



# Fervent

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, New Adult, Dark

**Description:** I never imagined things could get worse, but they do. The men who took us have no mercy. They won't stop until they've destroyed Rafe for something he has no memory of, and I'm their weapon of choice.

Tortured and defiled, they make me wish I was back in that cabin where death was favorable to drawing another breath, but our captors can't break what's already broken.

What scares me is the madness I see festering inside Rafe.

I've taken his freedom, his career, his reputation, yet despite all I've done, he's determined to fight for me, kill for me, give everything he is for me. He'll even die for me.

**NOTE TO READERS:** FERVENT is a dark romance with disturbing themes and explicit content, including sexual scenes and violence that may offend some. Intended for mature audiences. Please begin with Torrent and Rampant before reading Fervent.

**Total Pages (Source):** 58

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:32 am*

I was swaying. Or maybe I was flying. I couldn't be certain, but the quiet thrum of an engine hinted at some sort of motion. That annoying rumble pricked at the edge of consciousness, threatening to take me somewhere I didn't want to go.

Zach.

His name stormed through my blood, turning it to ice. I was trapped. He'd trapped me, locked me away from the world and from myself, reducing me to something unimportant. Meaningless.

A voice tunneled through my ears and landed somewhere in the muck of my mind. I clung to the blackness, every part of me revolting at the thought of forcing my eyes open. I was safe in this place, in this nothingness where I could just be.

But the voice was persistent. Someone curled their fingers around my bicep and shook me. Slowly, I came back to a reality I didn't want to face, to an existence that was unavoidable, inevitable even. Cloth stuffed the cavity of my mouth, and I choked on a muffled cry. The gentle sway of movement reminded me of a trunk, bringing about panic. Swift and debilitating—it held me in its unmerciful grasp.

That voice washed over me again as cold fingers pulled the gag from my dry lips. I let out a scream that was little more than a hoarse plea for survival.

“Shhh, you're okay,” he said, slapping a palm over my mouth until the scream died in my throat. His voice resonated in the deepest part of my soul, even at the level of a breathy whisper, and my heart tripped over in its haste to beat.

“Rafe?” I blinked against the pitch-black, eyes burning with the threat of relieved tears. In that foggy state of here and there, I’d feared I was back in Zach’s trunk, alone with the weight of Rafe’s death pressing on me. I squirmed, trying to maneuver so I could turn over and face him, inhale his scent, hold on and never let go...except I couldn’t move my hands.

As if he knew what I needed, he tugged at the bindings with deft fingers. I scooted forward and bit my lip, impatient to be in his arms.

“Hold on, baby.” His tone was rife with the same impatience. Several long seconds passed in each thud of my heartbeat, and the rope loosened in tiny degrees before dropping free. “C’mere.”

I wiggled to my back and bumped into his warm, naked chest.

“Just a little more,” he said, inching back to give me more room. I flopped over, and he crushed me in his embrace.

“What happened?” I asked, burying my face in the crook of his shoulder. But it was a stupid question. This wasn’t my first ride in the back of a trunk—as the dread in my belly and the fear souring my taste buds reminded me.

“You’re okay. I’ve got you.” Though his words came out calm, his pulse, sprinting to the fervent pace of mine, gave him away. We were far from okay. His nose nudged my temple, and I lifted my face in the darkness, shivering under the warm press of his lips on my skin. He brushed a kiss over each eyelid then dipped to my mouth, barely touching, and leaned his forehead against mine.

For a few moments, we just breathed.

No words.

No talk of what was coming next.

Nothing but comfort traded on the breath of our lips.

It didn't last. The moment was too perilous, and falling into its trap would only foster a false sense of calm.

"How did we get here?" I searched my memory for a clue but couldn't find one.

"They took us. Four or five of them, maybe more."

"Oh my God." A throb began at my temples and spread to the rest of my skull. With a groan, I tucked my head under his chin, unable to think beyond the pain.

"Are you hurt?"

"My head's pounding."

"Probably from the drugs," he said. "Do you remember anything?"

"No." My breath shuddered against his neck, and a niggling memory flourished in my mind; the hint of soft footsteps, a drift of air as the sheet lifted, the hope that rose in me when the mattress dipped at the edge. "Wait...someone got in bed with me. I thought it was you. Next thing I know, I'm waking up here."

"They drugged me too."

Whoever had taken us, and for whatever reasons, I was glad we'd landed in this trunk together. At least we were still together.

"Do you think Zach had something to do with it?" I asked, though the number of men

involved in taking us implied otherwise. My brother had always been a loner.

“I don’t know.” He fell quiet, and the length of that pause carried special weight, an air of significance. “They set the island on fire.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:32 am*

“Theywhat?” Of course, Zach was my first suspect, but something seemed off, especially since Rafe was still alive, trapped in the trunk with me this time, and I couldn’t think of a single reason why my brother would take the time to burn the island. “Who else could’ve done this?”

“Your father, maybe? And I’m not ruling out Zach.”

“But you said there were four or five of them?”

“Yeah.” He tried to hide a groan, and I imagined him biting his lip to silence the sound.

“What is it?” I asked, wishing I could see his face.

“The drugs are still in my fucking system. I’m useless, Alex. They broke in, and I didn’t even realize it. I shouldn’t have let this happen.” He grabbed the base of my neck and tilted my head upwards, and his worried sigh breezed across my lips. “If they hurt you...”

I couldn’t dwell on what they wanted, on how they outnumbered us. I clutched his hair and held him to me, finding sanctuary in his presence even if we were trapped in a trunk together, half dressed, drugged, and possibly facing death.

“At least I’m here with you.”

“I don’t want you here with me. I want you somewhere safe.” He abruptly let go and rolled to his back. “If I can find an escape latch, or maybe break a taillight...” He

kicked several times, each thwack of his foot escalating in effort. “Fuck!”

I pushed up on my elbows. “Something’s glowing over there. See it? By your feet,” I said, realizing he couldn’t see where I was pointing in the blackness.

“Yeah. Looks like the escape latch.” A loud thunk sounded, as if he’d bumped his head. “Damn it! I can’t reach it.”

“I might be able to.” I leaned over him and inched my way down his stomach and thighs. Stretching for all I was worth, I curled my fingers around the glowing handle and yanked, but nothing happened. “It’s not working!”

“Shit. They probably fucked with it.” He shifted underneath me, and I planted a palm on the fabric lining of the trunk to steady myself. I gripped his leg with my other hand.

“Check down there for anything we can use as a weapon.” He scooted again, causing me to plop between his legs, and we became a tangle of twisted limbs as we maneuvered.

I reached out but only found empty space. “There’s nothing here, Rafe.”

“There’s gotta be a spare tire under here. Maybe I can find a lug wrench. Hold on.” He rolled, taking me with him, and my backside pressed against the back of the trunk as he lifted the flimsy floor beneath us. “I feel the tire.”

“Is there a wrench?”

A few seconds of unbearable silence passed before he answered. “No. Can’t find shit. Can’t see shit either.” We rolled again, and his fingers clamped around my bare thigh. “Give me your hand.”

I complied, and he yanked me up his body and back into his arms. “Alex...we don’t know what’s coming. When I tell you to run, promise you’ll do it and never look back. Promise me.”

“I’m not leaving you.”

He grabbed my chin, as if to force my gaze even though we couldn’t see each other. “When we get out of here, you’re gonna run for your life. Do you understand me?”

I tried shaking my head, but he wouldn’t allow it. “I mean it, Alex.”

“They could kill you.”

“I can’t defend us both against a gang of men. You running gives me my best chance.”

He was feeding me a line of bullshit.

“Don’t choose now to be stubborn,” he said, as if he’d heard my internal protest. “Just do as I say.”

The next few moments held me in a death grip, and a shiver went through me. This could be it. “Kiss me,” I choked out.

“Alex...” he said, a touch of warning in his tone.

I angled my face, sensing the heat of his mouth. “Kiss me.” The demand whispered from my lips, and I cursed the fear and grief stinging my eyes. He wanted me to fight, to believe we’d survive, but I wasn’t sure I had it in me. Too much had happened and I didn’t have any fight left.



But I needed his kiss. No matter what came next, I wanted the taste of him with me, on my tongue, branded in my memory. Maybe I could survive if I had that to hold on to.

## Page 3

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He expelled a breath an instant before he pressed his mouth to mine. Parting my lips, he thrust his tongue inside and dueled me into surrender. One hand fisted my hair, yanking my head back, allowing him a deeper possession of my mouth. We both moaned, a sorrowful sound of desperation laced with need, maybe even hope.

Except hope was a sword that would slice us into pieces if we let it.

The frantic slide of his tongue speared through me with a delirious ache, and I whimpered. Everything fell away; the scars on my body, the coffin-like space that held us prisoner, the loss of his memory—it all vanished in the fray of our need for each other. Eventually, we severed the connection but hovered inches apart, our choppy breaths blending with the sound of the road beneath us.

Then the car slowed and the brake lights cast his face in eerie red. My pulse, already galloping from his kiss, took off in a sprint. “I love you, Rafe.”

“Don’t you dare say goodbye to me yet.” His brows furrowed, and I couldn’t resist running my thumb over one.

The car turned and we swayed with the motion. I held my breath, only letting it out after the vehicle regained speed. We clutched each other, awaiting the inevitable confrontation that would come when the tires stopped spinning. Time was lost to the lull of the road, distorted in every brake and turn. The wheels slowed to a crawl on rough ground, bouncing over potholes and ridges.

We lurched, hitting a particularly bad spot, and I cried out his name then pressed my lips to his again, wishing I could freeze this moment. I could live my life in this trunk

with him, our bodies entwined, mouths fused, and find peace.

But that was impossible. We rolled to a stop and the rumble of the engine fell silent. Blackness and fear coiled around us as our fate hung on a thread. Heavy steps rounded the side of the car, and someone jingled a set of keys.

“I want you to run, Alex. When I tell you to go, don’t even hesitate.”

With a nod, I swallowed and managed to squeak my agreement, but deep down, I knew.

I’d die before leaving him to face this alone.

Whatever they’d given me still blazed in my veins, stealing control of my body and fucking with my ability to protect her. The situation pressed on me like a thick slab of steel. My head felt woozy from whatever concoction they’d pumped into me, and my limbs were as useless as the tentacles of a jellyfish. I knew the odds weren’t in our favor. We were about to face off a group of men intending to...fuck, I didn’t know what they wanted, but I doubted they’d taken us to shoot the breeze.

The explosion on my father’s island was a continuous echo in my ears, but thinking about the flames that ate away at my childhood memories, turning them to ash, would get us nowhere. I couldn’t control what had happened. I could only control now, this moment and the next to come, and I’d be damned if I let Alex suffer without putting up the fight from hell.

The trunk popped open, and Alex clung to me with desperate hands, her face buried in my shoulder as she breathed, “Oh God,” against my skin. Her terror raged through me, her tiny frame shaking in my arms.

Yet I knew she was stronger than me.

She had to be, to have survived so much and still have a heartbeat. I cursed God, fate, the universe—even the ball of dirt gravity glued us to—for dropping her into another horrifying situation. Had she not been through enough?

“Promise me,” I whispered again, the plea lost in her hair, though I knew she heard because she held on tighter.

And that’s when I knew. She wasn’t going to run.

Because she was strong. Stubborn. Loyal.

Because she loved me.

The lid of the trunk creaked and cool air hit my back an instant before the barrel of what I assumed was a gun pressed into my spine.

“Get out slow and no one will get hurt.”

The guy at the other end of the weapon backed off, and someone snorted, barely covering their muttered, “yet.”

Reluctantly, I freed Alex from the cage of my arms and turned in the confined space. Trees obscured the moon, and shadows hid the men’s features, though their hatred poisoned the atmosphere and spiraled around me like a tangible entity. Only one held a gun, and he had it locked on me with relentless force.

Had I miscalculated the number of men on the island?

“Don’t have all night, Mason. Get out.”

I grasped the edge of the opening and hefted myself up, biceps flexing under the

strain, and crawled from the trunk. One foot then the other touched the ground, and rough earth gouged the soles of my feet. A chilly breeze whispered through the trees. Even July brought cold nights with it.

“Hands up.”

Raising my arms, I took stock of the situation. Three men, one gun, and the isolation blared its silence, save for the tumultuous chirp of crickets. I glanced at the sky, expecting to see the same galaxy of stars visible from the island, but the sky was faded, as if the glare from the city had snuffed out the brightness.

Considering the amount of time we’d spent in the trunk, I guessed they’d taken us close to Portland.

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“Don’t get any ideas,” the guy with the gun said. He wore a dark hoodie, and his stance was aggressive, as wide as his broad shoulders. “I don’t have to kill you to keep you from running. Your kneecaps will do.” He lowered the weapon to make his point.

I clenched my teeth and stood up straighter, though weakness still lingered in my limbs. My arms trembled from the effort of holding them up. If I could overtake the guy, then Alex might have a shot at getting away.

But could she outrun the other two? And what if there were more? I hadn’t miscalculated. There’d been more than three men on the island, and one of them had worn a baseball cap and sunglasses, but he wasn’t here now.

“Where are the rest of your buddies?” I asked, hoping to get a better idea of how many assholes we were up against.

Approaching headlights beamed from behind me, and Hoodie tilted his head so the light hit him at just the right angle to keep his face hidden in shadow. The car rolled to a stop, and doors creaked open and slammed shut. “Does that answer your question?” he asked.

Not even close.

From the corner of my eye, I spied motion. More weapons cocked, and I didn’t have to look to know they were all aimed in my direction.

“What do you want with us?” I asked Hoodie.

He shook his head, and the hood of his jacket fell back just enough to reveal a face manic with the promise of pain. “Don’t try anything stupid. If you fuck with us, she’s the one taking the heat for it, got it?”

Suddenly, his form swayed in front of me. No, I was the one swaying. The trees behind him morphed in my vision, as if they danced lazily on the other side of a funhouse window.

I blinked several times until my sight cleared. Holy fuck. When would the drugs stop messing with me? Alex couldn’t run. Not with all the guns and muscle surrounding us. I needed time. Time for the drugs to dissipate. Time to come up with a plan that wouldn’t get her hurt, or worse, killed. Then I’d have a chance at taking them on. I didn’t care what happened to me, so long as she got out of this alive.

Hoodie gestured toward her with his gun. “Get out slow like your boyfriend.” She gave no indication of moving, and as he took a step forward, I backed toward the trunk.

“She’s scared. Pointing a gun at her isn’t gonna help.” I cranked my head and glanced at her pale face from over my shoulder. “It’s okay.”

But it wasn’t okay. I swallowed hard and willed my voice to remain steady. “Get out of the trunk.” Every part of me rebelled at the thought of her crawling from that space and facing these assholes.

As she pushed to her elbows, the other men inched closer. What the fuck did they think we were going to do? Make a run for it in the dark with a bunch of assholes on our tails, guns firing? I was fucking useless, pathetically helpless, and I didn’t like it one bit.

I’d let her down. She’d stood in my living room hours ago, gazing out the fucking

window because something had bothered her. She'd sensed this coming, and I'd sent her to my bedroom alone, unprotected. I prayed to God they hadn't done more than just take her from my bed. A small hand slid into mine, bringing me back from the pit of self-flagellation I'd dived into.

"Good," Hoodie said. "Now that we're all here, let's take this underground."

"Where are you taking us?" I asked, not entirely sure I wanted to know what he meant by "underground."

"Shut the fuck up and move." Two men came from the sidelines, guns at the ready, and gestured for us to start walking. The guy I recognized from earlier, with the cap and sunglasses, shoved me forward, and my grasp on Alex's small fingers slipped. Without thinking, I swung around and slammed my fist into his face. He drew back then lunged for me with a powerful blow that pummeled me to the ground like I was nothing. I struggled to my feet, ignoring the sway of the scenery and the gun he pointed at my head, ready to deliver another punch, consequences be damned.

A cold, hard voice froze me to the spot. "Touch my brother again and I'll put a bullet in her head."

A skinny guy who looked to have more prep than hired goon in him held a gun to Alex's skull. I traded a glance with her, struck in the gut by the firm set of her jaw. She'd been conditioned to silently accept hell, even with the barrel of a gun pressed to her temple, and that pissed me the fuck off. She shouldn't have to accept this shit as normal, shouldn't have to harden herself against the next fight.

"Chill out, Vinnie," Hoodie warned his man. "He's got no power here." Even though he'd ordered the guy to stand down, Hoodie's dark eyes threatened retribution for the punch I'd unleashed on his buddy.



I dropped my arm just as Hoodie nodded to one of his men. Something sharp pricked the back of my neck and the world wavered. I slumped toward the ground, the enclosing wall of trees sliding horizontal, and Alex's scream echoed through what was left of my sanity.

My piercing cries for help obliterated the air, but Rafe lay unresponsive on the ground, his crumpled body unmoving no matter how much I begged him to wake up. The two brothers of the group had me by the arms, their fingers banding around my biceps in bruising grips. They dragged me away from him, and I dug my toes into the ground.

“Rafe!”

“Screaming isn't gonna do anything. In case you hadn't noticed, there isn't a whole lot around these parts.”

My gaze shifted through the darkness. Trees surrounded us in all directions, some tall and skinny, some with trunks wider than these two men put together. Ferns and other brush interspersed the isolated landscape. They pushed me further away from Rafe, from the road we'd come in on that was little more than a wide trail.

The guy Rafe had punched started down a steep path between two massive tree trunks covered in moss, while his brother—Vinnie, they'd called him—took up the end of our trek into the middle of nowhere, the barrel of his gun pressed to my spine. The quiet babble of a creek teased from somewhere nearby. Most would equate that sound with ambience, but I found it unsettling, a reminder of suffocation and terror.

“Where are we going?” I asked, hating how my voice wobbled. “Why are you doing this?”

“So many questions,” Vinnie's brother said as we reached the bottom of the incline.

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I skidded to a stop, letting out a squeaky cry as they pulled me toward a creek. “Please, no!”

“The fuck? It’s just a little water. What? You scared of getting your pretty toes wet?”

Oh God. I swallowed the hysteria about to choke me, determined to cross the creek without having a total meltdown. It was a ridiculous reaction, as the water would barely reach past my ankles. I swallowed hard, preparing myself. They couldn’t find out about my phobia—it would only give them more ammunition against me.

Upon the first contact with the icy stream, my feet ached clear to my bones. I wore nothing but a tank top and panties, and water splashed my calves like pin-pricks as we trekked to the other side. A hill rose on my right, trapping me between the creek and hillside as they propelled me downward, deeper into the woods.

The hike seemed endless. My legs ached for rest, but when we slowed, I wished to keep moving because stopping would mean it was over. I stiffened, expecting a bullet to the head, figuring they’d dragged me out here to kill me and discard my body. A sob bubbled up but caught in my throat. I hadn’t said goodbye to Rafe. We were going to die out here, and I hadn’t even told him goodbye. There was so much I hadn’t said to him, and now I’d never get the chance.

“Wh-why are you doing this?” I asked again, the words laced with high-pitched terror. If they planned to kill me, I wanted to know why.

“Hurry the fuck up,” Vinnie complained to his brother, completely ignoring my question. “It’s fuckin’ cold out here.”

“Chill out. I’m looking for the latch.”

From the corner of my eye, I spied Vinnie’s tall frame, bordering on lanky. His brother was the opposite. He intimidated with huge muscles and arms sleeved in tats. He pushed ferns and moss aside to reveal a door in the side of the hill.

What the hell? Who had an entrance in the middle of a forest?

Vinnie pushed me against the steel door, face first, and wrenched my arms behind me as Muscle Guy entered a code into the keypad near the handle. A beep sounded and the door opened. They shoved me inside and down a short flight of stairs made of stone. We halted under an arch, at the mouth of a hallway. I shook, teeth clinking together as chills wracked my half-naked body. A long row of lights illuminated a tunnel that seemed to go on indefinitely.

What is this place? I didn’t dare voice the question. They flanked my sides and pulled me down the passage, my feet dragging and stirring up dust. Mustiness flared in my nostrils, making breathing difficult. It reminded me of Rafe’s wine cellar, except these walls were made of deteriorating stone and brick.

