifting me in his sweaty arms. “Holy shit, you’re actually here!” He swung me around, and I squealed with laughter. When he set me down, I held onto him until the room stopped spinning. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

“I wanted it to be a surprise,” I said, not entirely lying.

Ripp, Braden, and Brooks joined us, and I hugged them, ending with Braden. He was a lot muscular from the last time I saw him, with some brand-new tattoos on his arms. “It’s so good to see you all.”

Braden smiled down at my body. “Same to you. You’re looking sexy as hell.”

Ethan glared at him and punched his arm. “Hey, shitdick, that’s my sister.”

“What?” Braden countered with a shrug. “She is. It’s not like I’m going to coax her into the back room and fuck her senseless.” Then he winked at me and lowered his voice. “Not unless that’s what you want. I’ve tried getting your sister in there, and she shoots me down every time.”

Reagan snorted behind me, and I chuckled. “Oh, Braden, I’ve missed you.” He could always get me to laugh.

I turned to Brooks, the only one out of all the guys who didn’t have tattoos. It was how everyone could tell him apart from Ripp. “I heard you’re leaving for a special FBI training camp,” I said to him. He’d already completed his basic training but had been selected to go even further, whatever that meant. From what I gathered, even

Brooks didn't know what it entailed. I looked forward to finding out when he returned.

Nodding, Brooks smiled. "I leave in two weeks. You came back at the right time to see me off."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:11 am

“Yes, I did.” I squeezed his arm. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Have you seen Mom and Dad yet?” Ethan asked, catching my attention.

With a shake of my head, I peered around the gym. I didn’t want to say too much with strangers nearby. “Not yet. I wanted to talk to you all first. Is there somewhere we can have some privacy?”

The tension in the room spiked, and Ethan’s expression tightened. “Is everything okay?”

“Not sure,” I replied.

Ethan nodded toward the hallway. “Come on. We can head to the back.”

I followed behind him, and everyone came with us. Once inside the vacant room, Ethan shut the door and crossed his arms over his chest while the others rested their concerned eyes on me.

“What’s going on?” Ethan demanded.

Reagan stepped up beside me. “Show them the letter, Em.”

The guys exchanged curious glances as I reached into my purse. It confirmed that none of them had received one. I pulled out the envelope and handed it to Ethan. “This was left at my apartment. There’s no postmark or return address.”

Ethan slid the black card out and opened it, his expression dark as he read the words. “What the fuck?” He passed it to Ripp, and once he was done, he handed it to Brooks and Braden, who then gave it back to me. I couldn’t even stomach to reread it.

“Guys, am I being paranoid? I feel like it’s serious.” I glanced down at the closed card. “When I read it, it literally turns my blood cold.”

“Do you think it could be tied to what happened to our parents years ago?” Reagan suggested. “The words specifically say ‘the sins of your family.’ That doesn’t just include our father,” she reiterated, gesturing at Ethan and me. “It means Uncle Cam too. We’re family.”

Ripp and Brooks exchanged weary glances before settling them on me. “I don’t know what all Uncle Ryley’s told you,” Brooks began, “but our father’s been pretty honest about his past. He did some shitty things, things you won’t find in any news article on the internet.”

Ripp blew out a sigh and pinned his blue eyes on me. “What do you know about the Dark Side?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Only what I’ve read and what my dad told us. He was forced to fight there, just like your parents,” I said, acknowledging Braden. And that included his mother. The Dark Side was an underground organization that a man named Scar put together. The fighting was brutal. People died, and a lot went missing, presumably dead. It was a place where you could fulfill your sickest, most disgusting, and violent desires.

Braden’s jaw tensed. “My dad was called the Reaper. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out what his job was. He has the skull tattoo of the Dark Side, just like Camden.” This was true. Camden and Paxton were deep into the workings of the Dark Side. My dad was forced in because of Camden, so he didn’t have the skull

tattoo.

Ethan waved a hand at me. “Can I see the note again?”

I gave it to him, and he read the words aloud, sending chills down my spine. “Whoever sent this was physically at your apartment building?”

Swallowing hard, I nodded. “Yes.”

“Fuck,” he hissed, handing the note back. “If you tell Dad, he won’t let you go back to New York by yourself.”

“I know. That’s why I need you all to promise you won’t say anything until we figure this out,” I urged, acknowledging each of them. “Hopefully, it’s just a sick, twisted prank. But if not, and I hate to say it, it’s got me scared. If this does have something to do with our parents, I don’t know why they’d come after me.”

Brooks spoke up. “That’s easy, Emma. You’re the easiest target. You’re alone in New York without any of us there with you. You’re unprotected.”

His words held truth, but it made me feel vulnerable ... weak. “I can take care of myself, Brooks. I may not be a competitive fighter, but I’m still a Jameson. Fighting is in my blood.”

With a roll of his eyes, Brooks huffed. “That’s not what I’m saying, Emma.”

Ethan held up a hand. “No, Brooks, you’re right. And before you come back with a smart-ass comment,” he said to me, “hear me out. “You are the easier target because you live so far away. It might be best if you stay in California for a while. Take some time off.”

It was my plan anyway, but it didn't make me any less angry. "So what? I have to put my life on hold?"

Reagan draped an arm over my shoulders. "Is it really so bad? You can take jobs around here. You already booked one in San Francisco. Will it honestly hurt you to stay?"

No, but it left me prone to see a certain someone I wanted to avoid. I could handle a week, but more than that? I was screwed.

"If this is connected to Scar or whoever was involved with the Dark Side," I pointed out, "they will find me here and think I'm afraid."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:11 am

Braden shook his head. “They’ll think you’re smart.”

“You have all of us here,” Ripp said, holding out his arms. “We protect each other.”

Silence descended the room for a few seconds before Ethan met everyone’s gazes.

“No one says a word about this to our parents. Got it?”

We all stared at each other and nodded, confirming a silent oath. Brooks pulled out his phone from his shorts pocket. “I know some people at the prison where Scar’s at. I’ll call them to see what I can dig up.” He walked out and shut the door behind him.

“If it is Scar and his people, how will we handle this?” I asked.

Ethan was the one who answered. “I don’t know, but we’ll figure it out when the time comes. Until then, I think you should probably stay with Braden and me.” His eyes shifted to Reagan. “Both of you. You’ll have Ripp and Brooks next door for extra security.”

Reagan grumbled and peered over at Braden, who had the biggest grin. “Fine. But I’m only staying while Emma’s in town. After that, I’m out.” She gripped my arm and pulled me out of the room and down the hall to the back door.

“What is it with you and Braden?” I questioned, knowing there was some tension between them. I felt it.

We made it to the door, and she pushed it open. “You know how he is. He flirts with anyone who has tits and a vag.”

By the time we got to her car, her cheeks were a bright crimson. I had a feeling there was more to their story that she'd failed to mention. Our new sleeping arrangements were going to be quite interesting.

CARTER

I got back from Vegas late morning and decided to spend the early afternoon taking it easy at the house. Now that I'd won the title, I thought about taking a break from the hardcore training. But who was I kidding? I loved it. With my parents traveling to their Oak Island beach house for a few weeks, I decided to train with the other guys.

When I arrived at the gym, Ryley and Camden worked with Ethan and Ripp while my uncle Paxton was in the other ring with Braden. I'd inherit my father's share of the gym one day, just like Ethan, Ripp, Braden, Reagan, Brooks, and Emma would take over their parts.

Ryley smiled as I walked over to the sparring rings. "Congrats on keeping the title, Reynolds. I know your dad is super proud."

"Thanks," I called out, setting my bag on the floor.

Camden leaned over the ropes just as Ethan and Ripp fell to the mat, grappling just a few inches away from him. None of it fazed Camden as he grinned down at me. "What are your plans now?"

"Not sure," I confessed, shrugging flippantly. Reaching into my bag, I pulled out my hand wraps and got to work putting them on so I could spar with Braden. "I guess I'm good for a while until someone wants to challenge me."

Seeing Ryley and Camden working side by side, you'd never know they were enemies once upon a time ago. The scar on Camden's face was a constant reminder.

Although, it was nowhere near as bad since he had cosmetic surgery about twenty years ago. It didn't take the scar away, but it made it less noticeable.

Paxton hopped out of the ring and hugged me. "Your title is safe. I don't think there's anyone who can beat you."

Exploding with laughter, Braden stared down at me from the ring. "Yeah, right. I'll kick his ass."

Paxton lifted his brows at me, and I smirked. "I'm ready."

"Okay," Paxton announced, motioning for me to climb up. "Go for it."

Braden and I had been training together our entire lives, and he had yet to beat me. Had he come close a few times? Fuck, yeah, but I refused to let him win. Once my hands were fully wrapped, I joined Braden in the ring and bounced on my feet, stretching my neck from side to side.

"That title won't mean shit when I beat you," Braden goaded.

Braden had a smart-ass mouth on him, just like my aunt Gabby. It was one of the things I loved about her; it made for interesting family get-togethers.

"You never have, and you never will," I countered.

Braden and I circled each other, and he went on the attack first. He always went on the offensive the second the bell rang; he was a true fighter. It was in his blood. Especially considering both of his parents were UFC champions. Braden came at me again and psyched me out, getting a good punch on my right cheek. My head jerked to the side, and the shit hurt.

“Not bad, cocksucker,” I shot back, rubbing my jaw. We sparred for a few more minutes, and I paid him back with not just one but two hits—a kick to the stomach and a punch to the left side of his head.

“Nice, Carter,” Paxton hollered.

Braden thrust out his arms and glared at his dad. “Seriously? You never encourage me like that.”

Paxton chuckled. “Tough love, son.” His phone started to ring, and he held up a hand, stopping us. “All right, you two, I have to head out. Keep at it if you want.” He walked over to Ryley and Camden, and it wasn’t long before they left as well.

That was usually how it went. Our fathers trained us during the morning to early afternoon, and then we’d be on our own for the rest of the day.

Braden smacked his gloves together. “Give me a few more minutes before you quit on me, cockbreath.”

Tilting my head back, I ripped out a laugh. “Me quit on you? It’s usually the other way around.”

“Whatever, assbag,” Braden countered, beckoning me to strike. Only I knew he wasn’t going to wait for me, but I was ready for him. He came in like a rocket, barreling straight toward me, but I swept his legs from under him and knocked him down. Then, instead of grappling, I got to my feet and chuckled as he slammed his hands on the mat. Ethan and Ripp’s riotous laughter as they walked past echoed through the gym.

“Ready to give up yet?” I asked, trying to keep the smile off my face and failing miserably.

Braden jumped to his feet. “Nope.”

He threw a punch, and I blocked it. “What’s everyone doing tonight?”

A wry smile spread across his lips as he countered my movements. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” I knew Braden and his tactics. There was something he wasn’t telling me.

“What’s going on?”

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:11 am

Braden waggled his eyebrows and continued to smirk. The more I thought about it, it was probably best I didn't know. "Never mind," I said, waving him off. "I'm good."

Braden shrugged. "Okay. Although you might want to know who I talked to last night; it's someone you know quite well."

For a split second, my heart stuttered and threw me off balance. Braden used it to his advantage and landed a hit to my left cheek. My head snapped with the impact, and pain exploded in my jaw, but I shook it off quickly.

"Who?" I demanded. The only person he'd goad me about was Emma. He was the only one in our inner circle who had suspected something was going on between us. I'd never confirmed or denied it, but Braden was very perceptive.

He gave me a shit-eating grin, the same he'd always give when he thought he had the upper hand. "You know who. She's looking hot as hell too. And get this, she's staying with me."

Muscles tensed, I reared back and let my arm fly, hitting him as hard as possible. Braden fell to the mat, guffawing the entire way down. He rolled over onto his back, clutching his stomach from laughing so hard.

Heart thrumming wildly, I stood over him. "Is she in California?"

All humor gone, Braden glanced up at me. "Yep."

"What's going on?"

I helped him up, and he peered around the gym before focusing on me. “None of us know exactly. Emma had a letter sent to her; it was kind of cryptic. We think she might need protection. That’s why she’s staying with Ethan and me.”

An overwhelming sense of the need to protect her ignited through my entire body. “Tell me everything.”

EMMA

“Do you miss our mountain home?”

Reagan should know the answer to that. It was hard to think of anything else with the magnificent view in front of us. The beach atmosphere had a completely different feel than our cabin. Standing on our parents’ deck and breathing in the coastal scents was breathtaking. In a way, I wished our parents had bought the house sooner. Reagan was the only one who got to enjoy this paradise. They only relocated to Santa Monica after I left for New York and Ethan moved in with Braden. Also, my father wanted to take an active role in Fightanium.

“I do miss our cabin,” I murmured, closing my eyes as the wind caressed my skin. “Our lives were a lot simpler there.”

Reagan snorted. “Got that right.”

Opening my eyes, I gazed out at the ocean, loving the sound of the waves crashing against the shore. “But this is beautiful too. I like it here.”

The rumble of the garage door made me gasp, and a few seconds later, the kitchen door slammed shut. “Reagan?” my mother called out.

Reagan nudged me in the side, her voice low. “She’s about to get the surprise of her life.” Then, loudly, she shouted, “I’m out on the back deck!” Her eyes darted around the patio, and she pointed to the grill. “Go hide behind that.”

Rushing off, I slunk down behind the grill and peeked around the edge, watching my mother walk outside. Usually, she'd wear her "teacher attire" to school, which consisted of a cardigan, a floral shirt, pants, and a pair of flats. Today, however, she looked cute wearing a pair of bright green pants, a polka dot sweater, and silver shoes with her chocolate-colored hair pulled back in a low ponytail.

"Hey, honey," Mom said, hugging Reagan. "I didn't know you were stopping by today."

Reagan grinned wide. "Thought I'd bring you a present."

Our mother started to speak, but I jumped out of my hiding spot. "Surprise!"

She jerked around, and her eyes bugged out of her head when she spotted me. "Oh, my God," she cried, slapping a hand over her mouth. Tears formed in her eyes, and she ran to me, flinging her arms around my shoulders. "What are you doing here?"

Sadly, I couldn't tell her the whole truth. "I have a job in San Francisco next weekend. I figured I'd fly in early and visit everyone, and maybe stay around for a while."

Mom let me go and wiped away her tears. "Where are you staying?"

"With me," Reagan answered.

I could see the sadness in my mother's gaze. "But I was thinking of staying here a few nights," I offered, knowing it'd appease her. "That is if you'll have me?"

My mother hugged me again. "Stay as long as you want."

"When's Dad coming home?" Reagan asked. "I left the gym an hour ago, and he was

still there.”

Our mother glanced down at her smartwatch. “He should be home any minute. I just got off the phone with him about fifteen minutes ago.”

A few seconds later, we heard the vroom of a sport bike down the street. Lifting my brows, I met my mother’s gaze. “Is that seriously him?”

Laughing, she grabbed mine and Reagan’s arms. “Old habits die hard, I guess. Sometimes I think he still believes he’s twenty-six years old.”

We walked inside to the living room. “Uncle Cam is the same way. He rode his motorcycle to the gym today too,” Reagan divulged.

Our mother stayed between us and kept hold of our arms. “Come on. Let’s surprise him.”

When our father walked in from the garage, he tossed his keys onto the kitchen counter. He lifted his eyes to us, making my heart happy when I watched the joy shine in his smile. He was still as handsome as he was when he was younger. I’d seen pictures of him when he was my age, his hair dark because he didn’t want people thinking he was his twin. Those days were long gone. Now that he was in his mid-fifties, he still had all his natural dirty blond tresses, but there were wisps of gray peeking through in some spots. Be that as it may, I wasn’t about to tell him that.

“Well, it’s about damn time I have all my girls in one place.”

Stepping away from my mom and Reagan, I opened my arms and hugged him tightly. “I’ve really missed you, Dad,” I murmured.

His shoulders shook with laughter. “I’ve missed you too. It’s good to have you home,

baby.”

I wanted to tell him all that was going on, but instead, I chose to forget it. I didn’t want anything to spoil this time with my family. For all I knew, the letter was an evil prank. I could think about it and pretend everything was okay, but I knew it wasn’t.

CARTER

Everything Braden told me about Emma had me unsettled. Even the beer I guzzled down didn't help. Grabbing another one, I headed outside and stood on the diving board to get a good view of the ocean. Braden said he could tell Emma was scared, but she tried to pretend otherwise when she showed everyone the letter. I wished like hell I was there.

The need to protect Emma heightened in my blood, demanding me to do something. But what? Emma wanted nothing to do with me. She left and we went our separate ways. Setting my beer down, I hung my head. Who the fuck was I kidding? We never went our separate ways; my mind constantly drifted to thoughts of her. No matter how hard I tried to forget, nothing worked. How long would I be able to fight it? I'd done it for four years now, and it grew harder every damn second of every damn day.

"Fuck," I hissed, pulling out my phone. I scrolled through my contacts until I found Brooks' name. I pressed send, and the line rang and rang.

I was about to hang up and try again, but he answered. "Hey, man. Congrats on the fight."

"Thanks," I said, getting up to pace around the pool. "I was wondering if you could stop by."

"Sure. Is everything okay?"

A long sigh escaped from my lips. "Braden told me about Emma."

“Ah, I see,” Brooks replied, his tone unreadable. “I’ll be there in fifteen.”

Staring down the beach at all the homes, I couldn’t help but wonder if Emma was at her parents’ house. They weren’t far away, just about a half-mile down. A part of me wanted to walk that way to see if I could get a glimpse of her. But then, the reality was that it’d only make things worse. Emma was the one who left all those years ago, and I didn’t stop her. How could I? What we had wasn’t exclusive. She had her own life in New York, and I had mine in California. It wasn’t long after she moved when I saw her in the tabloids, holding onto the arm of some douchebag hockey player. After that, I stopped giving a shit and began doing whatever and whoever the fuck I wanted. It was fun, and I enjoyed every minute of it ... until now.

All I could think about was Emma. It was as if the wall I’d built inside me had crashed down, exposing my true feelings, the feelings I’d kept buried. My phone beeped, and I started for the back door, thinking it would be Brooks, but I was wrong. The name that popped up said it was Hailey.

Hailey: I’m horny. You free tonight?

Who the hell was Hailey? If memory served me, I believed she was a girl I fucked a couple of weeks ago, but I couldn’t be sure. That was how it had been the past few years, just an endless parade of women whose names I couldn’t remember.

I typed back a reply.

Carter: Busy tonight. Sorry.

Another text came in with a sad emoji face, and I didn’t bother responding. Finally, the doorbell rang, and I hurried inside to let Brooks in. He stepped inside, and I closed the door behind him. Brooks was the spitting image of his father and twin brother with their golden blond hair and blue eyes. People in the MMA world had

hoped to have another Twins of Terror duo, just like his father and Ryley, but Brooks shocked us when he decided to pursue an FBI career. I was happy for him.

“Thanks for coming,” I said, extending my hand.

Brooks shook it. “No problem. I’m glad you called. I think I can use your help.”

I motioned for him to continue to the kitchen. “Oh yeah? How so?”

Once in the kitchen, I fetched him a beer out of the fridge, and he twisted off the cap. “I’ve got a time reserved to visit Scar next week. I thought about questioning him myself, but he hates my dad more than anyone. That’s why I think it could be you.”

Brows furrowed, I stared at him curiously. “Why me?”

Brooks downed a gulp of his beer. “Because you’re a legend at the prison. My friend told me the inmates watched your fight this past weekend. And also, Scar doesn’t have issues with your father. He had nothing to do with the Dark Side. Therefore, you’re not on his shit list.”

It wasn’t a bad idea, but ...

“What makes you think he’ll tell me anything?” I questioned.

“That’s the thing about Scar,” Brooks replied, scoffing with disgust. “He wants people to know he’s coming. So if he’s the one going after Emma, he’ll say it.”

Fists clenched tight, I could feel the anger well up inside me. “And if Scar confesses to that, I won’t be able to stop from pounding his head into the table.”

Brooks shook his head. “You can’t do that, Reynolds. Out of all the guys you’re the

only one I'd consider taking with me. Right now, you're the safe zone and someone Scar doesn't have a grudge with. If Emma needs to be staying with someone, it should be you."

His words caught me off guard, making me think things I shouldn't. What if it did come down to me being the one to watch over her? Emma would never agree to it. But if she did ... I'd be in some serious trouble. Having Emma alone to myself? God, help me.

Brooks finished his beer and tossed it in the trash. "Think you can handle this?"

"I know I can," I affirmed.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:11 am

Nodding, Brooks pulled out his car keys. “It’s settled then. I’ll keep you informed.” He started toward the front door and chuckled, but there was no humor to it. “You know, you wouldn’t believe the kind of shit my dad told me. Honestly, I’m surprised he’s still alive with all the enemies I know he still has.”

His father was a hated man, that was for sure. But then again, he found his redemption and became a better person. Everyone made mistakes. Brooks opened the front door, and I leaned against the frame as he walked to his vehicle.

“Let me know if anything changes before next week.”

Brooks hopped in his truck. “Will do.”

As I watched him leave, my phone rang. Groaning, I pulled it out of my pocket, wondering if it was Hailey again or someone else wanting a booty call. I never thought there’d come a day when I’d dread that. Luckily, when I peered down at the screen, it turned out to be my sister.

“Hey,” I answered.

Aleah’s chipper voice came through the phone. “Hello, hello. I got some good news for you.”

I could use that about now. “Let’s hear it.”

Aleah giggled. “You’re going to love this.”

EMMA

SAN FRANCISCO

Instead of booking a hotel, I stayed with Aleah at her gorgeous San Francisco condo with a distant view of the Golden Gate Bridge. Her place reminded me of my apartment in New York and had a clean and airy ambiance, with bright white walls and cabinets. It was the perfect place to relax. I wished I could've stayed longer.

Now, we were on our way downtown for the photoshoot for her magazine. She wouldn't tell me who the article was about, only that I had to pose with him. Modeling with strangers was something I was used to, so it didn't bother me.

Catching up with Aleah was something I didn't realize I needed. We went out on the town and grabbed some sushi before staying up all hours watching Bridgerton. After the week I had, it was fun being able to go out and let loose. The guys wanted someone to travel with me, but I refused. I'd been surrounded by them all week, and I needed a break. How did I manage to keep from seeing Carter? I don't know.

The main thing was staying away from Fightanium. Most of my days were spent hanging out at my parents' house until my mom got home from work, and then we'd go shopping while Reagan and Ethan trained at the gym with our father. Our nighttime routine was my favorite of all. After dinner, my dad and I would sit by the pool and talk every night. We reminisced about all the fun times we had at the mountain house and how I used to love four-wheeling with him when I was younger.

There were times when I'd try to bring up his past just to get a little insight on what I

could be dealing with, but he'd close himself off. I knew it was because he thought he was protecting me, maybe even scared I'd see him differently. People make mistakes and do stupid things all the time. Hell, I know I had. Nevertheless, nothing would ever make me love him less. I knew he was a good man, and he'd do anything to protect his family.

"We're here," Aleah announced, drawing me out of my inner thoughts.

She tucked her dark hair behind her ears, and a smile jotted across her lips. Aleah was a year younger than me and talented in many ways, especially with words. When both of my mother's parents passed away, she wrote the most beautiful eulogies for them and the sweetest poem I'd ever read. My mom had it framed and displayed in her office; I've looked at it over a dozen times this past week.

Aleah pulled into the parking garage of a massive building and parked. We took the elevator to the main lobby, and from there, we rode another one to the top floor where her office was located. When we walked inside her corner paradise, I gaped in awe at the vision that greeted me; she had the best view of the Golden Gate Bridge and the bay.

"I could stand here for hours and just look out this window," I gushed.

Aleah chuckled as she closed her office door. "I've done that a time or two." She walked over to her closet, pulled out a large white bag, and set it on her desk. "Your wardrobe for today, my friend."

Peeking inside the bag, I could see a pair of black spandex shorts and a black sports bra with a pink band underneath the breasts that wrapped around the back. Aleah pushed the bag toward me. "You're going to look gorgeous as always. Get dressed, and then I'll take you to hair and makeup. The photoshoot will be on the roof with the bridge in the background."

“Nice,” I exclaimed excitedly. I unbuttoned my jeans and slid them down my legs, earning a snort of laughter from Aleah. “What?” I asked, standing before her in only my underwear and tank top.

Aleah’s gaze fixated on my underwear. “You need to take those granny panties off. Can’t be having underwear lines.”

“Seriously?” I countered with a smirk, posing for her in my “granny panties”, as she called them. “I kind of like my underwear. It’s comfortable.”

Aleah clasped a hand over her mouth to drown out her riotous laughter. “Yeah, I bet they are. They practically swallow you whole.”

Rolling my eyes, I took off my panties and slid on the black spandex shorts. “I constantly have to model in underwear that rides up my ass. It hurts my sensitive butt crack,” I joked, making her laugh harder.

Aleah waved a hand in front of her face to dry her tears. “You’re killing me, Emma. But no, I get it. I have my own granny panties at home.”

She busied herself with papers on her desk while I slipped into the sports bra. “On my days off, I wear things for comfort. Sadly, I haven’t gotten much of that recently. So it’s been refreshing this week to lay low.”

Aleah nodded in agreement. “I understand that.”

Now that I was dressed, I twirled around for her. “Am I good?”

She beamed. “Perfect.” But then, she went back to looking through her papers.

“So, you never told me what you’re writing about to go along with this photoshoot,” I

said, curious to find out who I'd be modeling with.

A smile lit up her face, but she had yet to look at me. "I didn't?"

"No. Care to tell me?" I coaxed. "Am I modeling with someone else?"

Aleah giggled, and I didn't know if I liked the sound; it was playful yet sneaky. "You'll see. There are actually two men you'll be taking pictures with."

I gasped. "Two? Oh, this should be fun."

With a twinkle in her honey-colored eyes, she winked. "I hope so. Now come on. You have to get your hair and makeup done." I followed her down the hall to an office where a woman and a man were inside, standing by a dressing room station complete with rows of various makeup palettes and hair products. The woman had an angelic face and very short platinum blonde hair, reminding me of what I'd imagine Tinkerbell to look like. And the man had perfectly coifed dark hair and was wearing a snug purplish-gray T-shirt with skinny jeans, and was holding a hairbrush.

Aleah flourished a hand from me to them. "Emma, this is Starr and Danny. They'll get you beautified and ready for the camera."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

Danny extended a hand and pulled me over to the chair. “Honey, you are one lucky woman. I’d give anything to model with”

“Shhhh,” Aleah interrupted him with a finger to her lips. “It’s supposed to be a surprise.”

My curiosity was piqued beyond belief. I wanted to know what was going on. Glaring at Aleah through the reflection in the mirror, I pursed my lips playfully. “Why won’t you tell me? Friends aren’t supposed to keep secrets.”

Eyes twinkling, Aleah looked at me and winked. “See ya on the roof.”

She hurried out quickly, and Starr stepped in front of me, dabbing my face with foundation and smoothing it in. “Who’s this guy I’m modeling with?” I inquired, curious to see if she’d tell me now that Aleah was gone.

Starr snickered. “It’s two guys, remember? And there’s one I’d give anything to have a night with. The other is, unfortunately, taken. Or so I’ve heard.” She bit her lip and shrugged. “Guess it all depends.”

I had no clue what she was talking about. “Depends on what?”

Starr and Danny smirked at each other through the reflection in the mirror, but Danny was the one who spoke up. “Aleah will kill me if I spill. You’re just going to have to wait and find out.”

Confusion swept through me, and no amount of trying to figure it all out was helping.

Who the hell would Aleah be excited for me to model with? And why all the secrecy?
I'd never been nervous before in any of my modeling jobs, but now I was petrified.

EMMA

Starr and Danny said no more about the two men. I expected to see them when they escorted me to the roof, but it was just the photographer and Aleah with various lights set up all around.

Aleah waved me over and pointed to a spot in front of the camera. “Chris wants to snap a few photos to check the lighting.”

Chris smiled and waved at me. He was tall, bald, and looked to be in his mid-forties with a nicely trimmed dark beard and glasses. When I joined them, he gestured toward one of the black dots on the ground.

“Emma, just stand on that middle dot for me, please. You don’t have to do anything but stand there,” Chris advised.

I did as he said and looked around at all the views, hearing the camera snap a few times. With all the suspense, my heart started to race again. “Where are the guys?” I asked Aleah.

Aleah tried to hide her grin when she glanced down at her phone. “Here in just a sec.”

About that time, the door opened, and my mouth dropped when I got a good look at the man who walked out. Beaming, Aleah clapped her hands excitedly, but all I could do was stare in complete and utter shock. Bare-chested and dressed in low-cut jeans with mussed-up dirty blond hair and electric blue eyes was none other than my ex-boyfriend and famous hockey player, Ryan Grainger.

He walked over to Aleah and kissed her cheek as if they'd been best friends all their lives; I didn't know they knew each other. Be that as it may, Aleah did have connections to all sorts of athletes, so it shouldn't surprise me that they were acquainted. "Thanks for setting this up for me," Ryan said to her.

Ryan and I had dated on and off for the past two years. Our schedules always conflicted, and we never saw each other. Did I enjoy our time together? Most certainly, but he was a huge flirt. Even though he never got caught, I had no doubt he snuck around with other women while we were together. At the same time, I wasn't in love with him, so I never let it get to me. It was hard for someone to hurt you when they didn't have your heart.

"What's going on you two?" I called out.

Ryan ran over and hoisted me in his arms, making me shriek. "You are so fucking beautiful, Emma. I've missed you so much." He set me down and winked over at Aleah. "Aleah's writing a piece on me, and I wanted you with me for the photoshoot. I thought it could break the ice between us." A smirk spread across his lips, and he laughed. "Okay, that pun kind of slipped in there."

Rolling my eyes, I couldn't help but giggle. "It was kind of cheesy."

Ryan slid his arms around my waist. "What I'm saying is that I really have missed you. I want to give us another shot."

Before I could tell him I didn't think it would work out, the roof door opened, and my eyes locked on a familiar emerald gaze. I hated how my heart gunned into overdrive at the sight of him, dressed only in a pair of black athletic shorts with his upper body smooth and bare, showing off his well-toned muscles. Hands covered in red hand wraps, he looked like he was about to step into the ring. I loathed myself for wanting him, desiring him. I'd done my best to avoid Carter, and now he was here, his angry

gaze locked on Ryan, who still had his arms around me.

CARTER

Motherfucker. What was this horseshit?