We moved deeper into the tunnel and eventually passed several doors, all shut to prying eyes, though chilling noises filtered through some of them. Moans. Screeching cries. Masculine voices that iced my blood. The unmistakable thwack-thwack of instruments on flesh, not unlike the sound of Rafe’s paddle on my ass weeks ago.

My limbs trembled, threatening to give out completely. “Wh-where are you taking me?”

“For a little chit-chat with the boss.”

“Who? What does he want with me? Where’s Rafe?”

“Bitch has a lot of questions, huh?” Muscle Guy let out a harsh laugh. He flanked my right, baseball cap pulled low over his forehead, his eyes hidden behind dark shades, and dug the gun into my side. “Be quiet and keep moving.”

That was the last any of us spoke.

But something about Muscle Guy—with his black and orange Beavers hat and intense stare I sensed behind the dark glasses—licked at a memory, and it came back with such startling clarity, I couldn’t have spoken if I’d wanted to. He’d been on that busy street the day Zach called me from outside the restaurant. Even my brother had noticed him noticing me.

The shock still hadn’t abated by the time we neared the end of the tunnel to face the last door. My feet ached from the long walk, and I shuffled them nervously.

“I’ll take her in,” Vinnie said, his fingers biting into my arm. “Wait out here.”

“Yep.” Muscle Guy slid the gun into his waistband and leaned against the wall, crossing his beefy arms.

Vinnie reached for the knob, and I squeezed my hands into fists. Whatever waited behind that door couldn’t be worse than what I’d already been through. He shoved me into a room that was vastly different from the tunnel. The stone floor chilled the soles of my feet, but it was smooth and free of dirt. So were the neat brick walls that housed shelves of antiques. Another set of shelves held rope and other restraint devices, filming equipment, DVDs, and whips and paddles. My gaze veered to the fine art displayed on the walls. I’d bet a safe hid behind one of the paintings.

I forced my attention on the rest of the room. A large area rug covered the center where an oversized oak desk sat next to an odd piece of furniture that looked like a tall ottoman, though it had a restraint system and four wooden legs.

The air thickened with a musky vibe that could only be described as sexually deviant, especially considering the row of black and white photos hanging on the wall behind the desk. They were large, the size of posters, and all of them featured the same blonde in various poses of humiliation. I swallowed past the lump of dread in my throat, fixated on the signs of distress and fear on her stunning face. The grimace of pain, the open-mouthed cries that resembled screams of agony rather than ecstasy.

“What is this place?” I whispered, my throat too tight to manage anything else.

Vinnie shoved me into a chair facing the desk and stood nearby, his gun pressed to my head. From the corner of my eye, I saw him dig out a cell and punch in a number.

“The package is here, boss.”

And that was that. Five little words, and I was merely a possession. Not long after, a door to the left opened, and a man I thought I’d never see again stepped into this crazy room that didn’t make any sense.

Or maybe it made perfect sense and I just didn’t want to admit it.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:33 am*

I raised my eyes, opened my mouth to say something, but could hardly form a coherent thought, let alone a sentence. This must be a crazy dream.

Lucas Perrone didn't smile, didn't seem smug. In fact, he seemed bored, and that expression struck me hard in the chest because he'd often worn that look while we dated. Even the night he'd asked me to marry him, he'd lacked excitement. I'd always assumed it was because my dad had set us up. Now, gaping at him in utter shock, everything I thought I'd known about Lucas was a lie, nothing more than dust on the ground.

He gestured to the guy standing sentinel at my back. "Leave us. She won't be a problem."

The pressure of the weapon disappeared from my skull, and I sensed Lucas' henchman moving away. I let out a breath at the absence of his gun. A few seconds later, the door clicked shut. But reality crashed in, and I wrestled beyond my state of shock to say something.

"Did my dad put you up to this?" My heart thundering behind my breastbone, I drew in a deep breath through my nose, determined not to give in to a full-blown panic attack.

Five in, hold, five out.

The twitch of his mouth interrupted the repeat part of my breathing ritual. He rubbed his chin, thumb whisking over the patch of hair sprinkled with gray, and folded into the leather seat on the other side of the desk. "Why would your father have you and

Mason kidnapped?” Raising a brow, he ran a palm across the gleaming brown surface that matched the color of his eyes.

I glanced around the room, but my focus strayed to those unsettling photos displayed behind him. “If he didn’t do this, then why am I here? Why did you take us?”

“The two of you took something from me.”

“I-I don’t understand. I barely know you. The only reason I know you at all is because of my dad, and Rafe...” I glanced at my lap, only then realizing how I twisted my fingers in a display of unease. “He’s been in prison for the last eight years.”

“Exactly.”

“I’m not following.”

His brow furrowed, the one with the scar severing the perfect arch. “There was a time when I wanted you.” He rose and slowly rounded the desk. I kept my attention forward, but in my periphery I spied the strong build of his thighs at my side, hidden underneath the perfect fit of his slacks. He grasped my hair and tilted my head back until I returned his gaze.

“Rafe Mason is going to pay for what he did. You will too, for your part in this, but that doesn’t stop me from wanting you still.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said through gritted teeth. My mind raced in trying to decipher what Rafe and I could have done to earn his thirst for vengeance, but none of this made any sense. Unless my dad was involved somehow...that’s the only thing that clicked.

“What would you be willing to do to save Mason’s life?”

“What?” I jerked back, fighting against his hold.

“You heard me. What would you”—he let my hair slide through his fingers, and his hand descended to my lap—“be willing to do to save the man you love?” There was nothing to bar his access—just a flimsy scrap of underwear I’d worn to bed, thinking I was safe in Rafe’s room. Lucas parted my thighs and swiped my panties to the side, then he plunged a finger between my folds. I bit my lip hard.

“You never let me touch you like this when we were dating.” He bent and pressed his face to my temple, inhaling sharply. “I’ll spare his life if you let me fuck you.”

“Let him go.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“I’ll do anything...” My gaze strayed to the photos of the woman, and I wondered who she was. How could I have spent so much time with him and never sense the darkness beneath the expensive suits and charming demeanor? When it came to noticing the depraved fibers in people, I was broken, my evil detector in pieces, probably rotting in the same place as my innocence.

“I’ll be your...your...slave. Let him go and keep me.”

His mouth lowered to my ear. “You’re perfect, Alex. Young, pliable, and best of all, trained to take a man’s cock like a pro.” He added more fingers and jammed them deep inside, stretching my opening with an uncomfortable burn. It was all I could do not to tense upon the crude intrusion. “But you’re under the misguided impression that you have a choice in the matter, that you have the ability to negotiate with me. You,” he said, his breath blasting my ear with moist heat, “are powerless here.”



He unbuttoned his slacks and lowered the zipper. “We’ll start slow, but I need a token of your respect. Show me why I should consider your wants in this situation. Show me why I shouldn’t kill Mason.”

I leaned toward him, each second bringing my mouth closer to the hard-on straining behind his boxer briefs, and reached for the band of cotton, pulling it down...down a little more. I glanced up and wished I could smack the gleam of triumph from his expression. He was toying with me, thinking he’d already won.

And he had. I’d do anything for Rafe.

“If I give you a blowjob, you’ll let him go?”

“Wrap that slutty mouth around my cock, and I might let him live.”

A few weeks ago, I would have succumbed, would have bent under his threats. But I knew better now, could better judge when someone was using my fears against me.

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When someone was lying to me.

Giving in wouldn't save Rafe.

His cock sprang free, and he thrust his hips forward until the tip brushed my cheek. "That's right," he said, hissing in a breath. "You know what to do with that mouth, don't you, honey. Give me a reason not to let my guys break you."

Saliva collected on my tongue. I opened my mouth, as if I were about to slide my lips over his shaft. Instead, I spit on the tip. "Go fuck yourself."

I expected anger, even a blow to the face. What I didn't expect was a resigned grin. "You're not ready yet, but you will be." He jerked me up by the hair and marched me to the door where his men undoubtedly waited on the other side. Flinging it open, he pushed me into their strong hands. "You know what to do, guys."

Cigarette smoke burned my nostrils, but it didn't compare to the fire in my muscles. My hands were locked above my head, wrists shackled together, and my feet were anchored to the concrete with chains.

"Hey, Cleft," someone's voice thundered through my pounding skull. "I think he's comin' to."

Bodies moved and the putrid air around me stirred. I could hardly lift my head, which felt like a bowling ball on my shoulders. "Where's Alex?" I mumbled.

Someone slapped my cheeks. "Time to wake up."

“Whaddya want,” I slurred, forcing my chin up.

The guy in the hoodie stood in front of me, and the dim bulb hanging between the rafters cast his face in light. If not for the hard lines in his skin, I’d guess he was in his mid-twenties. He took a drag from a cigarette, and something flashed in my memory. I couldn’t hold onto it, though the notable cleft in his chin seemed familiar.

“Alex,” I said again, refusing to back down until I got an answer.

“Relax. She’s fine, but whether or not she stays that way is up to you. You hold all the power here.”

“Find that hard to believe,” I said, breath rasping out as I glanced up at my restrained hands, “seeing as how you assholes have me strung up.” I pulled on the chains, and the clank of metal grated. Fucking futile. I glanced beyond the guy they called Cleft. The room spanned deep in a rectangle shape, and a bed sat tucked against a crumbling brick wall on the far end. A display of paddles, whips, crops and other implements of pain hung on hooks. Lighting equipment and camcorders were scattered throughout the space.

A second set of chains and cuffs dangled a few feet in front of me, empty now, but I feared they wouldn’t be for long. Those things made me nervous. It was too easy to imagine them restraining Alex there, where they’d force me to watch them do their worst, so close but unable to stop them.

Fuck. I couldn’t let this happen.

Clenching my hands, I glared at Cleft, wishing I could rip into his smug grin. “What the fuck do you want?”

He took another drag, and a door creaked open. His gaze darted behind me.

“Rafe!”

I jerked my head and watched two men bring Alex in. “Let her go!” I struggled against the restraints, my eyes never leaving her ashen face. They hauled her to where the other set of shackles swayed.

Waiting.

Taunting.

“Strip her,” Cleft ordered.

I lurched forward and the chains strained from the ceiling, metal cuffs gouging my wrists, but my feet wouldn’t budge another inch. They’d fully anchored me to the ceiling and floor. “Don’t you fucking touch her!”

Cleft grinned, and the guy I’d punched earlier snickered.

“This is Brock,” Cleft said, slapping his buddy on the back. “He’s got a real hunger for pain, dontcha, Brock?”

His nefarious gaze, no longer hidden behind dark glasses, roved over Alex’s shaking body. He removed his hat and tossed it to the floor, revealing his closely-shaved head. She seemed so small next to his massive frame, so breakable under the strength of his muscles. They were going to rape her. The certainty of it gnawed in my gut like a parasite. I almost vomited at the mental picture.

“If you hurt her—”

“You’ll do what?” Cleft interrupted as Brock and the other goon he’d come in with slid the tank top over her head. The other men in the room hung back, arms crossed in

casual observation while Brock and his asshole accomplice tore her panties free. She squeezed her green eyes shut and pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. She didn't even try fighting them as they strung her up and locked her into the same position as me.

"Damn, girl," Brock said, swiping a palm over Zach's carving on her belly. "Someone marked you up good." Brock circled her then slapped her ass hard.

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“You don’t need her,” I said. “You have me. Let her go.”

Cleft dropped the cigarette butt and ground it out with his shoe before closing the distance between us. He dragged a finger down my chest, his eyes alight with something close to glee. “I have you and her.”

“What the fuck do you want?”

“Didn’t we go over this on your piece of shit island? I want you to suffer.” He gestured to Brock. “Make the bitch scream.”

“No!” I sprang forward again, mindless of the chains trapping me.

Brock pulled a rubber band from his wrist and lifted her hair, securing it in a messy bun. He grabbed her chin and turned her face so he could drag his tongue up her cheek. She inched away from him, her mouth twisted in revulsion.

“Why are you doing this?” I shouted.

But Brock ignored me. They all fucking ignored me.

He let her go and waltzed to the back of the room where he eyed the various implements. God, I couldn’t watch them hurt her. It would kill me. They had everything they needed to tear me apart, all wrapped up in Alex De Luca. He removed a cane from the rack and strolled toward Alex.

“Answer me!”

“We don’t answer to you, Mason.” Cleft’s lip curled, and he folded his arms as Brock halted a few feet behind her.

I captured her gaze and held it in the safety of mine. Our connection was the only thing left to get us through what he was about to do.

“Baby,” I said, my voice cracking along with the rest of me because I couldn’t stop this. “It’s gonna hurt.”

She blinked rapidly, as if to hold back tears. “I know.”

“Lesson number one,” Cleft said to me. “You don’t fight us, ever.” He nodded, and Brock struck the back of her thighs with an ear-splitting crack. She jerked forward, sucking in a noisy breath. Brock narrowed his bushy brows and swung again, harder this time, and the impact of cane on flesh reverberated off the walls.

She bit back a cry, refusing to give voice to her pain, though her eyes watered from the agony.

“Stop!” I shouted.

Brock licked his lips, as if savoring the challenge in her silence, and struck again. A small cry escaped her. With the grin of the devil, Brock unleashed his sadistic pleasure onto her ass and thighs, again and again until her escalating screams lashed through me. She cried my name, screamed until the sound of her anguish overwhelmed the room. She rose to her toes, biceps straining against the chains, body trembling, then her legs finally buckled.

My breath caught in my lungs, refusing to expel. Grief and frustration burned behind my eyes.

“Please,” I said, not above begging. Not when it came to Alex. “No more. Let her go. Your problem is with me.” I didn’t know why, but whatever they were after, it had nothing to do with her. “Take it out on me.” I growled the last word, swerving my attention between Cleft and Brock.

Cleft stopped in front of me and thrust his face within inches of mine. I tried going for his throat, regardless of my chained hands, but could only stand there with his hot breath in my fucking face.

“Please what? I like hearing you beg.”

Something about him was darkly familiar, but I still couldn’t put my finger on it, even though some part of my subconscious recognized him, responded to his presence with a level of fear I didn’t understand.

Though I was beginning to. These men, whoever they were, had proven of what they were capable. Intolerable pain delivered with menacing smiles and hooded glares.

“Please,” I said again, hating myself for sounding so pathetic, but I’d do anything to get them away from Alex. “Let her go. She isn’t part of this.”

“I warned you not to try anything, but look at Brock’s face. You just couldn’t help yourself, could you?” He turned and traded a glance with Brock. “More.”

The bastard wailed on her, and Alex’s hoarse shrieks ripped me to pieces. “Stop! I’ll do whatever you want!”

Cleft’s hand folded around my chin. “That’s us going easy on your girl. If the boss hadn’t given us orders not to fuck her, we’d all be having a go at her. But he’s saving her pussy for himself, so I guess we’ll settle for beating the bitch.”



I wanted to stop breathing, wanted to shut my eyes and find a place where I wouldn't have to witness them destroying her. If we didn't die here in body, we would die here in spirit.

“Again,” Cleft ordered.

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Brock lifted his right arm and swung the cane with a grunt. I jumped at the crack that struck my ears with such force, it rattled through me. I didn't know how she was still in one piece. Something warm and wet fell from my eyes, and her image blurred. I would have given anything to take her place. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry...

The apology bled from my soul, and maybe some part of her deep inside heard it. She slumped, eyes screwed shut as her screams diminished to hopeless mewls. Right then, I knew I'd kill every last one of them, and not in the I'm-fucking-irate-as-hell-and-talking-a-good-talk way. I would literally kill them, would do so with the most disturbing satisfaction imaginable, and no one would find the pieces of their corpses after I was through.

Another crack assaulted the tormented space between my ears. Her head dipped, chin to chest, body entirely limp as urine trickled down her quaking legs. She'd given up fighting. Her fucking brother had driven her to stop fighting the day she'd tried to kill herself.

"Let her down. She can't take anymore." Don't break on me now.

Cleft gestured with a wave of his hand, and the bastard with the cane brought it down on her again. After three more strikes, he pulled the rubber band from her hair, and her curls tumbled around her shoulders in a mess of tangles. He freed her from the shackles, the fucking bastard apparently satisfied he'd broken her.

But she wasn't broken. She couldn't be. I wouldn't let her fucking break. She'd come too far for these assholes to do her in.

Depleted of strength, she crumpled to the floor. Blood slickened her backside, and the sight of the deep red horizontal lines on her skin turned my stomach. Brock and another guy picked her up and carried her from the room.

“Where are you taking her?” I shouted, cranking my head around. She lifted her lids, just enough for me to see a spark of the woman I’d do anything for. In that moment, I knew it was true. Alex had me by the soul, her love winding around me like an unbreakable rope of which I couldn’t escape.

I didn’t want to escape her, but we had to find a way to escape this place.

Cleft stood in front of me and folded his arms with an air of nonchalance, as if we were old friends having a friendly chat. “That was your first lesson. If you so much as sneeze without my permission, she’ll take the punishment. Do you understand?”

“What do you want from me?” I asked through clenched teeth.

“You destroyed my family.”

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

“Same old memory problems.” He rolled his eyes. “You’re pathetic, Mason, but your head issues won’t save you. I’m here to collect a debt, and I’ll take it all, pound for pound, from your girlfriend’s flesh.”

I couldn’t hold it in anymore. The chains were the only things holding me up as I vomited on the gritty floor. “Kill me,” I begged. “She’s innocent.”

He tilted his head. “Is she?” He stepped closer, his sneakered feet bypassing the mess I’d made. “She’s the reason you were in that fucking prison in the first place. One lie that sent you away,” he said, pausing long enough to snap his fingers, “and my life is

fucked. She's as much to blame as you."

"She was only fifteen. Don't do this. Whatever I did...just fucking kill me for it and let her go."

"Believe me," he said, his breath rancid in my face with the stench of tobacco. "I will cherish that day when it comes."

I wheezed air between my lips, muscles bunched, aching to pound him to a bloody, unrecognizable mass of body parts.

Cleft's fingers fell to the button of his jeans. He nodded to the other two men in the room, who had quietly watched the horror unfold without a word. "Get him on his knees." He retreated a few steps. "In fact, make him kneel in his fucking puke." He grinned in such a chilling way, the smile crawled down my back like a spider.

"Do your girl a favor and open your mouth big." He unbuckled, and I stiffened, my teeth grinding as he lowered the zipper. The fucker had a huge-ass erection.

My nightmares came back, flooding my conscious mind with details I hadn't been able to grasp until now. Something had seemed so familiar about Cleft. His smell especially—the odor of sweat and tobacco combined with whatever musky cologne he favored.

Now I knew why. He'd raped me in prison. Though I didn't remember it with clarity, I knew it was true.

He folded his hand around his dick. "You've got two options. You can suck me off, or Brock can have some more fun with your girl. Your choice."

I couldn't breathe. Oh my fucking God. There was no choice. Not even a little.

His goons loosened the chains keeping me upright, and I collapsed to my knees, right in the middle of my vomit. Goon number one grabbed the back of my head and held me in place while the other forced my arms in the air again with a jerk of the chains.

The moment was surreal, like an echo from a nightmare that twisted my insides. I opened for him, focusing only on memories of Alex—on what it felt like to wrap my body around hers, how hot and wet she'd been when I dipped my fingers between her thighs. The whimpering sound she made in the back of her throat when I possessed her mouth.

Cleft pushed his cock against my tongue, and I gagged.

Memories flashed behind my eyes, crashing through the barrier like a dam busting. The rapes in prison, how deep his hatred for me ran, though my psyche refused to stir up the reason why. It was there, tickling the edges of my memories, but that sick feeling returned and scattered the path to recollection, and my heart thumped so fast, I thought I'd black out.

He pulled back, and his dick slipped free. "Fuck this. I wanna fuck." A quick nod to his men sent them into motion. They released my hands and shoved me to the floor. I struggled in my vomit, my limbs little more than deadweight. Someone grabbed my legs, but I kicked behind me and pushed to all fours.

Laughter. Footsteps.

I crawled to my feet, body swaying, and faced the three of them. With a roar, I launched at them, but the manacles around my ankles tripped me up and sent me crashing to the cement again. Pain shuddered through my injured shoulder, and I bit back a groan.