Aleah bounced over to me and flung her arms around my neck. “You’re early! Good, this gives you and Emma time to catch up before your photoshoot. I knew she’d be perfect for the job. You two have always been comfortable with each other.”

Clenching my teeth, I watched as Emma posed with her cunt of an ex. He had his hands all over her as they posed for the pictures; I wanted to rip his arms off. “You failed to mention any of this to me,” I huffed.

“Hey,” Aleah said, squeezing my wrist. I tore my gaze away from Emma and focused on her. Aleah’s smile faded as she glanced back and forth between the three of us. “Am I missing something? Why are you mad? I thought you’d like working with Emma.”

My attention went back to Emma, and I couldn’t tear my eyes off her. Her bare skin shimmered in the sun, and her dark hair now had caramel wisps that weren’t there before. I could almost remember how it felt to touch her and have her nails rake down my back as she screamed out my name. I have always wanted her, and now she was right in front of me in another man’s arms, the arms of someone I knew had been with her the way I had. And now, I had to watch him touch her as if she was his.

“Carter, talk to me,” Aleah demanded, her voice low. “I’ve never seen you this angry. What’s going on?”

The photographer directed Ryan and Emma to change positions, and Ryan moved even closer to her. I had to force myself to look away before I lost my shit.

“I wasn’t expecting Emma to be here, much less with that prick,” I hissed.

Aleah stepped in front of me. “Ryan’s not that bad. He wants Emma back and thought this would work.”

“He’s a fucking tool. He doesn’t deserve her,” I fired back.

Aleah pinned me with her honey-toned stare, crossing her arms over her chest. “And who does? You?”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” I spat out quickly.

A slow, wry smile spread across her face. “It’s not what you’re saying but how you’re acting.” She peered over at Ryan and Emma again. “I mean, correct me if I’m wrong, but you’re seriously giving off the jealousy vibes right now.” When I didn’t respond, her eyes widened in understanding. “Oh my God, you have a thing for Emma. I had my suspicions years ago but never saw anything happen.”

My jaw muscles hurt from clenching my teeth so hard. “That’s because we didn’t let anyone see it.”

Aleah sucked back a gasp. “Have you two like ...” She waved her hands in front of her as if she was trying to find the right words. “Gotten close?” she finished. Again, my silence was her answer. Her mouth gaped, and she grabbed her chest. “Holy shit, you have. And here I am flaunting her in front of you with another guy. I’m so sorry.”

She couldn’t be blamed for this.

I shrugged. “Emma left for New York, and I went my own way. It’s fine. We haven’t spoken in a long time.”

Groaning, Aleah shook her head incredulously. “First off, I’m going to kill you for not telling me any of this. And second,” she griped, holding up her hands, “I got this. I’m team Carter all the way.”

“What are you going to do?” I wondered.

Aleah winked. “Getting you what you want. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know what that is.”

She strolled over to the photographer and stepped in between Ryan and Emma so she could hug him. Emma refused to look at me again, but she was about to have no choice. Aleah waved me over, and I made my way to her and Emma.

Ryan marched toward me with a warning glare in his eyes. “Carter Reynolds. Great fight the other night.”

Did he mean it? No chance in hell. “Thanks,” I replied dryly.

He stepped in my way before I could get to Emma. “I saw the way you were looking at my girl. She’s off-limits, got it?”

Lips pulled back in a fake smile, I spoke through gritted teeth. “If you don’t get out of my way, I will break your fucking face.”

Ryan glowered at me, but I didn’t let my grin falter. Reluctantly, he moved out of the way, and Aleah laughed nervously when she came to my side. “All right, let’s get you two started. I’m going to take Ryan to my office so I can finish his interview.”

Grumbling under his breath, Ryan tensed and flexed his muscles, which broadened my grin. Once he walked away with Aleah, I turned my gaze to Emma, and the tension spiked between us. She still had yet to look at me.

The photographer waved me over. “Okay, you two,” he called out to Emma and me. “Let’s try a couple of different poses. Carter, why don’t you stand with your back to me and turn your head to the right so I can see your side profile. I want it to look as if you’re focused solely on Emma.” I stepped in front of the camera and did as he said, only nothing could take my attention off Emma. She was so close, yet so far away. “Good,” Chris acknowledged with excitement in his tone. “Now I want you to wrap your arm around Emma’s waist as she faces the camera. Emma, sweetheart, I need you to move closer to Carter.”

Emma huffed under her breath, but it wasn’t out of disgust ... it was nervousness. I could sense it all around her. Out of all these years we’d been apart, she still wanted me the way I wanted her. She just didn’t want to admit it.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

She moved closer, and I slid my right arm around her waist, drawing her into my side. “It’s nice to see you too, Emma,” I murmured low. “It’s been four years, and this is what it’s come down to?”

Emma snapped her head to the side, glaring at me with her sea-green eyes. “Please. Have you honestly missed me?”

She had no clue. Before I could respond, the photographer cleared his throat. “Am I interrupting?”

Plastering on a smile, Emma held up her hands. “No, of course not. We’re ready.”

Emma slid closer to my side, and I held her tighter, watching her face as she posed for the camera. She hadn’t changed much in four years, but she was still the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen.

“I see your ex wants you back,” I said.

Emma rolled her eyes. “Like you care. You’ve had plenty of women to keep you busy over the years.”

There was jealousy in her voice, and it riled me up. Leaning in close, I breathed her in, loving the familiar scent of her strawberry shortcake lotion. “Yeah, but none of them were you.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

EMMA

Out of all the jobs I've had to do in my lifetime, this one was the hardest. I couldn't concentrate with Carter's hands on me. My photoshoot with Ryan only lasted a few minutes, but it felt like an eternity with Carter.

Chris clapped his hands. "All right, we're done. You two sure did steam up my camera."

Heat rising to my cheeks, I walked away to put distance between Carter and me, but he followed close on my heels. "We need to talk," he demanded.

I jerked around, wishing like hell I didn't have to look in his eyes. They were easy to get lost in, which was the last thing I needed right now. "About what?" I challenged, knowing he would keep following me if I didn't acknowledge him. "You have your own life, and I have mine. Isn't that what you wanted?"

Carter's eyes darkened as he looked down at me, his body towering over mine. "It's what you wanted too. Or am I wrong? You seem pissed, and for the life of me, I don't know why. I did exactly what you wanted."

That wasn't true. At the time, I was too afraid to tell Carter what I truly wanted. It was best to cut ties and lose him for good than really get my heart broken. Sadly, who was I kidding? It broke anyway.

A laugh escaped my lips, but there was no humor to it. "That's for damn sure. The second I left for New York, you ended up cock deep in every woman you could get

your hands on.”

Carter stepped closer, and I had no choice but to back up. “And you ended up with that fucktard downstairs. Are you two getting back together?”

The audacity was mind-boggling. Carter had no right to be angry about anything. Crossing my arms over my chest, I shot him a nasty glare. “That’s none of your business.”

The door opened, and Aleah came out, carrying my bag. What was she doing? She waved at me with a sheepish grin on her face. “Hey, girl. I’m going to be a while finishing up the interview with Ryan. Do you mind if Carter gives you a ride back to my place?”

“Wait, what?” I gasped, panic rising in my chest. “No, that’s not going to work.”

“Please,” she begged. “I don’t want you having to stay here. You’ll be bored out of your mind.”

Shaking my head, I said no a million times, but she completely ignored me. Aleah handed my bag to me and quickly took off for the door, waving as she hurried away. “I’ll see you later,” she shouted, the door shutting behind her.

Everything happened so fast that all I could do was stand there in shock. “This can’t be happening.” But once the shock wore off, I stormed to the door. “I’m calling a cab.”

Carter ran up beside me and slammed the door when I tried to open it. “No, you’re not.”

My eyes burned so hot I could feel the fire in my veins. “Like hell, I’m not. Get out

of my way, Carter.”

He kept his hand on the door. “I heard about the letter, Emma. It’s not safe for you to be out and about alone.”

Of course, someone had to tell him. “I’m fine,” I snapped. “I can take care of myself. If you want me to show you, I can.” Carter smirked, and I shook my head. “Never mind. You’d probably like that too much.”

Carter shrugged. “Maybe so. But right now, you’re coming with me, even if I have to haul you over my shoulder and carry you right past your boyfriend. That’ll end up a giant fucking mess. He’s already told me you’re off-limits. I’d hate to have to break his legs before his next game.”

Carter had always been true to his word, and I had no doubt he wouldn’t hesitate to follow through on his threat. I couldn’t let that happen. “Fine,” I grumbled. “Take me to Aleah’s. The sooner we get out of here, the faster I can get away from you.” Carter opened the door, and we stepped into the elevator, his body so achingly close. “Seriously? Can you give me some space?”

“Nope. I like where I’m standing,” he countered, his tone smug.

Much to my dismay, I liked it too. “You’re such a pain in the ass.”

Carter chuckled, his laugh sending shivers through my body. “Me being this close never bothered you before.”

I didn’t want to hate Carter, but I did. Yes, I decided to move to New York, and I knew something serious wouldn’t work between us, not when he was about to start competing in the UFC. The distance would’ve torn us apart. I never realized how angry and bitter I’d become seeing him with all those different women. Over time, it

was easier to despise him than hold onto my true feelings.

When the elevator doors opened, I stepped out into the lobby and glanced over at Carter, still bare-chested in his athletic shorts. “Don’t you have some clothes you can change into?”

“Yep,” he answered. “That’s why you’re coming with me to the hotel.”

I stopped right in the middle of the lobby floor. “I’m not doing that.”

Carter turned around, his face grave as he moved closer. “Believe it or not, Emma, but I’m honest to God, truly worried about you.” Quickly, he glimpsed around at the people in the lobby who’d all stopped to watch us. “Now that I’m here,” he said, his voice smooth and deep, “I’m not leaving you alone for something to happen to you.”

His protectiveness was what made me fall for him in the first place. He had always been the serious one out of our group, but he was gentle when he needed to be. Hearing his words only confused me more.

“Why do you care?” I breathed.

Carter brushed a thumb over my cheek. “Because I do.”

* * *

The ride to the hotel was silent until a call from Ryan came through. I didn’t want to answer it, but I knew I couldn’t ignore him, not after what happened today.

“Hey, Ryan,” I answered.

“Hey. I thought we could go out tonight. You up for it?”

Carter’s grip on his steering wheel tightened, and I knew it was because he could hear every word. As much as I wanted to deny it, I found his jealousy sexy.

Blowing out a sigh, I closed my eyes. “I’m sorry, Ryan, but I’m not feeling very well. I’m heading out early for L.A. tomorrow.”

Ryan huffed. “So, I guess that means you’re done with me? There’s no chance of us getting back together?”

I didn’t want to hurt him, and it killed me having to turn him down. The truth of the matter was that he’d be able to find someone with the snap of his fingers. He wouldn’t be heartbroken for long over me.

Leaning my head against the headrest, I opened my eyes and looked out the sunroof

of Carter's silver Range Rover at the blue sky above. "I'm sorry, Ryan. The timing's not good right now."

"You're with him, aren't you? What makes him better than me?" Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the smirk on Carter's face.

"Right now, nothing," I replied. "I'm just not in the mood to deal with any of this. You're a great guy, you truly are. But, honestly, I'm not ready for a relationship, simple as that."

Ryan blew out a defeated sigh. "I understand. Call me if you change your mind."

Relief spread through me, putting me at ease. I didn't want this deal with Ryan to drag on. "I will," I uttered, knowing I never would. "Be safe on your way back to New York."

"Always."

He hung up, and I slid my phone back into my bag, holding up a hand to cut Carter off; I knew he was about to speak. "Not a word. I don't want to hear it," I warned.

Carter stayed quiet the whole way to the hotel and even when we walked inside to the elevators. There were so many unspoken words between us. I wanted to tell him how I truly felt, but it wouldn't matter. As soon as I had the okay to return to New York, I'd be gone, putting us back at square one. All of this would be pointless.

The elevator dropped us off on Carter's floor, and I followed him to his room. He swiped the key card and opened the door, waiting for me to enter first. I walked in and went straight to the window, my body feeling as if I was going to explode with all the emotions warring inside me.

Carter's reflection appeared in the window behind me. "What happened to us, Emma?"

"We grew up," I whispered.

He moved closer, and I could feel the heat of his body. "That's not it. We were close. I was your first kiss, and you were mine."

The memories flooded back, and it hurt my heart to think about them. They were special times, times I thought he'd forgotten. We were just kids when he gave me my first kiss. It happened on one of the many vacations our families took together. This time we were in Miami, Florida, on the hotel roof. Our parents had rented out the penthouse, which included the entire rooftop, where we had a private pool and hot tub. He was twelve, and I was ten, and Braden always joked that he would be my first kiss. Carter refused to let that happen. When no one was looking, he kissed me; it was one of the sweetest moments of my life. I thought it would always be like that.

Even though our first kiss was a monumental occasion in my life, it wasn't the memory my mind kept hold of. Another memory ranked higher on the scales. Not only was Carter my first kiss, but he was my first love in all ways.

"We changed, Carter. We're not the same two kids who'd sneak off and steal kisses in the closets behind our parents' back."

Carter traced a finger over my shoulder and swept my hair to the side. "And I guess we're not the same two people who made love for the first time in my bed." His lips touched the back of my neck and I jerked away, my chest trembling recklessly. Carter tried to grab my arm, but I moved away too quickly. "Why do you keep running away from me?"

The throbbing of my heart pounded in my ears, and I felt as if I'd burst. "It's because

I hate you,” I shouted. “I hate what you’ve become and what you’ve done. I hate ...”

Turning my back on him, I grabbed my chest, despising myself for letting him see my pain. My eyes burned like hot coals as the tears fell down my cheeks.

Carter’s voice softened, the sound of regret plaguing his words. “You don’t like that I’ve been with other women.” It was more of a statement rather than a question.

“Yes,” I confessed. “I hate the thought of you touching them the way you touched me.” Carter gently wrapped his arms around my waist. All the resentment I’d harbored in my heart left me at that moment. The fight was gone and what was left was an open wound that needed to be healed.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

“I’ve never touched them the way I would you, Emma,” Carter murmured. “I was in love with you. And seeing you again makes me realize I never stopped.” He turned me around, and I looked into his greenish amber eyes. “It wasn’t easy seeing you in the tabloids with other men either. The only way to get over you was to replace you.”

“Did it work?” I asked.

Carter gently wiped the tears from my cheeks. “Never.”

His touch sent shockwaves through every nerve ending in my body. It was intoxicating and something I’d craved for the past four years. Shaking my head, I tried to back away, but he held me firm. “We can’t do this, Carter.”

Carter leaned in, his lips only a breath away. “Says who?”

I didn’t have an answer, only the burning need to feel him near me, especially when his lips touched mine. My body melted against his bare-chested body, and he pulled me in tight, deepening the kiss.

“Say you’ll stay,” he growled, his voice thick with need.

My mind screamed at me to say no, but I couldn’t say it—the craving to have him outweighed all sense of logic. Carter kissed me again, his tongue exploring every inch of my mouth.

Tightening my grip around him, I decided to give in. I didn’t want to think about tomorrow or how hard it would be when I went back to New York. All I desired was

this one moment with him. To hell with the consequences.

“Okay. I’ll stay.”

A satisfied moan rumbled in his chest. Picking me up in his arms, he carried me over to the bed and laid me down, the sheets white and crisp beneath me. Carter stood and slowly undid his hand wraps, tossing them onto the floor while I took off my sports bra and shorts. His gaze turned raw when he noticed there was no underwear underneath.

“You’re killing me, Emma. I’m glad I didn’t know that earlier. The photographer would’ve seen a lot more than he bargained for,” he said, lowering his shorts. He was already hard between his legs, making my insides throb.

Carter kept his eyes locked on mine as he crawled across the bed, and my body trembled with anticipation. I’d never felt this level of need with anyone other than Carter. Spreading my legs with his knee, he trailed his tongue up my body, from my clit up to my breasts, and circled them both before biting down on one of my nipples. “God, I’ve missed you. The way you taste. Everything.”

Taking his face in my hands, I kissed his lips, tasting my desire. I didn’t want to think of this as just a one-night stand, but it couldn’t be anything else. “If you only knew,” I whispered back.

He grabbed his cock, and we both watched as he gently circled his tip around my opening, getting it wet before pushing in slightly, inch by inch. I missed the fullness of having him inside me; there was no greater pleasure. Closing my eyes, I trailed my fingers up his back and down his arms, loving how his muscles flexed and tightened under my touch. I felt safe in his arms, protected. “I love it when you touch me,” he murmured heatedly.

His warm breath tickled my skin as he kissed his way up my neck and over my cheek to my lips. Then, with his hands on both sides of my face, he held me firm as he kissed me, harder and deeper with each thrust between my legs. My orgasm slowly began to build, and even more so when Carter lowered a hand to my breast and squeezed, massaging it hard. It felt good when he pinched my nipples—the pleasure and pain of it always sent shock waves down below.

Carter pushed deeper inside of me, holding me tight. He was making love to me, slow and gentle, and I didn't want it to end. No one knew how to make love to me the way he did. I didn't want to leave him in California and go back to New York, knowing things would go back to how they were. I thought I hated him, but what I hated more was not being with him. Unfortunately, our lives weren't on the same path.

“I love it when you touch me too,” I breathed, tears welling in my eyes.

Still pushing deep inside of me, Carter lifted his head and gently kissed my lips. “We can have this, Emma. I promise you, we can.” I wanted to believe him, but it wasn't possible. Tonight, however, I planned to lose myself in his arms and enjoy every caress. Because once morning came, everything would change.

Carter wiped away my tears and picked up his pace, thrusting harder. I could see the pain in his eyes, and he wanted me to see it. He needed me to know that none of what happened between us was easy on him either.

Listening to the deep groans in his chest, I knew he was close. Wrapping my legs around his waist, I thrust my hips against him and arched my back when he lowered his lips to my breasts, suckling each one. The harder he sucked, the closer I got.

“Carter,” I moaned.

He fisted his hands in my hair, pulling tight as his pace picked up. After a couple

more thrusts, my body exploded. Digging my nails in his back, I screamed out my pleasure as Carter growled in my ear, pulsating as he released inside of me. Breathing hard, he kissed me softly and turned over on his back, taking me with him so I was straddling him. He was still hard inside of me, and he was ready for more by the smile on his face.

I needed more too.

EMMA

I woke up with a gasp, my heart beating relentlessly in my chest. Carter was asleep behind me, his arm wrapped securely around my waist, holding me close. I never should've let things go so far, but I couldn't resist. I missed Carter's touch, the way he smelled, and how he'd hold me protectively in his arms. But sadly, morning had finally come, and a decision had to be made.

Do I stay, or do I go?

Life would be so much easier if I left. Staying put my heart at risk, and I couldn't open myself up to that again. Hell, I was already screwed because I knew my heart would split right through the middle once I left.

Carefully, I slid out of Carter's arms and quickly fumbled through my bag for the jeans and tank top I wore yesterday. When I glanced down at my phone, there was a gazillion missed calls and texts from Aleah. But as I scrolled through her messages, she knew exactly what her brother and I were doing. She just asked that I call her before heading back to Los Angeles.

Carter shifted in the bed, and I held my breath as I got dressed. If he were to wake up, there was no way he'd let me leave. My heart wouldn't let me either because I knew I'd give in when I looked into his eyes. It killed me to walk out now.

It was still dark outside, which worked to my advantage. The only light in the room came from the alarm clock on the dresser. Grabbing my bag, I tiptoed to the door and gently opened it. My heart went into full gear, pumping so hard it made me

lightheaded. I stepped out into the hallway and shut the door; the only sound was a slight click. Once I was safely out, and in the elevator, I breathed a sigh of relief. I didn't know what I would do when I got back to Los Angeles. Carter wasn't going to just give up on me. Do I really want him to? My traitorous heart said no. He let me go before without so much as a fight to keep me. With that being said, I didn't help matters when I told him to let me go. He only did what I wished. Guess I couldn't entirely blame him for that.

The elevator dinged, and I hurried into the lobby to the attendant at the front desk, a middle-aged woman with short blonde hair and skin that had seen too much sun. She had a friendly smile and kind brown eyes, eyes that tried their hardest not to focus on the tangled rat's nest on top of my head.

"Hi," I greeted her. "Is there any way you could call a cab for me, please?"

The lady nodded. "Of course." While she busied herself with that, I kept my focus on the elevator, wondering if Carter would burst through at any moment. "Ma'am?"

I jerked my attention to her. "Yes?"

She smiled again. "One will be here shortly. Have a lovely day."

"You too," I said, rushing out the door and pulling out my phone to call Aleah. The sky was still dark, but there was a hint of royal blue in the distance. The sun would be up soon, but it was still early. Aleah most likely wasn't awake.

The line rang a few times, but Aleah's groggy voice answered. "Did you and my brother have fun last night?"

Groaning, I paced along the walkway. "No comment. I'm on my way to your condo to get my stuff. I need to get back to Los Angeles."

“Emma, it’s six in the morning,” she said, her voice dry. “Please tell me you didn’t sneak out of my brother’s bed without his knowledge?”

I froze mid-step. “Maybe.”

“Emma!” she scolded.

“What? I’m not ready to face him after last night. I don’t know what to do.”

Aleah huffed with annoyance. “It’s simple. You tell him how you feel, and he’ll do the same. Then, voila. You can stop fighting against what you want and give in.”

“It’s not that easy,” I fired back.

“Actually, it is. You’re the one making it difficult.”

“The cab’s here,” I said quickly, not wanting to hear anymore. “I’ll be there soon.”

I hung up and threw my phone in the bag before opening the cab door. The driver smiled and glanced at me in the rearview mirror. “Where to?”

I gave him the address, and a few minutes later, we arrived at Aleah’s building. I didn’t expect to find her in the lobby, dressed in pink pajamas with her dark hair in a messy bun and my suitcase at her feet.

Sheepishly, I walked toward her, knowing she was angry. “I love you, Emma, but I’m not happy with you right now. Carter’s going to come after you. I may not know the whole story with you two, but I saw his face yesterday when he watched you on that roof. I’ve never seen him look at another woman like that.”

I reached for my suitcase handle and slid it over to my side. “It doesn’t matter. My

life is in New York, and he is here in California.”

Aleah twitched a shoulder. “If it’s meant to be, that shouldn’t stop you.” She held out the keys to the SUV I borrowed from my dad. “I know you’ll figure this out, Emma.”

After I took the keys, I hugged her hard. “I will. Right now, I just need to think.”

Aleah returned the embrace. “I understand. Go. Maybe you’ll have the answers after your six-hour drive.”

I let her go and said thank you before racing outside to the car. I had to get a head start before Carter noticed I was gone.

CARTER

Emma got in the cab before I could stop her. The second I woke up and saw she wasn't in the room, I knew she'd chosen to run. I raced down to the lobby but was too late; she didn't hear me shout her name. I should've learned not to let my guard down, but I did. I thought after last night, she was mine again. But I was wrong.

After packing up my things, I checked out of the hotel and jumped in my Range Rover to head back to Los Angeles. Emma couldn't be that far ahead of me. I pressed the phone button on my dashboard and tapped Aleah's name. It only rang once before her chipper voice sounded through the speaker.

"I knew you'd call."

"Where is she?"

Aleah sighed. "On her way back to L.A. She just left here a few minutes ago."

I pressed my foot harder on the gas. "What did she say?"

The line went silent for a few seconds, and of course, I imagined the worst. "Emma's scared, Carter," she stated. "She kept babbling on about her life in New York and yours in California. It's an excuse. I love Emma to death, but I think she's afraid of getting hurt."

"So am I," I exclaimed. "It's fucking terrifying to be in love with someone." After I said it, I realized it was the first time I'd admitted that out loud.

Aleah gasped. “You love her? Damn, how much did I miss over the years?”

“A lot,” I admitted. “She was my first in many things.”

Emma was everything to me. When she left for New York, I hated the thought of being with anyone else, but I had to do something to forget about her. I would always regret not fighting to keep what we had. At the time, I didn’t know she wanted me to. We were both to blame.

Aleah’s whistle pierced my ear. “Wow. Everyone’s gonna flip when they find out about you two.”

My fingers clenched hard around the steering wheel. “I wouldn’t go that far. There’ll be nothing to tell if Emma keeps running from me.”

“Well, if it’s any help, my guess is Emma’s probably taking the scenic route home. I know she likes Pebble Beach, so she’ll most likely stop there for a break.”

“Thanks, Aleah.”

“You’re welcome, brother. I hope you find her and talk things out.”

“I hope so too,” I uttered, knowing Emma was the most hardheaded and stubbornly woman I knew. It wasn’t going to be easy.

We hung up, and instead of taking I-580 to I-5 South toward Los Angeles, I hopped onto US-101, which would lead me straight to Highway 1 and Pebble Beach.

I had to find Emma.

* * *

It took about two hours to reach Pebble Beach which was tucked between Pacific Grove and Carmel-by-the-Sea on the Monterey Peninsula. When I pulled up to the parking lot, I recognized Ryley's white Bentley off to the side, away from the other cars. I parked beside it, but Emma wasn't inside.

I pressed Emma's name on the dashboard screen, and the line rang and rang; it didn't surprise me when she failed to answer. My Fightanium baseball cap was in the backseat, so I reached for it and slipped it on before getting out of the car. I had two choices: stay in the parking lot or walk down to the beach and hope that I found Emma. If I stayed, it would guarantee I'd see her. If I left and she came back and saw my vehicle, she'd hightail it out of there. Nevertheless, I was never one to take the easy way out. Plus, I didn't want to wait.

After hitting lock on my key fob, I made my way to the path that led to the beach. The second I stepped onto the sand, I didn't have to look far. She was straight ahead, standing with her bare feet in the water with the wind whipping through her dark hair. There were other people around, but I paid them no mind. All I could see was Emma.

I walked right up to her side, but she focused on the ocean. "I had a feeling Aleah would tell you where I was."

There was so much I wanted to say. But instead, I stood there in silence, blood tearing through my veins. I glanced over at Emma, and like always, she took my breath away.

"My parents used to come here together when they were teenagers," I said, hoping it would put her at ease and break the tension between us. "This is where their love story began."

With a sad smile on her lips, she hugged her stomach. "It's beautiful here, peaceful. I can see how that's true." She looked down at the sand and then back to the water.

“It’s a good place to think.”

“Is that what you need?” I asked her. “Time to think?”

A tear escaped the corner of her eye as she looked up at me. “Maybe we both do. Last night was amazing, and it brought back feelings I hid away deep inside of me.” She uttered a calm laugh, but there was a sadness to it. “I’m scared, Carter. It kills me to admit it, but I am. I like to think I’m not afraid of anything, but with you, I’m terrified.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

It was good to hear her say it out loud. Now all I had to do was prove to her we could make this work. I stepped in front of her, hoping she could see the truth in my eyes. “So am I, Emma. You’re the only girl I’ve ever loved. I want to be with you; I have for as long as I can remember.” The wind blew a strand of her dark hair across her face, and I tucked it behind her ear. “I’m not saying it will be easy, but I want this to work. All we have to do is try. I’m tired of filling the void with people I don’t give a damn about.”

Emma averted her gaze to the sand, and all I wanted to do was pull her into my arms. I didn’t want to give her time, but I didn’t think I had a choice. The more space I gave her, the more I feared she’d come up with other excuses on why we shouldn’t be together. Was I willing to give up parties and fucking countless women? You’re goddamn right I would.

Lifting her head, Emma smiled sadly at me. “Give me until Wednesday, Carter. Three days is all I ask. Let me get back to L.A. and get my mind right.”

“And then what?” I asked.

Her emerald eyes pierced right through mine. “I’ll come find you.”

“You promise not to run away again? Even if things get hard?”

Emma nodded, and I could see the truth in her slight smile. “I promise,” she whispered.

Releasing a heavy sigh, I glanced around the beach at all the people and then settled

my attention back on Emma. Without me, she was alone. “I know you said you can take care of yourself, but being the overprotective ass I am, I want to follow you back to L.A. until you get to your brother’s. I’ll go my own way as soon as you’re there.”

Emma took my hand and leaned into me. “I’m good with that.”

I walked her to her car, not ready to let her go. Three days wasn’t a long time, but it was a fucking eternity when all I craved was to be near her. Regrettably, I had to let her go.

EMMA

With the sand squishing through my toes and the sun beaming down on my skin, I had to say that the May weather in California was sublime. Closing my eyes, I listened to the gentle waves, feeling more at peace with each passing second. Two days had passed since I last saw Carter, and my world had been a whirlwind of emotions. I told him I needed time, and it was almost up. Was I still confused? Absolutely. On the other hand, I'd never felt better.

Reagan tried to get me to join her at the gym, but when I told her I didn't want to see Carter yet, the questions began. I confided in her about everything, and she said she was happy for us, that Carter was one of the good guys. He was, but it didn't change that I was scared to be with him. When I mentioned that to Reagan, she went on and on about facing your fears. That was precisely what I was going to do. It still didn't change the fact I was terrified. Maybe that was how it was for many people, scared to take the leap. It happened with my parents when they were younger, and now, they were happily married.

"Hey, sweetheart," my mother called out. As she approached, I glanced at her over my shoulder; she was dressed in a cream-colored coverup dress over her bathing suit and her favorite floppy hat. "I was looking all over the place for you."

I patted the other side of my towel. "Been right here the whole time."

She sat down on her knees and smiled at me. "What are you doing out here all by yourself?"

“Thinking,” I replied with a shrug of my shoulder.

My mother giggled. “I know that voice. Got some guy trouble?”

That was the understatement of the year. “If you only knew,” I grumbled.

Sliding her legs from under her, my mom settled in beside me, bumping me with her arm. “Tell me.”

Everyone was going to find out sooner or later. For over an hour we talked about Carter and what happened in San Francisco with Ryan and the photoshoot. I left out the details of our sex-filled night, but my mom wasn’t stupid.

My mother’s concerned emerald gaze washed over me. “How long have you and Carter had feelings for each other?”

“Ever since we were kids,” I confessed sheepishly. “He was my first kiss.”

Her eyes doubled in size. “Uh, let’s not tell your father that. I don’t think I want to know the details of that first kiss. I’m sure there’s a lot more where that came from.” Cheeks burning, I slapped a hand over my face and fell back on the towel. My mother burst out laughing and laid down next to me, resting a comforting hand over mine. “Young love. I get it.”

“What was it like when you and dad started dating?” I asked, peering over at her. “Did you trust him?”

A chuckle sprang from her. “Hell, no. A girl had to be stupid to trust one of the Twins of Terror. Your dad and uncle Camden had a horrible reputation with women.”

They were wild, just like Carter had been. “How did you learn to trust him?”

My mother's smile saddened. "Honestly, it was the other way around. I had to fight to get your dad to trust me."

"Really?" I countered, wondering how that was possible. "How so?"

Blowing out a sigh, she averted her attention to the sky. "I'm the one who ran away, Emma. Your dad was the wild card, spontaneous and exciting. I left him for a safer choice, which turned out to be the worst decision of my life. I hurt your dad, and he hated me for it." I could hear the regret in her voice and see it on her face. "It took a long time for him to trust that I wouldn't break his heart again."

It reminded me of what I was doing with Carter. I was running away from him out of fear. "Seeing Carter on TV with women fawning all over him made me hate him for the longest time, Mom. I don't think I can handle the fighter lifestyle he has."

My mother turned back to me and sat up, her hand squeezing mine reassuringly. "Trust me, honey. If Carter cares about you, he's not going to screw up. Personally, I like the young man. Your dad might not when he finds out you're together."

I sat up quickly. "We're not together yet. I plan on talking to Carter tomorrow. He really didn't want to give me these days to myself."

With a roll of her eyes, my mother snickered. "He's impatient just like the rest of them." Then, getting to her feet, she brushed the sand off her dress. "I'm walking back to the house. Are you staying with your sister tonight?"

"Yep," I answered with a nod. "Reagan wants to order takeout and watch a movie."

My mother's smile was beautiful. Everyone always said we looked alike, but I didn't think I held a candle to her. The more I was around her, the more I missed her. "I love you, Emma."

“I love you too, Mom.”

I watched her walk away and then turned my attention to the ocean. Time didn't matter today, not even when another hour passed me by. I had nowhere to be, at least not until Reagan left the gym so we could begin our girls' night. It just so happened that a text came in from her.

Reagan: Leaving the gym in 20. I'm starving so figure out what you want to eat.

Grinning, I brushed the sand off my legs and was about to stand when a guy with sandy blond hair and golden skin and wearing aviator sunglasses ran up, holding out his phone. He looked in his late twenties and somewhat familiar, like I'd seen him before.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

“Excuse me, but have you seen this dog running around? His name’s Jack,” he said, bringing his phone closer. It was a medium-sized apricot-colored mutt with cute brown eyes.

Shaking my head, I peered up at him. “No, I’m sorry. How long has he been missing?”

The guy turned his back to me, and there across his shoulders was a giant dragon tattoo which snaked across his back and shoulders. “Uh, maybe an hour or so. Jack’s never been one not to listen.”

“I hope you find him. I’m sure someone will get him back to you.”

Still with his back to me, he laughed. “Oh, I have no doubt, Emma.”

Shivers raced down my spine, and even though it was hot outside, I was chilled to the bone. “How do you know who I am?”

“I know a lot of things, sweetheart.” I reached for my phone slowly, but he sat down next to me, casually stretching his legs. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you. I’m only here to talk. You’d be wise to smile and pretend we’re having a friendly conversation.”

“Who the fuck are you?” I snapped.

He tilted his head back and laughed. “Wow. Such dirty obscenities out of that pretty mouth of yours. I’m shocked.”

“What can I say?” I fumed. “I’m a fighter at heart.”

The guy scoffed. “Yeah, well, I know about that fighter family of yours. It’s why I’m here.”

My stomach sagged in understanding. “Are you the one who sent the letter?”

He shook his head, still not bothering to look at me. “Nope. That would be a mutual friend. Someone in New York delivered it for him. I’m just here to get the job started.”

Heart pounding in my throat, I swallowed hard. “What job?”

The guy laughed, the sound sinister and evil. “I can’t explain right now. You need to meet me tomorrow.”

“Seriously? Do I look stupid?” I spat, shaking my head incredulously. “I don’t know who the hell you are or who you work for.”

“Yeah, you do,” he replied, turning his sunglasses-covered eyes my way, “and if you don’t meet me, dear ole mommy and daddy will pay the price. Maybe even your sister, but we already have plans for her if you don’t cooperate. This isn’t a game, Emma.”

Gripping a fistful of sand, a mixture of both terror and the need to fight battled inside of me. “Where do you want to meet?”

He glanced around at our surroundings and patted my thigh; it was an intimate touch, and I jerked away. “Right here will be fine,” he said, smirking. “It’ll be a day date, so meet me here at noon. Plenty of people around and so forth. No need to worry about anyone hurting you.” He got up and looked down at me. “If you don’t show, I don’t

think I have to explain what we'll do. The rules are different now; it's not like when your father and the others played the game." He lifted his sunglasses and pierced me with his electric blue gaze. The feeling of familiarity grew stronger like I'd met him before, and there was no way I could forget his eerie presence. "See you tomorrow, Emma. And do me a favor, don't tell anyone about our meeting. I don't want any interference."

His full-toothed grin made everything inside of me tremble with fear. Whatever he wanted from me couldn't be good, and I knew the outcome if I didn't comply. Someone would die if I refused, and I couldn't allow that.

CARTER

Today was the day Emma's supposed to come to me. She hadn't stepped foot in the gym yet, nor tried to call. I'd hoped she would, but she was the stubbornest woman I knew. Even if she didn't want to take the three days away from me, she'd do so just to prove her point.

I had no fucking clue what was going through her head, but I did know that I was ready for the shit to be over. If she wanted me to fight for her, I'd do it in a heartbeat. I couldn't let her leave for New York without knowing she was mine, that she always had been.

My phone rang, and Brooks' name popped up.

"Hey, man," I said, pressing the speaker button.

"You ready?"

I slipped my T-shirt over my head. "Yep." All I had to do was to put on my boots.

"Good. I'll be there in ten. There's something I have to tell you."

The ten minutes flew by, and then I heard the rumbling of his Dodge Ram 1500 TRX pull into my driveway. When I hopped in his truck, I was greeted with a grim expression. I didn't like it.

"What the fuck's going on?" I asked, not sure I really wanted to know.

Brooks pulled out of my driveway and started toward the prison. “You’re not going to believe this shit,” he said, keeping his eyes on the road, “but Scar gets out of prison in two days.”

I was prepared to hear various things, but that wasn’t on the list. Shock didn’t begin to describe how I felt. “How is that possible?” I growled.

Brooks scrunched his shoulders. “Not sure, but I know our parents aren’t aware of this. The whole thing has been hush-hush. Scar has to know somebody higher up in the system.” He glanced over at me quickly. “My source has even mentioned him having ties to the mafia. I’m doing everything I can to find out who he has contact with. It might take some time.”

It got worse and worse by the second. “At least we’re talking to Scar now instead of waiting for him to show up on our doorsteps.”

Brooks huffed. “Which he’ll probably still do. The guy’s a fucking lunatic. My dad told me what Scar made your aunt do. She had to fight men; it was the only way she could keep them from going after Paxton, which they ended up doing anyway.” I knew she had to fight men but was never given the specifics. Brooks continued, his anger palpable. It took all I had to restrain mine. “One of those men Gabby had to fight tried to use a flogger on her.”

Bile rose up the back of my throat. Scar and his people deserved to get the shit beaten out of them and then some. They didn’t deserve to live. Now I could see why I wasn’t given specifics on Gabby’s time at the Dark Side. She probably didn’t want everyone to know, especially my dad.

“Did my aunt get hurt during that fight?” I asked.

Brooks barked a laugh. “Hell, no. Gabby went murderous on the guy and almost

flogged him to death. Your aunt's a badass bitch. My dad even told me about all the men Paxton killed in the ring."

It had been assumed he had, but it was a different story hearing it. "How many men are we talking about?"

Brooks shrugged. "I don't think anyone really knows. I was told they were the worst of the worst, so honestly, Paxton did the world a favor."

"What do you think Scar's going to do when he gets out? Do you think he'll start up another Dark Side?" I wondered.

His head tilted to the side, eyes narrowing in concentration. "I don't know. Scar's had over twenty years to do nothing but plot out his return. Whatever he does, I can assure you it'll be worse than before."

It took an hour to get to the prison, and all I could think about was the what-ifs. What if Scar physically went after Emma? What if they hurt her? The answer was plain and simple ... I'd kill him and everyone else who tried to take her away from me.

Brooks pulled into the prison's parking lot, and we went through two security checks before they let us inside. I was put in a small room with a two-way mirror and four-seater table that reeked of stale cigarette smoke and sweat.

"I'll be on the other side of the mirror," Brooks informed me. "The cameras will be off, and Scar knows that. It was the only way Scar agreed to talk to you."

I jerked around to face him. "He knows it's me who's here to see him?"

Brooks blew out a heavy sigh. "Yep. The bastard has so much pull in this place it's fucking scary. I honestly hate I'm leaving town for the next few weeks because I feel

you're all going to need me."

"On the flip side, you'll also be training with FBI elite. You could tap into their resources."

He nodded, but I could see the reservation in his eyes. "I hope so."

Brooks motioned toward the table, and I sat down when he walked out the door, shutting it behind him. I glanced over at the two-way mirror and stared at my reflection. The last three days had been hard, and I could see the toll it'd had on me. My eyes were tired, and my knuckles were raw from pounding the punching bag overzealously. Yet, I was ready for the fight ahead at the same time. I wanted Scar to stay the fuck away from Emma.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

A few seconds later, the door opened, and an officer strolled in with Scar behind him followed by another officer. Scar towered over them both, wearing an orange jumpsuit with his wrists and ankles shackled. He was tall and bulky, but he hadn't changed much from the pictures I'd seen of him over twenty years ago. I was told he'd gotten his nickname from the number of scars on his body, and they were right. He was covered in them, his skin jagged and rough all over his arms and neck, most likely knife wounds by their looks.

Smirking, Scar sat across from me and clasped his hands on the tabletop. The officers nodded at me and exited the room, leaving me alone with him. He averted his gaze to the two-way mirror and shook his head, amusement in his dark, soulless eyes.

"I see your friend didn't want to come in and say hi," he said.

I leaned back in my chair. "And what friend would that be?"

Scar chuckled. "Striker's son, or one of them, at least. But no worries, I'm perfectly fine with just you." His grin broadened. "Well done on the title fight. You're just like your father."

I was not in the mood for chit chat. Leaning forward with my elbows on the table, I shot Scar a fiery glare. "Thanks, but I'm not here to shoot the shit. You've always been straightforward with what you want from what I've been told. I know you're getting out of here in two days."

With a curious gaze, Scar tilted his head to the side. "I am. Good behavior, so I've been told."

“I doubt that,” I snapped.

Scar threw his head back and bellowed. “Ah, I’ve missed the Reynolds’ biting wit. Your aunt was a firecracker too. How is she these days?” His hollow eyes gleamed. “I saw her walking the red carpet on TV with your cousin, Peyton. Both of them are very beautiful.”

A fire like none other burned in my gut, and I slammed my hands down on the table. “I don’t know what sick, twisted game you’re playing, but I want answers.”

Scar shook his head. “You’re not a part of this, Reynolds. Your dad never crossed me, but if you venture over that line”

Seething, I leaned over the table. “You stepped over that line the day you sent Emma that letter.”

Scar’s eyes twinkled evilly. “I see. What makes you think it was me who gave it to Emma?”

“It might not have been you who physically delivered it, but I have no doubt it came from you somehow. And let me tell you, if you go after Emma, you’ll be making a huge fucking mistake.”

Scar sat back in his seat. “Hurting your ...” He paused for a second and smiled. “Friend is not what I want, son. She’s innocent in all of this. When I get out of here on Friday, I want to live my life in peace.”

“You expect me to believe that horseshit?” I hissed.

Scar shrugged flippantly. “Take it for what it’s worth. Although, I have a feeling I’ll be seeing you soon.” He leaned closer; his voice barely audible so only I could hear.

“Tell Emma I said hello when you see her. She’s a little busy right now.”

My stomach clenched with dread. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

With an unnerving smile, Scar let out a small laugh. “I’m happy to know she can be trusted to keep her mouth shut. Guess she didn’t tell you about her date today.” His leer turned menacing. “I think my guy has a thing for her, but don’t worry, nothing will happen to her ... yet.”

I kicked my chair back, grabbed his shirt and jerked him up. “Motherfucker! You better hope Emma’s okay. I don’t give a shit who you know in this world, I’ll rip off your goddamned head if anyone hurts her!” To hell with the consequences. At this point, I was ready to break his neck and be done with it.

The door burst open, and the officers pulled me off Scar, pushing me toward the door. “That’s enough,” one of them shouted. “You need to leave.”

Grinning smugly, Scar fell back into his chair, which pissed me off even more. Fuck him. I had to get to Emma. Brooks rushed out of the adjoining room and threw his arms in the air when he met me in the hall.

“What the hell? I couldn’t hear anything he said toward the end,” he said.

I grabbed his arm and pulled him down the hall, my patience running thinner by the minute. “Never mind that right now. We have to find Emma.”

I felt sick and overcome with rage just thinking about her being with one of Scar’s men and what they could be doing to her that very second.

Brooks’ eyes widened. “Why? What’s wrong?”

We stopped at the locked door, and I slammed my hands against it, desperate to be let out. “Scar has someone with Emma right now.” I punched the locked door. “Open the fucking door!” The gate buzzed, and it slowly opened to let us out. I needed my phone, but it wasn’t allowed in the room with Scar. Once we reached the front desk, they handed it to me, and I rushed outside, my hands shaking so violently I could barely press the call button.

Brooks and I ran to his truck as the line rang and rang. Once inside Brooks’ vehicle, I called again, impatiently tapping my fingers on the dash. “Answer the damn phone!” I shouted, running a hand angrily through my hair. All I wanted was to hear her voice, to make sure she was okay. I called three more times and nothing.

“She’s not answering.”

The tires squealed as Brooks laid on the gas. “Keep trying. I’ll get us back quick.”

Unfortunately, not quick enough.

EMMA

I was sick to my stomach all last night, wondering what that guy wanted from me. Then, it got me thinking ... what would Scar want from me? I had no clue. Whatever it was, it wouldn't be a walk in the park. If I didn't do what they said, they'd go after my sister next. I would do anything to keep her out of whatever shit it was.

My mother was at school, and Reagan was at the gym with our father and brother, so I didn't worry about them showing up. I hadn't talked to Carter since Sunday, but I wished he was close. I felt vulnerable and unprepared. If it was Scar I was dealing with, I had a feeling I was in way over my head. He wasn't your typical petty criminal. From what I'd heard, Scar was a murderer, cunning, clever, and highly manipulative.

Fighting off the urge to vomit up the contents of my stomach, I spread out my beach towel and sat down. The sun was bright and warm against my skin, but it did nothing to soothe me. There were so many people around, laughing and talking while walking through the water as it glided up the sand. They looked happy and full of life, something I envied at that moment.

A voice behind me caught my attention. "Well, don't you look beautiful today."

"And aren't you full of shit," I fired back.

The guy chuckled and sat beside me like he did yesterday. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed he was dressed as before in only shorts and no T-shirt, showing off the dragon tattoo on his back. This time, he didn't have the aviator sunglasses covering

up his eyes. He turned his head to me, and I clenched my jaw before looking at him.

He didn't have the look of what I assumed Scar's minions would have. In my mind, I thought they'd be rugged, stocky thugs who reeked of cigarette smoke, but that wasn't this guy at all. He was good-looking and a smooth talker, but he disgusted me. I despised anyone who worked for Scar.

I'd been around a gazillion rich boys in my life, and this guy was one of them. I didn't understand why he'd want to work for a criminal.

The guy held out his hand, his tone polite. "I'm Nikolai, by the way. I don't think I told you that yesterday."

Pursing my lips, I stared at his hand and then into his icy blue eyes. "It's because you were too busy threatening me."

His gaze twinkled with humor. "True."

My focus shifted to the dragon tattoo on his back, where I noticed the name Reaper intermingled with the fire coming out of the dragon's mouth. It made me think of Paxton and how he had the skull tattoo with the name Reaper as well. We all knew what the name meant.

A shudder throttled my spine. "So, you do work for Scar?"

Nikolai grinned. "Now that you know, I guess we can get down to business. He wants to meet you on Friday."

Mouth gaping, I looked around, confused. "How's that possible? He's in prison."

Teeth flashing, he shook his head. "He gets out Friday morning."

After choking down the bile, my stomach twisted into even more knots. How was Scar allowed out of prison? “What do you do for him?”

Nikolai raked his hungry gaze down my body. “You don’t want to know the answer to that. I kind of like the relationship we have going on here.”

“We have nothing,” I snarled. “Now tell me what Scar wants.”

He moved closer, his shoulder touching mine. “We need you. You see, Scar and I share a common enemy. All we have to do is take pictures of you and that bastard together. Once the world sees them, his life will be over.”

A blast of anger exploded in the very center of my being. “Not just no, but hell no! I’m not a damn prostitute. That will ruin me and my career.”

Nikolai beamed. “And it’ll crush dear ole daddy when he sees his little girl whoring herself out.”

“Screw you!” I spat, pushing away from him.

Nikolai smacked a hand over mine, squeezing it achingly tight. “We’re not done. You haven’t heard the rest of it.” Biting my cheek through the pain, I settled back in my spot beside him. His fingers relaxed, and it took a few seconds for the blood to flow back through my hand. “You wouldn’t be fucking anyone, Emma. Not unless you want to give in to me.”

I glared at him, hoping he could see the utter disdain for him. “I’d rather become a nun.” Jerking my hand out from under his, I lifted my knees and wrapped my arms around them. “Who is this man I’ll be basically blackmailing?”

Nikolai grinned slyly. “Let’s just say he’s a politician.”

“So, I’m going to ruin this guy’s life as well as mine while also shaming my entire family? Is this how Scar wants to hurt my dad?”

Nikolai stared at me, his expression unreadable. “Either you agree to this, or I turn the job over to your sister. It’s your choice. And like I told you before, if you or your sister refuses, you know who we’ll go after next.”

I couldn’t let them go after Reagan, and I couldn’t risk my parents’ lives. Squeezing my knees hard, I turned my attention to the ocean. There was nothing to think about.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

“There is no choice,” I whispered. “I’ll do it.”

“Excellent.”

“Yeah, go fuck yourself,” I snipped.

Nikolai laughed and got to his feet, leaving a card with his phone number on my towel. “I’ll pick you up at ten on Friday. And I suggest you answer the phone every time I call.”

Picking up the card, I crumpled it in my grasp. “You don’t even know where I’ll be.”

I looked up at him, and his frosty blue eyes bored into mine. “Don’t worry. I’ll find you.”

He turned to walk away and I gasped for air, not even realizing I had been holding my breath. I fumbled around for my phone and noticed I had over a dozen missed calls from Carter and Brooks. Tears streamed down my cheeks, and I hung my head.

What am I going to do?

CARTER

What should usually have taken an hour to get from the prison to Los Angeles ended up being only forty-two minutes. Emma still hadn't answered any of my calls which terrified the absolute fuck out of me. Brooks drove us to Fightanium to see if she was there, and of course, nobody had seen her. We played it cool in front of her father and the others so they wouldn't suspect something was wrong.

As luck would have it, Reagan mentioned that Emma was going to the beach by their parents' house; my place wasn't far. So that was where we were headed.

I couldn't think straight without knowing Emma was okay. It was like my insides burned and twisted at the thought of something terrible happening to her.

"We're almost to your house," Brooks said, dragging me out of my thoughts. He sped down my road, and the tires screeched to a halt when he stopped in my driveway.

Heart thundering, I jumped out and slammed the door. "Are you coming?" I asked him through the window.

He shook his head. "I think it's best we split up. I'll call you if I find her."

"Good idea." I rushed inside and ran to my back door to get to the beach, but then something bright caught my eye. Emma was there, wearing a yellow tank top and denim shorts. She was sitting by the pool in one of the lounge chairs with her head in her hands. The level of relief that spread over me made the breath explode from my lungs. I shot a quick text to Brooks to tell him I'd found her.

Jerking the door open, I dashed outside, and it startled her, and she lifted her tear-streaked face to meet mine, a look of terror in her eyes. She gasped and jumped in my arms, squeezing me tightly as she cried.

“Thank fucking God you’re okay,” I said, holding her close. I didn’t want to let her go. “Are you hurt?”

She shook her head against my chest. “No, I’m good, but it’s Scar. I know for sure he’s the one who sent the letter.”

“I know.”

Emma pushed away from me, her eyelids stretched wide as she studied my reaction. “Why do I get the feeling you already know something?”

It seemed we both had secrets of our own. Emma had a meeting with one of Scar’s men while I met with the devil himself. Cupping her cheeks, I wiped away her tears with my thumbs, desperate to kiss her. “Brooks and I went to see Scar today. He told me one of his guys was with you.”

Emma inhaled a stuttering breath and closed her eyes. “Carter, I’m sorry. I should’ve told you.”

I couldn’t wait any longer. I pressed my lips to hers, and Emma relaxed in my arms, moaning when I pushed my tongue against hers. “You don’t have to apologize,” I said, resting my forehead on hers. “I should’ve done the same.”

Eyes flashing open, Emma glanced around quickly. “We should go inside. It wouldn’t surprise me if someone’s watching us right now.”

Letting her go, I took her hand and led her inside. The second we were behind closed

doors, I gripped the back of her neck, crushing her to me. She moaned into my mouth, and it fueled my hunger, but it also sparked my anger.

I broke from the kiss and held her protectively. “I want to know everything. Who the fuck was with you today?”

Emma clutched my T-shirt and dropped her head to my chest. “I think I need to know about your visit first.” She stepped back and stared up at me.

“What can I say?” I said with a shrug. “I went to see him to ask about you. But unfortunately, when he told me about your beach date, I lost it and got thrown out.”

Wrapping her arms around her stomach, Emma turned her back on me. “And because of that, you’re going to be right in the middle of this.”

I stared down the back of her body, at the muscles in her arms and legs. There was nothing weak about her. “I told Scar I got involved the second he came after you. Now, what did the guy want with you?”

“It’s not something you’ll want to hear,” she uttered, her voice tired.

I moved closer to her. “Tell me.”

Emma blew out a strangled sigh and faced me. “They want to use me to blackmail someone, and by blackmail, I mean turn me into a prostitute.” The second she said the word prostitute, all I could see was red. Fists clenched tight, my nails dug into my skin, drawing blood. Frustrated, Emma threw her hands in the air. “The goal is to ruin that guy’s life, taint my career, and add scandal and embarrassment to my family’s name. The guy who met me, Nikolai, said he’ll go after my sister if I don’t do it. And then, if she doesn’t agree, they’ll kill my parents.” Her lips trembled. “He didn’t say those exact words, but I could see it in his eyes. My dad will go after Scar and get

himself killed if I do this. I'll lose everything." Tears filled her eyes. "This is Scar's revenge, but it's only the beginning. He's not going to stop at just me. My father isn't the only one he wants to hurt." She threw her arms in the air again. "What am I going to do? My family's in danger no matter what choice I make."

Grabbing her hands, I pulled her in close. "No one's going to hurt you or your family, Emma. We're going to figure this out." I could see the torment in her eyes.

"I only have two days, Carter. Nikolai's picking me up Friday night to meet with Scar."

"Fuck that," I snapped. "You're staying with me. Where you go, I go."

Eyes wild, Emma shook her head. "They'll kill you. I can't lose you too."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

I let her hands go and brought them up to her face. “I’m already involved, Emma. You are all that matters to me. I’m not letting those cocksuckers anywhere near you.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Emma cried. “Scar will get what he wants. It all comes down to who pays the price.”

The decision was made. “I’ll pay it for you, Emma.” She started to protest, but I cut off her words with a kiss, opening her lips with my tongue. I wouldn’t let her fight me on this, not tonight. I nipped her bottom lip when she tried to speak again, sucking it between my teeth. “Emma, please.”

“We’re not done talking about this,” she murmured.

She gave in, and I lifted her in my arms. “With you being here, does that mean you’re finally mine?”

Emma’s emerald gaze never wavered from me. “I always have been.”

Hearing those words made my dick strain against my jeans. I wanted her more than anything I’d ever wanted in my life. “I need you so fucking bad right now.”

She whispered across my lips. “Then take me to your room.”

I carried her down the hall and set her down the second we entered my room. Her eyes locked on the king-size bed, and she smiled. “I can’t believe you still have the same comforter I picked out for you.” If she only knew the truth. After she left, I barely spent any time in my house. I never even let another woman in my bed, not

when everything in my bedroom reminded me of Emma. It was better just to stay away.

“It was my own personal torture,” I admitted, taking off my shirt and throwing it on the floor. “I didn’t want to be reminded of you, but on the other hand, I did.”

Emma nodded. “I understand that completely.” She glanced down at my jeans and smiled as she rubbed a hand over my cock.

“Fuck,” I hissed, throwing my head back.

Biting her lip, she unbuttoned my jeans and shoved a hand inside, wrapping it around my dick. The moan that escaped her just about had me exploding in her hand. Eyes rolling into my head, I groaned as she massaged me.

“You better be ready,” I said, clenching my teeth as I tried to keep control, “it’s not going to be slow and easy tonight.”

“I didn’t say I wanted it easy,” she countered.

I lifted her in my arms again without another word, and she squealed when I slammed her down on the mattress. I covered her with my body and roughly massaged her breasts, loving how her nipples pebbled under my fingertips.

Groaning, she arched her back, and I squeezed her nipples harder. “I want you inside of me.” She tried to pull her shorts down, but I snatched her wrists and pulled them above her head, locking her in place.

“I want to be the one to take them off.”

Slowly, I pulled her up by her wrists and lifted the shirt over her head, exposing her

light pink lace bra. Her eyes twinkled when a deep rumble of satisfaction vibrated through my chest. I smoothed my hands over her breasts and then around her back where I unclasped her bra, throwing it across the room. It took every ounce of restraint I had not to spread her wide and fuck her senseless. She was so damn beautiful. The best part was that she was mine.

Emma glided her hands up my chest and face before running her fingers through my hair. “I thought you said you didn’t want it slow. You’re really tormenting me right now.”

A small smile spread across my lips, and it widened when I lowered my mouth to her neck. I planned to torment her more. Grazing my teeth along her skin, I sucked and bit her tender flesh, making her gasp when I did it too hard. She was going to have marks on her body, but so was I from her nails digging into my back. I fucking loved it. What I loved even more was the taste of her skin. I closed my lips over her nipple and bit down, sucking as hard as possible.

“Oh, Carter,” she groaned breathlessly.

As I sucked and kissed my way along her breasts, I slid my jeans down and kicked them off, my cock hard and ready against her thigh. Emma immediately grabbed hold of me and squeezed, starting slow with her pumps but then doing it harder and faster, earning a strangled moan to escape my lips.

“Fuck,” I growled low, snatching her wrist.

Pulling her hand away, I knew my eyes were wild and dangerous as I unbuttoned her denim shorts. It was time to show her what I meant about not going slow tonight. The adrenaline from the meeting with Scar and the outright rage I felt when I couldn’t find Emma this afternoon left me untamed, feral even.

Savagely, I gripped the waistband of her shorts and yanked them down along with her pink lace underwear, tossing them over the side of the bed. My breaths came out in deep low growls as I stared at her naked body, gliding my hands up her legs and spreading them wide when I reached her thighs.

Emma ran a hand over her breast, down her stomach, and to the V between her legs. My eyes followed the movement like a tiger waiting to pounce. Then, making one swipe with her fingers, she presented the wetness to me. “Do you see what you’re doing to me?”

That was it; I couldn’t take anymore. Lifting on my knees, I grabbed Emma’s hips and dragged her down the bed. Without warning, I plunged in deep with one hard thrust. Fully seated, balls against her ass, a loud growl ripped from my lips. It wasn’t enough. Over and over again, I pulled out and thrust in even harder. Emma’s pussy clenched around my cock, and it drove me wild. She locked her legs around my body, holding me tight.

Grabbing her arms, I flopped on my back and brought her to a riding position, her glorious body displayed in front of my eyes. Straddling my waist, she didn’t waste a moment working her hips. I slid my hands down to her ass, and she placed hers on my chest, riding me hard and fast.

I dug my fingers into her skin and slammed my head into the pillows. The insides of her thighs were drenched, her body sliding up and down my cock easily. My dick grew harder each time she slammed down on me.

“I’m going to come, Emma,” I growled through clenched teeth. I knew that if she kept up her punishing pace, I’d be done within seconds. Quickly wrapping my arms around her waist, I flipped her onto her back, burying her into the mattress. She brought her legs up, and I held them to either side of her, pushing down behind each knee. Then, holding her in place, I pounded into her, slamming my hips against her

thighs with untamed force.

As I looked down at Emma, my breaths came out in deep pants. “You feel so damn good.”

Digging her nails into my back, she bit her lip, and I could feel her pussy getting tighter. “Harder,” she moaned.

That was my undoing. I did as Emma asked, and I released inside of her, her body milking me to the quick as she rode wave after wave of her climax. Breathing hard, I let her legs go and laid on top of her, our skin slick with sweat. I kissed her gently on the lips and slowly pulled out of her, our eyes locked the entire time.

After brushing the damp hair off her forehead, I held her face in my hands. “You’re not going to disappear on me in the morning?”

“No,” she whispered, “I’m staying right here.”

EMMA

I spent the day with Ethan and Reagan, training with our father, while Carter spent his time with Braden and Paxton. With Brooks leaving town soon, I was glad he was there too, training with Ripp and my uncle. We all acted as if nothing was amiss. The only thing Ethan, Braden, and Ripp knew was that Scar was getting out of prison tomorrow. I didn't look forward to telling them the rest. However, for the day, I put it out of my mind so I could concentrate on my training.

It'd been over four years since I'd done any fighting. My muscles were sore, and it felt like a bulldozer had run over me, but it was nice to know I hadn't lost my touch. I even took Reagan down to the mat a couple of times. Did she tap out? Of course not, but it was fun trying.

The hardest part of the day was keeping my eyes off of Carter. Reagan got a few hits on me while I was distracted, and I had the bruises to prove it. It was a good thing I didn't have any modeling jobs soon.

Once the gym had closed for the evening, Ethan locked the doors, and we walked into one of the back rooms to keep prying eyes from seeing us through the front windows. It was safe to say that Scar most likely had someone watching us.

Ethan shut the door to the back room, and his eyes widened when Carter put his arm around my shoulders. Needless to say, Reagan already knew, so she didn't react, and neither did Braden, Ripp, or Brooks; Ethan was the only clueless one.