The four of us grappled on cold concrete, grunting under the fight to get the upper hand. One of them slammed my face into the ground, and stars swam in my vision for a few seconds. Strong hands wrenched my arms behind me and shackled my wrists together.

“I’m gonna enjoy this.” Cleft tugged my sweats down with a too-familiar laugh. He settled his bulky frame over me and straddled my thighs, just like in my nightmares, only this was real.

Happening all over again.

They held me down by the shoulders, pressed my ankles to the ground. Eager fingers slid between my ass cheeks, separating, seeking entrance. Cleft nudged his erection against my backside, a moment away from shoving it in, when the door burst open.

“Get the fuck off of him!”

I twisted my head, and my whole world shattered, everything logical lost to insanity. Jax stood in the doorway, the light from the hall casting him in silhouette, though I’d known it was him the instant he’d spoken.

“We’re just having a little fun,” Cleft said.

“Fun’s over. Fucking him isn’t part of the plan.”

Muscle Guy watched while I showered. His brother, the tall and lanky one, had left us alone. I braced myself against the grimy tile, my body still weak from the beating. The pipes overhead whined under the pressure of spitting out water, and the tepid spray sluiced over my head, slid down my stinging skin, and turned pink by the time the rivulets hit the drain at my feet.

The weight of his stare pressed on me, and the metal collar he’d locked around my neck threatened to choke me. He’d attached a chain to the hook at the center of my throat, and he held the other end in his large fist.

Every few seconds, he pulled on it to taunt me.

The water wasn’t warm enough to stop the chills from tickling my skin. His strikes ran through my head on constant replay, especially the part where he’d managed to break what I thought had already been broken. I’d lost control of my fucking bladder.

If I’d given in and sucked Lucas’ cock, would they have spared me this? Would my rebellion cost Rafe his life? The thought of what they might be doing to him tormented me, and I held my breath, unwilling to allow air into my lungs.

“Time’s up,” he said, voice echoing off the tiles.

Startled, I shot out a hand toward the faucet and shut off the water on the first try. Palming my breasts, I turned around. The room was one big shower stall with several showerheads on each wall, but it was empty save for us. His gaze dipped to my stomach, and he raised a brow.

“Wonder what your man thinks of that carving. Should I add my name to the mix?” He came at me, each step a calculated move of predator stalking prey. He raised a hand, and I froze, resisting the urge to flinch. I thought he was going to strike me again, or worse, but the door to the shower room opened, offering a perfectly timed interruption. A man I didn’t recognize dragged a girl inside by the same type of collar that circled my neck. She crawled on her hands and knees, and her wide eyes—a startling shade of blue that rivaled the sky in the dead of summer—zeroed in on me. Huge drops fell from her thick lashes, and a plea trembled from her lips.

“Please...”

“No talking!” The guy gave the chain a swift yank, and her blond head jerked forward. He yanked her up by the arm and pushed her to the wall, then switched on the spray. She sobbed, her arms wrapping around her naked body as the water drenched her hair.

“Got a new one, huh?” Muscle Guy said.

“Yep, but she isn’t gonna be much fun. She’s already half broken, and I haven’t even touched her yet.”

She shrank away from him with a strangled cry, as if his words alone were enough to cause her physical pain. Sickened by the terror on her face, I turned away, but she started screaming. I whirled, my heart in my throat, expecting to see the guy hurting her, but her stricken gaze remained locked on me.

“Wh-what happened to you?”

My backside flared in pain at the reminder of Muscle Guy’s cane, and he smirked before I could say anything.



“I want a shot at her before you start training,” he said. “She’s exactly the type of pussy our base wants to see on film. She’ll put up a real whiny fight.”

“No can do. She’s a virgin. Boss doesn’t want her on film. She’s going to auction.”

Her huge eyes begged me, as if she thought I could save her from a fate worse than a fiery pit. I bit my lip, hating how helpless we both were. They were going to ruin her—an innocent girl who barely looked eighteen.

And Rafe and I...

Lucas had his own agenda when it came to us, that much was clear. But we’d also seen too much in this place. There was no way they’d let us out of here alive.

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“Well that’s a shame,” Muscle Guy said as he pulled me toward the door by the chain. “I like blondes.”

“You like ‘em all, as long as they scream for you.”

A shudder tore through me, and I vowed that I would never scream or cry for him again.

“On your hands and knees.”

“What?” I blinked at him.

“Don’t make me tell you twice,” he said with a hard shove until I dropped to my knees. “Crawl like the slut you are.” He herded me back into the tunnel, naked, wet, and shaking from the chilly air.

The door to Lucas’ office was closed, and silence blasted from the other side. He yanked me in the opposite direction and paraded me down the passage like a dog, my knees scraping the dirt ground. After passing several doors, he stopped and pulled a ring of keys from his pocket before jamming one into a lock. “Be a good girl and wait on the bed.”

He pointed toward the claustrophobic darkness, and my hesitation cost me a kick in the ass. Pain scorched my backside, eliciting a wounded cry as I crawled inside. He latched the other end of the chain to an anchor in the ground before slamming the door shut. My breath came in panicked gasps as I pushed to my feet and searched for the handle. There wasn’t one. My trembling hands smoothed over a panel where a

doorknob should have been.

Hysteria flooded me, vibrating through my legs until they buckled. I fell to the ground and slinked across the dark space, chain clanking through the rocky dirt. My head hit the metal frame of the bed, and I planted a fist on the thin mattress to hoist myself onto it. Finding a blanket bunched in the corner near the wall, I wrapped myself in the scratchy material, curling in a tight ball on the cot, and wished I could wither away to nothing. If I could only erase the last hour as easily as the blood had vanished from my skin, then maybe I could fucking breathe. But that blood lingered, if not physically, then mentally.

So did the image of Rafe. He'd cried, actually shed drops of horror from his beautiful eyes. The man who'd at one time left me naked and cold in a cage, who'd fucked me after paddling my ass, had cried at witnessing my pain.

Palpitations seized my heart. Were they beating him? Killing him?

I couldn't cry. I wouldn't. If I started, I wouldn't stop. I bit into my lip, hard enough to puncture, and licked away the metallic taste. I should have done what Lucas demanded. If Rafe died because I'd refused to suck a dick...I wouldn't be able to live with myself.

I wouldn't be able to live at all.

Why had I chosen that moment to take a stand? For years, Zach had made me cower and submit, yet the one time Rafe needed me to do it for his life, I hadn't been able to.

Why was this happening to us? We should have run away together when we had the chance, gotten far away from this place and this madness and this cruel fate that kept unleashing its sadism.

I clutched the blanket to my chest and squeezed my eyes shut. And I prayed. To whom, I wasn't sure. To anyone listening.

Please get us out of here alive.

Whereas I'd wanted to end the pain not long ago by taking my own life, now I ached for the opposite. I wanted to live in peace with Rafe, hungered to submit my body and soul. I wanted to grow old with him, wanted to heal him...and maybe find a way to heal myself.

I'd gladly exist as a vagrant beside him, belonging nowhere or to anyone except each other.

My lids grew heavy, and as images of a life I'd never have flickered in my mind's eye, I allowed a fitful sleep to claim me. I was back in the cabin with Zach, body trapped under his punishing knife and held prisoner by his thrusting cock.

Except it wasn't Zach. Rafe took his place, one hand around my throat while the other drew the sharp blade into my skin.

"Mine," he said. "You'll never escape the pain of being mine." He rammed into me with one last grunt and spilled his seed, head thrown back, green eyes hooded while he watched me watch him. A breath hissed between his teeth.

"I'm going to destroy you, sweetheart."

The sound of my screams startled me awake. I shot up, hands rising in front of my face to protect me. Overwhelming darkness closed in, and my breathing escalated. The screaming continued, but I wasn't the one screaming.

"Please! Stop! I wanna go home," a shrill voice sobbed. A spine-tingling crack

sounded on the other side of the wall and another shriek rattled my bones.

I tumbled to the ground and crawled toward the sound with quaking knees. She let out another horrific scream. I jerked to my side, hands covering my ears, body folding into the fetal position. But it wasn't enough.

I couldn't breathe. Dust from the ground clogged my nose and throat. I removed my palms, and her screams ripped through my eardrums. Unbidden, I dug my fingernails into my forearm, scratching down the scar from my desperate attempt to break free of Zach. My fingers glided over the ridges circling my wrist from when the men had restrained me.

From when they'd beat me...just like they were doing to that girl.

They were stripping her of who she was, shattering everything she'd known to be true until this point, this irrevocable moment when her life would change forever. Each strike, each cry that left her lips was another step toward submitting to a fate she couldn't fight. To a fate that would make her wish for death.

I was glad Zach had destroyed me, and not some faceless stranger. At least he loved me in his own sick way.

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God. Even that observation proved how twisted my head was. I wasn't normal. I'd become too immune to the evil that lurked in people. If I could trade places with the girl on the other side of the wall, I would.

It was too late to save myself, but she was innocent. She was fucking innocent and I couldn't do a thing to help her, couldn't even tell her she wasn't alone. Her screams continued, and I buried my face in my arms to drown out her pleas for help.

"If you ain't gonna fuck him, why shouldn't I?"

"Because I said so." Jax's tone brooked no argument.

Cleft pushed off me, and I let out a sigh of relief as his heavy boots thumped across the floor toward Jax. "Just because you weaseled your way back in, don't think you're calling the shots now." He jabbed a finger at his chest. "If you don't do him, I will. One way or another, his ass is getting fucked and filmed. He's fucking Rafe Mason. That shit will sell."

"That's exactly why you're not filming him. It's too risky. You know my old man will side with me." Jax glanced around the room. "Besides, you're full of it. I don't see you filming shit here."

"Just warming up." Cleft rolled his shoulders. "Uncle Luke won't have a problem with a little fun."

"You're not gonna touch him." Jax curled his lip. "So back the fuck off."

“This is bullshit.”

“No,” Jax said. “The mess in here is bullshit. Fucking clean it up.” He pulled a hand through his blond hair and moved toward me, his feet pounding the ground in angry stomps. “Get him on his feet. Move!” he yelled when the guys holding me down didn’t budge. They scrambled into motion and dragged me upright. Blood rushed to my head, making my vision fuzzy as one of the goons bent to release my ankles. The other stepped behind me and freed my hands.

“You don’t have the balls to do him,” Cleft said with a taunting edge to his tone. “Even though you want to.”

“He’s off-limits. That’s all you need to know.” Jax glared at the two holding me up, but he wouldn’t meet my eyes. “Get those filthy sweats off. We need to get him to the showers.”

One guy bent and tugged my pants further down my legs. “Lift your foot,” he said.

I did so, my head in a fog, and blinked several times, but the whole room and everyone in it wobbled. This wasn’t happening. This was another nightmare. After he pulled the sweats free from one leg, I raised my other foot and nearly lost my balance. He tossed the soiled clothing to the side and grabbed me by the arm.

Jax nodded toward the door. “Get moving. Cleft can clean this shit up.”

Cleft grumbled his dissent as they ushered me out the door and down a long tunnel. We passed a guy hauling a frail blonde by a leash, her skin damp and pasty. As she crawled past, she lifted her tear-filled eyes—eyes that grew huge as she took in my presence. She didn’t even look old enough to graduate high school. I could only imagine how terrified she must be, and seeing a guy my size, naked and barely able to walk under his own steam, must have sent a devastating blow to her hope for

survival.

But I couldn't think about that girl. Not now. Not with all the chaos raging through my head.

Jax's familiar stride echoed behind us. The fact that it was familiar at all was shocking enough, but to wrap my fucking head around the rest of it—his presence here and the implication of his words back in that room—I couldn't do it.

Thoughts bounced around my head, but I couldn't catch a single one, couldn't even form the words to convey the total mind-fuck this situation was. Words refused to leave my tongue. They were stuck there in surreal silence as Jax and the others pushed me into a room full of showers.

"Get lost," he told the other two goons as he switched on the water.

I leaned against the tile, arms bent and forearms flat against the cold surface, and tried to gather my strength. As soon as the door shut behind the men, I lunged for Jax, hands going for his throat. But the floor tilted under me, and instead of attacking him, I used his shoulders to hoist myself upright.

"How the fuck are you behind this?"

He shoved me against the wall. Water washed over us in a chilly stream, dripping from my hair and soaking his T-shirt.

"You're wasting your energy. They dosed you with the same shit you gave Alex when we took her."

"Get your fucking hands off of me," I said through clenched teeth. I pushed against his stocky frame, but he wouldn't budge. Fucking drugs. It was the only way they'd



keep me down, and they knew it.

Jax had known it. The fucker had shared a cell with me for...I didn't know how long, but he'd been there, and he'd been in my damn house, living under the same roof.

He'd helped me take Alex.

He'd gotten me a fucking gun to protect her.

Why?

“None of this makes any sense.”

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“Remember when we talked in your cellar?” He lowered his voice, as if he didn’t want to be overheard. “I said I’d always have your back.”

“Like you have my back now? Don’t do me any fucking favors.”

He retreated with a sigh, and I went after him, my rage propelling me across the slick floor too fast. Slamming into him, we plummeted to the ground, and his skull hit the tile with a jolting thud. Veins pulsed at his temples as he fought me. He gained more ground each second, his muscles bulging under the exertion. With a roar, he shoved me off and rolled on top of me, straddling my thighs.

“Calm the fuck down before they come back in here,” he said, face inches from mine. “You need to trust me.”

“You’re crazy. You’re behind this whole thing. They fucking hurt Alex. They destroyed the island. You think I’m gonna trust you now?”

Jax closed his eyes, and his shoulders slumped. “I loved that land almost as much as you did.”

“Why are you doing this? Fucking tell me that much, at least.”

Voices filtered in from the hall. Jax rose to his knees and allowed me to push to my elbows. With a frown, he glanced toward the door, and we listened to the scuffle of movement on the other side. “You won’t get out of here alive without me. I’m the only one on your side.”

“If you’re on our side, then get us the fuck out of here.”

“Can’t do that.”

I studied him—the furrow of his brow, the defeat in his expression, and replayed the words he’d exchanged with Cleft. He’d referred to his old man...who apparently was the guy in charge around here. “You’ve got no real power, do you?”

“I haven’t had any fucking power since the day I was born.” He stood and pulled me to my feet.

The room spun, causing bile to rise in my throat. I swayed for several moments, sure I was going to spew what was left in my stomach onto the ground. Jax propped me up, one arm winding under my armpit, and we shuffled toward the spray of the shower.

I planted a hand against the tile to steady myself. He let go, retreating a few steps, and I closed my eyes as the water washed away the vomit and sweat from my skin. He stood nearby with silent patience, so I took my time, hoping it would be enough to regain some strength. I couldn’t protect Alex like this—fuck, I couldn’t even protect myself. This was bad.

“Where’s Alex?” I tilted my head and sent him a glare through the water dripping down my face. “Is she okay?” The question ended on a shaky note. I was fucking terrified of hearing the answer. I couldn’t stand to think of her as not okay.

Jax clenched his jaw, and his gaze lowered to his soaked sneakers. “How bad was it?”

“Bad. He used a cane on her.”

“Finish up.” He tapped his foot for a few seconds, his brows scrunched together, as if

he were mulling over something. “I’ll take you to her.”

I switched off the water before taking a few cautious steps. The room swayed slightly, but at least I could walk on my own.

“You got this?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

With a nod, he gestured at the exit.

“You’re gonna make me walk out of here like this?” I raised my arms, indicating my naked state.

“Don’t have any clothes for you. If Cleft had his way, he’d be fucking you right now, so I’d say beggars can’t be choosers.”

Getting to Alex was the only thing that mattered, so I stepped through the door, water trickling from my body, and let him lead me down the tunnel-like hall that never seemed to end. “Where the hell are we?”

He glanced up and down the tunnel before speaking in a low tone. “Underground.”

“Underground where?”

He pointed behind us. “That end leads to the old man’s office and connects to the basement. Some of the Shanghai tunnels ran to the house, but this portion was built during prohibition.” He shook his head with a scowl. “Now it’s used to traffic girls.”

I raised my eyes toward the ceiling, where the pipes hung low. Some leaked in a few spots, creating small puddles of mud on the ground. “What about the other end?”

Where's it go?"

"Somewhere in Forest Park."

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So we were in Portland, close to the bustle of people that could help us if they only knew this place existed. I wasn't sure why Jax was telling me this, and I didn't get a chance to question him further. A scream echoed from down the hall.

I staggered forward, every muscle bunching in preparation for a fight, adrenaline coursing through my veins.

"It's not Alex," Jax said.

He halted at a door, and another scream tore through my ears. He appeared stoically detached, as if the screech of pain was something he was used to hearing on a daily basis.

Maybe it was.

Maybe I hadn't known him at all, even before I'd lost my memory.

He pushed in a key. "She's in there." He wedged the door open and removed a penlight from his pocket. The beam bounced across an empty cot. Mouth flattening into a line, he shoved the door wider, and the tiny stream of light lit up a huddled form on the floor.

"There's no light in these rooms, but at least you got a bucket to shit in." He swerved the beam to the other end of the room.

I couldn't care less about the bucket or the lights or his casual, helpful tone. He sure as fuck wasn't a friend of mine. I gazed down the hall, toward the end that led to the

middle of nowhere in Forest Park, and wondered how much time it would take to get Alex out, assuming I could knock Jax on his traitorous ass first. The drugs were definitely wearing off, but the edges of my vision were still hazy, and I had shit for strength in my arms. She'd probably need to be carried out of here.

“Escaping isn’t gonna happen.”

My attention snapped to him. I was a moment away from trying to knock him out anyway, but the two goons—the ones who’d walked my pathetic ass into the showers—appeared a few feet down the tunnel.

Jax shut off the penlight and leaned against the wall, arms crossed. “We’re both stuck here, whether we like it or not.”

“Don’t play the victim, Jax. This is fucked up.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.” He shoved me into the room and slammed the door. I turned, and my hands smoothed over the surface, but he’d already clicked over the lock.

Suffocating blackness strangled me, blocking my air—blocking out everything except the stream of memories that flooded my head. I slid to the floor, my limbs shaking, losing strength as the last bit of adrenaline left my system.

Another shriek came through the wall, knifing through me, as pieces of my past resurfaced.

I jumped when the door burst open. Light beamed into the blackness, but it was too quick to note anything other than Rafe’s presence. He spoke to someone for a few moments, though I couldn’t understand what he said. Then he stumbled inside and the clank of the lock echoed, leaving us in complete darkness. Silence thickened the air, broken into pieces by the screams of the girl next door. Between the wailing, I

listened, waiting for him to say something, do something, make some noise that indicated he was there, because I knew he was.

So why wasn't he talking to me?

Gritting my teeth against the pain, I forced myself into a sitting position and slowly pushed to my knees. "Rafe?" I called, crawling in the direction of the door. The chain attached to my neck crept after me like a snake. At least, that's what I envisioned.

He remained eerily silent as I spanned the distance between us. Terror gripped my heart, and my breath came fast and noisy. "Talk to me," I said, but everything I was, all the shattered pieces of me, fell through the cracks. Fear iced my heart. Oh God. What had they done to him? My limbs shook violently as I lowered to my haunches next to him, and that's when I heard it.

A low groaning, interspersed with quick, shallow intakes of breath. As if he were trying not to breathe. As if he were trying to hold it in. I knew what that was like.

My eyes burned with grief. "Rafe..." I reached out to touch him, but he shifted away at the first brush of my fingers. Fear and rejection darted through me, leaving in its wake tiny holes where stubborn hope seeped. I had to believe we'd find a way out of this. Giving in to the alternative would surely get us killed.

"What...what happened?"

"I remember."

Letting out a breath, I reached for his hand, and my fingers wrapped around his on the first try, as if they knew exactly where they belonged. I held on tight, refusing to let him withdraw. "What did you remember?"



“The hole in prison. The guards let him in...”

“Let who in?”

“Cleft smells like him.” He returned my grip painfully. “He fucked me in there. Cleft fuckingsmellslike him.”

“Who’s Cleft?”

“The fucker in the hoodie.”

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I stiffened, still unable to get the hatred in that man's eyes out of my head. "He was in prison with you?"

"I think so. I can't remember...I couldn't see a thing in the hole."