"Seriously?" Ethan called out, staring at us in shock. "You two are together?"

Braden snorted. “You’re fucking blind, Jameson. The signs were there years ago.”

Brooks shook his head and laughed while Ripp nodded in agreement. “It’s true, even I saw it. Not that I cared, though. Emma’s a big girl. She can fuck whoever she wants.”

Ethan threw his arms in the air. “Damn, okay! I don’t want to think of my sister or sisters,” he said, acknowledging Reagan, “screwing around with anyone.”

“All right,” I exclaimed, waving for him to be quiet, “now that you all know about Carter and me, we have more important things to discuss. You all know Scar gets out of prison tomorrow.”

Brooks’ eyes narrowed. “Which baffles the fuck out of me. I haven’t been able to find out how it’s possible.”

“Still, it’s happening,” Carter threw out. “One of his guys has already approached Emma.”

Snarling, my brother stepped forward, his angry gaze on mine. “What the hell, Emma. Why didn’t you say anything?”

I’d used my anger on the punching bag today, but I was too exhausted now to argue. “Because I’m angry, confused, and sick of this whole thing.”

Reagan came up beside me, her voice low and almost menacing. “What does that scumbag want you to do?”

I went into detail about how I was set to meet with Scar tomorrow night and how he wanted me to pose as a prostitute so they could take blackmail pictures. Their goal was to provoke our father to go after Scar, even if it wasn’t specifically said. Scar

knew that would be the outcome. The photos would also shame our family and ruin my career; everyone would suffer the consequences.

Ethan blew out a huff and pulled me away from Carter so he could hug me. “Fuck, Emma.” Stepping back, he looked into my eyes. “Let me go in your place tomorrow. They can find a real whore to blackmail whoever the fuck they want. I’m sure Scar will trade you for me. I’ll do whatever I have to do.”

There was no doubt in my mind that I knew he’d offer to take my place. He was a good brother, a protector. “I’m not letting you do that,” I said to him.

Carter came up beside me. “I’m going with her, Jameson.” I shook my head, but he intentionally ignored me. “Whether Emma likes it or not, I’m going. There’s no way in hell I’m letting her anywhere near those bastards without me.”

The buzz of the front door echoed to the back, and we all froze; someone had just entered. “I thought you locked the door,” I whispered to Ethan.

He nodded and lowered his voice. “I did. So, help me God, if it’s one of Scar’s minions, I’ll beat the shit out of them.”

Carter pulled me behind him and stood in front of Reagan and me. Reagan grabbed my hand and squeezed. “You don’t think they’d actually come in here, do you?”

I looked into her bright blue eyes, and all I saw was determination and strength; she wasn’t afraid. Instead, I could see her wanting to fight. “Anything’s possible,” I uttered low.

Footsteps pounded down the hallway, and I held my breath, waiting to see who the assailant was. The room filled with so much tension and testosterone I could barely breathe; the guys were ready.

“Where the hell is everyone?” Paxton shouted.

The breath whooshed out of my lungs, and I grabbed my chest. Ethan opened the door just as Paxton walked past. He backed up and stood in the doorway, lifting his brows at us. “Do I want to know what’s going on?”

Out of all our parents, Paxton was the one who spent the most time around Scar and his people. He was tall, dark, and dangerous, with tattoos down both arms. I could see how he could be scary, but I’d never seen that side of him.

Carter stepped back, and I looked up at him, and then we both turned to Braden. He and Carter shared a glance, and Braden nodded as if they’d just had a silent conversation. “There’s something you need to know,” Braden said to his dad.

Paxton stepped into the room, crossing his muscular tattooed arms across his chest. With the exception of being younger and having fewer tattoos, Braden looked exactly like him with their dark hair and green eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

“What is it?” Paxton asked, his eyes searching all of ours.

Braden sighed. “Scar’s back, and he wants revenge.”

The second Paxton heard the name Scar, his eyes flashed wide open. “Son of a bitch,” he growled. “Who is he after?”

I stepped forward. “Me. And I don’t want my dad to know.”

The air around Paxton darkened. “He’s going to kill me if he finds out I kept this from him.”

Carter took my hand in his but kept his eyes on Paxton. “I’m not going to let anything happen to her. We just need to know what we’re up against.”

Hanging his head, Paxton let out an angry sigh. “Scar knows a lot of people.” He focused on us again. “I’m talking the scum of the earth, celebrities, government officials, as well as the mafia. That’s where most of his ties are.”

“The mafia?” I gasped.

Paxton nodded. “They’re good at getting rid of the bodies.”

Chills pierced down my spine. “I met the new Reaper. He’s the guy who approached me.”

Paxton stepped in front of me, concern etched across his face. “Be careful, Emma. If

he has that name, I know what he's done to get it." His focus averted to Carter. "Whatever you do, don't underestimate Scar. When he wants something, he doesn't go straight for it; he plays games. There is always a bigger scheme."

I had a feeling we'd find out what that bigger scheme was tomorrow when we came face to face with Scar. Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly and peered up at Carter. He seemed confident in his determined green gaze.

"We'll be okay," he assured me. "We're going to find a way out of this."

I sure as hell hope so.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

CARTER

Friday had come, and it was almost ten o'clock in the evening. Emma hadn't stopped pacing the floor. Nikolai supposedly said he'd find her wherever she was, and I was curious to see if the douchebag showed up on my doorstep.

Since Wednesday, Emma had been staying with me, and word spread through the gym that we were together. Her father shook my hand today and said that I was his first choice out of all the fighters in the gym. When it came to Ryley, Camden, and Uncle Pax, they'd all been like fathers to me, helping me train to be the best. I hated keeping the situation with Scar away from Ryley, especially when it concerned his daughter, but I had to believe he'd trust me to do what was right. That was what I planned to do, no matter the cost.

"You're going to wear my hardwood floors out, Emma," I teased, hoping to lighten the mood.

She continued to pace, and I watched her. I could see the redness under her right eye where Reagan had punched her during training today. Emma ended up turning around and roundhouse kicking Reagan, giving her a mark to match. Emma was a fighter, and I knew she could handle herself, but I wasn't able to curb the need to protect her. It was an innate desire that wouldn't go away.

Emma stopped pacing and sat down on the edge of the couch, nervously focusing on her phone. We had one more minute before the time ticked ten.

"I'm ready to get this over with," she grumbled impatiently.

And just then, the doorbell rang. Emma jumped to her feet, but I held up a hand, wanting her to stand back while I answered the door. When I opened it and got a look at the guy's face, I wasn't shocked to see annoyance. He appeared to be around my age and dressed in a fancy suit, but nothing about us was similar other than our body size.

Emma sidled up next to me and sighed, but I kept my glare on the cuntbag in front of me. "You were right," Emma said to him. "You did find me."

He smiled at her. "I told you I would." Fucking prick. I wanted to smack the grin off his face.

Emma glanced up at me, but I wasn't about to take my eyes off him. "It's Nikolai," she stated, her voice devoid of emotion.

"Yeah, I figured that," I replied, wrapping my arm around her waist. Nikolai glared at me before settling his gaze back on Emma, the lust clearly showing as he raked his eyes down her body.

Nikolai nodded toward the car. "Let's go. You're both riding with me."

He turned and we followed him right toward a black SUV with dark windows. Two other men were waiting for us, sitting in a black sedan behind Nikolai's vehicle. Nikolai opened the backseat door and pulled out two blindfolds from inside. Paxton had warned us this morning that they'd want us blindfolded. Emma peered up at me quickly before Nikolai slipped the black cloth over her eyes. I stepped in between them to help her into the backseat; I didn't want him touching her any more than he had to.

Smirking, Nikolai held out my blindfold. I took it and met his stare head-on, not intimidated in the least. He stepped closer and lowered his voice so Emma couldn't

hear. “I’m curious to see how long you last.”

“I can promise it’ll be longer than you,” I fired back.

Nikolai chuckled darkly. “We’ll see about that.”

Once in the car with Emma, I slipped on the blindfold. She reached for my hand, and I pulled her close when the vehicle began to move. The ride was silent, and I welcomed it. I had a feeling Nikolai and I were going to butt heads a lot, especially if he kept flirting with Emma and antagonizing me.

We’d been in the car for about twenty minutes when we stopped and Nikolai got out. The door to Emma’s right opened, and Nikolai called out to the others. “I got Emma. You two get him.”

Emma let go of my hand, and I was pulled out of my side, sandwiched between the two men. We were outside for only a few minutes before the sound of a door opening caught my attention. I was walked up a couple of steps, and then a blast of cold air whipped across my skin. The door shut behind me, and the blindfold was pulled off my head. I didn’t know what to expect, but it wasn’t what was in front of me. Looking over at Emma, she was just as shocked as I was.

Instead of being in a rundown warehouse or a dilapidated crack house like I assumed, we were right in the middle of a foyer with white marble floors and a crystal chandelier above us. A double staircase led to the second floor where two men stood guard, guns flashing in their holsters.

Nikolai motioned for us to follow him. “This way.”

Taking Emma’s hand, we walked down a long hallway, Nikolai out in front and the two suited men behind us. On the walls were several Picasso paintings, and we

passed several exotic sculptures that had to be worth thousands.

Once we got to the end of the hallway, Nikolai stopped outside a closed door and rapped on it twice. “Come in,” Scar called out. I recognized his voice.

“Is that him?” Emma asked, her voice barely above a whisper. I shot her a glance from the corner of my eye and nodded.

Nikolai opened the door, and a cloud of cigar smoke billowed out, filtering into the hallway. He waved for us to go in, and I squeezed Emma’s hand, pulling her with me into the study. There was a large desk in front of the floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the grounds. I could see Scar’s bald head from the top of the office chair, but he was turned away from us, puffing out more cigar smoke. On the opposite sides of the room were two men I hadn’t seen before, dressed in suits like all the other people in the house.

“It’s so good of you to join me here tonight,” Scar quipped, swiveling in his chair to face us. He set his cigar down in the ashtray on his desk and smiled at Emma when he stood. “You look just like your mother.” Emma didn’t respond but kept her glare on him. Scar turned to me and bellowed out a deep laugh. “But I see she has her father’s temper.” Dressed in an expensive suit like the other goons in the room, Scar wandered around to the front of the desk; he looked like the Godfather. “I had a feeling I’d be seeing you tonight.”

I kept hold of Emma’s hand. “I wasn’t about to let Emma come alone. The company you keep is questionable.”

A laugh barreled up his throat. “If anyone can keep Emma safe, it’s him,” he said, nodding over at Nikolai. “He’s a Michelson, one of the sons of the topmost powerful families in New York.” Emma gasped and I jerked my attention to her. She stared over at Nikolai, her eyes narrowed in disbelief. “See. I knew you’d recognize the

name,” Scar pointed out. “You were in New York, after all.”

Nikolai swung his curious gaze her way. “Do you know my family?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

And, of course, the plot thickened. Although, Nikolai seemed genuinely shocked that Emma had heard his family's name before. Maybe it was just a coincidence. Emma peered up at me, and I could see the worry on her face before she focused back on Nikolai. I had a feeling I wasn't going to like what was about to come out of her mouth.

"My roommate was dating Valentin Rossi for a while." She side-eyed me before uttering her following words. "I went out with one of his friends. Seth Michelson."

Nikolai tensed and a look of disdain passed across his face. "You dated my brother?"

I didn't want to think of Emma being involved with the Michelson family, let alone the mafia, which I assumed was what they were. Despite that, nothing could've made me happier than seeing the derision on Nikolai's face. It appeared there was no love lost between him and his brother.

Emma forced out a laugh. "That's why I thought you looked familiar the first time I saw you. It all makes sense now. You reminded me of Seth; only he's not a psychotic jackass."

Amusement rippled through Scar. "Ah, how I've missed this. As much as I'd like to sit back and listen to you banter back and forth, we have some things to discuss." He focused directly on Emma. "Have you made your decision yet?"

Emma had made her choice, but she didn't know I had a plan of my own. If I'd discussed it with her, she would've found a way to come to the meeting independently. Did I deliberately deceive her? Sadly so, but I didn't have any other

options.

Emma nodded, but I squeezed her hand, knowing she would hate me after what I was about to do. She opened her mouth to speak, but I cut her off. “She’s not doing what you want,” I threw out.

Grabbing my arm, Emma dug her nails into my skin. “Carter, stop! I can do this.”

“No,” I growled, making her suck back a gasp. I didn’t want to frighten her, but this was serious. I snapped my focus to Scar. “I’m here to take her place. Whatever debt you think she owes, I’ll pay it. I’m not going to let you ruin her life.”

Emma stepped in front of me and grabbed my face, but I kept my eyes on Scar. “That is not the way this is going to work,” she demanded. “Dammit, Carter, look at me!”

It killed me to ignore her, but it had to be done. Scar studied me and lifted his brows. “You must really care about Ms. Jameson to put your life on the line. Ryley was the same way about her mother. That goes for Paxton and Gabriella too. Such devotion. I’ve never seen that kind of commitment.”

“Do we have a deal?” I asked.

Emma pushed against my chest, and I didn’t have to look at her to know her eyes were blazing like fire. “So help me, Carter.”

With satisfaction written all over his face, Scar extended his hand. “We do.”

Emma grabbed my hand before I could take Scar’s. “Please, Carter. I don’t want you to do this.”

My eyes found hers, and tears poured like rivers down her cheeks. “I’m sorry, Emma.

It has to be this way.” I gently pried her fingers away with my other hand and held her back while I shook Scar’s hand, sealing the deal. Emma’s face turned blood red, and she jerked out of my hold. She might not forgive me yet, but I’d make up for it later.

Scar nodded at Nikolai and motioned toward Emma. “Take her to the living room. I need to talk to Reynolds.”

Emma’s daggered glare shot to Scar. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Nikolai took her arm, and she pulled it out of his grasp. I despised him touching her, but I didn’t want her in the room. “Emma, please. It’ll only be for a minute,” I promised.

Huffing, Emma threw her arms in the air. “Fine. I’m out.”

Scar exploded in laughter as Emma stormed to the door and swung it open with Nikolai right behind her. The other two goons stayed in their positions on opposite sides of the room.

Scar shook his head. “She’s a spitfire.”

“Just a little,” I agreed.

Once the door was shut, Scar moved around to the back of the desk and sat down. “If you want to take Emma’s debt, you can do it by working for me. I need good, strong fighters.” I already had a feeling that was what he wanted.

“You want me to fight for you?”

“Not for me, per se,” he replied, his dark eyes gleaming in the light. “I need a winner,

and that's you. Someone who isn't afraid of going all in, if you know what I mean." I knew exactly what he meant.

"I have to kill." It was more of a statement than a question.

Scar's evil leer was answer enough. "Do you have a problem with that? If so, there's another option."

My jaw hardened. "And that would be?"

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

Grabbing his cigar, Scar leaned back in his seat and took a long drag, the smoke billowing out as he spoke. "Recruit for me." He nodded at a piece of paper on his desk, and I reached for it.

It was a list of names: Ethan Jameson, Ripp Jameson, Braden Emerson, Kase Rushing, and Hunter Andrews.

Brooks' name was scratched off.

"What the hell is this?" I countered, holding up the paper.

Scar pointed at the list. "I want them all. Well, except for the other Jameson boy. I know he's part of the FBI. I don't want his kind in here."

After crumpling up the paper, I tossed it on the floor. "I'm not recruiting my friends for this shit."

"That's fine," Scar said, shrugging ruefully. "You just have to be willing to pay the price. Think your soul can handle it?"

"I'm not worried about my fucking soul. Their freedom is not something I can give. Put me in the ring, and I'll do what you want."

Scar nodded once. "You can sign the contract here tomorrow. I'll have Nikolai pick you up." He leaned forward in his seat. "And Reynolds, it needs to be you and you alone." That was fine with me. I didn't want Emma anywhere near this place.

“Are we done here?”

He waved toward the door. “We are. You’re free to leave.”

One of his men opened the door, and I charged out. Emma was alone on the expensive white leather couch while Nikolai sat across from her on the matching loveseat, holding our blindfolds.

When Emma saw me, she jumped up and rushed over. “What was that about?”

Grabbing her wrist, I pulled her to me and whispered, “Later.”

Nikolai tossed me my blindfold and went to stand behind Emma, slowly sliding hers down over her eyes, his menacing gaze taunting me.

“Keep it up, Michelson,” I growled low. “At the rate you’re going, you’ll be the first one I kill.”

A sneer pulled at Nikolai’s cheeks. “I’d like to see you try.”

EMMA

It took all I had to bite my tongue on the way home. I was angry at Carter for what he did, for offering himself up to God knows what.

“Brrr, it’s a little cold in here,” Nikolai teased. “You two have a wonderful rest of your night.”

Jerking off my blindfold, I tossed it in the seat and got out, slamming the door hard. I was hoping the window would break, but that was foolish thinking. Carter followed behind me, and I didn’t look at him when I stepped out of the way for him to unlock the door. The second we were inside, and away from prying eyes, I let him have it.

“What were you thinking? I know what that bastard wants you to do,” I snapped.

Carter sighed and walked past me to the kitchen. He grabbed a bottle of tequila out of his liquor cabinet along with a glass and poured a big shot. “I did it for you,” he said, his serious gaze pinned on me, “and I’d do it again.” He tossed the amber liquid back and poured even more into his glass.

When it was apparent he wasn’t going to stop there, I stormed over and jerked the tequila bottle away from him, slamming it down on the counter. “What did Scar say that I wasn’t privy to? And don’t lie to me or give me half-truths. I need to know what this is costing you.”

Carter fiddled with his glass and looked away. “Scar wants a fighter.”

I knew it, but it still didn't stop the knots from coiling in my belly. "What kind of fights?" I asked, wanting to hear him say it.

Carter faced me, his gaze unwavering and hard. "You know the answer to that."

He had to kill, to fight to the death. That was what Scar was all about. I never should've let Carter come with me; I should've figured out a way to go to the meeting alone.

"You're not a killer, Carter."

Carter focused on his empty glass. "No, but I can do this. Pax, Camden, and my aunt all fought for Scar. They came out okay."

"And look where we are now," I argued. "They crossed him, and now we have to look over our shoulders because of it."

Grabbing the bottle of liquor, Carter poured another shot. "It's better than the second option."

My stomach plummeted. "What second option?"

Leaning over on the counter, Carter tossed back his shot. I could tell the tequila had started to take its effect. "I won't have to do as much if I recruit other fighters." His gaze snapped up to mine; the color was darker than his usual greenish amber. "He gave me a list, Emma."

He didn't have to tell me who was on it because I already knew. "Ethan was on it, right?"

"And Ripp, Braden, Hunter, and Kase," he added. "I can't do that to them. I'll

sacrifice my own freedom.” Carter’s phone beeped, and he pulled it out of his pocket, eyes blazing when he looked at the screen. He slid the phone across the counter, and it fell to the floor with a loud thunk.

“Who was it?” I asked.

Carter snarled his lip. “That stupid cunt who can’t keep his eyes off of you. He’s picking me up tomorrow morning, said we have a long day.”

“Of what?” I inquired hesitantly.

“Fuck if I know.” Coming over to me, he grabbed my wrist and pulled me into him. “While I’m gone, I need you to stay with your brother and the others. Promise me.” I could hear the desperation in his voice.

Laying my head on his chest, I breathed him in. “I promise.”

His arms wrapped around me, almost as if he was afraid I’d run away. I wasn’t going anywhere. “Why do I feel like you’ll fight me when things start to change?”

I didn’t want things to change, but what Carter was about to endure would no doubt turn him into someone else. “You can’t take all of this on yourself,” I murmured.

“I can and I will.” Then, grasping my arms, he gently pried me away so he could cup my face with his warm hands. He kissed me softly at first, the pressure growing harder with each passing second. Then, he nipped my lip and rested his forehead on mine. “Let’s go to bed. I need you right now.”

“You have me. You always will.”

As he took my hand and led me down the hall to his bedroom, all I could feel was

helpless. Carter was risking his life to save my family and me, and there was nothing I could do to help him. There were no words that could make everything all right.

Once in the bedroom, Carter kept his raw gaze on mine as he took off his clothes, and I did the same with mine, minus my bra and underwear. Reaching behind me, Carter unclasped my bra and tossed it to the floor. Bare from the waist up, I heard a rumble of satisfaction growling in his chest when he looked at me. He picked me up in his arms and set me down on his bed, spreading me wide once he slipped off my underwear. I glanced down at his thick length and shivered, my body growing wet at the sight.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

He kissed his way down my leg to the inside of my thigh and slid his tongue down my slit. My body jerked, and I gasped, wanting more. Entering me with his tongue, Carter fondled my clit with his nose and breathed me in. He replaced his tongue with his fingers and pushed them inside with ease. Holy hell, I wanted to feel him inside me, to feel the connection. I was so close to losing control, but he pulled back before my orgasm could peak.

Trailing his lips up my stomach, he latched onto a nipple, sucking it greedily. I arched off the bed and whimpered. Chuckling, he flicked his tongue across a sensitive peak before hovering above me, the tip of him pressing against my opening.

“I know you were close.”

I waved him off. “I’d rather you be inside of me when I come.”

Lowering his body onto mine, he circled his cock in my wetness before pushing. “I can do that.”

My body instantly clenched, wanting more of him ... all of him. He glided in slow, almost as if he was afraid he’d hurt me. “I love you, Emma.” Delight swelled in my heart, and I had to catch my breath. I hadn’t heard those words from him in a long time. A part of me wondered if I’d imagined it, but Carter gazed down at me, his hand softly against my cheek. “Did you hear me?”

Eyes burning, I nodded quickly. “Say it again.”

He kissed me tenderly on the lips. “I love you. Always have.”

Lips trembling, I cupped his cheeks. “I love you too.”

His body rocked gently back and forth until he was fully submerged inside of me. I moaned with the pleasure and pain of it, and he groaned, picking up his pace. Wrapping my legs around his waist, I held on tight as he made love to me. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I fully opened up to him, letting him in. Our bodies moved perfectly in sync. My orgasm built, and without warning, it exploded from within. Clutching his arms, I rode wave after wave of pleasure until he released inside me, all warm and thick. His breaths came out deep, almost like growls as he regained his composure. I didn’t want him to see my tears, but he saw them when he looked down at me. He turned my face to the side to be sure and swiped his fingers along the wetness.

“Why are you crying?” He slowly pulled out of me and laid beside me, resting on his elbow so he could see my face.

I shrugged. “There’s just so many emotions right now. I’m happy we’re together and don’t have to fight those feelings anymore, but on the flip side, I’m angry and terrified.”

He nodded in understanding. “I get that. But I need you to promise me you won’t tell the others what happened tonight. They don’t need to know.”

My conscience battled inside me, and I didn’t want him to see it. I disagreed with him. Our friends needed to know what was going on. “Don’t ask me to make a promise I don’t know I can keep, Carter.” He sighed, and I wrapped my arm around his waist, resting my head on his chest. “But I will promise that I won’t tell them unless it’s absolutely essential.”

Carter kissed the top of my head. “At least you were honest.”

Tilting up my chin, I looked right into his eyes. “No lies, Carter. That’s all I ask. Don’t lie to me, and don’t keep me in the dark. This won’t work if you do.”

His lips spread into a grim line. “You’ll see me differently, Emma. If I have to kill someone, to fight to the death”

Shaking my head, I cut him off with my words. “I’ll still love you. The only monsters around us are Scar and his people, not you.” I could see the doubt in his eyes, and it killed me that he didn’t fully trust that I’d still love him. Whatever happened, I’d be by his side, no matter what.

Nothing could turn me against him, and I’d prove it to him.

* * *

My nerves were shot, and I couldn’t sleep, so I got up to watch the sunrise and made breakfast as if it was a typical day. I could almost imagine Carter and me spending the afternoon on the beach, laughing and enjoying our time together. Only that wasn’t going to happen.

Carter’s phone was still on the floor from where he threw it, so I picked it up and set it on the kitchen counter, shocked that it wasn’t damaged. There were no calls on it yet. Nikolai was supposed to get Carter sometime this morning, and I didn’t want him to leave. Unfortunately, I had no choice.

Everything was quiet as I glanced around at Carter’s home. I remembered the day it went on the market and how excited Carter was to put an offer on it. He’d changed the inside to more masculine gray colors instead of the earthy tones it came in. That was Carter’s style: sexy and serious. He wasn’t your earthy, laid-back type of guy. Not only did I pick out the comforter in his bedroom, but I helped him choose the living room furniture as well. Everything was the same. The black leather couch and

chairs barely looked sat in. Guess he was telling the truth when he said he didn't spend much time at home.

The second I sat down at the table to eat my scrambled eggs and bacon, Carter walked in, freshly showered and dressed in jeans and a dark blue T-shirt. The scruff on his face made him look rugged and unpredictable, like there was a wildness to him. I could already feel a shift in his demeanor; he had to be hardcore in whatever game Scar had him playing.

"I made breakfast," I called out.

Carter fixed a plate of eggs and bacon and sat at the table with me. He gave a thin smile, and I could tell he was preoccupied. But at least he ate, which made me happy.

I picked at my food and studied him. "What are you thinking about?"

Blowing out a heavy sigh, Carter met my gaze. "Honestly? No fucking clue. My mind's a blank right now."

His phone beeped, and he dropped the fork on his plate. "Here we go." He walked over to the kitchen counter to look at his phone. The muscles in his jaw tightened when he read the text. "They'll be here in ten minutes." He returned and picked up his plate, setting it in the sink. "You can use my car today." I watched him snatch his car keys from the key rack, and set them down beside me. "You promised you'd stay around your family. Text me when you get to the gym, so I know you got there safely."

Looking up at him, I nodded. "I will."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

I finished eating quickly and washed up the dishes. I wanted to be gone before Nikolai arrived. Once I had my tennis shoes on, I grabbed my gym bag, and Carter walked with me into the garage. He pressed the button to open the garage doors, and there behind his silver Range Rover was Nikolai's SUV, blocking us in. Nikolai hopped out of the driver's side, and the behemoth of a man with him got out from the other. Nikolai wasn't in a suit like last night but dressed casually in jeans and a T-shirt. The giant with him had on an expensive suit with his gun tucked away in the holster under his jacket. I'd seen several mafia movies in my time, but I never thought I'd be trapped in one.

"Good morning Emma," Nikolai said to me, completely ignoring Carter. "Where you off to?"

Carter stepped in his way. "That's none of your fucking business. You're here for me."

Nikolai scowled. "Unfortunately." He nodded toward his vehicle. "The blindfold is in the backseat. Let's go."

Dismissing him, Carter turned to me. "Be careful."

Swallowing hard, I nodded. "You too."

He kissed me quickly and disappeared inside the SUV. I couldn't see him through the tinted windows. Nikolai grinned at me as he backed out of the driveway, making my uneasiness worse. From here on out, every time Carter left, I'd never know if he'd come back.

Opening the door to Carter's car, I tossed my gym bag across the seat and hopped in. I backed out of the driveway and pressed the button to shut the garage door. I could see Nikolai's SUV a little way down the road, and fought the urge to follow them. If I were in a different car, I would. Next time, I had to plan better.

The drive to Fightanium didn't take long, and everyone was already there when I arrived. Before going in, I texted Carter just like he requested so he'd know I was safe. Knowing he wouldn't be able to message back, I slid my phone into my gym bag and headed inside. My dad was in one of the fighting rings with Ethan, Ripp, and my uncle Camden. Reagan was in the other with Braden and Paxton. The second they all looked at me, it was as if time stood still. Since the meeting was just last night, Carter and I hadn't had the chance to speak with them. I wanted to tell them the whole truth, but I couldn't yet.

My dad leaned over the ropes and smiled. "You training with us today?"

Plastering on a smile, I nodded. I could use all the fighting practice I could get. "Yep.

He waved for me to join him. "Come on then."

After I climbed up into the ring, I went straight to Ethan, leaning against him while I pretended to fix my shoes. "What happened?" he asked, his voice low.

I whispered back, "I promised Carter I wouldn't say anything unless it got worse. I feel that's going to be sooner rather than later."

Ethan grumbled under his breath. "Fucking shit. We knew this was coming."

"Yeah, we did. We'll talk later."

I'm ready for the day to end.

CARTER

I tried to concentrate on the different turns with the blindfold on, but I couldn't keep up. Nikolai and the guy up front, whose name was Wheeler, talked about football the entire time. Wheeler was only a couple of years older than me and Nikolai and had closely shaved blond hair and a thick British accent. I was hoping they'd talk about something important, but that didn't happen.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, but I couldn't look at it yet. Hopefully, it was Emma saying she was at the gym. Scar might have said he'd leave Emma out of this shit, but I didn't believe a fucking word that came out of his mouth. I didn't trust that she was safe or he wouldn't use her to get something out of me.

The vehicle stopped, and Nikolai got out. "We're here." The back door ripped open, but he didn't touch me. Smart man. "Get out and take the blindfold off," he grumbled impatiently. I stepped out and slid the black cloth off my eyes. Nikolai glared at me, clearly annoyed by the scowl on his face. "Start walking, Reynolds."

Keeping my head forward, I walked toward the front door of the white brick mansion with Wheeler to my right and Nikolai close behind. When I stepped inside, it was the same house as last night. Instead of going down the left hallway to the study, Wheeler motioned for me to follow him down the opposite hall. We walked past the kitchen and down a service hallway to a door. Wheeler opened it to reveal a set of stairs that descended into a basement.

The sound of flesh hitting flesh echoed in the air, and I already knew what I would see when I took the last step. The room was darkly lit with concrete walls and tiny

slivers of windows, and was designed as a fighting gym with weight benches, punching bags, and treadmills. There wasn't a fighting ring, but in the middle of the room was a large mat where the two suited guys from last night were sparring each other. Scar—dressed in another expensive suit—looked on from the other side of the room with another man covered in head-to-toe tattoos from what I could tell. There wasn't a single inch of his skin that didn't have ink on it.

Scar noticed us and walked over. "Good. You're here. We can get started."

"On what?" I asked blandly.

He smiled. "Your contract. Follow me."

Nikolai and Wheeler stayed back while I followed Scar over to the corner of the room set up like a tattoo shop with a table and all the equipment. The tattooed guy sat down in the chair by the table and turned on the power supply to his machine.

Scar pointed at the table. "If you still want to do this, take off your shirt."

I peered over at the two men sparring, and on their backs were dragon tattoos. Lifting my shirt, I tossed it on the table before lying down on my stomach. "I'm good. Let's get this shit over with."

The tattoo guy prepped my skin and got to work, the needles piercing my skin like tiny jackhammers. I loved the feel of it; that was why I had so much ink to begin with. However, I knew I'd be on the table for hours so he could mark me with the large dragon.

Scar leaned against the wall and watched his men spar on the mat. From what I could tell, they were good brawlers, but they lacked longevity and endurance. Nikolai watched them from across the room before taking off his shirt and joining them; he

also had the dragon tattoo on his back.

“When do I fight?” I asked.

Tilting his head to the side, Scar pursed his lips. “I’m starting you off with in-house fights next week, the same kind of fighting your buddy Rushing organizes at his club in Vegas. You’ll be in the ring every single night.” He smirked and side-eyed me. “Unless you want to recruit your friends.”

Clenching my fists, I shot him a fiery glare. “Not gonna fucking happen.”

Scar shrugged me off. “Hope your body can handle the stress.”

I wasn’t worried about it. Even if I had to fight for hours at a time, I wouldn’t let them beat me. “So, no fighting to the death?” I wondered.

He let out a throaty laugh. “Not yet. That starts next weekend for you. Nikolai has the main fight tomorrow, and I want you there. I’ll have someone come pick you up. It won’t be here.”

That was where he’d gotten smart. When he ran the Dark Side, it was in one location. Now with him holding the fights in different places he’d be less likely to get busted. Turning my attention to the mat, I focused on Nikolai and how he moved. He was quick on his feet and a hard puncher, his technique aggressive and bold.

“Is he your best fighter?”

Scar followed my line of sight and nodded. “He is. His family are the kind of people you don’t want to mess with. They’re the ones supplying the men you’ll be fighting against.”

And now it all made sense. “Basically, your fighters do the dirty work for them.”

Scar pulled out his phone and then slid it back into his pocket. “Guess you can put it that way. They do their part, and I do mine.”

I went back to studying Nikolai’s style. “Am I fighting him at some point?”

“No,” Scar barked, his tone hard. I looked up at him, and he shook his head. “You two are not to step in the ring together.”

Eyes narrowed, I stared at him, wondering why he was so adamant. “Why?”

Scar huffed. “Because you two are the best I got. I can’t have one of you taking out the other.”

“Who’s better?”

He peered down at me and lifted his shoulders. “That’s why I can’t let you fight. I honestly don’t know who would win.” His phone rang, and he walked away.

Nikolai continued to spar with the two men, and his tactics were brutal. One day, he and I would take the mat; it was inevitable.

One thing was for certain. I can’t lose.

EMMA

I'd been sitting in the dark for the past two hours in Carter's living room. It was closing in on midnight, and I'd heard nothing from him. So many scenarios ran through my mind. Did he fight? Was he lying in a ditch somewhere? Had Scar done something else to him?

My phone rang, and I gasped, my heart racing as I knocked it off the couch onto the floor. I wanted it to be Carter but was disappointed to see it was Ava. I hadn't talked to her since she left for Paris.

"Hey," I answered.

"Hi. I know it's late there, but I wanted to call and check up on you. You doing okay?"

"Oh yes," I lied. "It's been nice spending time with my family."

"What about the letter? Did you ever figure out who sent it?"

Ava was my best friend, but it was too dangerous to tell her the truth. "I'm pretty sure it was just a prank, nothing to worry about. But you ... tell me about Paris." I had to switch the subject.

She squealed so loud I had to hold the phone away from my ear. "It's amazing here! I can't believe I have another week in this paradise. Then, I'll be back in New York with you."

Biting my lip, I leaned my head back against the couch. “I don’t know when I’m going back, Ava. Right now, I kind of like being in California. I think I’m going to stay for a while, maybe find some modeling jobs on this side of the country.”

“And here I thought you wanted to avoid Cali,” she said, laughing. And I did for a while.

“Things are different now.”

A beep sounded in my ear, and I looked at the screen to see it was Reagan calling in. “Ava,” I called out quickly, “I have to go. My sister’s on the other line. I’ll talk to you soon, okay. There’s a lot I have to tell you.”

“Okay. I miss you.”

“I miss you too.” I switched over the calls and took a quick breath. “Reagan, what’s up?”

“Is he back yet?”

“No,” I huffed. I got to my feet and paced around the living room. “Carter’s not answering any of his texts either. His phone didn’t get charged last night, so it’s probably dead.”

“Ugh, men. Are you worried?” I was more than worried: I was petrified.

“A little,” I said, downplaying my true feelings.

“Are you going to tell me the whole story now? You were exceptionally vague earlier.”

I knew that if I told Reagan something, she'd keep it to herself. I trusted her. Plus, it killed me to keep everything from her.

"Carter's in really deep, Ray," I confessed. "Scar gave him an ultimatum. He has to fight for him."

Reagan hissed out a breath. "I figured as much. Are we talking fight or die?"

Just the thought made my stomach shrink in on itself. "Yes. I'm guessing it'll be similar to the way things were when dad, Uncle Cam, and Paxton fought. And even now, I still don't know all the details about that."

"Neither do I," Reagan added. "Paxton gave us some insight, but I'm sure he held back."

There was still a considerable chunk of Scar's ultimatum I had yet to tell her. I stopped pacing the living room and sat back down on the couch. "There's something else, Reagan."

"Oh hell, what else could there be?"

Closing my eyes, I slowly let out a shaky breath and opened my eyelids. "Carter has to take part in more than double the number of fights because he wouldn't recruit anyone. I'm sure you can figure out who he's saving here."

Reagan gasped. "Oh my God, Scar wants our brother too?"

"And Ripp, Braden, Kase, and Hunter," I added, peering around at the dark living room. "He wants them all. Carter refuses to tell them."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

“Are you going to? Carter can’t do this alone; it’ll totally screw with his head. Having to fight is one thing, but constantly fighting for your life is another.”

My heart pounded in my throat. Reagan was right; he couldn’t do it alone. But I made a promise to him. “Please don’t say anything, Reagan. I’m trusting you to keep this to yourself.”

Reagan puffed out an angry breath. “Fine. I still think the guys should know. They’ll want to help.” I knew they would.

Headlights beamed in through the windows, and my pulse skyrocketed. “I think Carter’s back,” I burst out quickly. “I gotta go.”

“Okay. Fill me in tomorrow.”

We hung up, and I held my breath as I waited for Carter to come through the door. Finally, I could hear his jingling keys as he unlocked the door and walked inside. He immediately found me even though it was dark, his face cloaked by shadows.

“I’m sorry I didn’t text back. My phone’s been dead for hours,” Carter said, his tone low and gruff.

I stood. “I figured it would be.” Slowly, I closed the distance between us, wondering what I would see once I got a good look at his face. His eyes never wavered from mine when I stepped up to him. He looked the same, with no bruises or cuts.

“You didn’t fight tonight?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No. That starts on Monday. I’ll have one every night, and then next weekend will be a big one.” The hesitance in his eyes was my answer; I knew what next weekend would bring.

“What did you do today that took so long?” I asked, my stomach sagging with dread.

Averting his gaze, he turned around and lifted his T-shirt over his head. On his back was the same dragon tattoo Nikolai had on his, only Carter’s was freshly done and covered with a clear waterproof bandage. The tattoo took up the entire upper half of his back, and was across his shoulders, and on part of his neck.

“I see,” I said.

“It’s my contract.” His voice sounded tired and tense, as if it took effort to speak. Carter turned around and kissed the top of my head. “I’m going to take a shower.” He walked away, and I watched him go, regret plaguing me from the inside out. I should’ve handled this on my own from the beginning, and now it was too late.

EMMA

Carter and I had a gorgeous, beautiful Sunday to ourselves before he'd be forced to leave to watch Nikolai fight. I didn't realize how much time he would be spending away from me. Once Carter got home last night, he took a shower, and we laid in bed. He didn't speak; he just held me. I wanted to tell him how much I hated myself for getting him involved with Scar, but I knew he didn't want to talk about it. So that was why I decided to give him his space. When he was ready to speak, he'd find me. But it killed me to feel the distance between us.

Closing my eyes, I tilted my head up to the sky and let the sun soak into my skin. It did nothing to calm my nerves. The back door opened, and I watched Carter stroll toward me from the corner of my eye, dressed in swimming trunks with a towel draped over his shoulder. He grabbed one of the lounge chairs and pulled it over beside mine.

"I'm sorry I slept so long. I needed it," Carter said.

I lifted my sunglasses on top of my head and looked up at him. "It's okay. I'm just out here relaxing."

Taking my hand, Carter helped me up, and he sat down with me straddling his lap. He wrapped his arms around my waist, his fingers gently grazing my bare skin. "I love you, Emma."

In his eyes, I could see the real Carter. When he came back last night, there was a wall he put up between us. Right now, it was gone, and I wanted to hold onto him.

Cupping his cheeks, I leaned in and kissed him. “I love you too.”

When I looked into his eyes, he smiled. “Tell me something good.”

“Something good, huh?” I swiveled my hips against him, and he groaned, making me smile. “Let’s see.” I thought back to all the memories we shared; there were so many. However, there was one that I never came clean about. It seemed like the perfect time to confess. “I got one,” I said, grinning wide.

Chuckling, Carter rested his hands on my hips, his cock stirring between my legs. “Uh-oh. I can’t wait to hear this.”

“Oh, you’ll love it,” I promised. “Remember that time when everyone visited my family’s cabin? You were fifteen, and I was thirteen.”

His eyes lit up. “I do. All of us took turns taking the four-wheelers out. You and I ended up riding the trails together.” We only had two four-wheelers, and the boys thought it pertinent that one of them get paired with the girls. Ethan rode alongside Peyton while Reagan and Braden were adamant about competing against each other. It was a rivalry that continued to exist today. Ripp and Brooks rode out together, leaving me with Carter.

“It couldn’t have worked out perfectly if we tried,” I confessed.

Carter’s eyes narrowed with curiosity. “What am I missing?”

A snicker escaped my lips. “My four-wheeler didn’t break down that day.” I had disconnected one of the hoses, and hid it so he wouldn’t be able to fix it. That way, I’d have to ride with him through the rest of the trails.

Understanding flashed in his greenish amber gaze. “You’re a bad girl, Emma

Jameson.”

I shrugged. “What can I say? I wanted to hold onto you. I never knew that silly teenager crush would turn into so much more today.”

He slid his hands up my body, grazing the sides of my breasts before cupping my cheeks. “Who would’ve thought.”

Leaning into his touch, I stared right into his eyes. “Do you see me in your future?”

A sad smile spread across his lips. “I’ve never seen anyone but you in my future, Emma. Of course, there are a lot of uncertainties, but I’d like to think that one day our lives will be what we want.” He glanced down at my lips, his gaze heated and raw. “I only want you, Emma. You are my forever.”

Tears sprung to my eyes, and my heart overfilled with joy. “Then, I guess it’s the perfect time to tell you that I plan on staying for a while. I already told my roommate not to expect me back in New York just yet.”

“How long are we talking?” Carter asked, excitement in his voice.

I shrugged. “Not sure, but we’ll figure it out. All I know is that I’m not leaving you to deal with this mess with Scar yourself. I’m going to be right here.”

He slid his hands back down my body to my waist, his gaze never wavering from mine. “I don’t want you to worry about me. The only person I’m worried about is you. I’m so afraid Scar will use you to get to me. It’s what he does.”

Sadly, I knew that, and I was prepared. “I know,” I replied softly. “And if it comes to that, I’m ready to fight. I’m not helpless, Carter. You don’t have to protect me twenty-four-seven. I’m stronger than I look.”

His smile made everything inside of me tighten. “Yes, you are.”

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I offered up a cheeky grin. “We have the day to ourselves before you have to disappear tonight. What do you want to do?”

Carter’s eyes darkened with need, his cock twitching between my legs. I thrust my hips against him, earning a low growl to escape his lips. “I can think of a few things,” he said.

Biting my lip, I ran my hands over his arms, his skin hot from the sun. “I think you need to cool off a bit.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

I nodded toward the pool, and he chuckled. “I think so too.” Grabbing the backs of my thighs, Carter lifted me and I wrapped my legs around his waist as he entered the pool. Once settled down on the stairs, he untied my bikini bottoms and mock gasped. “Whoops. Sorry about that.”

Reaching behind my back, I untied my top. “Oops. I guess I’m sorry about that too.” I tossed it behind me while my bottoms floated away along with it.

Carter’s heat-filled gaze raked down my body. “You’re doing the opposite of cooling me off.”

Snickering, I slid my hands down to his cock, freeing him from his shorts. “That’s the whole point.”

I pumped up and down his length a few times until a strangled groan erupted from his lips. “Fuck, baby. That feels so damn good.”

Hooking my arms around his neck, I teased him by trapping his arousal between our bodies, sliding his length along my wet center. Carter’s arms gripped me tightly around the waist, and he kissed me, pushing his tongue deep inside my mouth. His cock pulsed between us, and he began rocking into me with increasing pressure. I moaned into his mouth in response.

I moved my hips against him to give him a taste of what it would feel like with me riding him. Carter groaned with need and bit my lower lip. His strong grip on my ass held me firmly in place while he thrust against me.

“Stop teasing me,” he growled.

I bit his lip back, sucking it between my teeth. “It’s so fun, though.”

I lifted my hips and allowed the tip of his cock to graze my opening. By the grip he had on me, I knew I was in for the ride of my life. Slamming me down over his cock in one thrust, he stopped and held me there, maintaining eye contact. I loved being stretched to the point of pain and seeing the passion in his eyes. His fingers dug into my hips, and he squeezed, holding me still as he began pounding into me with short, fast thrusts, his breaths coming out quick and shallow. His mouth came down on my breasts, which were teasing him by bouncing in his face.

The water sloshed around us, cooling my skin, but it did nothing to quell the heat between my legs. I was so close to losing control ...

“Oh fuck. I’m gonna come, baby,” he groaned, his teeth teasing my nipple. His arms wrapped around my body and pulled me against him as he pushed his hips into mine. My insides tightened, and I screamed out my release as his body spasmed and jerked. As I milked him to completion, his body trembled beneath me, and he rested his forehead against mine.

“While you were gone, it was like a whole part of me was missing,” he whispered.

Still connected, I looked into his eyes. “I know the feeling.”

CARTER

FIVE DAYS LATER

The last five days felt like an eternity of hell. If I had known that my Sunday with Emma was the last day of my true freedom, I would've found a way to stop time. But instead, the world I'd been thrust into was foreign to me; it was almost like I was in a different realm.

Grabbing my hand wraps, I started wrapping my wrists and hands. I had fought every day this week. My body was sore, and I was almost sure I had a broken rib. What surprised me more than anything was the venue. I thought I'd be fighting in a dilapidated crack house or something similar, but it was the complete opposite. Instead, I was fighting in the hidden basement of a fancy downtown L.A. hotel. There was a secret way in and out. I was told the Corsino family in New York made a fortune with underground fighting, so the Michelsons wanted to do the same in California, to make it their territory.

I'd learned a lot the past few days, things I didn't want to know. Scar was so far up the different mafia families' asses there was no way he'd ever free himself. The longer I fought for them, the deeper I got as well.

My phone dinged with another incoming text, and it was from Braden. I'd ignored the guys all week because I knew they'd try to get involved if they saw me. What I hated more than anything was seeing the expressions on Emma's face every time I got home at night. It wasn't the way I wanted things to be. I'd just gotten her back, and now, all this shit would undoubtedly tear us apart.

Gritting my teeth, I tightened my hand wraps and cracked my neck from side to side. Anger ignited in my gut, especially when my eyes landed on the stacks of money in my duffle bag. I hated Scar and everyone he was involved with. It'd taken all the restraint inside me not to go on a rampage and fight my way free. Now, I was a fucking show pony, fighting every night because some asshats thought they could beat me.

Scar told me it was the same kind of fighting as Kase's organized fights at his club in Vegas. That couldn't have been further from the truth. Kase's fights were mainly with newbie fighters who wanted to make a name for themselves. Clean fighting with rules ... legal. Here it was a different crowd altogether, the fights being the complete opposite of legal. The men I was fighting were doing it to work their way up into the other mafia families to prove they were strong enough. So far, none of them had beat me, which had given me more enemies than I could count.

Tonight, I was fighting the same man who broke my rib when I battled it out with on Monday night. He wanted another shot. There were no rules or weapons allowed; the only way to win was by knockout. You could fight as dirty as you wanted.

The door to my room opened, and I didn't even turn around. "What the fuck you want?"

Nikolai chuckled. "Oh, just to watch you move around like an old, decrepit man. You've really gotten the hell beat out of you this week."

"I could still beat your ass," I seethed.

"Nah, I don't want to fight you right now," Nikolai goaded. "I like my opponents to be in the best shape possible. That's surely not you at this moment. I'm starting to wonder if you'll even win tonight."

Ignoring the pain spiking through every nerve ending in my body, I faced him. He looked just like all the other tools in his pricey suit and well-kempt hair, but he was dirtier than all of them put together.

“I don’t lose, Michelson. Tonight, you’ll see exactly what I’m capable of.” I stormed past him out the door, bumping him hard with my shoulder. The long hallway seemed to stretch farther and farther as I made my way down to the red door, guarded by a six-foot-five, three-hundred-pound man with a gun in his holster. Every night there was someone different at the door. It made me wonder how many thugs Nikolai and his family had working for them.

When I got closer, the man opened the door, and a whole other world greeted me. The spectators were all wealthy men and women, dressed in expensive suits and gowns. They threw around thousands of dollars as if it was pocket change. It was a world I never thought I’d be a part of, and I was afraid I’d never be able to get out.

The fighting ring was straight ahead, and I fixated on it. People murmured my name as I stormed past them. When I competed, there was always a fight song to get me amped up for the battle to come but I didn’t need that tonight.

I was ready for the fight.

I craved it.

EMMA

“I think I like this one better,” Reagan claimed as she stabbed her chopstick into the last Somerset roll on my plate.

Pursing my lips, I glared at her while she moaned in delight. Most people couldn’t tell we were sisters, especially since she had blonde hair and blue eyes like our father. My hair was dark, but I did try to lighten it up a bit with the caramel highlights.

It was a tense night but being around Reagan helped, even if she did like to steal my food. We’d picked up several sushi rolls for dinner, and the Somerset roll was my favorite. If Reagan wasn’t physically stronger than me, I would’ve fought her for it. When she opened her eyes, they widened when she noticed me staring.

“What? Do I have something on my face?” she asked, wiping her hand over her mouth. She looked like a little kid in her doughnut pajamas with her hair in Princess Leia buns. I had to give her props for wanting to cheer me up.

There were only two pieces left of the Mr. Flowers roll on the dinner tray, so I snatched them up and put them on my plate. “Yeah, you were about to have my fist on your face. I was going to eat that piece of sushi you stole off my plate.”

Reagan winked. “I got to it first.”

I shoved one of the rolls in my mouth. “It’s a good thing I love you.” She reached over as if she was about to take the last roll, and I held up my chopstick, daring her. “Go ahead. I’ll stab you right through the hand,” I joked playfully.

We both laughed, and she held up her hands in defeat. “Okay, okay. You can have it.”

“Thank you,” I said, opening my mouth wide. I moaned while eating the salmon-filled goodness, just like she did with the last Somerset roll.

Once done, Reagan took our plates and came back with two glasses of Chardonnay. “What do you say? Another episode of Bridgerton?”

I took my glass from her. “Of course.” I’d already watched all the episodes twice now; it was my favorite show.

She sat down and grabbed the remote off the coffee table. I waited for her to hit play, but she instead she lowered it and turned to me. “Okay, I can’t take it anymore. I’ve been waiting for you to bring up Carter, and you haven’t. What’s been going on this week, sis? I’m tired of being patient.” I’d intentionally avoided the subject, not just with her but with all the guys; it wasn’t easy to do. “The truth,” Reagan demanded.

Swallowing hard, I wrapped my arms around my stomach; it’d been in knots all week. “Carter’s exhausted,” I confessed, hearing my own weariness in my voice. “He’s bruised all over his body, and I think he has a broken rib.” I threw my arms in the air. “Hell, he’s barely spoken to me. The last full conversation we had was five days ago.”

Her gaze drilled into mine. “We have to tell the guys.”

I’d promised Carter I wouldn’t say anything to our friends, but I teetered closer to that edge as the days went on. “Not yet,” I stressed. “Things are so confusing right now.”

Reagan placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. “I know, but”

My phone rang, and I gasped, grabbing it up quickly from the coffee table. When I turned it over to see who it was, I felt an insurmountable bubble of rage blossom in my chest.

Reagan sucked in a breath when she saw Nikolai's name. "Oh, dear God. Not good."

I accepted the call. "What the hell do you want, Nikolai?" I snapped.

Nikolai's smooth laugh only irritated me more. "Only to hear your voice. I'm sending you a video. I think you might want to see what your boy's been up to. You know where to find me if you need me." The connection ended, and it felt like a brick had dropped through my core. I held my breath as I waited for the video to upload.

Reagan scooted next to me with her chin rested on my shoulder. "What are you waiting on?" I could hear the hesitance in her voice.

"A video," I muttered, my throat thick. "I don't think I want to see it." Yet, I couldn't look away from my screen. What was I going to see? What if it was Carter with other women? I'd lose my shit along with all the food in my stomach.

The ping came in just a few moments later, and the video appeared. All I had to do was press it. Finger hovering over the play button, my chest tightened so hard I could barely breathe.

"I'm scared."

Reagan wrapped her arm through mine. "So am I, but I'm here with you."

Taking a deep calming breath, I pressed on the video. The lighting was sultry and dark, and all I could see was red. The walls, carpet, chairs, everything was crimson-colored; it was like a human version of a fiery hell, only it was high-class. I had no

clue where that place was. Smoke filled the air as the men enjoyed their cigars, and the women looked pristine in their fancy gowns and glittering jewelry.

“And you dated this Nikolai’s brother?” Reagan asked. “What were you thinking?”

I paused the video. “Seth isn’t like Nikolai. He was nice and treated me with respect. I don’t know how the hell they’re brothers.” Seth was a gentleman and very mature, almost regal even though he wasn’t much older than me. I enjoyed spending time with him, but our schedules became too demanding.

“Did you know his family was part of the mafia?” she wondered.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

I shook my head. “I mean, I knew they were powerful and rich, but I never thought too in-depth on it.” Now I knew why Seth was busy; he was trying to help build his family’s empire. Once his father stepped down, he’d be the one in charge. At least, that was what I assumed since he was older than Nikolai.

Reagan cleared her throat. “Did you ... um ... did you and Seth ever sleep together?”

“Yes,” I answered honestly. “It was right after Ava and I moved in with each other. The guy she was dating introduced me to him.”

“Does Carter know you slept with the enemy?”

With a heavy sigh, I shrugged. “We never talked about it. I guess it’s one of those things you don’t really want to know.”

Looking down at the paused video, I swallowed hard and hit play. We watched more of the footage, and there were so many people throwing around money as if it was nothing. But then, the camera focused on the fighting ring in the middle of it all. A tall, muscular man was already in it, lifting his arms as if he’d already won. He was older than Carter—probably early thirties—with slicked-back midnight-colored hair and wild eyes. There were bruises on his face and chest, reminding me of how Carter looked this week. Then, the fighter’s attention turned to the right, and the camera followed his line of sight, straight to Carter who stormed toward the ring.

Shivers ran down my arms when I saw the outright hatred on his face, almost murderous. I’d never seen him look like that before.

“Holy shit,” Reagan gasped, “that doesn’t look like Carter at all.”

Swallowing hard, I closed my eyes briefly, trying to conjure up the true Carter in my mind. “No, it doesn’t.”

Carter hopped in the ring, his muscles tense as he paced back and forth with a dangerous gleam in his eyes. Scar joined them and said something, but I couldn’t hear due to all the commotion. The second he exited the ring, the fight began. Carter charged first and punched the other guy right between his eyes, knocking him flat on his back, the sound echoing through the video.

“Holy shit, that’s insane,” a guy around the camera called out excitedly.

The other fighter lifted his hands to protect himself as Carter pummeled him, over and over, his arms moving so fast they were blurry on the screen. Carter landed a hit to the guy’s nose, and blood sprayed across the mat. The wildness in his eyes was terrifying as he beat the man’s face to a pulp. All I could see was blood.

Two men rushed into the ring to pull Carter off the man before the video stopped. The room fell silent except for the erratic heartbeat in my ear.

Reagan squeezed my arm. “Did he kill him?”

Tears filled my eyes. “I don’t know.” If the man wasn’t dead, he was close to it.

“All right, it’s time, Emma,” Reagan burst out, getting to her feet. She rushed into the kitchen to grab her car keys. “If you don’t tell the guys what’s going on, I will. Carter can’t do this on his own. We have to help him.”

She was right. After what I saw tonight, there was no way I could wait around to see what happened. I just got Carter back; I couldn’t lose him now.

* * *

Ethan and Braden lived next door to Ripp and Brooks, so we headed that way, knowing they'd likely be together. We found them at Ethan's, eating pizza in the living room. Reagan and I could see them through the window as we walked to the door.

Ethan noticed us first and rushed to the door, opening it wide. The second he saw my face, he tensed. "Who died?"

"Nobody yet, I hope," I said, walking past him into his house.

He followed Reagan and me into the living room, and the guys set their plates of pizza down on the coffee table in front of them. Braden stood, his gaze hard as he crossed his arms over his chest. Usually, Braden was a jokester, but I hadn't seen that side of him all week. He was concerned about Carter; we all were.

"Where's Carter?" he demanded. "He's been ignoring me all week."

I nodded. "Same. And I've been living with him." Eyes burning, I met each one of their gazes. "I'm sorry about this week. I've intentionally kept you in the dark, but it's only because I promised Carter."

Ripp and Brooks stood and joined Braden and Ethan, all four more serious than I'd ever seen them before.

"He had a fight tonight," I confessed to them, "just like he's fought every night this week."

Braden angrily ran a hand through his dark hair. "Fuck, man. Is he okay?"

Lips trembling, I lifted my shoulders. “I don’t know. I watched a video of him tonight, and I didn’t like what I saw.”

I peered over at Reagan, and she nodded. “Let them see it.”

Scrolling through my messages, I found the video from Nikolai and handed my phone to Ethan. “I think it’s time to tell you what’s going on.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

Ethan pressed on the video, and it began to play. All the guys swarmed around him and watched it; their expressions were grim. Tears burned my eyes, but I squeezed them shut, hoping to keep the waterworks at bay. I had to be strong. The whole situation made me sick to my stomach.

Brooks turned away from the video. "I've never seen Carter like that."

Ripp agreed with a nod. "Neither have I. And the new tattoo? I'm assuming that's the new mark instead of the skull?"

He looked to me for the answer and I nodded. "It is. Carter's going to be pissed I told you about this, but he's not going to ask for help. He wanted to do this on his own, but I don't see how it's possible."

Ethan turned to the guys and then back to me. "What can we do?"

"Scar gave Carter two options," I began, "either he recruits other fighters or fights on his own and quadruples the work. I'm sure you can see which option he chose."

"And you three were on Scar's list," Reagan but in, pointing at Ethan, Ripp and Braden, "as well as Kase Rushing and Hunter Andrews, too."

Ethan's mouth gaped, his glare on me. "Are you fucking serious? Don't you think that's something we should've been told?"

"No shit," Braden growled. "Carter's my family. I'm going to kick his ass myself."

Brooks stepped past all of them and grabbed my hands. He could tell I was barely holding it together. “How do we get in?”

Shaking my head, I squeezed his hands then gently let them go. “You can’t, Brooks. Scar knows you’re involved with the FBI. He doesn’t want you.”

Clenching his jaw, he looked away, eyes blazing. “Fine. I’ll figure out a way to shut Scar down.”

The lines of my throat tightened. “Be careful with that. Scar’s made it clear our parents will pay the price if we mess with him.”

Ethan huffed, and I turned my attention to him. It was uncanny how much he looked like our father. “Get us in, Emma. I’m going to call Kase and Hunter. Hopefully, they can get out here tomorrow.” He pulled out his phone and disappeared down the hall.

Stomach heavy with dread, I focused on Braden and Ripp. “Are you sure?”

Braden ducked his chin in agreement and Ripp did the same. Then, with bated breath, I turned away from them and scrolled to Nikolai’s number on my phone. I stared at his number as my finger hovered above it, wondering if I was about to make a huge mistake. I didn’t want all the pressure on Carter, but they’d be in too deep once the guys sealed the deal.

Reagan placed a hand on my wrist. “Call him, Emma. It has to be done.”

Lifting my eyes to hers, I sighed. “I know.”

Before I could press the call button, Ethan came back into the room. “Kase and Hunter are in. They’re flying out here first thing in the morning.”

Pocketing his phone, he stood between Ripp and Braden, their expressions dark and serious. There was worry and regret in Brooks' eyes, and I knew he desperately wanted to help, but he couldn't. However, I hoped he'd be able to figure out a way to take Scar down for good. Our parents thought they had, but Scar came back with a vengeance.

I stared down at Nikolai's number for a few more seconds and then pressed the dial button, dreading the sound of his voice.

"I had a feeling I'd be talking to you again tonight," he goaded.

The snarky quips were all out of me tonight. Glancing over my shoulder, I let out a ragged breath as I stared at the guys. "They want in."

"Who?"

"My brother, Ripp, Braden Emerson, Kase Rushing, and Hunter Andrews. Kase and Hunter will be here tomorrow morning," I promised.

Nikolai belted out a satisfied laugh. "All right. I guess you showed them the video?"

I clenched my fist so tight it started to numb. "Carter can't do it all himself."

He snorted. "That's for damn sure. He's losing his fucking mind."

That was what I'd been afraid of from the beginning. Fighting in a UFC competition was one thing but having to fight to survive every night was something else entirely.

"How do you want to handle this?" I snapped.

"I'll get everything set up. Let the guys know I'll be contacting them tomorrow. I

already have their numbers.” Not that it was hard to find out contact information, but it made me wonder what kind of connections Nikolai had. I didn’t like the unsettled feeling taking over me. “Oh, and Emma,” Nikolai added.

“Yeah?” I scrunched my eyes shut.

“Tell them to be ready. You know what they’re in for.”

“I will.”

He hung up and Ethan stepped in front of me, pulling me in for a hug. “It’ll be okay, Emma.”

Squeezing my lids harder, I held him tightly. “Will it?”