And we couldn't see a thing in here. I ran my thumb over the back of his hand, blinking rapidly to hold back the simmering grief. I'd failed him eight years ago. I wouldn't do the same now. I'd be strong for him, a rock for him to lean on. "Did he d-do it again?"

I waited with bated breath, my heart pounding in my ears. Another thwack and scream came from the other side of the wall, and I jumped.

Rafe jumped too. "Jax stopped him." His voice sounded off, almost as if he'd rehearsed his void tone. I recognized the underlying shock because it matched the way I felt.

"In prison?"

"No, here. He's here."

"Jax is involved?"

"I don't know how or why. None of this makes any fucking sense. He wants me to trust him, but I don't even know him. How can I trust him when he won't even tell me what the fuck is going on? All I know is they're hurting you because of me."

“I-I’m okay.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I will be okay. Just don’t shut me out.” I moved to straddle his lap, needing more than anything to wrap my arms around him, but he held me off.

“I’m naked, Alex.”

I sucked in a breath, sickened by the implications of why they’d remove his clothing. But we only had each other, so I straddled him, despite his protests, and lifted my hands to his rough cheeks. “So am I.”

He laughed. He actually laughed. But the pitch was off, like he was trying hard not to cry or scream or punch something. “I don’t know why this is happening. They said I did something in prison, but I can’t remember shit.”

“I don’t think this is just about you. After they drugged you in the woods, they brought me in to see Lucas.”

“Who?”

“Lucas Perrone,” I repeated, then faltered because he had no idea who I was talking about. How could he? He didn’t remember any of it. “He was a business associate of my dad’s. We dated for a while. He...he asked me to marry him the night you took me.”

“Did you accept?”

That wasn’t what I expected him to say, and I definitely hadn’t expected the note of possessiveness that tinged his tone. I lowered my hands to his shoulders. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“I thought it would protect me from Zach.”

“So you didn’t love him.”

“There’s only one man I’ve ever loved. You already know that.”

“You have shitty taste, sweetheart.”

“I have a taste for you.” I lowered my head, and our breaths mingled. Electricity zinged through the darkness, crackling over our naked skin. Everywhere we touched sparked with heat. I inched back because being so close sent vivid images through my twisted head. I wanted to forget about Lucas, Jax, the fact that we were both prisoners in a dank room, naked and sitting in the dirt.

I wanted to lose myself in him, except we couldn’t just ignore reality. The threat wasn’t going away on its own.

“Why do you think Jax would do this?” He wasn’t the first person I’d trust, but Rafe had trusted him enough to share the cabin with him.

“Fuck, Alex. I don’t know. I’m pretty sure they’re all working for someone though. Jax mentioned his father.” Silence ensued, and we both stilled as the implications settled in.

“But that would mean...”

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“Perrone is Jax’s father,” Rafe said, the words hoarse and barely audible. “What did he want with you?”

I squirmed on his lap, hesitant to go into Lucas touching me or nearly forcing his cock into my mouth. “He wanted something I wasn’t willing to give, not unless he agreed to let you go.”

“Alex...” he warned. “Don’t you dare try to bargain for my life.”

“It didn’t work anyway. He sent me into that room and...”

“And they beat you,” he finished, his voice cracking. He burrowed his face into the crook of my shoulder and crushed me in his embrace, holding on as if letting go meant he’d splinter apart. “I’ll kill them all,” he whispered.

My ass was burning something fierce, but I clenched my teeth until the pain dulled. I was just starting to relax, calmed by the shelter of his embrace, when another screech bled through the wall. We both froze, suspended in quiet horror.

Her screams reached every part of me, and my skin erupted with goose bumps. I’d been through a lot. Some would say I’d been to hell and back. But they were baptizing that poor girl by fire, taking her from everything she knew and loved just so they could torture her into becoming nothing.

A thing with holes to fuck, like Zach had treated me in that cabin. I shuddered at the thought.

“I won’t let them hurt you again,” Rafe said.

I knew he meant every word, but he was only one man. “I know,” I whispered. I wouldn’t upset him by telling him that I had little faith left. We were trapped in a dark room underground somewhere, and no one would find us.

“I won’t let them,” he repeated. We settled into each other, bodies pressed together, mouths parting over warm skin, and breathed the other in as the monster next door elicited more screams from his victim.

This confined, dark pit of hell was fucking with my head. Or maybe Alex’s naked body sent me spiraling through the deviant holes of my mind. She lay next to me on her stomach, her warm thigh pressed over my dick, and I couldn’t stop touching her. The cot was barely big enough for the two of us, which was fine by me because I wanted to keep her close anyway. But being so close tested my limits, and being trapped in this never-ending blindness had awakened a certain part of me. The part that enjoyed tracing a finger over the welts on her ass, following the angry lines branded in her flesh.

I’d traced her skin for hours, finding the act somehow soothing.

Blind captivity skewed reality to the point where time was meaningless, and it had a way of driving a person mad. It seemed like weeks had passed since Jax slammed the door, though it couldn’t have been more than a few days. Sandwiches and bottles of water arrived every so often through a slot in the door, apparently on some schedule I couldn’t track due to the pitch-blackness that made it impossible to measure time.

The longer we remained trapped in this dark cell, the closer I came to fissuring, and that pissed me off. I couldn’t let whatever issues lurked in my screwed up head pull me under now.

Thank fuck the screams next door had silenced on the first day. I kept torturing myself with what that girl might be enduring, and I felt like a bastard because I was grateful Alex was in here with me, safe from the monsters outside this room.

But that only left me to question the nature of the monster inside this room with her. Her vulnerability sparked something ugly in me. Something shameful. Something that threatened to unlock what I'd forgotten.

I didn't want to remember what I'd done to her, but I was obsessed with finding out.

She whimpered in her sleep, indicating another nightmare was on the rise, and I gently shook her shoulder to wake her before the horrors of her mind trapped her in the past.

"Wake up, baby."

She awoke with a sharp intake of breath and pushed to all fours, barely missing my balls with her knee. The bastards had leashed her, and the chain slid along the ground anytime she moved. I brushed my fingers over the cool metal running down her back.

"They were...they..." She sucked in another quick breath.

"It was just a dream."

Letting out a shaky sigh, she settled against me again. "I'd rather have nightmares of the cabin. At least Zach was...someone I cared about. How messed up is that?"

"Everything about this is fucked up. I'm not surprised you're having nightmares. I've been having them for a while too."

"I remember," she said quietly.

Of course she did. I'd practically attacked her in my sleep our last night on the island. Figuring we could both use a distraction, I patted the mattress above my head and searched for the tube of cream someone had slipped through the slot in the door. If I had to guess at who had been feeding us and slipping first aid items inside, I'd put my money on Jax.

Still didn't make a shred of sense though. I kept replaying his words, trying to find the angle that clicked into something recognizable, but I only went in circles. Jax was the son of Perrone, who'd proposed to Alex. Perrone was behind all of this, but he also had ties to Abbott De Luca, who could easily be involved too.

How the fuck did Jax fit into the equation?

Maybe I couldn't figure it out because I couldn't fucking see beyond the darkness trying to choke the monster in me.



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Fisting the tube, I squirmed out from underneath her and maneuvered to my knees, depressing the mattress on each side of her legs. I unscrewed the cap and squirted what I hoped was the right amount into my hand, then I palmed her firm, round ass. “Was it this dark in the cellar?” I asked as I rubbed in the ointment.

“Mmm-hmm,” she hummed, the pressure of my hands inducing a relaxed state. I finished applying the cream and glided my palms upwards. Brushing her hair to the side, I massaged her shoulders.

“God, that feels good.”

Her words tingled down my spine, heating my blood to simmering. I was a pussy, fucking terrified of remembering, but I couldn’t help but want to. I wanted to know what it felt like to own every part of her.

“Tell me more about the cellar.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to know. I need to know everything.” I pressed my fingers deep into her muscles and worked out the knots.

“You left me naked in the cage. I didn’t have a blanket or any clothes. The thing I remember most is the cold. And the shame. You hated me, but I couldn’t blame you for it.”

“Me hating you...I find that hard to believe.” I lifted my leg and rolled her out from

under me, onto her side, then stretched beside her on my back. I draped her over my body, not thinking, only acting on instinct as I embraced her, my fingers moving in slow circles down her spine. She caged me between her knees, and my dick nestled at the opening of her sex, fully erect and begging for entrance.

“Rafe,” she whispered, letting out a strangled moan.

Our captors could burst through that door at any moment, and I was sick for wanting to fuck her like this.

While being held captive.

While the remnants of Brock’s cane still sent unbearable amounts of pain through her system.

She couldn’t move without sucking air through her teeth. I only knew this because I heard her trying to hide it every time she shifted. I feared they’d do it again, that they were giving her time to heal so they could inflict more damage.

It’s what I’d do...if I were a psychotic bastard.

Fuck. My cock grew even harder. I didn’t want her to suffer...Ididn’t...but my body responded in a shameful, disgusting way at the thought of being the one on the other end of the cane. I’d never hurt her the way he had, but I wanted to make her cry. The urge intensified the longer we were locked in this dark hole together. Denying it was useless, but maybe if we poked and prodded at my memories, I’d understand it better.

Bury your head in the sand some more, Mason.

The dark tendencies had always been there, but something had made me snap, had propelled me to act on them. I wanted to remember what that something was.

She moaned again, face nudging the side of my neck. Rolling her hips, she slid her mound up and down my length in sensual madness.

“Fuck, Alex.” I twisted my head and nipped her lips, nudged her chin until she turned and bared her ear. My breath wafted over the delicate skin beneath her earlobe, and I whirled my tongue, savoring the salt of her flesh. The urge to bite became overpowering. I couldn’t help it, couldn’t stop it. My mouth had a mind of its own, and I sank my teeth in with a groan.

She pulled at my hair with frantic fingers, and my traitorous hips juttled up to meet hers. “Don’t stop talking. What happened next?”

“You left me in there for a few days. You fed me”—her wet center teased my tip, and she gasped—“gave me a bucket to piss in. That was a dick thing to do, by the way.”

“What otherdickthings did I do?” I tried not to think of how close my dick was to pushing inside her.

“You cooked breakfast for me, let me take a shower. Made me eat off the floor.”

“I fuckingwhat?”

“I knocked my plate off the table, so you made me eat off the floor.”

I’d been a mean sonofabitch, and I didn’t know how she could relive that while grinding on me, her pussy slick over my shaft. Fucking teasing. She could easily impale herself on me, but instinctively, I knew what she was waiting for.

She wanted me to force her cunt onto my cock. I grasped her hips and almost pushed her downward. She’d fit me like a glove. I knew she would. I couldn’t wrap my head around the fact that I’d already been inside her. How could I forget something like

that?

“Later that night, you fucked me.”

I groaned at the mental picture of her helpless beneath me, skin doused in sweat, her body shuddering. “Tell me when you were most scared.”

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“When you made me tell you about Zach...or maybe the night I almost drowned in the river. Both were pretty fucking terrifying, Rafe.”

I stiffened all the way to my toes. “Talking about the past is a bad idea.” I pushed against her, but she only held on tighter.

“You’re scared you’ll remember.”

“I want to remember.”

“Are you trying to convince yourself or me?”

I sighed. “Both, maybe. Going there will open something that can’t be closed. Whether it’s my memories or a lunatic who’ll do worse damage—”

“You can never do worse,” she interrupted.

“What was our first time like? Did I hurt you? Did I make you cry?”

“You’re right. Let’s not do this.” Her voice wavered, telling me all I needed to know, yet I couldn’t stop picking at the scab of our history together.

“I did, didn’t I?”

“You were angry.” But I heard the pain behind those words. Our first time still haunted her, ached somewhere so deep, she’d never forget it existed.

“You didn’t deserve that. There’s wrong, then there’s wrong. I don’t need to recall those missing years to know I crossed a line.”

“Then uncross it,” she whispered. “Fuck me like it’s our first time.”

I groaned, but before I could protest, she slid down my chest, her dainty palms warm on my skin, and the cool metal of her leash followed suit. Her hair brushed my abs, her breath a tempting blast of heat on the tip of my cock.

“Don’t,” I told her.

“Why not?”

“Not the time or place.”

“We might not get another time or place. This might be it.” She paused. “Or is there another reason you’re holding back?”

Good fucking question.

I was kidding myself by not answering. She was too willing. Something about this room, about the suffocating blindness, drove me crazy. I tamped down the urge to force her onto her back, but my mind sprinted ahead. I imagined straddling her chest, my weight pressing her to the mattress, one hand fisting her tiny wrists as I shoved my cock deep into her mouth. Her eyes would pop open, her lips stretching as they wrapped tightly around my shaft.

Struggling to breathe, I bucked her off. That hadn’t been a fantasy, but a memory. I’d forced my cock between her lips in my room back on the island. The one that was undoubtedly turned to ashes now.

“What’d I do wrong?” The tremor in her voice sliced me deep, but it also sent a rush of blood straight to my cock. How could I hurt so much at the pain in her voice, yet want to force tears from her eyes all the same? I licked my lips, craving the salt of sorrow.

“It’s not you.”

“What is it, then?” She shifted on the bed, and her chain rattled through the darkness.

I became obsessed with that thing. It would be the perfect way to restrain her to my bed, the band of metal around her throat a constant reminder of my power over her.

Perfect...if I weren’t also trapped inside this dungeon with her.

Fuck. What the hell was wrong with me? This room, the welts on her body, that chain...all of it poked at my own personal Pandora’s box.

That chain...

Holy fuck. We had a weapon in here. Why hadn’t I thought of this sooner? I scrambled off the bed and wrapped a loose fist around the chain, following it to the hook in the floor. Reaching out, I slid my fingers down the smooth surface of the door, roughly two feet away.

Those assholes would come back, and when they did, I’d tangle them up in their own leash before they had the chance to drug me again. I prayed to God I could get my hands around their throats and apply enough pressure to subdue them. I’d fucking kill them if I had to. It’d be risky, especially if they were packing heat, but if I could get ahold of a gun...

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We were out of options. I'd searched every inch of this room by touch, had spent hours listening, hoping to find something that would give me a clue. We weren't getting out of this damn dirt hole unless we tried.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her voice small. Timid. Hurt.

Rejected.

"I want to fuck you, sweetheart. Believe me, I do. But I just had an idea."

"An idea?" Disbelief dripped from her tone.

I had a lot of ideas tumbling through my chaotic mind, most of them deranged and dirty and involving her at my mercy. None of them involved being in this place and at the mercy of others.

I tightened my fist around the chain. "Yeah. An idea."

The persistent thump thump thump of my fists on the door blasted my ears. I was surprised everyone in the place wasn't screaming at me to quiet down. But having someone yell at me and possibly bark threats would be a step up from them outright ignoring me.

"Can anyone hear me?" I shouted again. I'd been wailing on that door for several minutes, though it felt closer to an hour. Faltering, I drew in a deep breath and listened carefully for the hint of footsteps, the jingle of keys. I couldn't see a thing, but I knew Rafe waited nearby, chain held tightly in his hands, ready to trip up



whoever opened that door.

First, I had to lure them into the room.

“Please!” I cried again. “I need some help in here!”

Footsteps sounded on the other side. I bolted away, the darkness whirling around me, and sat in what I hoped was the middle of the room so Rafe would have enough slack in the chain. The welts on my ass burned, but there was no time to change position. Someone pushed a key into the lock, and I held my breath, trying to calm my trembling limbs. This had to work. God, please, let this work.

The door burst open, and someone stood in the entrance, their tall build a silhouette against the bright backdrop of the tunnel. “Whaddya bitching for?” His beam tore through the blackness and lit me up like a spotlight.

“I’m bleeding,” I said, leaning back on my elbows and spreading my thighs. “I need a tampon.” I bit my lip, which probably came across as coy to him, but I was really trying to mask my fear. This plan was screwed if I couldn’t get him into the room.

The guy took a step inside and shone the light between my legs. “Where’s your boyfriend?”

I spread my legs further, hoping to keep his attention. “Can I get a tampon? Please?”

He took another step toward me, the beam of his flashlight casting over the bed, and I let out a sigh of relief.

“I asked you a question, bitch. Where’s the guy?”

“On the shitter.”

He swerved the light to the other end of the room, where the unoccupied bucket sat, and let out a curse under his breath.

Rafe's shadow moved from behind the door, and he flung the chain over the guy's head, bringing him down with a bone-jarring thud. The flashlight dropped to the ground and went out. I fisted my hands as the pull of the chain on my neck tightened. A scuffle broke out, and grunts and groans ensued. A bundle of shadows wrestled.

"Rafe?" What would I do if he didn't answer? What would I do if this didn't work? What had we done? They could kill him. This was stupid. So stupid.

"Rafe!" I said in a loud whisper.

One of the shadows rose and yanked on the chain, propelling me across the ground. I grabbed at it with ineffectual hands, barely rising to my feet, and dug my toes into the dirt. Fear constricted my throat with each step forward. Strong hands grabbed my shoulders, and that's when I recognized the heavy breathing. Rafe's breathing.

I slumped against him, close to losing it, and his arms wound around me for a moment.

"Gotta get moving, baby." He let me go, and a few seconds later, the flashlight switched on. He aimed it at the prone form of the guy who'd opened the door. He didn't look like he was waking up any time soon.

"If he doesn't have a key for that thing..." Rafe said, shining the beam at the choker around my neck. "There's no way in hell I'm leaving you here." He bent and patted down the guy's body, paying special attention to his pockets, and withdrew a set of keys.

I shuffled my feet, my pulse skittering too fast, as Rafe started his way through the

bundle. “Hurry.”

“Just breathe,” he said on his fourth or fifth try. “We’re getting out of this fucking room, I promise.” He pushed in another key and turned it, and this time, the chain fell free of the choker.

Rafe grabbed my hand. “Let’s go.”

“You didn’t find a gun on him?”

“No.”

Stepping into the hall was blinding. After spending days in total darkness, the light seared my eyes. I glanced up and down the tunnel, in disbelief that it was actually empty. Clinging to Rafe’s hand, I followed him down the passage toward the office, acutely aware that we were naked, and that at any given moment someone could discover us and send our hope for survival crashing through the ground.

“Maybe we should go the other way,” I whispered, a tremor taking my voice hostage.

“The office is this way. I’m hoping to find a gun in that room.” His fingers flexed around mine.

We approached the last door just as another opened somewhere down the tunnel. I held my breath as Rafe tried the knob and turned it without resistance. We scurried inside, and the flashlight lit up the office in weak illumination. Rafe made a beeline for the interior steel door Lucas had come through on my first night here.

“There’s a fucking keypad.” He leaned his forehead against the steel with a loud sigh. “Fuck!” He turned, and I felt the weight of his stare through the darkness. “How well did you know Lucas? Any guesses at the code?”

Biting my lip, my gaze veered toward the ceiling, trying to remember anything of significance. “His birthday is October twenty-eighth.”

“What about the year?” He turned back to the keypad and punched in some numbers. “I doubt he’d use his birthdate though.”

“He was born in 1969.”

“Of course the bastard was. Fuck, Alex. He’s old enough to be your father.”

“I was desperate and...stupid.” Shaking my head, I rounded the desk and began pulling drawers open. “Shine that thing over here.”

He joined me and aimed the light into the drawers, but they were mostly empty, only housing stray pens, paper, and sticky notes. The filing cabinets underneath the poster-sized photos of the blonde were locked with no key in sight. Even the desk’s surface was free of clutter. No phone, no computer, not even a letter opener we could use as a weapon.

This room was a shell of an office. A sham, much like its owner. No wonder the door hadn’t been locked. The paintings, the shelves with art and antiques, the humongous desk—they were all props to give off an intimidating vibe to whoever set foot in this room.

Rafe met my eyes, and even in the dim light, I detected the heart-wrenching defeat in them. It only lasted a moment, but it was enough to tell me that he was losing hope, giving in to the bleakness of our situation.

“Okay,” he said, backing away from the desk. He turned around and aimed the light at the shelves. “The guy I took down will wake up soon, we can’t call out for help, and there’s Jack shit in here to use as a...

He swerved the beam, stopping on the whips, paddles, and restraints. As he shot across the space, I headed in the direction of the heavy-looking vase on the other

shelf.

It didn't weigh as much as I'd hoped, but it was better than nothing. Or was it? I eyed the bulky ceramic piece and wondered how much strength it would take to knock someone out with it.

Rafe pulled out a set of handcuffs with a sigh. "How long would you guess the tunnel is?"

"Long, at least thirty minutes to reach this end."

"Damn," he said with a sigh.

"There's nothing but forest out there, Rafe. We walked quite a ways before entering the tunnel."

"We'll worry about out there once we get out there."

But his tone wasn't one of hope. He didn't think our chances of reaching the other end were good, and if this door was anything to go by, we'd probably find another keypad at the other exit too.

"Can we fight our way out of here?" I asked. "What about the other hostages? Maybe we can free them and fight our way out as a group."

"We don't know how many there are, or the extent of their injuries." He shook his head. "I don't want to leave anyone behind, but you're my only concern right now. I'm getting you out, then we can get help for the rest."

We both glanced toward the door. First, we needed to make it down that tunnel.

Rafe took the vase from my shaking hands and placed it on the shelf. “I can do more damage with the flashlight. Hold on to these though,” he said, holding the cuffs out to me. “They might come in handy.”

I nodded with a hard swallow, and we both sent a longing look at the door with the damn keypad blocking our escape.

“Stay close, baby.”

“Always.”

He reached for the knob, but the quiet thump of footsteps echoed from the tunnel, growing louder, closer, and Rafe switched off the flashlight. His fingers folded around mine, and he pushed me behind him as we moved to the side.

The door opened, and I held my breath, my pulse throbbing in my ears. A stream of light flooded the space between the door and the jamb, and a slim, shadowy figure filled the entrance. A hand reached out and flipped on the overhead light.

Rafe launched at the guy with the speed of a rattler, the flashlight cracking against the other man’s skull in three swift strikes. He wrestled him into a choke hold, the muscles in his arm bulging as he applied pressure to the guy’s throat. They slammed into the wall, and the flashlight dropped to the floor.

Jax stormed inside, his dark eyes swerving between Rafe and me, then he yanked me in front of him and pressed a gun to my head. The handcuffs slipped from my trembling fingers and clattered to the ground.

“Dude, let him go.” Jax pressed the barrel to Alex’s temple with a steady hand, but the lines around his eyes hinted at his reluctance. “C’mon, man. Don’t do anything stupid.”

I tightened my hold on the guy who’d found us. He was a puny little thing, probably not even old enough to drink a fucking beer, and I wondered what the hell he was doing in a place like this. He flailed in my arms, but I refused to give an inch. Just a little more pressure and the guy would sink to the floor, out cold.



Jax wrenched Alex's head back and placed the barrel under her chin. "Don't make me do this. Let him go."

The longer I stared at Jax, at the gun he threatened Alex with, the more I wanted to squeeze the life out of this guy.

Alex returned my gaze from beneath hooded eyes. Her lips parted, breaths escaping in shallow puffs. She clawed at her arms, nails digging into the jagged scars left behind from when she'd sliced herself up.

"Put the gun down," I said, keeping my voice even, much calmer than the boiling rage rioting through me.

"Let him go!"

Cursing under my breath, I removed my arm, and the guy slumped to the ground like deadweight.

Jax let out a breath. He took a step backward, pulling her with him, and kicked the door to the office shut. "I don't wanna do this. If you'd just stayed put...fuck, Rafe! What part of 'trust me' did you not get?"

I gestured toward his weapon. "Why don't you put the gun down so we can talk all about it?" I lifted both hands, a show of surrender, and hoped to keep him talking.

"We were like brothers." He removed the gun from her chin and dropped his arm. "I consider you family more than my own fucking blood."

"Then why are you going along with this?" I asked, watching him carefully. His gaze kept straying to the wall behind me. I cranked my neck and studied the photos on display. I hadn't paid them much attention before, as I'd been too focused on finding

a way through the door that led to escape, but now the crude nature of the poses stormed through my veins.

“She was my mother,” Jax said quietly, face pinching in remembered sorrow. “My sister looked just like her.” He raised the gun toward the photos, hand trembling. “She was the old man’s favorite.”

Was.

Memory or not, I doubted I’d known any of this.

“Jax...” I drew in a deep, calming breath because despite the pain in his expression, what I really wanted to do was yank that fucking gun from his fingers and turn it on him. Talking was my only option though. “Why are we here?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Why don’t you uncomplicate it for me?”

“Wish I could, man.” He swerved the gun in my direction. “There’s no way out of this, so why don’t I take you guys back before someone a lot meaner than me finds out you’re gone?”

“How about you punch in that code and let us go?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Can’t do that. If you escape, they’ll know it was me, and I can’t afford to get kicked out now.” Jax pressed his fingers into Alex’s arm and shuffled toward the door leading to the tunnel.

“Someone got something on you? Is that why you’re going along with this?”

“Something like that. Let’s go.” He gestured toward the guy at my feet. “I still have to deal with him, not to mention the stupid idiot that let you out in the first place.” He pressed the barrel of the gun to Alex’s head again. “So get the door. I’m right behind you.”

Alex and I traded an ominous glance. I wanted to wrap her in my arms and hide her from all of this, but we both knew she’d end up paying the price for our botched escape attempt.

I kept failing her. I’d dropped the ball when I’d left her in that damn hospital after she’d broken free of her brother, and I’d ignored the fact that we’d been sitting ducks on that island. We’d thought Zach was our biggest threat, but an evil more potent than her brother had lurked from the shore, just waiting for the perfect unguarded moment to strike. Jax had known they were going to attack. Was that why he’d gotten me the gun?

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But they'd unarmed me too easily...as if they'd known exactly how to rip apart any defense system I might have in place. They'd drugged me, taken my own fucking weapon, and had used it against me.

Yet here was Jax, acting like he fucking gave a shit about what happened to us.

I reached for the handle, my hand shaking, and turned the knob. The door creaked open, and the breath I'd been holding exhaled in a resigned sigh. Cleft stood on the other side, mouth curved in a wide smirk, body blocking the exit. Before I could make a move, he sprang forward and jabbed a needle into my neck.

The ground rushed up to meet me, but my blurry gaze never left his face. He bent over my useless heap of bones, his features pinched in rage.

"She didn't...didn't..." I licked my lips, blinked, and tried to force the words out. "Myfault. Don't..." Fuck, my tongue was little more than a dead slug in my mouth. I couldn't even plead on her behalf.

Cleft narrowed his dark eyes, and the intent in them made me want to scream. "Everything you do goes back to her." His words hollowed through my ears, then a black void sucked me in and swallowed me whole.

"This is a bad idea."

"If Cleft says get the guy, we get the guy."

"Yeah, but Jax will be pissed if—"

“Will you chill out, bro?”

“He’s the boss’s kid. I’m just sayin’.”

A bright light seared my eyelids, but I didn’t know where I was, couldn’t immediately recall what had happened—I only knew that I felt like roadkill, and at least two men were standing over me.

Rough hands yanked me upright from the thin mattress. “Time to wake up and play.” They held me up by the arms, and I forced my eyes open as they herded me out the room. It was the same rancid shithole they’d held us prisoner in. Like a pipe bursting, memories flooded me—using the chain to take down the guy Alex had lured inside, and the subsequent confrontation with Jax. Then the fuckers had drugged me again.

“Fuckin’ cowards,” I slurred. “Need to drug me ‘cause you’re all pussies.”

A weak blow glanced off my jaw. “I’ll lick your girl’s pussy. Bitch would probably like it.”

“Calm your ass down, Vinnie. Don’t let him get to ya.”

I squinted, but the lights in the tunnel made my vision spotty. “Where is she?” I swallowed hard, and my head lolled on my shoulders, jostled by the jaunt down the hall. Nausea rose and burned in my throat.

“She’s waiting for you, lover boy.” The one on my right snickered. I recognized that laughter and the cruel grip of his hands. Brock wasn’t someone easily forgotten. “We’re gonna make a fucking kick-ass film. You guys will be super stars.”

We shuffled down the tunnel, stirring up dust, and they ushered me back into their torture room with the concrete floor. Alex hung by her wrists from the rafters, her

skin darkened from dirt and bruises. She was entirely helpless with her head drooping toward her tits. The men shoved me to where those damn chains waited, so fucking close yet too far away to touch her. I slammed to my knees and swayed for a few precarious seconds, then I lifted my chin and peered up at her.

“Now that’s a fine piece of ass.”

Snickering.

Laughter.

Words blending together in a long string of threats and taunts I couldn’t understand because everything from my sight to my hearing was garbled.

Except for Alex. Her presence came through achingly clear, and my apprehension choked me. I couldn’t speak, couldn’t plead. So long as they kept pumping my system full of drugs, I was fucking nothing.

How much pain would she suffer because I couldn’t fight for her?

“Fuck me...just leave her alone.” I tried rising to my feet, but the floor swerved, and I fell sideways. The contact bolted through my brain, throbbing with an incessant pound. Blood pooled on my tongue from where I’d bit down hard.

More laughter.

“I’m not into dudes, sorry.” Brock bent and yanked my head up. Vinnie disappeared from view. “I’d rather watch the two of you get it on.”

“Fuck you.” I spit in his face. He snapped back and planted his fist into my jaw, and fuck, he had a better arm on him than his scrawny brother.

I glared at him, ignoring the deep ache that radiated to my teeth, and a sense of satisfaction spread through me as he wiped my saliva from his cheek. “Fuck you,” I said. “Go ahead, hit me again.”

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Better me than her. The longer I kept the focus on me, the longer he'd leave her alone.

He pulled his arm back, preparing to strike, but a single demand from Cleft, who appeared in the doorway behind him, made him freeze.

"Save it for the camera." Cleft sauntered into the room. "Getting started without me, I see."

"Nope, just warming up." Brock retreated, and I pushed to my knees as the room spun around me for a few seconds.

Cleft assessed the situation with a nonchalant glance. "Let her down. But him..." He jabbed a finger in my direction. "I want him on his toes. Don't rely on dosing him. He's a mean sonofabitch. Gave me hell on the inside, even while I had my cock shoved up his ass."

A chill penetrated my bones, and I lowered my gaze as his boots came into view.

"What I wouldn't give to have a piece of your ass again, Mason."

"Fuck me all you want. Just leave her alone."

"That's a tempting proposition. I might take you up on it later."

Cleft released her, and she slumped to the floor with a whimper. He stepped down on her face, pressing her cheek to the rough cement, and threatened to add more



pressure.

She cried out, her eyes popping open.

I struggled to my feet, but his words halted me. “Don’t make me hurt her,” he said, withdrawing a gun from the waistband of his jeans. He cocked the weapon, making his point. “Give Brock your hands.”

Seeing Alex’s head sandwiched between his boot and the concrete, her parted lips sucking in air, green eyes huge and full of horror—the decision was a no-brainer. There were three of them and one drugged-up me.

I held my wrists out, allowing Brock to shackle them. The third goon pulled on the chains and hoisted me to my toes, arms straight above my head. I had enough trouble balancing, considering my doped-up state, and the position put me at a disadvantage. I couldn’t even kick without losing balance.

Passing the gun to Vinnie, Cleft lifted his foot, then he forced Alex to her knees in front of me, his grip tight in her hair. Brock moved the cameras and lighting equipment to where we were grouped together, and the spotlight he flipped on blared in my eyes. I glanced down at the crown of her dark curls, blinking the spots from my sight. Brock switched on the camera.

“Sugar,” Cleft said. “You’ve sucked off your boyfriend before, right? Good sluts know how to give great head.”

She lifted her sad gaze, and somehow, I knew what she was thinking. She’d pleased me with her mouth, maybe she’d even enjoyed it, but I didn’t remember. These bastards were taking our second chance from us, under the glare of lights and rolling cameras.

Under the threat of violence.

She was right. We should have taken our chance while we had it. At least that was something they couldn't take away.

"Don't just look at him. Get his limp dick up." Cleft smirked in my direction. "Aren't you man enough to get hard for your girl?"

"You're a sick fuck."

"You're the one about to get sucked off, and something tells me you're gonna like it, so who's the sick fuck now?"

At the thought of her lips wrapping around me, my traitorous dick stirred.

He jolted her head violently. "C'mon, bitch. Get your man up."

"Okay," she cried. "I'll do it." She took my cock in her warm palm, and at the first touch of her hand to my shaft, my own fucking sickness rose, tearing through me with the devastation of a torpedo. I closed my eyes, drew deep breaths through my nose, but her dainty fingers pulled me under. It was the first time she'd touched me—that I could remember anyway—and my cock grew into a rock hard piston of shame.

"Eyes open, Mason. It's only respectful to watch your slut suck you off." Cleft wrenched her hands behind her. "Hand me a pair of cuffs, Vinnie."

Bulky leather restraints exchanged hands, and Cleft fastened her wrists at her back. "You wanna mouth-fuck him, right sugar?"

She didn't answer, and his expression darkened. He smacked her on the cheek.

“Answer me!”

“Yes!”

“That’s what I thought.” He brushed a thumb over her trembling lips before wedging his fingers inside, stretching her wide open. He slid her mouth onto my dick, and fuck...it was like coming home. My cock nestled in her wet heat, and the suction of her mouth, the sensual whirl of her tongue, the wide-eyed way she gazed at me—each were lethal on their own, but the combination of sensory overload ignited a war in my veins.

I was scum. Worse than scum.

She'd been shoved to her knees, her mouth forced to fuck me, and I wanted nothing more than to explode down her throat, camera, assholes, and spotlights be damned.

"Sweetie, let's hear some moaning." Cleft pushed her further onto my dick. "Make it good for the audience."

Brock snickered. What I wouldn't give to send my fist into his face again. I yanked at the chains, and the clink of metal on metal echoed through the room.

Alex moaned, and my whole body twitched at the vibration of her tongue. Pressure built in my balls. I clenched my hands into fists. "Don't make her do this."

"Unless you want Brock to bloody her ass again, you'll keep your fucking swimmers inside your balls until I give you permission." Cleft's lips curved into a ruthless smile. He pressed against her skull and shoved her flush with my groin. Her throat had no choice but to suck down my cock.

She gagged, but her eyes...fuck, those eyes never wavered from mine for a moment. Smudges of dirt sullied her forehead and cheeks, and her curls surrounded her face in a riot of tangles, but she'd never looked so gorgeous.

Or tempting.

My legs quaked from the effort of keeping myself upright on my toes, and each pump of blood in my body rushed straight to my dick.

Cleft yanked her off then impaled her on my shaft again.

She moaned. I moaned.

We were both fucked, because in that moment, I knew she was getting something out of this too.

“Make him beg to blow his load.” He tugged on her hair, and my cock sprang free, jutting straight out and leaking my shame all over her heaving tits. “If he ain’t begging, you ain’t doing it right. C’mon, slut. Give us a good show.”

She sucked and bobbed, letting out tiny whimpers and slurping noises, and I bit back a groan. My balls tightened, and my hips had a mind of their own. I thrust deeper. Fuck. I couldn’t get deep enough.

“Beg,” Cleft ordered. He pulled her back slightly and folded his fingers around the base of my dick, pumping while Alex’s lips slipped on and off my tip in quick, maddening slides.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I groaned. I wanted to turn it off—the need tearing through me, leaving me in shattered pieces, all of them hurtling toward her amazing mouth.

“Grab the whip, Brock.”

“No!” My eyes flew open, but Brock was already passing the camera off to Vinnie.

Cleft clamped her nose between thumb and forefinger, and he held her to me, her lips stretching wide around my base.

“Your man’s not begging. Guess he’s got balls of restraint. Tell me, sugar, can you take Brock’s lashes without chomping off your boyfriend’s junk?”

Alex fought his hold. “Never mind, don’t answer that, seeing as how you can’t talk or breathe right now.” He allowed her a few seconds to suck in air through her nose before he plugged it again.

“Don’t do this,” I said, my gaze glued to Brock as he grabbed a coiled whip down from the rack.

“Ah, now we’re gonna get to the begging part.” Cleft shifted to the side as Brock approached Alex. He stood several feet behind her, clenching the handle of the whip in his eager fist.

“I’ll give you one last breath.” Cleft released her nose, and she drew in air, her eyes huge and pleading with me as her lungs filled. “Try not to take off your man’s cock, okay?”

Something familiar tickled my mind, a flash of her hoarding air as if she were about to die, her naked body submerged in water between my legs. Before I could examine the memory further, the whip swooshed through the air and struck her backside. Screeching around my shaft, she clamped down hard with her teeth.

I hissed in a breath, my muscles taut, and lost balance. Extending to my toes again, I tried not to cry out like a pussy. She loosened her jaw, and the pain echoed through me, a warning of the damage she might do if she lost total control under the next sharp bite of the whip.

Cleft allowed her a moment to breathe as his dark gaze pinned me. “Beg to blow your load.”

“Please,” I said.

“That didn’t sound convincing enough.”

“Fuck you!” I winced, immediately regretting my loss of temper because Brock struck her again. Her teeth came close to ripping into my cock, which would hurt like fuck, but I was more furious at myself.

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I couldn't stand her mouth around my dick, hot and tight and so fucking perfect, couldn't stand the way her throat opened for me, sucking down my length until she made continuous gagging noises. Most of all, I couldn't stand the spasm of pain that tightened her muscles, because while she was enduring the brutal lashings, I was getting off on it.

Her helplessness made me harder, desperate, and fuck, I wanted to explode down her throat, despite the scrape of her teeth.

Cleft grabbed my chin. "Fucking beg."

Shame flared, searing my flesh and heating several layers below. "Please let me come."

"Still not buying it. Hit the bitch again," he told Brock.

Another bite of leather on flesh, and Alex's muffled cries shuddered around my shaft, pulling at the beast in me. I groaned, heaving in air, my heart rate thundering in my chest. I had to stop this. If I came...

Fuck.

What would they do to her then?

"Make your stubborn piece of shit boyfriend beg like he means it!" Cleft shook her head, and she sucked harder.



“Don’t hurt her!”

“Make me believe it, Mason. Last chance.”

Alex and I exchanged a heavy glance, and she didn’t need words to plead. The way her eyes pummeled me said it all. She wanted me to give in and find pleasure in her mouth. Wanted me to end this already.

Ah, fuck. “Please, I’m begging you.”

“Begging me for what?” Cleft asked.

“Fucking let me come in her mouth!”

He bobbed her head in rapid thrusts, his fingers fisting her hair, and Brock returned to filming our humiliation. Her mouth gloved me in blessed hell, sucking my cock so deep, I thought she might swallow me whole.

“How bad do you want it?” Cleft asked.

Bad, more than I’d ever wanted it in my life. I gritted my teeth, lips pulled tight, and threw my head back with a long groan. I couldn’t speak, couldn’t breathe. A woman’s mouth had never felt so fucking good.

“You don’t have permission.”

Too fucking late. God himself couldn’t stop the eruption. I pumped my seed down her throat, letting out several hoarse cries, limbs rigid from the rush of release. Cleft let go of her hair, and she inched back, her tongue lapping at my tip to catch the final drops.

The ensuing silence was profound yet tenuous, and as Alex lowered to her haunches and hung her head, the disquiet spelled fucking doomsday.

“Sugar, your boyfriend has a defiant streak.”

Keeping my head bowed, I peeked at Rafe, and the tribal tattoo covering the left side of his heaving chest drew my focus. The black lines danced over his abs as he tried to catch his breath from his eventual dive into ecstasy.

My heart wouldn't stop galloping, and a flush bathed my skin in sweat. I was hot and wet between my thighs. Rafe did that. We did that to each other. His release still echoed in my mind, an arousing whisper that infiltrated my system until I wanted to squirm.

I couldn't bring myself to look at his face. I knew I'd find only shame and self-hate. He hadn't been capable of holding back, and though that thrilled some sadistic part of me, it would douse him in guilt because Cleft and his men would punish me for it.

But wasn't that the point? They were doing this to fuck with his head, with both of our heads.

Someone grabbed my shoulders and hoisted me to my feet.

“Leave her alone!” Rafe shouted.

I didn't bother fighting. There was no point, but beyond that, I refused to give them the satisfaction. Firm fingers turned my head, and I met Brock's eyes. He leaned forward and dragged his tongue up my cheek.

“Stop tasting the bitch and chain her up,” Cleft said.