EMMA

Reagan felt more comfortable staying with our brother, and I didn't argue. We laid on the couch, her head on one end and mine on the other while the guys talked in the kitchen. I was too tired to listen in on them. Instead, I stared at my phone, wondering what Carter was doing. Was he okay?

I decided to text him just to see if he'd text back.

Me: I love you.

A few minutes passed and nothing.

"Why don't you try to get some sleep," Reagan murmured.

"Not gonna happen." Every time I closed my eyes, I would see the replay of Carter's fight. Until I knew he was okay, I wouldn't be able to rest.

It was closing in on midnight, when a phone began to ring causing my pulse to spike. Sadly, it was just Ethan's, so I knew it wouldn't be Carter. However, I sat up in surprise when Ethan rushed into the living room and held up his phone.

"It's Carter." The guys all gathered in the living room with us, and I held my breath when Ethan answered. "Hey, man." I could hear Carter's voice on the other end, but I couldn't tell what he said. Ethan's eyes instantly connected with mine. "Yeah, she's here." More words from Carter, and Ethan nodded. "Okay, I'll bring her to you." Ethan hung up and waved toward the door. "Carter needs you. He's at a hotel

downtown.”

Heart racing, I jumped to my feet. “Let’s go.”

Reagan hugged me quickly. “Be careful, Em. I’m going to stay here tonight.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” I whispered. “I’ll call you later.”

Ethan grabbed his keys from the kitchen, and we hurried out to his metallic blue truck. The engine roared to life, and we sped down the road.

“How did he sound, Ethan?” I asked.

Clenching the steering wheel hard, Ethan glanced nervously over at me. “Angry. It sounded different coming from him.”

The ride was silent the whole way to our destination, which ended up being one of the most luxurious hotels in downtown Los Angeles. Ethan pulled into the parking garage and walked with me inside to the elevators.

“He’s on the top floor,” he said, pressing the button as the elevator doors closed.

As soon as they opened, I followed Ethan down the hall. “Don’t say anything about our plans.”

Ethan shook his head. “You don’t have to worry about that, but he’s probably going to find out tomorrow.” Yes, I know. At least I had tonight to reel him back, even if it was only a slight reprieve. Ethan knocked on the door, and I was so afraid of what I would see when it opened.

Carter opened the door wide, his wet hair and body smelt like soap, and he was bare-

ched, only wearing a pair of jeans. There were no new bruises on his face, but his opponent didn't even get the chance to hit him.

Carter nodded at Ethan. "Thanks for bringing her."

Ethan balled up his hand, and they fist-bumped. "You're welcome. Do you need me to stay?"

"No," Carter replied, "I'll take Emma back with me." He had yet to look at me.

Ethan squeezed my shoulder and stepped back. "All right. Call me if you need me."

He turned and walked off, and Carter finally met my gaze. In his eyes, I could see he was on edge. He moved out of the way so I could walk into the opulent room that was three times the size of my New York apartment. It had its own small kitchen, as well as a dining room, living room, and separate bedroom with a bed that looked larger than a standard king. Carter's clothes were scattered all over the floor, and the breath hitched in my lungs when I saw his bloody hand wraps and shorts in the trash.

Looping his arm around my waist, Carter pulled me back and turned me around to face him, crushing me against him protectively. "You're the only thing getting me through this hell."

His arms wrapped around my waist so tight I could barely breathe. "I saw you tonight," I whispered. "I saw the fight."

Carter hung his head, resting it on my shoulder. "How?"

"Nikolai. He takes joy in all of this."

His warm breath brushed against my neck. "I don't want you seeing me like that."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

“Hey,” I murmured, pushing against his arms so he’d let me go. Cupping his face with my hands, I could see the anguish in his eyes, but there was something else, something I couldn’t decipher. “Nothing will ever make me see you differently. How many times do I have to tell you that?”

Carter’s expression darkened. “As many as it takes. I have a fight tomorrow, Emma. Only one of us will walk away.” He slid his face out of my grasp and moved over to the window overlooking downtown L.A. “I don’t recognize myself in the mirror anymore.”

Coming up behind him, I snaked my arms around his waist. “You’re Carter Reynolds, the man I love more than anything.” His body relaxed but only slightly. If he couldn’t recognize himself anymore, I had to help him. “Your favorite color is red, and you love listening to Jack Johnson. Every time we eat dinner, and you have something different, you always leave a bite for me.” When we were younger, I’d steal food off his plate. At first, I didn’t think he noticed, but as we got older, he’d intentionally leave some of his food for me.

Through the reflection in the window, I could see him smile. “You weren’t as sneaky as you thought, Emma. I knew you were stealing my food.”

Trailing my fingers down his arms, I kissed his bare shoulder. “You were generous, even as a kid. You devoted your time to my brother and our friends, helping them become better fighters.” I moved around to stand in front of him, but he wouldn’t look at me. “You’re a good man, Carter.”

Muscles tensing in his jaw, he shook his head. “Not anymore.” He marched over to

the bed and sat down, keeping his gaze from me. “This is changing me, Emma. I feel it. I don’t want to become like them.”

I knelt between his legs, and rested my hands on his thighs. “You never will.”

Carter reluctantly looked in my eyes. “You’re wrong. I lost myself tonight. I wanted the fight. I wanted to show everyone how powerful I was.” He turned away. “And it felt good. I liked seeing the fear and knowing people were afraid of me. I want them to know they’ll never beat me.” Lowering his head, he ran his hands through his hair, blocking me from seeing his face. “I love you so fucking much. I’m so afraid something will happen, and you’ll leave.

Slowly, I climbed onto his lap and forced his hands away from his face. I kissed him softly, tenderly. “I’m going to be right here, showing you how much I love you every chance I get. I won’t let the darkness take you.” I pressed my lips to him again, and he opened up to me, his body relaxing under my touch. “Make love to me, Carter. I want you to forget about tonight and focus on me. It’s just us.”

Growling low, he lifted me in his arms, never taking his lips from mine. He tossed me onto the bed and covered me with his body. I loved the feel of his weight pressing me into the bed. All I could smell was him all around me. I didn’t want the night to end. Because once tomorrow came, all bets were off.

Carter sucked my bottom lip between his teeth and tugged on my shirt. “Let’s get this off of you.” He lifted my shirt and bra over my head, and I unbuttoned my shorts so he could slide them down my legs. My entire body ached for him. I watched him as he took off his jeans, and everything inside me tightened.

He crawled up my body, and I nipped his neck, rolling my hips beneath him, earning another deep growl to escape his lips. His fingers traced over my nipples, and my whole body throbbed in anticipation.

All I could hear was my erratic breathing and the sound of his breaths as he touched me. It felt like his hands were all over my body, exploring me. It felt so good, I wanted to scream.

Bending down, he flicked a nipple with his tongue before closing his lips around it, sucking it greedily. Desire shot through my veins, its heat coursing through my body. Carter rubbed the tip of his cock between my legs, smiling when he felt how wet I was.

“How bad do you want me inside you?” he asked, still licking my taut nipples.

“Probably just as bad as you want to be inside me,” I countered teasingly.

His lips pulled back in a smile. “You have no fucking idea.” He pushed the tip in just a bit, but it was enough to drive me wild.

Moaning, I lifted my head and arched my back. “Just make love to me.”

Carter’s deep-throated chuckle echoed throughout the room when he pinned me to the bed with his weight. Then, grasping my face in his hands, he leaned down and bit my bottom lip. “Happy to.”

Plunging deep and hard, Carter moved his hips against mine, grunting with the sheer force of his thrusts. I countered his movements, rocking my hips just as hard. His arms caged me against his body, and he towered over me like I was nothing but a small animal. I wanted more; I had to have more.

Wrapping my legs around his waist, I tilted my hips higher to get more of him in me. “I need to feel all of you.” He lifted knees, and angled my hips up even more as he pushed himself inside me until we were fully connected. I could feel him stretching me, his movements raw and untamed.

“Is this what you wanted?” he growled low.

“Yes,” I moaned.

Faster and faster, he pounded into me, the orgasm building in between my legs. I raked my nails down his back, and held back my scream as the final burst of pleasure spread throughout my body. Carter pumped a couple more times, and I could feel him shudder and release his warmth deep inside, filling me up.

Breathing hard, he collapsed on top of me and kissed me tenderly on the lips. I smiled up at him, loving that he was still hard between my legs. I wished it could always be like this.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

EMMA

I was able to make Carter forget his troubles for the rest of the night, and I was determined to see it through to the remainder of the day. At least until he had to leave for his fight tonight. Ethan said he would text if something happened with Scar, but all I knew was that Kase and Hunter had arrived this morning from Vegas.

After leaving the hotel, we stopped by my parents' house for a pancake breakfast. The longer I was around my mom and dad, the more I wanted to tell them what was happening with Scar. They had no clue how much shit we were in. Luckily, Carter and I were able to get through breakfast with smiles on our faces.

The rest of the day was spent on Santa Monica Pier, riding all the rides and indulging in a bit of arcade fun. After that, we finished up at the aquarium. For a few short hours, it was as if nothing was amiss in the world, that tonight wasn't going to change our lives forever. I was terrified to see what tomorrow brought.

Hand in hand, we walked out of the aquarium and began our trek back to his house, which was only a quarter-mile down the beach. The sand was warm against my feet, and I slowed my pace, not ready to get back. Our time of peace was rapidly ending.

Carter lifted our clasped hands to his lips and kissed my wrist gently. "Remember when we were younger, you said you wanted five kids. That still true?"

I burst out laughing. "Oh, hell no. Two is my max." I looked up at Carter, and his smile warmed my heart as he looked out at the ocean. "What about you?" I asked him. "You and the guys proclaimed none of you would ever get married. Has that

changed?”

Smirking, Carter met my eyes. “Why do you want to know? You offering to be my wife?” My heart stopped, and all words escaped me, especially when he leaned in and kissed me. “Or is that not something you want?” His breath was warm against my lips.

“Are you proposing?”

Carter kissed me again and released my hands, folding his arms around my waist. “I wish you were already my wife, Emma.”

When I’d imagined what my wedding would be like, Carter was the only man I could picture standing with me. Deep down, I’d always known he was the one. I’d never loved anyone the way I loved him.

My eyes began to burn, and I smiled. “You didn’t answer my question. Are you proposing?”

Carter’s lips pulled back in a sad smile. “I wish I was. As soon as we get an idea of what life will be like, I’ll get down on my knee.”

That was good enough for me.

Lifting on my tiptoes, I kissed him. “You know what this means, right?”

Carter beamed. “What?”

“You’ll be stuck with me forever.”

“That’s a good problem to have,” he said, holding me tight.

“Excuse me,” a girl’s voice called out.

Carter kept an arm around me as I turned around to see two teenage girls and two boys grinning excitedly at Carter. Both girls had blonde hair and golden skin from their California tans. I missed the bronze skin as a result of lying out on the beach. Being in New York and working twenty-four-seven kept me from that guilty pleasure. Then again, it wasn’t good for the skin, so I stopped indulging in the UV rays several years ago. The boys both had on backward ballcaps and swimming trunks, but the one with blue shorts stepped forward; they had to be around sixteen years old.

“Are you Carter Reynolds?” the boy asked.

I looked up at Carter and he grinned at them. “I am.”

The boys hooted and hollered as if they’d just won the lottery. It was sweet and I knew it was what Carter needed right now. The one with red shorts pulled out his phone. “Dude, can we take a picture with you?”

Carter released his hold on me. “Of course.”

I stepped away from him so the boys could get their selfies, and I even took all their phones and snapped some pictures with all of them together. Once they went on their way, several people in the vicinity snapped pictures of Carter as we walked past them.

Carter clasped my hand and I loved seeing the smile on his face. “How does it feel to be a celebrity?”

“You tell me,” he said, “you’re the one in all the magazines.”

“Yeah, but I’m not at your level.” Our success was utterly different. Only people in the modeling world knew who I was. The whole country knew Carter Reynolds. He had to endure hours and hours of physical stress to get where he was.

Carter squeezed my hand. “Both of our jobs are demanding, Emma. You work hard for what you have.”

“Yeah, but I’m not a champion.” I smiled up at him but his faded quickly.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

“If word gets out about what I’m doing, I’ll lose my title.”

“That’s not going to happen,” I stated adamantly. Although, in all honesty, it could but I had to be optimistic for his sake. We made it back to his house, but I wasn’t ready to go inside yet. “Can we stay out here a little longer?”

Grinning, Carter pulled me down to the sand. I snuggled in beside him and gazed out at the ocean where dark clouds rolled in from the horizon.

“Looks like a storm’s headed our way,” Carter announced.

I breathed in the air. “Yep. I love it.”

A low laugh escaped from Carter’s throat. “One of these days, you’ll be on the local news, giving us weather updates. Unless you’ve changed your mind and want to move to Oklahoma or Kansas to chase tornadoes.”

“Hey, that still sounds exciting,” I countered, bumping him with my shoulder. “But no, I would love to find a good news station to work for. It’s where I see myself in the next five to ten years.”

Carter kissed the side of my head. “You’ll get your dream job; I know it.”

We sat in silence for a few more minutes until the storm clouds drew in closer. Then, finally, lightning struck in the distance, signaling it was time for us to get off the wide-open beach. Groaning, Carter jumped up and held a hand out to me. “We need to get in anyway. I have to run by Scar’s and warm up. I don’t know why the fuck I

have to go there for that. Our fathers own a damn gym.”

Carter helped me up, and we walked through his private gate and around his pool to the back deck. Once he unlocked the door, we disappeared inside and the cool air blasted across my skin, making me shiver.

“I wish I could be at the fight tonight,” I said, watching him grab a water bottle out of the refrigerator.

Carter paused with his back to me. “It’s too dangerous. Too many people will know who you are to me. I can’t fight knowing you’re there unprotected.” He gulped down the water, and a low growl rumbled in his chest. “Especially with Nikolai around. He wants you.”

Knowing I couldn’t argue with him there, I stayed silent as he walked out of the kitchen and down the hall to the bedroom to grab his bag of fighting gear. I didn’t want him to leave. If I had my way, I would’ve made the day last forever so he wouldn’t have to face tonight. There was a chance he could lose, and I’d never see him again. I had to stay strong for him.

Appearing in the doorway with his face a stony mask, Carter had his duffle bag slung over his shoulder. I closed the distance and he leaned down to kiss me, his lips lingering longer than I anticipated.

He held on to me, and I breathed him in one last time. “Come back to me, Carter.”

“I will. I promise.”

He walked out the door and I locked it behind him, watching him through the window as he got into his silver Range Rover. The second his car disappeared from view, my phone beeped.

Ethan: Got the call. About to be on our way to fuck knows where. Kase and Hunter are with us.

A pang struck my middle, making me wish I'd come clean to Carter. He was going to be furious with all of us. I pressed Carter's number, my body breaking out in a full sweat while the line rang. It rang and rang and rang.

And, of course, he didn't pick up.

CARTER

I enjoyed the day with Emma. It kept me grounded to be near her, but now I had to get her out of my mind. No distractions. When I pulled up at the mansion, I entered the code at the black wrought-iron gate. The stone driveway circled the large, white brick mansion and there was already a line of cars, ranging from fast sports cars to luxury sedans. What I didn't understand was how Scar had all of it. The bastard spent the last twenty-seven years in prison.

Once out of my car, I grabbed my bag from the backseat and looked around at the San Fernando Valley home. There weren't any close neighbors nearby, which worked in Scar's favor.

The two men stationed at the front door stepped aside so I could enter. From what I gathered, their names were Antonio and Bridger, and were Scar's main bodyguards. They were tall and stocky, both with slicked-back dark hair. I'd never heard them speak, nor have I seen them without shades over their eyes. They looked like the kind of men who'd put a bullet in your head without a second thought.

Entering the house, I headed past the kitchen to the hallway that led to the basement entrance. As I walked down the stairs, the energy in the air shifted to something more sinister, darker. It was like a whole other world in that basement.

Two of Scar's men were in the corner lifting weights, so I chose the opposite side of the room where the punching bags were. Dropping my gear to the floor, I took off my shirt and slipped in my earbuds, cranking up Avenged Sevenfold as loud as possible. The music blasted in my ears as I pounded on the bag until my body and mind went

numb. It was the only way I'd be able to follow through with the fight—by taking out all emotion.

Sweat dripped down my back, soaking into the waistband of my shorts. I didn't want to stop, even as it fell into my eyes, obscuring my view. A few minutes later, someone walked up behind the bag, and I didn't have to see clearly to know who it was. Twisting my body, I roundhouse kicked the punching bag, making it slam into Nikolai's side.

Laughing, he steadied it. "Damn, Reynolds. Save some for the fight tonight; you're gonna need it."

"I'm already ready," I snarled.

Nikolai shook his head. "Actually, you're not. That's why I'm here. There's been a change of plans."

Stepping away from the bag, I glared at him. "What are you talking about?"

A smirk spread across Nikolai's face. "I'm taking your place tonight."

I didn't like the leer on his face; something was up. "Why?"

Nikolai's attention moved to the other side of the room. "Take a look."

The second I turned my head was when I saw them: Ripp, Braden, Kase, Hunter, and Ethan. "What the ..." I stormed away from Nikolai, straight to them. "What the hell is this?"

Braden was the one who stepped forward first, his green eyes blazing. "We're here to help you, you insufferable ass. You shouldn't have to do this alone."

Hands planted on my hips, I hung my head and sighed. “Emma told you.”

“Don’t be mad at her,” Ethan said. I lifted my head and he stepped forward. “She just wanted to help, just like the rest of us.”

Kase came up and slapped me on the shoulder. “It’s okay, Reynolds. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you. Honestly, this isn’t supposed to be your fight. One way or another, Scar was going to get us all here.”

Grinning smugly, Nikolai joined us. “Tonight is the beginning. I hope you’re prepared.”

Once he was gone, I stared at my friends, knowing it was too late to get them out. “You shouldn’t be here.”

* * *

Wheeler, Nikolai’s main bodyguard, drove me and the guys to a rundown warehouse on the industrial side of town notorious for gang activity. The streets were quiet, almost as if there were an ominous energy warning people away.

“Seriously?” Ethan called out. “Where the fuck are we going?”

Wheeler pulled into the back of the warehouse, ignoring Ethan’s question. There were other cars around—expensive ones at that—but they were all hidden from the road out front. Wheeler parked amongst them and opened his door.

“Get out,” he grumbled.

I was in the front with him, so I opened my door while the guys climbed out the back. We followed Wheeler inside the dark, musty warehouse which smelled like piss, shit,

and rotting wood. The feel of death hung heavy in the air, and I strongly suspected that tonight wasn't the first night someone had lost their life there.

There were a dozen men inside—all older and dressed in suits—involved in their own in-depth conversations. “Where do you want us?” I asked Wheeler.

A few men looked our way with wide eyes, confusion sweeping across them. I didn't know what to make of it. Finally, Wheeler pointed at the group and said, “Anywhere. The fight starts in ten minutes.”

He disappeared around the corner, and I glanced back at the guys. “Go on. I want to hang back for a minute.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

Kase, Hunter, and Ripp walked around the room, not even intimidated by the mafia bosses. I never doubted their abilities to handle the fights; it was only that I didn't want this life for them.

Ethan stepped up next to me. "What kind of shithole is this? Didn't you fight at that snazzy hotel this week?"

"Yeah," I answered with a clipped nod, "but this is different. This is where people die."

There wasn't a fighting ring or any indication of what kind of fight we'd be watching. However, I did know there was a lot of money riding on it, judging by the stacks of it on the shabby wooden table situated in the middle of the spectators.

Braden's voice came out low. "Carter, why are they staring at you like that?"

"I don't know," I muttered back.

One of the suited men I recognized from the hotel left his group to walk over to us. His name was Emilio Kazakov, the kingpin of his family. As he closed the distance, his black shoes shined in the dim light of the warehouse. With his white hair and grandfatherly persona, you wouldn't think the Kazakov family would be deep in the gun trade and stealing real estate, but they were. It was amazing the kind of stuff you could hear when nobody thought you were listening.

"Carter Reynolds," Emilio greeted, extending his hand.

I shook his hand. “Mr. Kazakov.”

He rendered a light laugh. “You can call me Emilio.” Brows furrowed, he glanced around the room before setting his stony gray eyes on mine. “I thought you were fighting tonight.”

Confusion swept over me. “I was but there’s been a change of plans.”

Emilio pursed his lips. “That’s unexpected. I was betting on you to win.”

Just as he said it, two suited men walked in from outside with another man in between them, his jeans ripped and carrying a large chain around his shoulders. There were brass knuckles on his right hand and a knife in his back pocket. At the hotel, there were no weapons allowed. It was a whole new ballgame here.

Braden nudged me with his elbow, and I turned to him. “Is that who you were supposed to fight?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Guess so.”

Sighing, Emilio crossed his arms over his chest. “His name’s Rod O’Laoghaire, but here his last name is O’Leary. That’s what everyone calls him. If he wins, his family will acquire one of my hotel chains. If he loses, I get one of their castles in Ireland.” He looked up at me. “That’s why I was hoping you’d be fighting tonight.”

Ethan scoffed incredulously. “Fucking shit. This is insane.”

Yes, it is. Anger ignited in my gut, and I clenched my fists tight. If I were fighting, I’d be risking my life over a goddamn real estate deal.

“Who’s fighting in your place?” Emilio inquired.

Nikolai strolled out from a darkened hallway, wearing only a pair of black athletic shorts with Wheeler by his side. I pointed over at him. “He’s right there.”

Chuckling, Emilio slapped a hand on my back. “Ah, perfect. It looks like the castle will be mine, after all.” He winked at me. “Enjoy the show.” Strolling off, he went straight to Nikolai and shook his hand.

Nikolai talked to several of the suited men—laughing and carrying on—while his opponent snarled and wrapped the chain around his hand, ready for the fight. The room was divided, and it was clear who wanted who to win.

Braden pointed over at the dragon tattoo on Nikolai’s back. “I take it that’s the ink we’ll be getting?”

“Yep,” I said. “I have it already.”

Ethan ran a hand over his face. “It’ll be fun explaining that one to our families. We can’t hide it from them.”

No, we can’t.

“My dad will know what it is,” Braden stated.

I turned to him. “Have you talked to him about this?”

He shook his head. “Not yet.”

If I had to choose which parent of ours to tell, it would be my uncle Pax. He was the one with the most experience with Scar and the one who would understand our situation more.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:12 am

Ethan elbowed me in the arm. “I think it’s about to start.”

We moved closer to the rest of the men, and Ripp, Kase, and Hunter joined us. Ripp pursed his lips, his forehead creased in concentration. “How are Kase and Hunter going to fight for Scar when they live in Vegas? They can’t just fly here on a whim; they have their own lives just like us.”

Kase’s face was an unreadable mask when he looked at me. “They’re going to use my club. I know it.”

Ethan’s jaw clenched. “Just like they’ll use our gym and whatever else they can get their hands on. The shit we’re in now is a lot bigger than what our parents had to deal with.” He was right. No one ever told us the mafia was involved with the Dark Side. The clientele wasn’t rich fuckers in suits at that time.

The men started to form a large circle around Nikolai and O’Leary so we stood with them. O’Leary swung his chain in the air and slammed it down on the concrete, his Irish accent thick as he spat at Nikolai, “Come and get me, you fucking pussy.”

It was as if a switch shut off in Nikolai. One minute he was smirking, and the next, he was devoid of all emotion. O’Leary swung his chain at Nikolai’s head, but Nikolai ducked and rolled across the floor, quickly jumping back to his feet. The same thing happened a few more times, which pissed O’Leary off even more.

After tossing the chain across the room, O’Leary pulled the knife out of his back pocket. “You wanna play games?” he snarled.

Eyes gleaming, Nikolai didn't say a word. It unnerved O'Leary and I could see the fear start to bloom on his face. Ethan leaned in close. "Nikolai's toying with him."

"It's what predators like to do with their prey," I replied.

"Are you going to fight him?" Braden asked me.

I kept my focus on Nikolai. "I will if I get the chance."

Scar strolled over with a satisfied grin on his face. "I'm sure you're happy you get a break tonight."

I didn't even know how to answer that. All I wanted to do was break Scar's neck for putting those I cared about in this hellhole of a life. "How long have you been in bed with the mafia?" I questioned, glaring at him.

Scar brushed me off with a shrug and focused back on the fight. "For as long as I can remember. They've gotten a lot of money from my endeavors."

I looked over at the money table. "Yeah, I see that."

Nikolai continued to taunt O'Leary, but the crowd's attention grew restless; they wanted blood. O'Leary swiped his knife desperately at Nikolai, his moves sloppy with each passing second. Nikolai hadn't even broken a sweat, but his arrogance would be his downfall one day. O'Leary tried to stab at him again, and when Nikolai pivoted, the blade sliced across his right side, blood flowing out of the gash. Nikolai stared at the wound, and his expression darkened like a storm preparing to wreak its havoc. He stalked around O'Leary; his muscles tensed as if he was about to strike. The second the warehouse fell silent, that was when he attacked. Nikolai punched the bridge of O'Leary's nose, causing blood to splatter all over the floor. O'Leary brought his hands up to protect his face in a moment of panic, but Nikolai grabbed

him around the waist, lifted him, and slammed him down on the concrete, his bones cracking the moment he made contact.

O'Leary might not be dead, but that was a killing blow. Whether Nikolai broke O'Leary's back or neck, it was only a matter of time before he succumbed to his injuries.

"Finish it!" one of the men yelled.

Chest heaving up and down, Nikolai stared down at O'Leary who lay unmoving on the concrete floor. I could hear the gurgling of his lungs as he tried to breathe. Nikolai tilted his head to the side with a slight grin, almost as if he wanted to relish this final moment before finishing O'Leary off. He straddled O'Leary's waist and gripped a handful of his jet-black hair, whispering something in his ear. O'Leary's eyes flashed open in fear, obviously knowing this was it for him. Nikolai slammed O'Leary's skull so hard onto the concrete that it split open, his blood flowing freely out of his body.

Scar chuckled in delight. "Now that's what I'm talking about. Reynolds, I can't wait to see your main fight next weekend."

Braden jerked his attention to me, and so did the others. I would be the first in our group to step over that line between good and evil. I just hoped it wouldn't be the end of my humanity.

CARTER

The fight was done, mostly everyone was gone, and Rod's body had been taken away. There was still a dark stain on the concrete where he'd bled out. Nikolai emerged from the dark hallway, this time dressed in a pair of jeans and a dark gray T-shirt, the side of which was soaked with blood from his knife wound. He talked to Emilio and his clan for a few minutes, but they left soon after. The only people left in the warehouse were Scar, his two bodyguards, Nikolai, Wheeler, and us.

Scar's laugh echoed against the hollow walls. "Well, that was quite exciting."

Nikolai peered down at his bloody hands and smiled. "Yes, it was."

Glancing back at Antonio and Bridger, Scar nodded toward the exit. "I think it's time to call it a night. Let's go." He started to walk, but the men didn't follow him. In that instant, I knew something was wrong. The air around us crackled, and my body went on alert; the same went for Ethan, Braden, Ripp, Kase, and Hunter. They knew things were about to get crazy.

Looking over at Nikolai, his attention was still on his bloodied hands, but his grin grew into an evil sneer. Scar jerked around and grabbed a fistful of Antonio's button-down shirt. "I said let's go!" he shouted. "Are you fucking deaf?"

Nikolai reached behind his back and pulled out a gun, holding it at his side. "No, they're not deaf. They're just not going to listen to you."

Scar let go of Antonio's shirt and stormed around to face Nikolai. "They work for

me! I'm the one who pays them!"

Nikolai threw his head back and laughed. "And I'm the one who supplied them to you, old man. They're part of my family, not yours."

Braden moved closer to me. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," I whispered back. Whatever it was, it wasn't good.

Huffing, Scar held out his arms. "You son of a bitch. What are you going to do, kill me?"

Nikolai shrugged as if he didn't have a care in the world. "Actually, that's exactly what I'm going to do." Then, in the blink of an eye, Nikolai pointed the gun and fired, the bullet going straight through Scar's forehead.

The blood rushed through my ears as I watched Scar's lifeless body fall to the floor, the thud of it hitting the concrete made my stomach churn. I had no words. I was numb. When I looked at my friends, their emotionless faces were all I could see, but hidden beneath the surface was shock.

Sliding the gun back into the waistband of his jeans, Nikolai marched straight up to me, not even acknowledging anyone else. "Think you can still beat me, Reynolds?"

I met him eye to eye. "Why don't you find out?"

Nikolai's gaze narrowed. "Maybe I will. I thought after tonight you'd tuck tail and run, but ..." He glanced over at the others. "You've all surprised me. Guess there's more darkness in you than I thought." Then to Wheeler, he said, "Get the car ready and take them back."

Wheeler nodded and walked away while Antonio and Bridger followed him to the garage. Nikolai didn't take his eyes off mine as he addressed the others. "Rushing and Andrews, you get your tattoos tomorrow, and then I want you back in Vegas. You're not needed here right now." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw them nod. Nikolai then spoke to the others. "Ripp, Braden, and Ethan, you'll get yours this week. After that, you belong to me. When I call, you come. Got it?"

Braden tensed beside me, and I knew he had a smart-ass comment waiting to fire. Unfortunately, it wasn't the time or place for it. Thankfully, he kept his mouth shut and so did the others.

Once Nikolai was satisfied, he looked at the others and jerked his head toward the exit. "Go. But not you," he said, pinning his lethal glare on me.

The guys were hesitant to leave, but I nodded so they'd go. As soon as they were out of sight, the tension in the room skyrocketed. Nikolai hated me and the feeling was mutual. If there was ever a person I wouldn't regret killing it would be him.

"You have a fight next Friday, Reynolds," he said, his voice challenging me. "I suggest you get your affairs in order because winning isn't going to happen."

"We'll see about that."

Nikolai nodded. "Yeah, we will." His eyes gleamed. "And when you're lying cold on the ground, I'll be there to comfort your girl. Or should I say, my girl. She won't be able to resist when I show her what I can give her."

Clenching my fists, I wanted to take him out, but I couldn't without risking my friends' lives. "Whether I'm dead or alive, Emma will never be with you."

"We'll see," he said, grinning smugly. "Enjoy your last week with her."

He walked out and my whole body shook with rage. I peered down at Scar's body, the smell of his blood permeating the air. If I thought fighting for Scar was terrible enough, I'd just been proven wrong. Scar was the old, and now a new generation had taken hold. Things were a lot worse than I ever could've imagined.