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Brock wrenched my arms behind me and forced my body into a bent over position. I spread my feet for traction and lifted my head, finally peering at Rafe through my thick, messy curls.

He pulled at the chains mercilessly, and panic strained his features. He looked ready to rip out of his skin to get to me.

The heavy thump of Brock's footsteps halted behind me. He took his time, prolonging the torture of waiting for that first strike.

It was going to hurt. I knew it before the whip sliced the air. The leather cut across my ass with scorching impact, and I locked my gaze on Rafe, pretending he'd ordered the lashing.

I'd been bad. Maybe I'd come before he'd given me permission, or I'd done something more serious, like piss him off with some sort of reckless behavior. I could see myself doing that. I was, after all, the girl who'd tried to kill herself in an attempt to escape a psychopath.

My scattered thoughts were on the brink of reality. Even acknowledging that didn't slow the wheels of my mind. We had no way out, no way of knowing how long either of us would live.

I wouldn't let them take this from us. Pain...pain between Rafe and I was supposed to be good, so with eachthwackof that whip, I pretended it was from him. Squeezing my legs together, I hoped they wouldn't notice the evidence of my arousal.

I was sure Rafe knew though. He read me too easily, and my face was on fire as I returned his heated gaze. Neither of us said a word, as if we'd come to a mutual understanding. After several more lashings, Brock dropped the whip with a clatter and exchanged a glance with Cleft.

"She's hot from getting him off. Those fucking endorphins." Sighing, Cleft paced the area between Rafe and me. "Gotta say I'm disappointed. Mason got to blow his fucking load, and you," he said, stopping to grab my chin, "seem to be impervious to pain at the moment."

Letting go of my face, he ran a hand through his brown hair and halted to confront Rafe. "This is a bit unfair, dontcha think? If you get to come, I think I should too."

Rafe shook his head, his eyes spitting poison. "Not with her. You wanna fuck someone, do me."

"Rafe!" I jerked forward, pulling the muscles in my shoulders, and nearly lost my balance. "No!" I'd rather Cleft fuck me. I could take it. But Rafe...he'd been raped in prison because of me. This was all my fault. I couldn't stand the thought of him enduring it again.

"Ignore her," Rafe said. "Fuck me. I know you want to."

"No!" I shouted. "You can do whatever you want to me. Leave him alone."

Cleft frowned. "Gag the bitch," he told Brock.

Brock disappeared then came back a few moments later with a large ball gag held tightly in his fist. I shook my head, squirming in my restraints. Tears threatened, an unbearable burn behind my eyes.

Brock shoved the gag against my mouth. I groaned, pressing my lips together, and shook my head back and forth. His mouth flattened into a mean line as he forced the gag in. My protests came out as whines, screeching higher, and Vinnie cocked a gun and pressed the barrel to my temple.

Cleft dragged a chair near Rafe, then released him from the chains. “You see that gun? If you fight me even a little bit, Vinnie will blow her brains all over the place.”

I didn’t recognize Rafe in that moment. His eyes were alight with something I couldn’t name. He averted his gaze as he bent over the armchair, baring his ass to Cleft, who stood behind him, stance wide and cocky. He slowly unbuckled his jeans and pulled the zipper down. Cleft palmed his ass, fingers gouging skin, and Rafe’s whole body twitched. He fisted his hands.

He was really going to do it—allow this bastard to rape him, all to protect me.

The burn of vomit lingered in my throat, and I closed my eyes, panicked at the thought of puking while gagged. Five in, hold, five out. There wasn’t time for the repeat part.

Rafe hissed in a breath, and my eyes flew open.

Cleft worked the tip of his cock between Rafe’s ass cheeks. I pleaded for him to stop, but no one paid attention to the smothered whines emanating from my throat.

Then the door banged open and Lucas stood in the doorway. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he shouted, his face red with fury.

Cleft backed off, and I let out a breath. This was the second time someone had stopped him from violating me. I didn’t know how much more of this I could take. I glanced at Alex, feeling like shit, because she’d suffered far more than I had.

I stood, and the room whirled around me for a few unsteady seconds. I wanted more than anything to go to her, but Vinnie remained at her side, gun dangling at his thigh, and I'd probably fall on my ass if I tried. I reached for the back of the chair and propped myself up.

The guy who'd burst through the door jabbed a finger at Cleft. "This place is full of pussy, yet you're trying to ram your prick uphisass? I can't turn my back for a fucking second without this place going to hell."

Cleft opened his mouth, his gaze darting in my direction. "Uncle Luke...I didn't mean any disrespect."

So this was the fucking father figure Alex had almost married. A swift rush of possessiveness crashed over me, and I wanted to pound on him. I settled for squeezing the chair until my knuckles whitened.

"You never mean any disrespect, but you keep fucking up. You and Jax both. If you weren't my blood, you'd be dead by now." Perrone began pacing, one hand rubbing his chin, and his gaze ran over Alex's restrained body. Slowly, he made his way to her and ran a palm over her face, down the valley between her hanging tits.

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I wanted to kill him for touching her.

Leaning closer, he sniffed her skin and scowled. “Which one of you idiots touched what’s mine?”

I clenched my teeth, taking serious issue with that statement.

“We didn’t touch her,” Cleft said, exchanging a worried glance with Brock.

“Someone’s cum is all over her. Who ejaculated on my property?”

“Um...we filmed her sucking off Mason.”

Perrone whirled, his expression thunderous and pummeling Cleft from across the room. “Did I give you permission to use her like that? I thought I made myself clear. She belongs tome. I gave you explicit freedom to break her through corporal punishment. Mostly to goad him,” he said, pointing at me. “Nothingmore. Did you not understand those very simple instructions?”

“No, we just thought—”

“I don’t care what you thought. I’ve heard enough.” He turned back to Alex and unbuckled the strap keeping the gag between her lips. The rubber ball dropped to the floor. “Were you fucked?”

She hardened her jaw and turned her head, but he trapped her chin between his fingers. “I asked you a question.”

“N-no.”

“Did anyone in this room touch you, sexually, aside from the blowjob?”

She blinked, her gaze straying to me, and Perrone tightened his grip. “Eyes on me. Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“No.”

“Good.” He let go of her face and glared at Cleft. “Go get my son, and have Mick and Zander fetch the blonde.”

“Which blonde?”

“The only fucking blonde in this place right now worth mentioning. Tell them to bring her to me.”

“Yes, sir,” Cleft said, scurrying to the door.

“You two,” Perrone barked at Brock and Vinnie after the door slammed shut. “Why is Mason fucking standing around? We have restraints in this room for a reason.”

Vinnie swallowed hard, and he and Brock stalked toward me. My attention shifted between Alex, Perrone, the goons, and the door. I stumbled back, but my fucking head swam. The damn door seemed miles away, and Alex even further.

Vinnie raised the gun. “Boss? He’s not wanting to cooperate.”

“For fuck’s sake. I’ve hired idiots! Shoot him if he gives you any trouble.”

I raised my arms and allowed them to shove me toward the chains before stringing



me up again. Perrone cast an appreciative glance at Alex, his tongue darting out to wet his lips.

“So you’re the guy in charge,” I said, trying to draw his attention away from her. “Obviously, I did something to piss you off, so why don’t you have your assholes take her back to the room, and the two of us can have it out?”

I wasn’t stupid enough to think he’d let Alex go, but maybe I could talk him into shutting her away in that shithole, where at least she’d be safe for a while, tucked out of reach from this room. Whatever was about to go down, I didn’t want her around for it.

Perrone arched a brow at me. “You’ve done far more than merely piss me off. And she’s not going anywhere. She needs to see this as well.” He rounded, his expression pinched with rage as he took in his two remaining men. “You all need a fucking lesson in respect! This is my place. I’m the boss. Nothing happens from here on out without my knowing about it.”

He circled Alex, his lips curving upon seeing the damage to her ass. “Honey,” he said, smacking her sore bottom. “Give me what I want, and I can make all of this go away.”

“I’d rather have Brock whip me again.”

The way she stood up to him made me proud, but at the same time, I wanted to slap my hand over her mouth. Because he was fucking stalking her, just waiting for her to step wrong.

He stalled in front of her and bent down, bringing his face close to hers. “From what I can tell, they went easy on you. Do you know what real pain feels like?”

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She spit in his face, and I stiffened, terrified for her.

Perrone retreated, his fingers wiping off her spittle. “Did you spit out Mason’s cum? Or did you show your respect by swallowing?”

She twisted her head, refusing to answer or meet his gaze.

“Answer the question,” he said, his voice dangerously low. He could have screamed and it wouldn’t have been more intimidating.

“I swallowed every last drop,” she said, her gaze imparting wrath. “You don’t deserve my spit.”

He smacked her, and the slap of palm to cheek tightened my teeth. I clamped my jaw shut, because speaking now wouldn’t help either of us.

The door flung open, and Cleft pushed Jax inside. Puffy, red skin surrounded his left eye, as if he’d been hit.

Perrone rounded on him. “Are you still denying it, boy?”

“It wasn’t me,” Jax said, his shoulders slumping, breathing labored.

I swerved my gaze between the two of them, trying to decode what was happening here, but I had no clue. Perrone seemed unpredictable, easily enraged. Why else would his men cower at his presence, including his own son?

“Do you think I’m stupid?” He advanced on Jax, his face reddening with each second that passed. “You opened your big mouth to your new girlfriend.”

But the only woman Jax had been with recently, as far as I knew, was Nikki. A chill slid down my spine.

Perone’s voice rose. “Mason disappeared, and your slut ran straight to the cops! So tell me,” he said, jabbing the air with a finger. “If you kept your fucking mouth shut, like you claim, then how did they find their way to me?”

“I don’t know,” Jax said. He straightened his spine but never quite met his father’s eyes.

“You are lying to me. I had to pay off my guy on the force to make this go away. I thought you were serious about proving yourself, but apparently, you need a reminder.”

Jax shook his head. “I swear. I didn’t say a word.”

“Hmm.” Perrone gestured to Cleft. “Bring her in.”

I didn’t want to watch what I feared was coming, but I couldn’t tear my gaze from Cleft as he opened the door wide. Two guys shoved Nikki into the room, and he caught her before she tumbled to the cement. Cleft held her up under one arm, and her head lolled to the side. They’d obviously drugged her.

“She didn’t do anything!” Jax yelled. He staggered forward, his face as white as his father’s button-down shirt.

Perrone pointed toward a chair. “Sit the fuck down.”

Jax did so without hesitation. He was terrified of his father, and I was terrified for Nikki.

My gaze shifted to Alex, whose wide eyes pummeled me. I couldn't protect either one of them. "Hey!" I shouted. "You want to hurt someone, you fucking bastard? Hurtme!"

Perrone narrowed his brows. "Someone gag him."

Brock picked up the gag from the floor and stalked toward me, his mouth curving up at the corners. He wrestled my lips open before shoving the rubber ball in.

I was useless, unable to plead for Nikki, and when Jax lowered his head into his hands, I yanked at the chains in a fit of panic. Jax was freaking out—I was fucking freaking out—and I couldn't do a thing about it.

I couldn't save Nikki.

Couldn't save Alex.

How the fuck had we gotten to this place?

"You guys should be ashamed of yourselves," Perrone said. "I've got prisoners waltzing into my office, unauthorized filming going on, and my own fucking son can't keep his big mouth shut!"

"Please," Jax begged, lifting his head. "She doesn't know anything."

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“Bullshit. She went to the cops with too much info—info she wouldn’t have known unless you told her. She’s Mason’s ex-girlfriend, you idiot! Did you think she was going to sit on her hands when that island went up in smoke?”

Lifting her head, Nikki groaned. She squinted at the people surrounding her and began fighting their grasp on her arms. “I h-have a son. Please...please let me go. I don’t belong here.” She hung her head, and a sob escaped her lips.

She had a son, someone who needed her, who depended on her...holy fuck. I wanted to tell her how sorry I was, but I couldn’t even speak.

Perrone lifted her chin. “Honey, if you want to live, prove your worth. My son has an unhealthy aversion to women—”

“Whose fault is that?” Jax jumped to his feet. “Maybe if you hadn’t forced them on me...” He dragged his hands through his hair and took a deep breath. “Let her go. She didn’t do anything wrong. Please...Dad.”

That was the first time I’d heard him refer to his father in such a personal way, and saying that single word had cost him. Nikki was in real trouble.

Perrone pushed Jax back into the chair. “Bring the blonde. I want her on her knees for my boy.”

Nikki pleaded, and Cleft smacked the whine from her as he dragged her across the floor, her heels digging in the whole way. He pushed Jax’s knees wide open and shoved her to her haunches between them.

“Unzip so the slut can suck you off.” Perrone began pacing. “If she can get your confused cock to work, I might let her live.”

Nikki sobbed as Jax unzipped with shaking hands. His erection jutted out, but the sight of his own arousal seemed to horrify him. His face crumbled as Cleft shoved Nikki’s head into his lap, muffling her cries with the girth of his cock.

Chewing on his lip, Jax closed his eyes and fisted his hands until his knuckles turned white. Cleft bobbed her head, pushing her downward when she started gagging. She struggled for a few moments before he yanked her head up, and my insides twisted at witnessing her pain. Snot ran from her nose, blending with the tears drenching her face.

Jax lifted his lids with a quick intake of breath, and when he gazed at Nikki, moisture erupted from his eyes.

“Fuck this,” Perrone said with a sneer. He shoved Cleft out of the way and wrenched Nikki to her feet. Holding her immobile against his chest, he pulled a knife from his pocket.

Time fucking screeched to a stop.

I yelled through the gag, blasting every bit of energy toward Nikki, praying someone would stop this. Her overflowing eyes met mine, and the truth in them nearly stopped my heart.

She knew it. I knew it.

Perrone switched open the blade, and Jax knew it too because he charged his father, mouth open in a silent scream, hands reaching for Nikki.

But it was too late.

Perrone was already slashing a red horizontal line across her throat.

Blood.

Gurgling sounds.

So much blood.

Soaking through her clothing.

Silencing her sobs.

Her body crumbled to the ground, and Perrone tossed the knife to the side. He stepped back, out of reach of the blood pooling on the concrete, and that's when Alex started screaming.

The room erupted in chaos. I blinked and it seemed as if a lifetime had passed in that mere second. The gurgling noise had stopped. So had my screams. But Jax bawled as he held the blonde's limp body, his devastation pouring from his eyes in streams of grief. Blood stained his clothing, but that didn't stop him from sheltering her in his embrace, rocking her as if she were merely sleeping.

Rafe's gaze swerved between her and me, his glassy eyes round with horror, shock, disbelief. The ball gag kept him quiet, though his rage burst free in his fisted hands, in the veins cording his bunched muscles. In the violent way he pulled at the chains.

He was a caged lion, bound by metal and madness, and this place was a zoo.

I glanced at Jax and the blonde again, and something inside me cracked, allowing

memories to creep inside. As Brock freed my hands, I saw sunlight and white lace curtains. Murky water, dark with the kind of death that bled out my mother. I collapsed toward the floor, and Brock caught me in his arms as if I weighed nothing.

“Take her to the cell,” Lucas said, voice booming off the walls. “I’ll deal with her in a bit.”



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Brock and Vinnie herded me out of the room amidst Rafe's smothered protests. Hysteria rose in my chest, refused to release. I squeezed my eyes shut as they hauled me down the hall, toes dragging the ground.

"C'mon, use your feet," one of them said, hoisting me up. "Almost there."

I lifted my lids, and the tunnel spanned before me in a line of hazy crimson. Blood dripped from the pipes like a leaky faucet, forming puddles where the walls met the floor. That liquid death expanded, stalked in a furtive slither. I was going mad. That was the only explanation because logically, I knew the blood wasn't really there, but the deep red tore through my mind in a cacophony of whispers. I glanced at my forearms and gasped. Sticky red poured from the slashes as if the wounds had never healed.

"Make it stop!" My breath caught in my lungs, and I fought the grip of their fingers. "Get the blood off of me! It's not real! Not real...not real...not real..."

Lucas' minions shook me, propelling me forward. A door creaked open, and the haze of red morphed to black as I hurtled to the dirt. I scratched at my wrists, as if I could remove the blood with my fingernails.

"What's wrong with her?"

"Fuck if I know. The bitch is going batshit crazy."

The light from the hall cast their figures in an otherworldly blur. My eyes burned with too many emotions that boiled, writhed, cut through me. I wanted to cry and sob and

scream, but I couldn't.

I needed to hurt.

As Vinnie attached my leash to the hook in the floor, I dragged my nails down my arms hard, sucked in shallow breaths, and dug deeper.

"I think she was broken long before we got to her."

"Rafe..." Even saying his name incinerated me.

"Your boyfriend isn't coming."

So much blood.

Pumping from Rafe's neck in thick spurts.

No! They hadn't killed him. My mind was only playing tricks on me, editing the continuous loop of knife to flesh slashing through my sense of reality.

Blond hair.

I grasped that piece of truth, because Rafe's hair was beautifully dark, just like his soul. My mother's face flickered in my mind, and I jerked my head back and forth, my thoughts overflowing with chaos, with bloody water and a bathtub full of dead mothers and lost hope.

Five in—

Can't breathe.

I screamed, though the wail didn't come from me. A wild animal thrashed inside my being, screeching its pain.

Someone hefted me up and sent a hard smack to my cheek. "Snap out of it!"

Gulping air, I returned Brock's wide-eyed stare.

"You're gonna sit on that bed and calm the fuck down. Do you understand me?"

I nodded, mouth trembling, and stumbled toward the bed. My legs gave out, and I plopped onto the cot's thin mattress, ass flaming from the welts. Rather than fight the burn, I embraced it, wrapped myself in its blessed relief.

Brock pivoted, running a hand over his shaved head, and he and Vinnie left. The door shut with a quiet click, as if it didn't want to ignite the screaming again.

I rocked back and forth on the bed, nails clawing my skin. I couldn't wash away the blood. I was bathing in it, reliving it. Those fucking tears needed to burst from my eyes and drench my face. I needed to cry, but I was a brimming cactus in the middle of a desert, and nothing could extract my despair.

Someone inserted a key into the lock, and I jumped. I could have lost minutes or hours—I had no way of knowing. Lucas stood in the doorway holding the handle of a lantern. He set it on the floor before picking up a bucket he'd left outside the entrance. The door slammed behind him, and a soft glow filled the space. So did the malevolent shadow of his form. He came toward me with purposeful steps.

"Now you know what I'm capable of," he said, bending to set the bucket on the floor. "I have no problem killing Mason. You have the power to keep him alive."

"You want to fuck me," I said, voice as dead as I felt on the inside.

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“I can do that anytime I want. You’re helpless here, Alex, and you can’t stop me.”

“What do you want then?” I lowered my gaze and imagined blood all over the shiny black surfaces of his shoes.

“I want you to want me to fuck you.”

“That will never happen.”

“Are you sure about that?” He placed a hand on my chest, between my breasts, and gently pushed until I flopped to my back. Grabbing my legs, he slid them onto the bed before bending and spreading my knees. I closed my eyes and found that place I hadn’t ventured to in a while—the place where I’d sought refuge when Zach had pushed me beyond my breaking point in that cabin.

The scrape of the plastic bucket on rough ground pulled me from that mental sanctuary. I sensed him shifting, and the mattress squeaked under his weight. Water sloshed, eliciting a shudder, and warm drops dribbled over my breasts. Goose bumps broke out on my skin. My nipples tightened, begging to be touched, pinched...bitten.

I wanted Rafe. God, how I wanted him—to get me out of here, to make my body bend, to fucking love me.

Lucas’ sleeve brushed my stomach, and I silently cursed my body for displaying any sort of reaction. He ran the sponge over my mouth and chin, wiping away the musk of Rafe, and continued to my breasts.

“My men fucked up. They should have separated you from Mason upon your arrival.”

I scoffed at his tone. He made it sound like we were his guests. “Let us go.” I swallowed hard. “If not me, at least let him go.”

He let out a heavy sigh. The sponge dipped between my thighs, and his fingers followed. Unlike the brutal force of his touch the first time he’d thrust his fingers into me, now he dipped into my center with such teasing skill, something inside me twitched to life.

I hated myself for that twitch.

He caressed my clit, soft and light as a feather. I gritted my teeth. “Just fuck me and get it over with.”