EMMA

Reagan and Brooks decided to stay with me at Carter's house while the rest of the guys were gone. The only thing we knew was that they had to watch a fight, and luckily, it didn't involve Carter. It was a relief, even if it was temporary. Carter will have to fight to the death eventually; it was just a matter of when.

Standing by the window, I peered out and my pulse raced every time a car drove by. I kept hoping it would be Carter and the others. Reagan was lying on the couch, staring up at the ceiling while Brooks was in the kitchen, pacing the floor holding a tumbler of whiskey. We were all on edge. What I hated more than anything was how I could feel Carter slipping away from me. I knew he was strong and that he'd win the fights at any cost, but at what price?

Headlights beamed down the street, and I gasped as three cars headed toward the house. It's them. "They're here!" I shouted.

Reagan jumped off the couch, and Brooks opened the door wide while we stood behind him. Carter marched up the walkway first, and I breathed a sigh of relief. He wasn't covered in blood, nor was he hurt. However, the haunted expression on his face made my stomach drop.

The second he walked into the house, I jumped in his arms. "Thank God you're okay."

"I'm fine," he said in low voice as he wrapped his arms around me.

My brother, Braden, and Ripp walked in, followed by Kase and Hunter. I hadn't seen them in so long, but they both had the same blond hair and were built as if they were brothers. Guess it shouldn't surprise me since they were cousins. Letting Carter go, I hugged Hunter first and then Kase.

"I'm so sorry this is happening," I said to them.

Kase stared down at me with his silvery-gray eyes. "It's not your fault."

"So, what happened?" Brooks asked.

Ethan and Braden started to explain, but Carter grabbed my hand, his tone urgent. "We need to talk."

He pulled me down the hallway to his bedroom and shut the door. Fear spread like ice through my stomach as I waited for him to speak. When he opened his mouth, I didn't know what to expect, but it surely wasn't the words he said.

"Scar's dead."

The breath hitched in my lungs, and a surge of relief took away the fear, but then it came right back when I saw the worry in Carter's eyes. "Some would say that's a good thing," I mentioned hesitantly.

Carter shook his head. "Not this time."

Swallowing hard, I shivered as goosebumps spread over my skin. "Who killed him?"

He let out a slow breath. "Nikolai. He put a bullet in his skull."

"Oh my God," I gasped, clasping a hand over my mouth. "Why?"

Carter's jaw turned rigid. "Not sure. Honestly, I don't care. He's gone which is good, but now we have Nikolai and everyone else involved with him to deal with." He turned his back on me and gripped his hair, the air around him turning electric. "Nikolai wants me dead, Emma. He sees me as a threat."

Bands tightened across my chest, and I could feel the bile rise in my throat. "What did he say?"

The muscles in Carter's back tensed. "Doesn't matter. All I know is that I have to get you away from here before my fight next Friday." He jerked around, and I could see the desperation on his face. "Please, Emma. I don't know what will happen at the fight, but I do know I don't want you anywhere near Nikolai."

There was no way in hell I would leave him to face whatever he had to face alone. "No, I'm not going anywhere," I fired back.

Carter huffed, his voice gruff and angry. "Dammit, Emma, this is serious. I watched Nikolai kill two men tonight. One he shot through the head, and the other he smashed their skull into the ground. His people don't care who they hurt. They're dangerous and I know Nikolai will come for you."

He wanted to protect me. I understood that because I would do anything for him. What Carter failed to realize was that no amount of running or hiding would help.

I grabbed his arms and looked right into his feral greenish-amber eyes. "Running will only make it more exciting for him. If Nikolai wants to find me, he will. I'm not afraid." I cupped his cheeks. "Do you want to know why?"

Carter closed his eyes and opened them slowly, his resolve barely hanging on by a thread. "Why?"

Ever so gently, I kissed him. “Because we’re stronger together. No matter where you try to send me to keep me safe, it’s not going to work. I’ll leave and come right back to you.”

Bowing his head, Carter blew out a frustrated breath. “You’re going to drive me in-fucking-sane. You know that?”

Sliding my hands soothingly up and down his arms, I waited for him to look at me before kissing him again. His body relaxed slightly, and he pulled me in closer, his warmth seeping into my skin. “We’re going to get through this together,” I promised.

There was no room for doubt.

EMMA

FIVE DAYS LATER

All the guys had gotten their tattoos, and when Uncle Camden asked Brooks where his was, he used the FBI as his excuse. Now Brooks was gone to his super secretive FBI training while Kase and Hunter were back in Vegas, going on with life as if nothing had happened. Things had been quiet ... eerily quiet, the calm before the storm. Nobody knew when Nikolai was going to call on them to fight. So far, none of the guys had heard from him. Granted, not hearing from Nikolai was a good thing, but I had a feeling a lot was going on behind the scenes we didn't know about.

That was why Carter and I had spent the last five days at the gym so he could train. In two days, he was supposed to fight. I dreaded to think about what would happen, especially since weapons were allowed in the death matches. Nikolai's words to Carter had haunted me all week. It took some coercing, but Carter confessed everything that was said to him including Nikolai telling Carter to enjoy his last week with me. I didn't know what kind of mind games Nikolai planned to throw at me, but none of it would work. Even if he offered me twenty million dollars, I would never sell my soul and give up Carter for him.

How could anyone love someone like Nikolai? He was a killer and a master manipulator, corrupt and vile. I didn't care what he had in mind for me, but I would fight to the end before giving him anything he wanted.

I'd kept my concerns about Nikolai to myself because I knew voicing them to Carter would only make it worse. Carter knew he had to win at all costs, and his worry for

me had been eating him alive. So, all I could do was show him my support and how much I loved him.

However, one thing was tearing away at me which concerned me more than anything. Nikolai didn't want any of the other guys at Carter's fight on Friday. He made it clear they were not invited. It made me think that something was going to happen, something Nikolai didn't want interference on.

For the last week, I've spent every waking moment with Carter. His parents were still gone which was a plus, but we'd garnered the attention of both my uncle Camden and Paxton at the gym now that all the guys had their massive dragon tattoos on their backs. Even my dad had been seen giving us curious stares, but he hadn't said anything to me.

While Carter was sparring with the guys, I sat at the reception desk. It was almost closing time, so I sent Natalie home early. She was a senior in high school and worked the afternoon shift every day. Her goal was to graduate and get a college degree in physical therapy so she could come back and work for Fightanium. We had a lot clients who could use that kind of treatment. Fightanium was expanding in ways I never thought possible, and we still had plenty of empty rooms in the back, waiting to have something done with them. I was proud of my dad and the others for building their dream together.

I just hoped it wouldn't go crumbling down after Nikolai got through with us all.

"What's on your mind, sweetheart?"

Gasping, I grabbed my chest and looked up at my father; he'd caught me off guard.

"Dad, I didn't see you walk up."

He leaned over the desk, concern in his eyes. "You're a little jumpy today.

Everything okay?"

I waved him off. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just thinking."

My father lifted his brows and smiled. "About what?"

It was uncanny how much Ethan and Reagan took after him. I wanted what he and my mother had together, and I knew I found it in Carter.

"About what?" I repeated. "Let's see ..." I couldn't tell him about Nikolai, but there was something I had been thinking a lot about. Nobody knew, not even Carter. However, I did tell Carter I would stay in California for a while, but he didn't know that I'd talked to Ava just the other day to discuss our apartment. At first, my time in California was only temporary, but now, it was going to be permanent. My life was about to get crazier, and what better way than to tell my father first.

"Well," my father coaxed, motioning for me to continue.

Grinning, I looked up at him. "I'm leaving New York. Ava and I only have three months left on our lease, so I'm going to pay my half, and she's going to find herself a smaller apartment."

His crystal blue eyes widened. "And where will you be moving to?"

"Here," I answered happily. "All of you are going to be stuck with me."

I'd never seen my dad so excited. He ran around the desk and hoisted me out of the chair, twirling me around like I was a child. A laugh burst from my lips, and it felt good.

My dad set me down and steadied me until the world stopped spinning. "Your mom's

going to be so excited.”

“I know.”

Looking over his shoulder, I noticed Carter, Ethan, and Reagan staring curiously at us as they leaned over the ropes. My dad put his arm around my shoulders, his face beaming. “Guess who’s moving back to California permanently?”

Carter’s mouth gaped and Reagan squealed so loud that Ethan had to cover his ears. She jumped out of the ring and ran to me, snatching me away from our father. “It’s about damn time! I knew you would eventually.”

Ethan joined us and hugged me. “Where you gonna live? You can always stay with Braden and me until you find a place.”

Carter snorted from behind us. “Not happening, Jameson. I love my cousin, but I don’t want Emma stuck under the same roof as him.”

My dad kissed the side of my head. “All right, I’m going to head out so you can celebrate with everyone. Come by the house later so we can tell your mother.”

I kissed his cheek. “I will.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:13 am

Camden and Paxton finished up with Ripp and Braden so they could join us too. Braden bumped into Carter's shoulder. "What did I hear about Emma moving in with her brother and me?"

Carter smacked the back of his head. "Not a chance in hell."

Braden winked at me, and I laughed, turning my focus to Carter. I'd thought about telling him about my permanent move when we were alone, but I was glad everyone found out at the same time. "I'm sorry I didn't say anything," I said, closing the distance between us. "I wanted it to be a surprise."

Taking my hands, Carter pulled me into his body. "This is exactly what I needed to hear." His lips pressed against mine, his voice just above a whisper. "Does this mean you'll be living with me?"

I bit my lip. "Maybe. Do you want me to?"

His eyes filled with need. "I refuse to let you be anywhere else. We should get home so I can welcome you in properly."

Reagan snickered under her breath, and I'd forgotten she was still close by. "Okay, TMI," she groaned. "I heard all of that."

Turning to her, I fluttered my eyelashes. "Well, you shouldn't have been listening."

Reagan shook her head and giggled. "I'm heading out for the night. You two have fun."

I winked at her. “Don’t worry. We will.”

* * *

The weather was perfect as we headed back to Carter’s house with the windows down and the sea breeze blowing through my hair. Carter had on his black Fightanium ballcap, and I always thought he looked sexy in it.

“When are you going to start taking on more jobs? The last one was with me.”

Squeezing Carter’s hand, I turned to face him, and the wind whipped a sprig of hair in my face. I pushed it aside and smiled. “Soon.”

“Did your ex try calling you anymore after the photoshoot?” he asked, his gaze curious.

Tilting my head back, I couldn’t help but giggle. It seemed like ages ago when we had that photoshoot on the rooftop. The way he got so jealous turned me on, even though I tried to convince myself otherwise. “No,” I answered in all honesty. “I would’ve told you if he did. I’m pretty sure Ryan got the gist when I told him I wasn’t interested.”

Carter lifted my hand and kissed it, his lips warm on my skin. “For a hot second, I thought I was going to have to kick his ass.”

Teasingly, I winked at him. “Someone’s going to be jealous when they see mine and Ryan’s magazine spread next month.”

His eyes twinkled with mischief. “Very. But then, the month after, it’ll be all me and you. I can’t wait to see the pictures.”

“Has Aleah not sent any of the proofs to you?” I asked. I’d been dying to see them too.

Carter shook his head. “Not yet. She said it’ll be sometime next week.”

We arrived at Carter’s house, and he pulled his Range Rover into the garage. I grabbed my bag out of the backseat and he fetched his, slinging it over his shoulder. “My dad wanted us to stop by later so I can tell my mom about my plans.”

A smirk spread across Carter’s face. “Are you going to tell them you’re moving in with me?”

He walked up the steps, and I followed him into the kitchen. “I think that’ll be a given.”

Taking my gym bag, Carter tossed it onto the floor along with his. “We can go over there now if you want. Or ...” His gaze landed on my lips. “We can head on up to the shower. Your choice.”

The spot between my legs tightened with need. “Oooh, tough decision.”

Carter lifted me in his arms. “Then I’ll make it for you.”

I straddled his waist, and he carried me into his bedroom, his lips on mine the entire time. The next thing I knew, my clothes were ripped off, and we were in the shower with steaming water cascading all over my body. Carter slowly set me down, my body sliding against his growing cock.

“Who wants to wash up first?” he asked, grabbing his soapy washcloth.

Smiling, I took it from him and rubbed it over my breasts and down between my legs.

“I will.” The heat in Carter’s eyes spurred me on even more.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:13 am

“Damn,” he groaned, unable to take his eyes away. “I could seriously stay here and watch you touch yourself all day.”

“What about when I touch you?” I murmured. I rubbed the washcloth over his arms and stomach before moving around to get his back.

Carter moaned again. “It feels so fucking good.” Pressing my breasts against his back, I dropped the washcloth and cupped his balls, wrapping my other hand around his cock. I worked him hard, loving how his cock pulsed in my hand.

Placing his hands on the shower wall, he leaned forward, his muscles tensing. “Fuck, Emma. You’re killing me.”

I worked him faster. “Let me make you come.”

“Shit,” he groaned. His body jerked and he grunted as his release took over his body.

“Feel good?” I asked, bending underneath his arm so I could face him. He had me caged in his arms, the water tantalizingly dripping down his chest to his still-hard cock.

Pushing me against the wall, he opened my mouth with his tongue and licked the water off. I wrapped my arms around his neck and held on tight as he grabbed my thighs and lifted me above his waist, spreading me wide.

I gasped as he pushed me against the wall again, gazing down at me with heat-filled eyes. “You have no idea what you just started.”

He lowered me slowly, his arousal pressing into my opening. “Actually, I do.”

Dropping his head to my breast, he sucked me hard and bit down. “I think it’s time to get what I want.”

He pushed into with a thrust and I screamed, digging my nails into his back as I held on. His mouth was relentless, sucking my taut nipples intensely. My body tightened around his cock, and I was so achingly close to the edge.

Wrapping my legs tighter around his waist, he grabbed my ass and rocked me harder, my back sliding up and down the slick wall. He trailed his lips up my neck, nipping the tender flesh behind my ear. “You feel so fucking good,” he growled.

“Yes,” I moaned.

As he rocked his hips more vigorously, I countered his motions, moving my body along with his. His muscles tensed and I could tell he was close. “I love being able to come in you.”

Hearing those words was my undoing. Lowering my mouth to Carter’s neck, I bit down and screamed out my release as he pounded harder, coming inside of me. With labored breaths, he held me against the shower wall for a moment before lowering me to the floor.

I swayed when he set me down. “I needed that,” I murmured, smiling lazily up at him.

“So did I,” he admitted honestly.

I laughed and kissed him. “Why don’t we go see my parents and get something to eat? You made me work up an appetite.”

Carter raked his gaze down my body. “Sounds good. Then we can come home and do this all over again.”

My insides clenched with desire. “Can’t complain about that.”

CARTER

The time had come. Friday was here.

Emma and I stayed at my house all day, and I used the time to get my body and mind prepped for the fight. We'd barely spoken to each other, my mind preoccupied with all the thoughts running through it. I didn't know the location of the fight, but I assumed it'd be at another vacant warehouse like the last one—what a shit place to die in.

“Do you want anything to eat?” Emma asked, her voice soft.

The thought of food didn't appeal to me. I peered over my shoulder at her, loving how beautiful she was in her pink tank top and jeans with her long dark hair in loose waves down her back. I could see the worry in her eyes as she leaned against the doorframe of our bedroom. It wasn't just mine anymore; it was ours. “No,” I answered, shoving a change of clothes into my bag. It was getting late, and I knew Nikolai would be calling any moment.

Emma sighed and walked in. “I can't eat either.”

My phone buzzed on the bed, and I looked over at Emma. “I think it's time.” When I picked up the phone, Nikolai's name was on the screen. “Yeah,” I growled.

“Come to the house. The fight starts at ten.”

“On my way.”

I didn't wait for him to say anything else; I just hung up and tossed my phone in my bag. Emma came up behind me and wrapped her arms around my waist. "When this is all over, we're going to my family's cabin in the mountains."

Taking her arms, I pulled them apart and brought her around to face me. "I look forward to it." I kissed her slowly and rested my forehead on hers. "I'll be back."

Tears welled up in Emma's eyes. "Promise?"

I held her tight. "Promise."

Once my bag was zipped, I slung it over my shoulders, and Emma followed me into the garage. I got in my car and looked at her one last time before backing out of the driveway. I hoped I could keep my promise to her.

It took about forty-five minutes to get to the mansion because of the traffic, and when I arrived, the driveway was full of cars. I slid into a space between two Jaguars and made my way to the front door where Antonio stood guard.

Grinning smugly, he opened the door. "Good luck tonight."

I didn't waste my breath with a response. Instead, I walked into the house and straight down to the basement. Things weren't the same when I turned the corner. The basement looked like a completely different place altogether. The exercise equipment was replaced with multiple bars set up around the room with rows of shot glasses and hundreds of liquor bottles. And right in the middle of it all was the fighting ring with seats all around it.

Nikolai's voice rang out behind me. "I thought I'd liven the place up a bit."

Clutching my bag, I turned to face him. He was playing the part tonight dressed in his

fancy suit and neatly coifed hair. He fit in perfectly with the rest of the mafia cunts who got off on watching people die.

“Why are we here?” I asked. “Isn’t this Scar’s place?”

Nikolai tipped his head back and laughed. “Fuck no.” He waved a hand about the room. “This is all mine, has been from the beginning. I just made Scar think otherwise.”

“Why?”

His eyes gleamed. “To get to Emma and the others. You were an unexpected inconvenience.”

“Glad I could help,” I snapped.

Nikolai shrugged. “Yeah, well, it was all for nothing. Tonight is your last fight.”

“What makes you say that?”

He walked past me, his focus shifting to the ring. “Because I know who you’re fighting.” Nikolai glanced at me over his shoulder, his lips curled. “And he has something to fight for.”

“Who is he?” I asked. Not that I gave a flying fuck, but I had to know his endgame.

With amusement in his eyes, Nikolai walked around me. “He’s my family’s hitman, as you would call it. You see, he withheld money from my father. So, he has to prove himself to get back in my dad’s good graces.” He stopped in front of me. “And to do that, he has to fight you. It was my idea,” he boasted, his grin spreading wide. “If he loses, he pays the price with his life. If he wins, we forgive him.”

I scoffed in disgust. “Couldn’t do it yourself, huh? Fucking pussy.”

Nikolai glowered and stepped up to me, but I refused to back down. “Oh, you’re going to die, Reynolds. But, if you survive tonight, it won’t be for long. I’ll have my way with you.”

“Not if I end you first.” Fisting my hands, I was ready to take the first swing, but Nikolai’s phone rang, and he moved back.

“Goodbye, Reynolds.”

He walked away and I didn’t take my eyes off him until he was out of the room. I had no fucking clue what was going to happen, and the only person I could think of was Emma. Pulling out my phone, I sent her a text, hoping like hell it wasn’t my last one.

Me: I love you, Emma.

EMMA

Ittexted I love you back to Carter, but I knew he probably wouldn't text again. My heart hurt seeing his words; it was almost like a goodbye. I didn't want to think that way, but I was terrified of what was going to happen tonight. The uncertainty made me sick to my stomach.

Grabbing my purse and the keys to my dad's Bentley, I walked out the front door and locked it behind me. I was supposed to be at my brother's house thirty minutes ago, but I didn't want to leave Carter's.

I pressed the key fob to unlock the car door, but before I could grab the handle, my phone rang in my purse. Heart thudding in my chest, I prayed for it to be Carter, but that wasn't who I got.

I accepted the call and brought the phone up to my ear. "What do you want?" I snapped.

Nikolai chuckled darkly. "Have you seen the news?"

Stomach clenching, I sucked in a breath. "No."

"Look up 'dead body in California warehouse' and see what comes up."

After pressing the speaker button, I searched the internet and a whole list of articles popped up, all of them about the execution-style killing of Marshall Gene Whittaker, who was just released from prison.

“Why do I need to look at that?” I huffed. “I already know Scar’s dead.”

“I just wanted to say that I’m sure your parents will be happy when they find out. If only they knew what their kids were up to.”

Rolling my eyes, I opened the car door and hopped inside for privacy. “Why did you kill Scar?”

Nikolai laughed. “I can explain that when I pick you up.”

Fear prickled my spine like tiny ice shards jabbing through my skin. “Pick me up? What for?”

“For the fight,” he explained. “I figured you’d want to give Reynolds your support. I mean, it could be the last time you see him.”

My throat tightened at the thought. It wouldn’t be the last time I saw Carter; I wouldn’t let it. Even if I had to jump in the ring myself to help, I’d do it. However, the one thing that came to my mind was that it had to be a trap. Nikolai would use me to taunt Carter. Why else would he want me there? But then, I didn’t want Carter to fight for his life alone in the lion’s den.

“Emma?”

I blew out a shaky breath. “I’m still here.”

“Do you want me to come get you?” Nikolai asked.

“Do I have a choice?”

He chuckled. “Of course. I’m not going to make you do anything you don’t want to.”

Did I believe him? Not in the least.

“Fine. Come get me,” I gave in.

I could hear the smile in Nikolai’s voice, and it pissed me off. “I’ll be there soon. Oh, and Emma?”

“What?” I huffed.

“Dress nice.”

I hung up and sat back in the driver’s seat, looking down at my jeans and pink tank top. “Dress nice, my ass,” I snarled in disgust. I wasn’t going to change a damn thing about my wardrobe. Nikolai’s going to get me the way I am.

* * *

About an hour later, Nikolai pulled up into the driveway in his black SUV. He got out, looking all dressed up in a fancy suit, and I could see the holster and gun strapped to his body. I was scared to get in the car with him, but I wasn’t about to let him see that.

Opening the door, I stepped out and locked it quickly behind me. There was no way I would let him inside Carter’s home.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:13 am

Nikolai burst out laughing as he raked his gaze down my body. “Why am I not surprised?”

I stormed down the walkway toward him. “There’s nothing wrong with my clothes. I don’t give a shit about fitting in with your people.”

He shook his head incredulously. “No worries. You’re still sexy in that.”

“Save it,” I thundered, flipping him off.

My anger was the only thing that overcame the fear. I had to hold onto it. Walking over to the passenger side, I opened the door and hopped in, my nerves making my stomach churn. Was I making a huge mistake? Most likely, but I couldn’t keep sitting on the sidelines, not when Carter needed my help.

Nikolai started up the vehicle and drove us in the direction of the San Fernando Valley. “Where are we going?” I asked, peering out the window. Even though it was dark, I’d rather look at nothing than at him.

“My house.”

“What?” I gasped, jerking my head toward him. “What for?”

Nikolai smirked. “It’s where the fight is, Emma. Would it hurt you to trust me a little? We’re going to be around each other for a very long time. You need to get used to me.”

A snort escaped my lips. "I'd rather have hemorrhoids."

His chest filled with laughter. "Nice. I'll wear you down eventually."

Not a chance in hell.

Turning to the window again, I focused on the city lights and how they passed by so quickly, like shooting stars. I didn't want to talk to Nikolai anymore, but I doubted he'd keep his mouth shut the rest of the way. And, of course, he didn't.

"Tell me about you and my brother," he said.

I shrugged off the request. "There's nothing to tell."

"I doubt that." It sounded like there was no love between the brothers.

"Do you not talk to Seth?" I wondered, peering over at him.

Nikolai squeezed the steering wheel so hard the leather scrunched together. "My brother and I haven't talked since I left New York a couple of years ago." Seth wasn't anything like Nikolai, and I knew that for sure.

He glanced over at me, and I batted my eyelashes. "Gee, I wonder why?"

The muscles bulged in Nikolai's jaw. "We've had a lot of disagreements over the years. He's in New York taking over our empire there, and I'm trying to expand here in California."

It all made sense now. "I see," I replied. "So, it's a rivalry. Who's winning?"

Nikolai's gaze hardened on the road. "Me. I'm going to make damn sure of that."

The rest of the ride was silent, and I welcomed it. I didn't think Nikolai meant to give me a glimpse into his family history, but it was interesting to hear. It was always good to know everything you could about your enemies.

Nikolai turned off the highway a few minutes later and drove through some winding roads until we reached an enormous white brick house with a circular stone driveway. Cars were lined up from one end to the other, most of them probably worth a hundred thousand dollars apiece.

Nikolai pulled into the garage and closed the door behind us. He smiled over at me, his electric blue eyes gleaming evilly. "Are you ready?"

Heart beating wildly in my chest, I got out of the car and shut the door. Was I ready? No, I was terrified.

EMMA

We walked inside and there were people everywhere. The women all wore cocktail dresses while the men paraded around in their expensive suits, sipping champagne. Did they even know what kind of event they'd be watching tonight? My guess was yes. The whole situation made me sick, but it infuriated me even more.

"I need your phone, Emma," Nikolai said, drawing my attention. He held out his hand, and I could see the seriousness in his eyes.

"Why?"

It wasn't hard to figure out—it was probably so no one could film the fight or any other shady things he had going on under his roof.

Still holding out his hand, Nikolai kept his face blank. "It's not just you," he informed me. "Everyone else isn't allowed to have theirs either. I'll give it back to you when we leave."

I didn't want to get rid of my only lifeline, but it didn't appear as if I had a choice. I reached into my purse to grab my phone and handed it to him. If there were a next time, I'd be sure to bring a decoy phone.

Nikolai slid my cell into his jacket pocket. "Thanks. You can follow me. The festivities don't start for another hour."

"Festivities," I bit back, ensuring he could see the disdain on my face. "Is that what

you're calling it?"

Chuckling, Nikolai waved for me to follow him. "I call it as I see it, baby girl."

The hallway he took me down was further away from the people in the living room, and a prickly tingle ran down my back. "Where are we going?" I demanded, hoping he couldn't hear the unease in my voice.

Nikolai stopped at a closed door and opened it wide, revealing a room filled with wall-to-wall built-in bookshelves and a large mahogany desk in the center that looked as if no one had ever sat at it.

Placing a hand on the small of my back, Nikolai gently nudged me in. "Since we have time, I thought we could hang out in here, get to know each other better."

I walked inside and away from his touch, trying to get as much distance between us as possible. Nikolai shut the door behind him, and I breathed a sigh of relief when he didn't lock it.

"I know everything I need to know about you, Nikolai," I huffed impatiently. "We have nothing to talk about."

Eyes twinkling with mischief, Nikolai moved closer. "I wouldn't say that. There's a lot I can offer you."

"Like what?"

I didn't want him getting close, so I moved over to the large window, only there was nothing to see but darkness. During the day, there was probably a spectacular view of the valley, but right now, it was nothing but a black void: ominous and eerie.

Coming up behind me, Nikolai met my eyes in the window reflection, his gaze predatory. "I can offer you the world, Emma. Anything you could ever want."

I jerked around to face him. "I want Carter free to leave. That's what I want."

Nikolai snorted through his laughter. "Yeah, anything but that."

"Then you lied," I fired off, throwing my arms in the air. "You can't give me anything I want."

A sly grin spread across his lips. "What about jobs? With me by your side, I can get you in any magazine or on any runway you desire. Designers will be begging for you to model their clothes."

He was too close, making my heart race, and not in a good way. "I don't need you for that. I've been doing that all on my own."

Nikolai's smile grew wider, and it was as if he shifted into a different person. The energy around him turned darker. "You know, I didn't think it would be this easy."

Easy? What was he talking about? I knew it was something terrible by the menacing gleam in his icy blue gaze.

"What was easy?" I asked, furrowing my brows in confusion.

His gaze raked down my body before settling back on my eyes. "Getting you here. Granted, I didn't expect Reynolds to throw a kink in my plans. I thought it would've been your brother taking your place after the whole prostitute blackmail scheme. Things would've been a lot easier that way."

"Your plans?" I questioned. "What about Scar?" Scar was the one who wanted

revenge on my father and the others.

Nikolai laughed and it sounded so evil it sent shivers down my spine. “That worthless piece of shit had nothing to do with this, Emma. He was just a means to an end. I needed his name to get this started.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:13 am

It was all Nikolai from the very beginning.

“And now that Scar’s no use to you, you killed him.”

Nikolai nodded. “He cost my family hundreds of thousands of dollars when your father and the others got the FBI to shut our operation down. Did Scar keep his mouth shut when they took him in? He was loyal; I’ll give him that. But now, I’m running the show. It was my plan to stage the blackmail on you to draw your brother and the others in. There’s no way Ethan Jameson would’ve ever let his sister’s reputation get tarnished.”

My pulse thundered in my throat. I played right into Nikolai’s game, just like he wanted. Carter and all the guys were in a lot deeper than I thought possible. Swallowing hard, I moved away from Nikolai until the cold glass of the window touched my shoulders; there was nowhere to go.

“What if I never told my brother and did the blackmail photos? None of them would have been sucked into this hell hole.”

Nikolai shook his head. “No, I was banking on you telling him. I knew that you’d break if I ran Reynolds ragged enough.”

And I did.

Clenching my jaw, I turned my face away from him. “You’re such a slimy bastard.”

Nikolai caged me against the window, his hands splayed on the glass beside both

sides of my head. “What is it about Reynolds, huh?” he growled, his voice clipped with anger. His body brushed against mine, and panic rose in my throat. “The guy’s probably fucked over half the female population in California.”

“You don’t know shit about him.”

Nikolai leaned in close, his chuckle deep and sinister as he grazed his nose across my cheek. “I know he’s going to die tonight.”

He said the words with such conviction that I knew he believed it. Terror gripped me, kicking my fight-or-flight senses into full gear.

“You’ll die too if you don’t back the hell up,” I snarled, my hands trembling with outright hatred.

My breaths came out in rapid pants as I contemplated my next move. I wasn’t a fool to think I could get away from Nikolai, but I sure could do some damage.

Nikolai bit his lip, clearly turned on if the hardness of his cock pressed against me was any indication. Thoughts of reaching into his pants and breaking his dick came to mind, but I knew that wasn’t a viable option. Before I could ram a knee into him, the door burst open.

“Ah, there you are.”

The breath whooshed out of my lungs. I recognized the voice, although it’d been a long time since I heard it. I could see the doorway underneath Nikolai’s arm, and there he was ... Seth Michelson. He had the same build and sandy blond hair as Nikolai, but the eyes were completely different. Seth’s were a golden hazel and warm, not the icy coldness of Nikolai’s blue.

Seth stared at his brother's back, his eyes narrowed in concern. Nikolai had me blocked from view. Sweat dripped down the small of my back, and all I could hear was the thunderous beating of my heart in my ears.

Keeping me caged in, Nikolai glared at Seth over his shoulder. "What the fuck are you doing here?" Then his attention snapped to me. "Not a word," he whispered.

Seth chuckled, but then his tone turned serious. "Our father sent me. He wanted me to see what you've been up to. Hopefully, tormenting women isn't one of your endeavors." He cleared his throat. "Ma'am, are you okay?"

A low rumble of annoyance vibrated in Nikolai's chest. "She's fine. Now get the fuck out of here."

Closing my eyes, I wanted to tell Seth not to go, but I feared the repercussions. Carter was about to fight, and I couldn't risk making matters worse than they already were.

Seth huffed. "Your guests are waiting for you."

The door shut and I pushed against Nikolai's chest. "Get away from me."

Nikolai backed off and slammed his hands on the desk, the wood cracking under his strength. "Son of a bitch," he seethed. His eyes were wild, like a caged animal ready to attack; it terrified me. He ripped his phone out of his jacket pocket and put it to his ear. I didn't realize the animosity between him and Seth ran so deep. "Answer the fucking phone," he growled, pacing the floor. A few seconds later, I could hear a voice on the other end. Nikolai blew out a sigh and focused on me as he spoke. "I'm taking Emma upstairs. I need you to keep her there until the fight's done."

Gasping, I started for the door. "Oh, hell no, I'm going."

Nikolai cut me off and grabbed my arm, hauling me away from the exit. “You’re going to do what I say.”

The door swung open and Seth appeared again, his eyes wide with shock when they landed on me. “Emma, what are you ...?” Then his gaze fell to Nikolai’s bruising grip on my arm. Seth lifted his hardened stare to his brother. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I suggest you let her go right now. I’m glad I had the good sense to know something was wrong.”

Nikolai pulled me closer. “Fuck you, brother! I don’t take orders from you.”

Leaning against the doorframe, Seth appeared calm and collected, but the tension in the room suffocated me. “Yeah, well, I’m not giving you an order. I’m making you a promise. If you don’t let Emma go now, I will take this to the next level.”

Nikolai’s fingers loosened around my arm, and I jerked out of his hold. “Douchebag,” I hissed under my breath.

Seth held out his hand but kept his stormy hazel eyes on Nikolai, almost daring him to fight back. “Come with me, Emma.”

I took his hand and he pulled me out of the room. I didn’t know if I was safe with Seth, but it was definitely the better alternative.

EMMA

Seth didn't speak as he squeezed my hand, leading me through the crowds of people. Carter was somewhere in the house, and I needed to find him, as there was no sign of him anywhere. Seth opened the patio door and pulled me past the pool to a secluded spot behind the green shrubberies.

He took both of my hands in his, his concerned gaze searching mine. "Are you okay? My brother didn't hurt you, did he?"

Shaking my head, I glanced down at the red handprint on my arm. "Nothing other than piss me off."

Seth sighed. "You're safe with me, Emma."

"Am I?" I countered. "Last I checked, you're a part of this. Your family is the reason I'm here." My eyes bored into his. "Did you know when we were together?"

The muscles in his jaw bulged. "No. I found out a couple of days ago when my father mentioned Ethan Jameson as one of the new fighters. I was worried you'd be dragged in. So, when Ava told me you were planning to stay in California, I had to come out and check on you." His hazel eyes pierced into mine. "I know you're here for Carter."

When Seth and I were dating, we talked about our first loves and I brought up Carter, saying that he was my first in many ways. "I love him, Seth," I murmured, my chest tightening with the unknown. "I don't want Carter here alone. I know what he has to do tonight."

Seth's expression darkened. "I had nothing to do with this, Emma. I need you to know that."

Given the circumstances, I didn't know if I could trust him, but something inside of me told me I could. I'd always known Seth wasn't a bad man. When we were together, he was fun, gentle, and warm, but he had a serious streak to him like there was something dangerous beneath the surface. Now I know what that danger is.

"What are you going to do?" I asked him.

Sighing, Seth squeezed my hands. "You're going to stay with me. Nikolai can't get to you anymore, not with my men around. I'm going to take care of this." There was a hint of worry behind those golden-hazel eyes of his.

"What are you holding back?"

Lowering his gaze, Seth stared at our clasped hands and then back into my eyes. "I can't guarantee Carter will win. His opponent isn't a stranger to violence. But if Carter beats him, I can promise you he'll leave here alive. I don't think that could've been said if I wasn't here."

Tears filled my eyes because I knew he spoke the truth. When Nikolai said Carter would die tonight, he meant it would be by his hands.

"What about after tonight? Nikolai wants Carter dead."

Seth shook his head. "I'm going to handle that." He let my hands go and held out his arm so I could loop mine through his. I was afraid of the fight, of Nikolai, and the unknown, but strangely enough, I felt safe around Seth.

"I'm glad you're here," I said to him.

Seth cracked a smile, but it dropped quickly. “So am I. I don’t want to know what would’ve happened to you if I wasn’t.”

Neither do I.

* * *

When we made it down to the basement, it was as if we had stepped into a different world. The walls were black with purple sconces set up to give the room an ominous glow. There were people everywhere, standing by the three bars set up around the room. However, in the middle of it all was the fighting ring. It appeared out of place with the sheer luxury of everything else.

There were only ten minutes left before the fight was due to start, and Carter still hadn’t been seen. Neither had Nikolai or the other man Carter was supposed to fight. I had never felt so out of place in my life. Several women in the room snuck evil glares my way, disgusted that I was dressed in jeans and a tank top and sitting with a powerful Michelson.

We were on the far side of the room, away from the ring so Carter wouldn’t see me. If he did, it’d distract him. He had to stay focused without worrying about me. Plus, he didn’t need to see me surrounded by Seth and his six men who were oozing with dominance and danger.

Seth sat close to me; his muscles relaxed but tense as he scanned his surroundings. When people walked by, they nodded at him to show respect. It was a world I didn’t want to be a part of but was sure to be stuck in for a very long time.

“After you walked in the first time, Nikolai was going to have me locked in a room. He didn’t want you to see me,” I said, leaning in closer to Seth.

Seth's expression hardened. "Of course, he didn't. I take it he knows about our past?"

I nodded. "Yes."

Jaw clenching, he shook his head and scoffed. "Then he knew exactly what I'd do. I may be a bad boy at times, Emma, but I don't hurt females. He used to be the same. Now I don't know who he is anymore. From what I see here," he explained, gazing around the room, "Nikolai needs to be taken down a notch or twelve. I'm going to make sure he gets that."

"That's all fine and dandy, but I don't want to be stuck in the middle of a war you have with your psychotic brother."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:13 am

Seth turned his face to me and sighed. “There’s no other choice. You just have to decide which side you’d rather be on.” His attention averted to something behind me, and I glanced over my shoulder to see Nikolai headed toward us with a murderous glint in his eyes, focused solely on Seth. Behind Nikolai were four hulking men, all carrying guns in their holsters.

“Be ready, brother,” Nikolai warned, sitting next to Seth.

Seth snorted out a laugh. “Always am.”

Nikolai glared at Seth and then focused on me. “You’re making a big mistake, Emma.”

A snide remark was on the tip of my tongue, but Seth gripped my hand. “Don’t respond to that. It’s what he wants.”

Nikolai’s phone rang, and he put it on speakerphone. “Yeah?” he answered.

“Philip’s ready. I’m bringing him out,” the man replied. “Wheeler’s got Reynolds.”

Nikolai chuckled. “Excellent.” He slid his phone away and laughed when he turned to his guys. “It’s showtime, boys.”

My heart stopped and I held my breath. It was almost time. Carter could emerge from only two entrances: the stairs where I came down or a side hallway at the back of the room. I focused on both. Two men appeared from the hallway a few seconds later, one in a suit and the other in ripped jeans with his dark hair slicked back. His upper

body glistened with sweat, and on his arm was a tattoo that started at his wrist and went all the way up to his shoulder.

“Antonio,” Nikolai called. A man with long brown hair in a low ponytail closer to the ring turned around and lifted his brows. “Make sure Dane is ready with his machine. Philip’s tattoo is gonna get a little bigger tonight.” Antonio grinned wolfishly and nodded.

Without acknowledging Nikolai, I kept my head straight and whispered to Seth. “What does that mean?”

Seth’s arm brushed against mine, his voice by my ear. “Every time Philip kills someone, he adds to his tattoo.”

Taking a deep breath, I blew it out slowly. Carter was going to win; he had to. Nostrils flaring like a bull, Philip climbed into the ring and kept his attention on the hallway while he marched back and forth. My head grew dizzy from holding my breath for so long.

When Carter appeared, my heart stopped. Dressed in a pair of black athletic shorts and black hand wraps, he stormed toward the ring with his head held high and expression blank. The anger poured off him in waves, and I could feel the intensity fuel the crowd, their lust for the fight potent in the air. My skin broke out in gooseflesh, and beads of sweat formed above my brow. Yet, Carter’s focus was on Philip and Philip alone.

Carter hopped in the ring, and Wheeler walked over to Philip to say something in his ear. Philip bounced on his feet, and I saw movement in his back pockets. There was something in one of them, but I couldn’t tell what it was.

“Are they allowed to use weapons?” I asked, whispering the words over to Seth.

He nodded. “No rules, Emma. They can do whatever they want as long as one kills the other.”

Stomach falling, I could feel the bile rise up the back of my throat. Carter would never use a weapon which put him at a disadvantage. He was an honorable fighter, something these people weren’t. Wheeler moved to the center of the ring, and all the spectators took their seats. There had to be at least two hundred of them.

“Who are all these people?” I inquired. Not that I gave a damn, but I needed to think of something else during these last few minutes of torment as we waited for the fight to start.

Seth pointed at the crowd. “Since this fight deals with one of our own, only our loyal family and friends were invited. For example, if Carter were fighting a Rossi or Kazakov, then their people would be here.”

His mouth moved as he spoke, but I could barely hear anything over the erratic heartbeat in my ear. I tried to swallow, but my throat was too thick. It was as if the whole room closed in all around me.

Wheeler jumped out of the ring, and everything after that moved in slow motion. The bell echoed through the room, and the fight began. Carter tilted his head from side to side to crack his neck like he always did before his UFC matches. Unfortunately, this one wasn’t a sanctioned fight. This was real life with real consequences if he made a mistake.

Philip paced around the ring and Carter mirrored him, both never taking their eyes off the other. Philip swung and missed, giving Carter an advantage. He punched Philip in the side and Philip roared in pain, his face scrunched in fury. Like a wild beast, he tackled Carter to the mat, and all I could see were flying fists as they rolled around the ring. Carter got the upper hand and straddled Philip, pummeling his face with

both fists. Philip elbowed Carter in the side where he had a broken rib just a week ago. For a split second, Carter doubled over, giving Philip the out he needed. He reared back and elbowed Carter in the face, knocking him away.

Philip jumped to his feet while Carter righted himself, blood dripping down the side of his face from a gash above his eye. Then, reaching into his back pocket, Philip pulled out a set of brass knuckles and slid them down his fingers.

When the dim light shone against them, I could tell they weren't normal. "What the hell is on his hand?"

Seth could see the worry in my eyes and sighed, his voice hesitant as if he didn't want to tell me. "Razor blades," he said.

Folding my arms across my stomach, I tried to breathe, but nothing helped. I wanted to look away but couldn't. Carter's expression didn't change when he noticed the tiny blades on Philip's fist. Instead, he looked even more determined to win. Focused.

Philip ran at Carter and swiped the blades across his chest, but Carter jumped back, only getting a scratch. I could see the thin red line of his blood from where I sat. Philip went on the attack again, and Carter made him work for it by dodging him at every turn, which only angered Philip more. I knew Carter's game. He wanted to tire Philip out, but Philip had a wildness that wasn't being quelled. It was as if the humanity had left him and all that was inside was the burning need to kill. Philip shouted and reared back his arm, but Carter blocked the punch, the blades digging into the side of his forearm. Blood poured out of the wounds, but he kept going. He grabbed Philip around the waist and lifted him in the air before slamming him down hard. It all happened so fast that my brain needed time to catch up.

Carter whipped around and locked Philip's head between his thighs, grabbing hold of Philip's brass-knuckled hand before he could swipe the blades across his legs. Carter

gripped Philip's arm and pried his hand open while Philip tried to claw at Carter's thighs, his face red and blue from the lack of oxygen.

Carter seized the brass knuckles, and the blades dug into his fingers as he ripped it away from Philip's hand, throwing the weapon out of the ring.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:13 am

“Smart move,” Seth claimed, sounding impressed.

Nikolai scoffed in reply. “It’s not over yet.”

Carter released Philip’s head and jerked him up by the arm, almost like a new spurt of energy charged through him. He twisted Philip’s arm to a hard angle, and the snap echoed throughout the room, sending chills all through my body. Philip thrashed around and Carter let him go by pushing him across the ring. Philip landed on his knees with his arm hung limp at his side. Carter’s chest rose and fell with rapid breaths; he was tired and so was Philip. I wanted Philip to stay down, that maybe the fight would end if he gave up on his own.

Sadly, I knew it wouldn’t be that easy.

Philip whirled around, using his good arm to reach behind his back, only this time it was a knife instead of razor blade brass knuckles. Swinging it erratically, Philip went on the rampage. Carter evaded him, and I could tell he wanted to attack by the fire in his eyes, but Philip would surely use his knife if he did. And I had no doubt he knew the exact spots that would be killing blows.

Think Carter. Use your legs.

I wanted to scream it, but I knew I couldn’t.

And just like that, it was as if Carter heard my silent plea. He roundhouse kicked Philip in the head. Philip’s neck snapped to the side, and he fell like a giant boulder onto the mat, his body motionless with his broken arm at an odd angle beneath him.

Nikolai jumped to his feet. “No fucking way,” he hissed.

Blood poured out of Philip’s body onto the mat, and Carter stared at him, his face a stony mask. Then, charging into the ring, Wheeler rushed over to Philip and gently turned his body onto his back, revealing the knife stuck in Philip’s gut.

Gasping, I slapped a hand over my mouth. “Oh, my God.”

Carter climbed out of the ring, and I could tell he was hurt. Jumping out of my seat, I raced through the crowd, my blood tearing through my veins. Seth shouted my name, but I didn’t stop.

I had to get to Carter.

CARTER

Philip was dead.

I killed him and my insides were numb to the fact. There was no regret, no remorse. I did what I had to do. The world was a better place without that prick in it. But unfortunately, the fight wasn't over. Nikolai would be coming for me ... and I was ready.

However, the second I heard Emma's name, my blood ran cold. I wanted to think I imagined it, but then I heard it again. Whirling around, I desperately searched the crowd. There were people every-fucking-where. But then, I saw her. She pushed through the crowd and ran toward me, throwing her arms around my neck.

"Carter!"

Wrapping my unbloodied arm around her waist, I quickly searched the room for Nikolai. I had to get her away from him and this place. "You shouldn't be here," I warned her, frantically moving away from the ring.

Emma squeezed me tighter, the feel of her hot tears streaming down my bare chest. "I didn't want you alone."

My eyes met Nikolai's from across the room as he stormed our way. Quickly, I let Emma go and blocked her from him. "Stay behind me, Emma," I commanded.

She took my hand, and her touch was all I could focus on. Not the muscle pain, the

deep gashes on my arm or the ribs I knew were broken—just her.

Nikolai's lip curled in disgust when he closed the distance. "You weren't supposed to win."

Letting Emma's hand go, I threw out my arms. "Well, I did," I spat. "What are you going to do about it?"

Nikolai got in my face, his nostrils flaring. "I could break your neck with a simple snap of my wrist."

"Oh yeah? Try it." I was way past done to be rid of him.

An entourage of seven men charged over, and the one in the lead looked like Nikolai. They had the same blond hair, build and facial features, which meant not only was he Seth Michelson but also one of Emma's ex-lovers. The only difference between the two men was their eye color.

Seth pushed Nikolai away. "That's enough."

Nikolai snarled at him. "This is the second time you've interfered tonight. There won't be a third." The animosity between them was thick.

Emma held onto my arm. "Seth's a friend," she whispered. "I promise."

I scoffed. "Yeah, we'll see about that. I don't trust any of these motherfuckers."

Seth turned to me and nodded toward the stairs. "We need to get you out of here."

A gun clicked behind him, and I looked over his shoulder to see Nikolai with his pistol pointed straight at Seth's head. "Carter's not going anywhere. I told you to stay

out of this, brother.”

Chuckling, Seth turned to face Nikolai with no hint of fear from the gun. “By all means, Nik, pull the trigger. You’ll be dead within two seconds.”

Nikolai glared at him and lowered the gun. “This is my house,” he challenged. “My rules. Carter has my mark.”

Seth tore off his jacket and ripped open his button-down shirt, revealing the dragon tattoo on his back. “I have it too, brother. Or did you forget?” He stepped up to Nikolai. “Carter and Emma are leaving, and I’m going with them. So it seems I’ll be staying in California a while.” He glanced over at his six men, who all slipped their guns back into their holsters. “Get Carter’s things.” Then, he looked at Emma and me. “Let’s go.”

“Wait,” Emma said, nodding over at Nikolai. “He has my phone.”

Seth glowered at his brother and thrust out a hand. “Give it to me.”

Nikolai pulled my phone out of his jacket pocket and slammed it into Seth’s hands. “You think you’ve won, huh?”

Seth shook his head, his voice clipped. “No, Carter did. See you soon, brother.”

He started for the exit, and Emma squeezed my hand. “I’ll explain everything. But, right now, we need to follow him.”

I didn’t like it, but what choice did we have? We were trading one villain for another. Seth marched through the crowd, and everyone gave him a wide berth as we made our way up the stairs to the central part of the house. Once outside, one of his guys handed me my bag, and Seth gave Emma her phone.

“You need stitches,” Seth said, focusing on my wounds. “One of my guys knows how to suture.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:13 am

“Why are you doing this? I’m nothing to you,” I countered.

Seth’s hardened stare met mine. “You’re right, but this has nothing to do with you.” He jerked his focus over to Emma. “Call your brother. I want to talk to him and the others.”

Emma nodded. “They’re all at Ethan’s house waiting to hear from me.”

Seth motioned for his men to follow him. “Good. We’ll follow you there.”

Reaching into my bag, I pulled out my car keys and Emma took them. We hurried to my car and the tires squealed as Emma sped out of the driveway with Seth and his men behind us. Blood still oozed out of the gashes on my arm as I rummaged through my bag for a clean T-shirt. I wrapped it tightly around my wounds to stanch the flow.

“Do I want to know everything that happened tonight?” I asked. I could only imagine it’d make me want to kill Nikolai even more than I already did.

Emma kept her eyes on the road. “Probably not. Let’s just say that Seth came to my rescue.”

An exasperated scoff escaped my lips. “Of course, he did. And let me guess, he wants you back now too?” It seemed to be a growing trend. First, the hockey-playing douche, then that cunt Nikolai, and now his motherfucking brother.

Shaking her head, Emma glanced over at me, and I could see the truth in her eyes. “Seth doesn’t want me like that.” Her focus went back to the road. “When he heard

about Nikolai's plan to wrangle in my brother, he came to check on me, especially when he heard that you were fighting. He knows about our past and figured I'd be involved somehow."

The blood started to soak through my T-shirt. "You shouldn't have come tonight. What were you thinking?"

Emma's lip trembled, but she held her head high. "I didn't want you alone."

I didn't want to think about what would've happened to her if I had lost. Reaching over, I took one of her hands off the steering wheel and brought it to my lips. "I'm sorry you had to see me like that."

Blinking back her tears, Emma turned to me. "I watched you fight for your life and do it with honor. All you did was defend yourself. You did what you had to do."

I averted my gaze and looked over at the side-view mirror to see Seth close on our tail in his dark gray Bugatti Chiron. "And what is this other Michelson going to have us do?"

Emma released a stifled breath. "I don't know but being on his side is a much better choice than the other."

We'll see about that.

EMMA

Everyone was there when we arrived at Ethan's house, including my sister. They all stared in horror when Carter came in, covered in blood and purple bruises with gashes on his arm and chest. Seth and one of his men came inside while the others stayed in the driveway to keep watch. Seth didn't know if Nikolai would make a move, but he wanted to be prepared. That thought didn't settle well with me. The last thing I wanted was to look out my window every time I left the house or worry if someone was following me. Carter was my main concern. Nikolai wanted him dead, and I had a feeling he'd do whatever he could to make that happen.

The man who came in with Seth was named Benny; he was considered a soldier in mafia terms. Benny looked in his mid-thirties with a perfectly bald head and dark brown eyes. While Carter took a shower, Seth gave me a quick rundown of the Michelson family hierarchy. He was the oldest son and the one who would step up to take his father's place when that time came. Nikolai wanted to prove he could be the leader, which had sparked the rivalry between him and Seth. Our involvement only fueled the fire.

Once Carter was out of the shower, he sat down at the kitchen table while Benny worked on his wounds. Benny didn't say a word the entire time; he was the strong, silent type as Seth put it. My brother and the others stayed in the living room while Seth explained to Carter the inner workings of his family. There was a lot I was sure he left out, but I was okay with that. It was probably best we didn't know everything.

As soon as Benny was done with Carter's arm, he wrapped it in gauze, and we joined the rest of the group in the living room. Reagan was on the couch with Brooks and

Ripp while Ethan and Braden stood near the windows, taking their turns peering out. The infuriating part was that it wasn't just Carter and me having to look over our shoulders; it was everyone else, including my sister. I dreaded that being our lives, always having to be on guard.

Crossing his arms over his broad chest, Ethan narrowed his gaze at Seth. "So, you're Nikolai's brother?"

Seth glanced over at me. "And a friend of your sister's." Then, he focused back on Ethan. "I can already tell you don't trust me."

Carter leaned against the wall, and I snuggled into his side. "Why should we?" Carter called out.

Sighing, Seth acknowledged everyone in the room. "I'm not saying you should, but I am here because I want to help."

Braden stepped forward, his anger palpable. "Why? Why would you turn on your brother?"

Seth's demeanor darkened, and the muscles in his jaw clenched. "Nikolai threatens everything my family built. He's reckless and unpredictable. My father said Nikolai's idea was to bring in Scar to lure you all in. My family made a lot of money when your parents fought for him."

Braden snarled with disgust. "They were forced to fight, including my mother. Do you want to know what Scar made her do?"

Seth breathed out a long exhale and shook his head. "I can only imagine. The thought sickens me to my fucking core." Then, gaze serious, he faced us all. "If I had my way, I'd release you from this. But unfortunately, it's going to take some time. My

brother's started something that I have to finish."

Carter squeezed my waist, pulling me in closer to his body. "Where do we go from here?" he asked, his gaze pinned on Seth. "Nikolai's not the type of guy to back down."

Seth nodded. "You're right, he's not. I don't know what he's going to do, but as always, expect the worst. I'm going to stay in California for a while, so you'll have my protection. My guys are going to watch him. If he tries anything, I'll intervene for my family's sake. I can't have him fucking everything up. So, from now on, you'll be my fighters, not Nikolai's."

"What does that even mean, Seth?" I asked him. "These guys are my family." I waved a hand at my brother and the others. "Will they have to fight to the death like Carter did tonight?"

They all stared at Seth, wondering the same thing. Luckily, Seth shook his head, giving me a semblance of relief. "I would never force anyone into a fight like Carter endured tonight. I will leave that up to the individual fighter."

It wasn't what I wanted to hear; there was a lot of gray area in his response. Before I could ask more questions, my phone rang and I looked up at Carter, my stomach dropping with dread when I saw Nikolai's name on my screen. Reagan jumped up from the couch, concern etched on her face. "Sis, who is it?"

"It's Nikolai," I said, looking over at Seth.

Seth hurried over and Carter wrapped his arms around my waist from behind. "Answer it, Emma," Carter said. Seth agreed with a nod.

After gulping down a steadying breath, I exhaled it fast. "What do you want,

Nikolai?”

“I know you’re all there,” he growled. “Put me on speaker.”

I pressed the speaker button and held the phone out so everyone could hear. “You’re on.”

“Good,” Nikolai said, his voice deep and menacing. “That means I only have to say this once. I’m coming for each one of you, including you, brother. The game has just started.”

Seth stopped in front of me, his dark and dangerous glare on my phone. “I look forward to it.”

Nikolai hung up and my chest constricted around my heart. His threat was serious, which meant everyone I loved was in the crossfire. When will it ever end?

Carter leaned in and kissed the side of my neck. “I beat him at his game tonight, Emma. So whatever he throws at us, we’ll win.

Ethan pounded his fists together. “That’s the fucking truth. I say let him come.”

Braden rested an arm on Ethan’s shoulder. “I agree.”

Ripp and Brooks nodded to show their support while Reagan came over and hugged me. “Same goes for me. I’m ready for anything.”

I hugged her tight. “So am I.”

Carter moved to the middle of the group and peered around at all of us while Seth and Benny moved back. “One more thing,” he said, voice low, “We have to keep this to

ourselves. No getting our parents involved. Are we all agreed?"

He acknowledged each person individually and they all nodded, sealing the deal. Then, when he came up to me, he held me in his arms, his lips warm as they pressed against mine.

"You're the last one. Do you agree?"

"I do," I whispered. "This will stay between us."

EMMA

TWO WEEKS LATER

The past two weeks went by quickly. I told Carter that after his fight, we needed a vacation to my family's cabin in the Sierra Nevada mountains. It also gave his wounds time to heal before our parents could see them. Yes, he'd have scars, but we figured we'd tell everyone he got attacked by a dog while we went out for a run.

Luckily, Nikolai hadn't bothered any of us, but we knew it was only a matter of time. Would he come after Carter and me again? Or would he move on to someone else in the group? Without a doubt he would, but everyone was on guard, ready for when he'd strike next.

I decided to take some time off from modeling, and I didn't know if I even wanted to continue with it. What I desired was to pursue my meteorologist career. I had the schooling already under my belt. Not to mention, there was going to be an opening at the local news station soon. The current meteorologist was about to go on maternity leave and was not expected to return. So, I planned to apply for the job and if I got it, I'd take it as a sign that it was where I was supposed to be.

Carter took my hand and walked alongside me when the trail widened. "I can see why your parents wanted to leave L.A. and move here. It's quiet."

Looking up at the trees, I smiled as the wind made the leaves rustle back and forth, the sound soothing. "It is. I loved growing up here. My great grandmother made the best biscuits in the world." I was young when she died, but my memories were still

vivid in my mind.

Carter squeezed my hand. “I remember. One of our group trips was the week after she passed away. Your parents wanted to cheer you up.”

My lips pulled back. “I believe that was the vacation you held my hand for the first time.”

Chuckling, Carter glanced over at me. “We were at Disneyland, and you were a wild six-year-old. Your poor mom would let you go for one second to find something in her bag, and you’d take off. That’s why I decided to keep a hold of you. Besides,” he said, bumping me in the arm, “you liked me.”

“Yeah, right,” I chimed.

I did like him at that point in my life. For as long as I could remember, I had a crush on Carter. I never thought I’d believe in soulmates, but Carter was mine. We’d been connected ever since I was born. There would always be regrets and things I wished I could change in the years we spent apart, but it turned out for the best. If we hadn’t separated, I never would’ve met Seth. Seth was our saving grace right now. We talked to him the other day, and he told Carter he wouldn’t have to fight anymore. I knew Seth was doing it for me, but I also knew that if one of the guys needed help, Carter would be back in the ring in a heartbeat. So, was it entirely over for us? I doubted it. Until that time came, we would live our lives ... together.

Up ahead, the trees started to space out, and beyond that was a rocky ledge that overlooked a river with more mountains in the distance. It was the perfect place to watch the sunset.

“When do you start competing again?” I asked, smiling up at Carter.

He beamed when his eyes met mine. “In just a few more weeks. I’m looking forward

to it.”

“So am I,” I replied in all honesty. “However, I’m not thrilled about having to beat all the women off with sticks.” It was meant as a joke, but I did hate the thought of all those women trying to force themselves onto Carter.

Carter winked. “Or you could always give them your right hook.”

A laugh burst from my lips. “I might have to do that.” I won’t hesitate either.

Finally, we made it to the cliffside and in the distance, the sky was cast in a pinkish-orange glow while the clouds were all different shades of purple.

“This literally takes my breath away,” I gushed. Holding a hand over my heart, I stepped up to the ledge so I could get the full effect. “I wish I had my phone to take pictures. Do you have yours?” I called out to Carter.

A few seconds passed, and I waited for his reply, but there was nothing. When he didn’t answer, I turned around and he was on his knee in the grass, surrounded by pretty wildflowers, with a small, black box in his hand.

Overwhelmed with joy, I clasped a hand over my mouth. “What are you doing?”

Carter opened the box, revealing the ring inside. “I’m asking you to marry me.” He stared up into my eyes and I could see love, adoration, and someone who would go through great lengths to protect me. How did I ever deserve someone like him?

Slowly, I took a step toward him, the tears burning my eyes. “Oh, my God, Carter.”

I looked down at the platinum ring, and it was the most enchanting thing I’d ever seen. There was a diamond in the center, signifying a flower, while the band was a vine of emerald encrusted leaves; it was magical.

Carter plucked the ring out of the box and reached for my hand. “What do you say, Emma? Do you love me enough to say yes?”

There was so much happiness inside me I thought I’d explode. “I love you way more than that,” I confessed. My tears fell like happy rivers down my cheeks when Carter slid the ring down my finger.

“Is that a yes?” Carter asked, smirking. “Because I kind of already put the ring on your finger.”

“Yes!” I shouted, flinging my arms around his neck. Carter lost his balance and we fell back onto the soft grass, but he rolled over on top of me, settling himself between my legs.

Lowering his lips to mine, Carter tenderly explored me with his tongue. My whole body ignited with unadulterated passion. Carter groaned against my mouth, his hardness pressing against my core.

“You spark a need in me that’ll never be satisfied. Even if we made love a million times, I’d never get enough of you.”

Placing my hands against his cheeks, I smiled as my ring shimmered in the sun. “That’s exactly how I feel. It drives me mad sometimes.” I thrust my hips against his and bit my lip. “So, what do you say? We have a few more minutes of daylight.”

Carter nipped my bottom lip and smiled. “I love you so much, Emma.”

“I love you too,” I murmured, wrapping my legs around his waist. “I’m ready for the day I can call you my husband.”

Carter’s eyes glistened in the retreating sun. “That’s the best title I could ever have.”

THE END