His low laugh rumbled through the room. “I’m not fucking you today. But you’ll beg me to, believe me.”

Over my dead, bloodied body.

“My personal slaves learn to serve me with pleasure, Alex. Some men like to forcefully take. I like to forcefully take what is given.”

“I’m not giving you anything.”

“You already have. You gave me a piece of yourself months ago. I saw your potential, your passion. And now,” he said, pressing on my clit with firm pressure, “you’re giving me your reluctant arousal.” He burrowed his fingers deep.

“Do you think this will work?” I asked, disdain bleeding from my lips. “You’re a

sick, disgusting bastard who rapes women. You destroy them.” I thought about the young girl one of his men had brought to screams for hours on the other side of the wall.

And I thought of the blonde whose throat Lucas had so carelessly slashed. He’d pulled that blade across her neck as if she were an animal, as if she meant nothing. She’d been someone’s daughter, someone’s sister...someone’s mother.

She’d had history with Jax and Rafe. They’d both cared for her.

“Why are you doing this to us?”

“Some people believe in that old adage, ‘an eye for an eye.’ I’m underwhelmed with that saying. When someone wrongs me or mine, I don’t stop at the eye.”

He might as well have been speaking in Pig Latin. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you need to grasp the reality of your predicament. You’re not getting out of here.” He leaned over me, and his breath hit my face. “You feel my fingers inside you? I will have my cock there.” He ran his tongue along my earlobe. I cringed, but a rough hand kept me from retreating. “Maybe I’ll keep Mason alive long enough to hear you beg for it.”

I spread my legs as wide as I could. “I have nothing left to give, so you’re gonna have to take it.” I was playing with fire by inserting that challenge into my tone, but I didn’t care. Maybe I was still in shock. Numb. Seeing red.

It didn’t matter. He was going to kill Rafe. If anything had the power to break my pieces, it was the certainty of his death busting through me like a wrecking ball. I’d rather die on our terms. Our time. I’d rather call Lucas’ bluff and die now than continue to bend.

He removed his fingers and stood. The sponge splashed into the bucket, and he reached for the button of his pants. “I’m visiting him next.” He paused, and my heart pounded out of control during those tense seconds. “You sent him to prison, Alex. Do you know what he did while he was in there?”

“No,” I whispered, barely able to get that single word out.

“Mason killed my blood, so I’m going to kill him.”

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Now that he'd said the words, I wanted to bend.

Oh God.

"He's not a killer."

"Maybe you don't know Rafe Mason as well as you thought."

No, I knew Rafe. Lucas, on the other hand, I hadn't known at all.

"If you won't beg me to fuck you, maybe you'll beg for his life."

Fear seized me, choked me. I wanted to feel numb at the thought of Rafe's death and my servitude living as Lucas' adoring pet, leash and all, but I wasn't strong enough. Pushing off the bed, I slid to my knees and begged in Lucas Perrone's language—I yanked down his zipper and wrapped my lips around his shaft.

He'd killed her.

I kept running those three words through my mind, thinking they'd penetrate, but I still couldn't believe it. That whole scene had been a nightmare because them dragging Nikki in didn't make any sense.

Perrone slaughtering her didn't make any fucking sense.

I must be delirious, drugged beyond what my body could handle. I'd hallucinated the whole thing. Tilting my head up, I pulled at the chains holding my wrists hostage.



Assholes had strung me on my toes again, back in the pitch-dark room I'd shared with Alex. The echo of her name invaded my head to the bursting point.

The door opened, and I went on full alert even though I couldn't do shit to protect myself. Perrone filled the entrance, lantern hanging at his side. He set the flickering light on the floor and quietly shut the door before wandering to me, his stride casual, unhurried.

"Alex has an exquisite mouth," he said. "I'll give you that. She just demonstrated her exceptional skill on my cock."

I blinked him into focus, and he struck fast, pummeling my mid-section. I groaned and would have doubled over if my hands weren't chained to the ceiling.

He grabbed my jaw. "So I understand why you had trouble keeping your cum inside your prick."

I shook my head free, sucking air between my teeth. "I'll fucking kill—"

He sent a fist to my jaw, and the pain jolted through my teeth, burned behind my eyes.

"She's quite malleable. She got to her knees of her own free will and gave me the best damn head I've ever had."

She wouldn't have done that without being coerced. Unless...

Unless he'd threatened my life.

I wanted to scream at him, gouge his eyes out with a lethal jab of my fingers, rip his fucking cock off and mouth-fuck his goons with it, so I was shocked by the laughter

that poured from me. Void of sanity or rationality, I laughed until my stomach cramped where he'd socked me.

I was manic, insane. Probably both. Maybe this was all a screwed up fantasy, and I was a mental patient living inside my own head.

"Why the fuck are you laughing?" Taking a step back, he folded his arms.

"She did it for me. She sucked your tiny dick because she loves me. She'll always love me." His eyes widened, and I laughed some more. "You can't break that. No matter what you do, you can't break what she feels for me."

He brought a knee up and rammed me in the stomach. "How about I just break you then, starting with every fucking bone in your body?"

The blow strangled me, but I was still laughing through the pain, and it was a sick mixture of agony and madness.

Perrone's mouth flattened into a line. He released my hands, grabbed my head, and slammed his knee into me, again and again until I couldn't laugh anymore.

Until I couldn't breathe. I slumped to the floor, wheezing air between tight lips.

"I was going to kill you, despite Alex's oral bribery tactics. But now I think I'll keep you around for a while, just long enough for you to hear the slut beg for my cock."

The air stirred as he retreated. I heard the door slam shut, and he must have taken the lantern with him because the never-ending darkness came back. I pushed to my hands and knees, limbs quaking under my weight, and struggled to the cot.

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I sprawled on that bed for hours, maybe even days, months...a whole fucking lifetime, and as I drifted in and out of consciousness, images of Nikki's murder infiltrated my nightmares. So did Alex's broken pleas for me to save her. I also dreamed of Cleft's cock in my ass, the strong grip of fingers holding me down.

And the laughter. Always the fucking laughter.

Time passed in a jumbled mess of nightmares that never failed to spring me up from bed, drenched in sweat and shaking to my bones. I was pathetic. I couldn't even protect the woman I loved.

I loved Alex.

Fuck.

I'd never told her.

I'd also loved Nikki, maybe not in the same intense, out-of-my-fucking-mind way I did Alex, but I'd loved her.

Had I ever told her? Even once?

I'm pretty sure I hadn't. I was a fucking pussy incapable of telling anyone how much they meant to me. I didn't need a shrink to tell me I had abandonment issues. I could blame it all on my mom for leaving the way she had, but I was an adult, even if I'd grown into adulthood on the inside of four prison walls. Even if I didn't remember that transformation, I was twenty-nine fucking years old.

So where did that leave me?

Alone, fucked, and about to die without having ever said those important three little words to anyone.

To my own son.

I held my breath, heart thudding so hard, I thought I might save Perrone the trouble of killing me.

I had a kid.

Nikki.

Holy fuck.

I gripped my head and squeezed my eyes shut. I remembered nothing else, but I knew it was true. She'd had a son, and he was mine.

And now he was motherless, about to be fatherless. But he'd been fatherless all along. I wasn't fit to be a parent anyway. I wasn't fit to be loved by Alex either.

Fucking dying down here was for the best.

Eventually, that door opened again, but I didn't move or acknowledge whoever had ventured into this shithole. Part of me wished they'd just end this hell already.

"You here to kill me?" I asked, a challenge in my tone.

The door shut with a quiet click and a flashlight came on, the beam gliding over my prone figure on the bed. Footsteps sounded, and my pulse sped up in preparation for a

fight, because even though I wanted them to get it over with already, I couldn't go down without one last battle. And I wanted a fair fucking fight. It'd been a while since they dosed me with drugs, and I wouldn't get a fair go at whichever asshole was in here if he pumped me full of them again.

A bundle of denim landed beside my head, followed by soft cotton. I sprang up and launched myself at whoever was here to drag me into another scene of torture.

"Rafe!" Jax said in a low whisper.

I let go of him and stumbled back.

He aimed the beam of light into my face. "I'm getting you outta here. Get dressed."

I didn't move at first, too stunned in trying to wrap my head around what was happening. Jax blinked several times, and the stress on his face, the defeat in his grievous eyes, sent a spear of dread through me.

"Is Alex...?" I swallowed hard, but I still couldn't get the words out. If she was gone, she was in a better place now, but I about hit the ground at the thought.

"Alex is fine." He hung his head. "Nikki's gone. What happened to her is on me." Taking a deep breath, Jax appeared to shake it off and gestured to the clothing he'd tossed on the mattress. "I have to end this. I'm getting you guys out of here, but we don't have much time. The old man will be back in a few hours."

I grabbed the jeans and pulled them on. "What's the plan?" I asked before yanking the T-shirt over my head. My pulse pounded, and I gritted my teeth. Trusting Jax wasn't easy, but what choice did I have?

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“We need to get to the office. It’s our best shot out of here. But getting down the tunnel is gonna be tricky. I need you to pass yourself off as Cleft.”

“How the fuck am I supposed to do that?”

Jax shrugged out of his jacket. “He wears a hoodie just like this. Can you pull it off?” he asked. “Once we break Alex out, she’ll have to crawl down the hall. It’s the only way we’re getting out of here.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes.”

With a nod, Jax pushed the hoodie into my hands. I shoved my arms through the sleeves and flung the hood over my head, burrowing my face into the soft lining.

“Got a smoke?” I asked.

Jax aimed the flashlight at my face. “You’ve never smoked.”

“No, but Cleft does.”

“Quick thinking.” Jax pulled a pack from his pocket and passed it to me. I pulled out a cigarette as he sparked a lighter to life.

Hopefully, the stench of tobacco, along with the hoodie and the leashed girl, would be enough to convince any passerby that the man at Jax’s side was one of them. Since Cleft and I were about the same height, this might work.

I put the nasty butt in my mouth but didn't inhale. "What about you?" I asked. "Is anyone gonna question you roaming the tunnel?"

"I learned a long time ago how to put up a good front. The old man thinks he put me in my place." He turned his head away for a moment, his Adam's apple bobbing. "It's back to business as usual. He's a fucking heartless bastard."

"Why'd you go along with this then?"

"We'll get into all of that shit later. Let's just get the fuck out of here."

"It's about time," I muttered, stomping the cigarette with my bare heel. I prayed to fuck no one would notice how I wasn't wearing shoes. The jeans were on the long side and would hopefully hide the barefoot problem.

"Ever since your escape attempt, the guys have been on high alert, and today the clients are visiting the underground to sample the goods, so keep an eye out."

A sense of smothering fear overcame me. "What about Alex? Is she safe?"

Jax reached for the handle. "She's the old man's pet. No one's touching her but him."

That didn't make me feel any less sick. "She doesn't deserve this."

"You used to feel differently," he said.

"I'm not the same guy. Shit, I don't even remember that guy."

But I put too much effort into convincing myself it was true. Even now, with my memories gone and a drop of decency careening through my bloodstream, I'd wanted to own her in this dark cell, had thrilled at thrusting my cock down her throat in their

torture room.

How long before I snapped and let the monster possess me?

Could she handle it if I did?

Could I?

Jax wrenched the door open, taking the lead. I walked at his side, vigilant of every sound, which left me with no time to question or war with myself. If we didn't get out of here, none of it would matter anyway. A man entered a room down the tunnel, and the faint pleas of a woman drifted to me. She wasn't a willing participant in whatever he was about to do to her. None of them were. If we got out of here, I vowed to take this place down and free these women.

Jax halted a few doorways down and inserted a key. The room was dark and nearly identical to the one they'd held me in. At the soft pads of our footsteps, Alex sat up, grasping the blanket to her chest. Jax's flashlight lit up her face.

God. She looked like hell. She'd been through too much, seen too much, had experienced too much.

For years. She'd been going through this shit for years.

I was about to hurtle the distance and crush her in my arms, but she shrank back at the sight of our towering forms, her eyes squinting against the light.



“It’s me, baby.”

“Rafe!” The blanket pooled around her, and she catapulted into my arms.

“We’re getting out of here,” I said, words muffled in her hair. “But I need you to act like I’m Cleft. Can you do that?”

She nodded, her hands roaming my cheeks, her gaze wondering over my face, lowering to my chest, as if checking to make sure I was in one piece. “I thought he was gonna kill you.” She buried her head in the crook of my shoulder and inhaled. “God...I thought you were dead. It’s been days.”

I shared a look with Jax. Had it really been that long? Man, had I been out of it.

“Timing, man. It’s now or never.” He lifted his shirt, revealing the gun jammed in his waistband. “You have no idea what I had to do to get this thing. Old man took my damn weapon.”

But one gun wouldn’t do shit against a bunch of guys with guns and access to human shields. Alex shifted in my arms, and her chain grated my ears.

“Tell me you have a key for that?”

“Sure do.” He bent and released the lock with a quick turn of a key. “But you’re gonna have to crawl,” he told her. “Keep your eyes on the floor, like a slave would, and we might make it out of here.”

With not a tinge of hesitation, Alex dropped to her hands and knees and lowered her head.

“Let’s do this.” He wedged the door a crack, peeked into the hall, then opened it all the way. I followed, Alex behind me on all fours, and we hadn’t taken more than a few steps when a man exited a room.

“What’re you guys up to?” he asked.

Jax slowed, and I turned to Alex, yanking on her chain with a growl. “Sit,” I ordered in a low voice, hoping to fuck the guy didn’t realize I wasn’t Cleft. Curling my toes inside the hem of the jeans, I kept my attention on her dark head and hoped it was enough to shield me from the guy’s scrutiny.

“Boss is on his way in,” Jax explained. “He wants her in the office.”

“What about the boyfriend? Should we grab him?”

I watched from the corner of my eye and recognized the puny kid I’d taken down during our first escape attempt.

“Nope. I think she has a private date with the boss and his spanking horse.”

“Lucky for him, huh?”

“Yep. Mason’s out cold. He won’t be a problem.” Jax turned to me. “Ain’t that right, Cleft?”

“Uh-huh.”

The kid laughed. “Boss is making the two of you work together? Man, he must really

be punishing you.” He slapped Jax on the back before ambling down the hall.

Jax let out a breath. So did I.

“Fuck, that was close,” he muttered.

We made frustratingly slow progress down the hall, as Alex could only move so fast on her hands and knees without drawing attention to ourselves. We passed by two more men, though they didn’t stop to talk. Keeping my head low, I hoped it was enough to hide my face in shadow. Once we reached the door to the office, Jax glanced down the hall. A door opened and shut somewhere.

“If we don’t make it out of here—”

“We will,” I interrupted his quiet words.

“But if we don’t, I just wanna say I’m sorry, man.”

I peered over my shoulder. “Just open the damn door. You can kiss my ass all you want later.”

He let out a shaky breath and rapped on the door.

Was someone else in on this? Was this a fucking trap? But I didn’t have time to process shit. Jax pulled the gun out and raised it. The damn thing shook in his hands, but the firm set of his mouth said he meant business.

“What are you—”

The door opened, Cleft’s eyes widened, and Jax pulled the trigger.

No warning.

No hesitation.

The blast ricocheted down the tunnel, through my ears. Voices echoed, but Jax was already yanking Alex to her feet. I shoved him out of the way and tossed her over my shoulder, and we stepped over Cleft’s body and into the office.

“Why the fuck did you do that?” Rafe shouted at Jax. He nudged Cleft’s body out of the way and slammed the door before turning the lock. He set me on my feet then grabbed a chair and wedged it underneath the knob.

I stood frozen in place, arms wrapped around myself. I couldn’t rip my gaze from Cleft. He stared at me with unseeing eyes, his head at an odd angle, as if he’d fallen and broken his neck. Blood pooled from underneath his brown hair, and the edges of my vision started to go red again. The gunshot rang in my ears, a continuous bang that muffled all sound, even the thump of my heartbeat. I felt it at my throat, my temples, pounding through my chest.

“Alex.” Rafe shook my shoulders, and my attention snapped to him. “That’s it. Look at me.” But his worried gaze swerved toward the back of the room.

I turned and found Jax fingering one of the oversized portraits of his mother. He

lowered his arm, glanced at Cleft, and his face went pale.

“He deserved it.” His jaw slackened, as if he couldn’t believe he’d pulled the trigger.

“Jax!” Rafe shouted as footsteps thundered from the tunnel. “Punch in the fucking code!”

Blinking with a jolt, Jax dragged his gaze from Cleft and hurried to the door that stood between us and freedom. His fingers trembled as he entered a string of numbers, but nothing happened. “Fuck!” He rested his head against the door, closed his eyes for a few moments, then tried again.

Someone banged on the door leading to the hall. “What’s going on in there? Cleft?”

Rafe and I exchanged a glance, and his fingers threaded through mine. The doorknob jiggled.

“Hurry,” Rafe told Jax in a loud whisper.

More beeping. More cursing. More footsteps.

“Open up!” That sounded like Brock, and the consequent body-slam that shook the door supported my suspicion. I jumped, and Rafe and I backed toward Jax, who wrenched the heavy door open. We scrambled up the darkened staircase, but Jax stalled at the bottom to close and lock the entrance.

“Can they get through there?” Rafe asked.

“No. Door’s made of steel and no one but me and Cleft knows the code...knew the code.” He slumped toward the bottom step. “I killed him...”

“Get the fuck up,” Rafe said, taking a step downward. “You can have a pity party later.”

Jax’s features hardened in determination, and he began climbing the stairs. He squeezed past us and opened another door. The three of us entered what must be the basement of the house. Decades worth of furniture and art cluttered the space between the slab walls.

Rafe slid the hood off his head and shrugged out of the jacket. “Can you get that fucking thing off her neck now?”

As I pulled the hoodie on, covering my breasts, Jax shuffled through several keys until he found the one he was looking for. I tilted my head back, baring my neck. The lock clicked over and the choker fell free, dropping to the floor where the chain pooled around the collar.

I drew in a deep breath, but it didn’t quite fill my lungs. “Can we get out of here now?” I wouldn’t be satisfied until this place was behind us. I didn’t know if I could handle getting this far just to have Lucas toss us back into that tunnel. I thought about the women still trapped down there and shuddered.

“What about the others?” Rafe asked, as if he’d read my mind.

“We’ll figure it out after we get the fuck outta here.” Jax strode toward another door, and we climbed another flight of stairs. Entering the ground floor of the estate was like stepping into an alternate reality. The decaying brick and stone, the dusty rooms, the darkness—all of it was gone, replaced by open spaces that allowed the sunlight to stream through the windows. My bare feet glided across the smooth hardwood in the dining room.

I’d been here before, sitting at that very table with Lucas as he wine and dined me.

A whole world of horrors had existed at my feet, several layers below the earth, while he'd attempted to work beyond my indifference with his charming smile and conversation.

Jax led us through a French door, but the alarm started its countdown. Cursing under his breath, he punched in a code, silencing the beeping with a sigh of relief. Sunlight hit my face, and I nearly gasped at the warmth, the blinding brightness. I lifted my chin toward the sun and closed my eyes for a few seconds. A slight breeze ruffled my hair. It was almost too much, after being confined in darkness for so long. Rafe tugged on my hand, and we padded over the grass, like silk underfoot.

"My van's parked over there," Jax said, pointing to a shaded spot between two trees just off the driveway. We changed direction and Rafe came to an abrupt stop, his attention locked on a gas generator standing a few feet from the house.

"Does that thing supply power to the tunnel?"

“Yeah, why?”

Rafe cranked his head, apparently searching for something, and his gaze landed on a shed. “I have an idea.”

I swallowed hard, remembering what happened the last time he had an idea. He pulled me along after him, and Jax scuttled to catch up.

“What’re you doing, man? I just killed my cousin down there. The old man is gonna be on our asses soon. We need to get the fuck outta here.”

Rafe tried the knob on the shed without success. “Stand back,” he warned, letting go of my hand. I retreated, and he studied the door for a few seconds before sending a swift kick below the knob. After four more strikes, all impacting the same spot, the frame cracked at the latch, and Rafe pushed open the broken door.

“Dude, what the hell are you doing?” Jax followed him inside.

“Looking for something,” he mumbled.

I pulled the jacket tighter around my body and cast a furtive glance toward the driveway that ended at the garage, expecting to find Lucas’ black SUV pulling in. The next minute passed in an eternity, and I heard nothing but my rapid breaths mixing with the subtle chirp of birds and passing of vehicles.

They exited the shed, playing tug-of-war with a gas can.



“Don’t be stupid!” Jax shouted. “If you blow the power, those girls will never be seen again. They’ll just move the operation elsewhere, and the old man will lay low, protected by his fucking cop buddies until it blows over.” He yanked the jug from Rafe, and fluid sloshed inside. “We need some time to figure this out.”

Rafe swiped a hand through the air. “I’m not fucking kidding. Hand it over.”

“No way!” Jax put the jug back in the shed. “What are you thinking?”

“He’s gonna pay for this! That’s what I’m thinking. He killed Nik...that bastard fucking hurt Alex.”

“It’s always about your lying whore, isn’t it?”

The harsh words punched me in the gut, and Rafe pummeled Jax in the nose. They tumbled to the ground, Rafe wailing on his face, unleashing blow after blow as if he couldn’t stop.

As if he wouldn’t.

“Stop it!” I screamed.

Jax pushed against his shoulder and raised a knee. He squirmed from beneath Rafe by a few inches, and they rolled. But Rafe was too irate.

Out of control.

His face scrunched in exertion, blanketed with sweat. Rafe pinned him to the ground again, his hand reaching for the gun in Jax’s waistband. He pulled it free and held the barrel to his head, then pressed an arm across his throat. “You did this.”

“Rafe!” I grasped his back, but he applied steady force to Jax’s neck, and he wasn’t letting up. He was too far gone.

“You’re killing him. Please, Rafe! He got us out!” Biting back a sob, I tried pulling on his shoulders, but they were like rocks under my hands. “Rafe!”

With a roar, Rafe sprang to his feet, breath coming fast and hard, his body trembling from the surge of adrenaline.

Jax gasped for breath, fingers clawing his throat, feet kicking the ground. He rolled to his side and spasmed with coughing fits.

“Her brother raped her!” Rafe waved the gun in the air. “Those fucking assholes in there violated her. Ifucking violated her. Don’t you ever call her a whore again, do you understand me?”

Jax pushed to his knees and stared up through his shaggy hair, the tips tinged with the blood dripping from his nose. “I got it,” he said, pulling his T-shirt off. “She’s not a whore.” He bunched the shirt and pressed it to his nose.

“She’s fucking mine, and I’ll kill anyone who touches her again.”

“I’m on your side. I got her out, didn’t I?”

“Which is the only reason you’re still alive.”

Rafe’s words seemed to pummel Jax more than his fists had. His shoulders drooped. “Won’t happen again.”

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“You let this happen,” Rafe said, jabbing a finger at Jax’s defeated form. “You could have stopped it, but you didn’t. You let them fucking beat the shit out of her.”

“She lied to you,” Jax said, wheezing air between his lips. “She made you go crazy in that prison. I was there, and that’s all I knew. That’s all I had to go on. I had to do it.”

“You didn’t have to do anything.”

“This isn’t the place to talk about this, man. We need to get the fuck outta here.”

“I’m not leaving until Perrone comes back.” Rafe jammed the gun into his waistband.

“You’re not the only one who wants payback. Get into the damn van. We’ll figure something out.”

“And go where?”

“We have a safe house, you and I. Money. No one else knows about it.”

Rafe frowned. “You could’ve gone off on your own and no one would be the wiser. Why’d you get us out of there?”

“Because you’re under my fucking skin the way she’s under yours.” Jax stomped past us and headed toward the van.

The sun kissed the horizon in fiery red-orange by the time Jax pulled into the place he called a “safe house.” I wanted to scoff at the term. I’d yet to find a place that

inspired a sense of safety. Even my own fucking island hadn't been safe. The engine fell silent, and I glanced over my shoulder at Alex's dozing form. She'd curled on the bench seat, one hand pillowing her cheek, yet her muscles hadn't given in to sleep yet. She was too rigid, too unrelaxed, and probably headed for another nightmare.

I sent a sideways glance at Jax. Dried blood lingered around his nose, and his right cheek was red from my fist. He had both hands locked on the steering wheel, eyes focused straight ahead. We hadn't said two words since we'd left Perrone's estate.

He claimed we were like brothers, and he had gotten us out, even if it was several days too late. Fuck, he shouldn't have let them take us in the first place. I studied the profile of his face.

"You still don't trust me," he said.

"Kinda hard to."

"Cleft was my cousin, my fucking blood, and I shot him."

If he hadn't done what he'd done, Alex and I wouldn't be in this van with him. "Why'd you shoot him? I mean fuck. You didn't even hesitate."

He glanced at Alex in the rearview. "Let's go inside. Take care of her first and get some rest. We've got time to deal with shit."

"You're stalling."

"Maybe." He let out a breath, and it drifted through his hair. "But I think we could all use some rest. We won't have room for error when we go after my old man."

"You got a plan?"

“Possibly. Actually,” he said, opening the driver’s side door, “you gave me an idea back there, when you wanted to go allCarrieon the old man’s estate.”

He never referred to him as his father or dad. Always old man. Considering what Perrone was capable of, I guess I didn’t blame him. I shoved my door open before sliding the back door to the side so I could reach Alex. She stirred but didn’t wake.

Wedging my arms underneath her body, I lifted and cradled her against my chest. She wound her arms around my neck, mumbling something incoherent in her sleep. The fact that she felt safe enough to let her guard down blew my mind.

She trusted me with her life. But was she wise in trusting me with her heart?

Fuck, I hoped so.

Jax climbed the steps to the front porch of the small house nestled deep in the woods. The nearest highway was at least twenty miles away. We’d come in on a county road, then a long dirt driveway that seemed to go on forever. I wasn’t sure I could find my way out of here, if I needed to, and that made me nervous. But at least it wouldn’t be easy for others to find us...unless this was a trap.

Knock it off.

They’d had us right where they wanted us. If not for Jax busting us out, we’d still be locked in that dark underground hole, practically buried alive. Fuck, it sure had felt like it. I shivered at the thought, my pulse racing upon remembering the blackness, the dripping faucet...wait. There hadn’t been a dripping faucet in that room. The pipes in the tunnel, yes, but not in that cell.

I hated this—the absence of memory. A piece of my identity was missing, hiding underneath the layers of my fucked up mind. Every now and again, a small nugget

escaped and confused the heck out of me.

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Jax handed me a key. “That’s your copy. The place is already stocked, and the money’s in the safe. Most of it is yours. I contributed what I could from working for your brother.”

I shook my head as he jammed his key into the lock and turned the handle. “You’ve got alotof explaining to do.”

“I know.”

Alex clutched my hair, and her warm breath breezed across my neck. “We here?” Her voice was heavy with sleep.

“Yeah, baby. We’re here.”

“I need a shower.”

I wasn’t surprised that was her first priority. She probably couldn’t wait to wash off the memories of that place from her skin. Jax pointed down the hall. “There’s two bedrooms, each has a bath. Yours is on the right.”

I cast a glance around the place. The living room was tiny with a futon and matching chair. The kitchen seemed even dinkier on the other side of the bar that separated the space from the living area.

“Does any of this look familiar?” he asked.

None of it sparked a thing.

“No, sorry.”

Why was I apologizing to him? He’d done so many fucked up things, yet at the very core of my being, I trusted him.

He headed toward the small kitchen, and I was tempted to follow, to demand he tell me what I wanted to know, but Alex needed me. She clung to my neck, as if loosening her grip would mean she’d crash to the floor and shatter.

I hesitated, indecision freezing my muscles. This was stupid. He’d busted us out. No one was coming to drag us back. We all just needed a little time to adjust.

Jax pulled a bottle of vodka down from a cupboard and parked his ass on a stool at the bar. He poured the clear liquid straight down his throat.

And that was that. He wanted to be alone with his bottle of misery.

Letting out a frustrated sigh, I ventured down the hallway, pushing the door on the right open with my foot. The bedroom was surprisingly spacious, considering the size of the rest of the house. A large king-sized bed, four posters and all, dominated the room. My gut clenched. Instinctively, I knew why that bed was important. No matter where we ended up, I’d always need a place to restrain her.

It was ingrained in me.

I set Alex on her feet, and her quick intake of breath told me she understood the significance too. She stepped forward and let the hoodie slide from her shoulders, forgotten on the hardwood floor. I spotted an ajar door to the left.

“Bathroom is that way.” Placing a hand on the small of her bare back, I pushed her toward the one place she needed. The place where she could hide and let it all out,



safe in the shower as the water washed away the last few days.

I searched the wall and switched on the soft light, thankful it wasn't too bright. Our eyes had become accustomed to pitch-black. The sunlight today had been a glaring ball of pain in my eyes.

The bathroom ran long and narrow, and a large tub sat front and center. Alex backed into me, her breaths coming in quick gasps.

I wound my arms around her midsection and nudged her neck with my nose. "What is it?"

"I don't take baths."

"How come?"

She let out a half-laugh, half-snort. "I just don't."

I wanted to push for what she didn't say, because I was sure she was keeping something to herself, but for now, I let it slide. This whole day was surreal, especially this moment as she stood naked in my arms, staring at a bathtub as if it would jump out and drown her.

And that's when it hit me. Water.

I kept forgetting. I knew she couldn't swim, and I remembered how fucking terrified she'd been when Zach had pushed her into the pool when she was younger, but I'd had no idea her fear extended to a simple tub of water.

Then again, she'd found her mother dead in a bathtub.

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Maybe I had known all of this. Maybe I'd even used it against her. I'd definitely played on her fears by holding her captive on the island.

"You're safe here. You don't have to use the tub. There's a shower over there." I pointed around the corner, not sure how I knew, but I did.

We shuffled past the tub and turned, and sure enough, the nook opened into a shower stall. Alex crossed the threshold and turned on the water, but she didn't step into the spray.

"Do you wanna be alone?" I didn't want to leave her, but if she needed space, time on her own to process and let it out, I'd give it to her. Besides, I was itching to strangle answers from Jax. He needed to start talking, and people armed with booze tended to have loose lips.

"I don't want you to go." Her naked vulnerability gutted me.

Everyone coped with trauma in their own way—I knew that better than anyone. My psyche had chosen to block it from my mind. But shit, I wanted to be her rock, the one she clung to for support and safety. I wanted to puzzle over her pieces until I found where they fit.

Fuck, Jax could wait.

"Tell me what you need, baby."

"I just need you."

The spray of the shower sluiced over my skin. I closed my eyes, feeling his intense stare on my body, and let the water run over my head in hot rivulets, but nothing could wash away the blood. It clung to my mind, just like the musty scent of that tunnel burrowed several layers beneath my skin.

I slid to the tile, and my arms snaked around my knees. I couldn't bring myself to look at him. I wanted him to take the lead, to come inside and take me the way he should have in that fucking cell. I wanted him to take away the pain. I clawed my arms, chewed my lip, squeezed my eyes shut.

A zipper sounded, and clothing rustled. A soft thud landed by my feet before he slid to the floor behind me and dragged my ass to his groin. He engulfed me in the shelter of his arms and legs.

"Let it out, baby. Scream, cry, do whatever you need. Just let it out."

"I want to hurt myself."

He stiffened. "You're not fucking hurting yourself. I'm here. I've got you."

I grasped his arm and held on tightly. "I want you to fuck me."

"Alex," he warned.

"No!" I struggled against the cage of his body, but it was fruitless. He was too strong. Slumping against him, I sighed. "Stop holding back. You're scared, I get it. But I'm scared too. We're sitting in a shower naked, Rafe. You can't get any more intimate than this."

"Intimacy isn't what I'm worried about."

“We’re gonna wake up tomorrow, or the day after, or whenever we can bear to crawl out of bed, but for right now, I just need you to fuck me.”

“Why?” he whispered in my ear, his lips soft and warm and wet against my lobe.

“Only you can take it all away.” Reaching behind me, I wedged a hand between us and rubbed his cock. Immediately, it sprang to life against my palm. He couldn’t help but groan. I swirled my thumb over the head and spread the moisture collecting at the tip.

He pushed upright, bracing his back against the tile, and pulled me with him. He whirled me around, bringing us face to face, and shoved me against the opposite wall.

“I know you’re hurting right now, probably in shock. There’s no easy way to get through what we’ve just escaped.” He planted his hands on either side of my face, and his chest rose and fell quickly. “I want inside of you, but not tonight.” He pushed away from the wall. “Tonight, I want you to crawl in bed and sleep as much as you need.”

The burn of tears threatened, and panic bubbled up. I wasn’t ready to let them out yet. Somehow, those hot, salty drops would make it all real. Cement it in history. I blinked, reaching out blindly, and planted my palms on his heaving chest, smoothing down his abs before lowering to my knees.

“Alex?”

The cold floor numbed my skin. “Let me do this,” I whispered, my lips nearing his arousal. They’d forced us into this just days ago. Now, I needed to make a new memory. I slid my mouth over his tip, tongue laving the underside.

“Alex...fuck. I’m powerless here.”

That was all the encouragement I needed. I impaled myself on his shaft then worked my way back down the length, my tongue circling the head before I pulled away with a pop. I clasped my hands at the small of my back and peered at him. "Take it back."

"Take what back, baby?" His fingers brushed my cheeks, slid into my hair, and pushed the soggy strands from my face.

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“What they took. Take back control. It’s yours, not theirs or Zach’s. Only yours.”

He tugged me toward him. “This is what you want?”

I wanted him to remember. I wanted him to unleash the beast inside him, the one that didn’t give a shit about what I wanted. But I was also scared of him remembering. What if this soft side of him, the side I was falling even more in love with, completely disappeared? Was it too much to want the whole man?

“I want you. No, I need you. I don’t care what’s happened. That might sound heartless, but God...please, Rafe. Take it all away.”

He let out a rough breath. “Then open your mouth.”

“No.”

“No?”

“Don’t tell me what to do. Make me do it. You once told me that you had some fucked up fantasies. I want them. I want you to take what you need from me. I want you to strip me of everything so I can think of you and not that fucking dark place.”

He tugged me by the hair, bringing my mouth to his cock, and nudged my lips. I pressed them together, wanting him to force his way in. He slid his tip along the seam of my lips before slapping my cheek in silent command, then he pushed against my tongue and made me hold still for several seconds. Warmth flooded the aching spot between my thighs, and my nipples hardened into tingling buds.

“Is this making you hot?” he asked in a breathless whisper.

My moan vibrated around his shaft, and he rammed all the way to my tonsils until I gagged uncontrollably. Pressing a hand on my throat, he massaged where his cock nestled.

The way his breathing filled the shower excited me, made me even wetter, and his raspy groans drove me up the wall in wanting him. He was so close to coming, just from having my mouth wrapped around him.

This was the part I craved, the reason I freely gave him the reins. In taking power, he was giving it back—in the way he dove over the edge at the touch of my mouth, the sensual slide of my tongue. In the way he took what he wanted, yet cherished the gift all the same.

He slipped out, then shoved in again. “I don’t wanna come in your mouth,” he said, words a hoarse plea colored by desperation. “I want inside you, your legs spread. I want you fucking begging for it.” But his control snapped, and he pistoned his cock down my throat, each downward thrust bringing him closer to the point of no return. My gag reflex kicked in again, fueling his fire.

Rafe became an uncaged animal, his reservations tossed to the side, all sense of guilt forgotten. He fucked my mouth with abandon. My heart raced behind my breastbone, and I pulled air through my nose, willing my throat to relax under the onslaught of his cock.

“Oh fuck...” He pulled out and yanked me to my feet, and his mouth crashed onto mine, his tongue conquering, dividing my lips and demanding entrance.

I severed the connection, inching back as my rapid breaths fanned across his mouth, and wondered if he liked the taste of himself on my lips. “You didn’t finish.”

“Your mouth is fucking amazing, but it’s not what I want.” He lifted me, urged my legs around his waist, and water rained over us as he pushed me against the wall again.

Then he slammed into me, plunging so deep he reached the center of my soul. I clawed his shoulders, and the wantonness inside me unraveled as he stretched me, filled me.

With his body, his spirit, his whole being.

“God, Rafe,” I said, lips teasing his earlobe. “You belong there. Don’t ever leave me.”

A moan caught in the back of his throat, and he fastened his mouth on mine again. He held me to the wall and sought control by seizing my wrists and raising them above my head. I tasted desperation on his tongue, and it zinged through my veins until I fought the band of his fingers.

I yanked my lips from his. “Let me touch you.”

He freed my wrists and wrapped both hands around my neck. The action stunned him. I saw self-disgust in his eyes but also the overwhelming need to take my breath. This wasn’t the gentle pressure of a few minutes ago, when he’d had his cock deep in my mouth. He wanted to choke me. I sensed it in the barely restrained energy emanating from his grip.

He hesitated, and I wondered which part of him would win the battle.

I fisted my hands and didn’t move, even though I ached to run them through his soaked hair. Slowly, he moved inside me again, his thrusts the speed of a crawl as he flexed his fingers. Memory or not, the need to take my air was embedded in him.



“You can’t break me,” I whispered.

“But I want to.” He leaned his forehead against mine and shuddered. “I want to make you beg for mercy, watch you shatter. Does that make me a monster, Alex? Does that make me no better than them? Than your brother?” He let up on my neck, and I placed my hands over his, urging him to squeeze harder.

“Get your hands back up there,” he ordered.

The hard edge of his tone made me shiver. I extended my arms. “You can’t break me. I need this from you. I need it because you need it.”

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“Sweetheart, once we open that can of worms, there’s no going back.” He gnawed on his lip, eyes narrowed, then dropped his head to my breasts—maybe to hide from me, or maybe because that’s where he belonged.

Suddenly, I understood. His reluctance, his bullshit talk about right and wrong. It wasn’t to protect me. It was to protect him.

“Fuck...you feel so good.” He scraped my nipple with his teeth, darted his tongue out to tease, and I trembled from the hot, wet stroke of his mouth on my breast. “I could stay inside you forever. Just like this, Alex, with my hands around your neck, my cock buried deep in your cunt. Not moving at all.”

I let out a restless whimper, my hips jutting forward uselessly. He had me pinned in place, unable to move. “Please...”

“Please what, baby?”

“Don’t hold back.” I swallowed under the firm weight of his grip.

“I’m not choking you,” he said. His hands fell away, and he grabbed my ass before turning from the wall. We stumbled out of the shower, past the dreaded tub, and found our way to the bed with our mouths glued together. Water dripping all over the place, he pinned me to the mattress, and his cock owned me as he worked my body like it was made for him.

His thrusts were shallow, hitting the perfect spot at just the right rhythm, and he kept that pace up for what seemed like forever. I quaked underneath his powerful body as

warmth pooled around his slippery cock. His name ripped free of my lips, but he forced his fingers into my mouth, pressed on my tongue, and stifled the sound as he plunged to the hilt. He buried his head in my shoulder and rumbled a groan along my skin.

I dug my feet into the mattress, widening for him, arching to meet his thrusts with muffled gasps. The fact that he'd gagged me with his fingers was a major turn-on. The pressure built, turning me into a writhing animal, and holy fuck, the plummet stole my breath.

He removed his fingers and kissed me, his tongue battling mine, eating up my cries. I came undone, broke into pieces as my release poured from me, dampening the bedding on the last cresting wave.

He sank his teeth into my shoulder and smothered his own grunt of completion. By the time we both crashed, our limbs tangled in a sweaty mess, darkness had fallen over the room. He rolled to his back, taking me with him, and the moon filtering through the window illuminated our entwined bodies in the shadow of night. The lack of light didn't feel suffocating, and the walls weren't caving in like they had while locked in that cell. I placed my head on his chest and draped a leg over his, content to just be.

To doze.

To feel safe for the first time in forever.

“Why do you love me?” he asked, pulling me from the allure of sleep.

I opened my eyes and lazily traced a finger over his tattoo, following the dark tribal design toward his belly button. His muscles quivered under my touch, and one glance at his cock gave away his renewed desire. “What kind of question is that?”

“The kind of question I want an answer to.”

I stalled my hand just below his belly button, and his sharp intake of breath thrilled me.

“I don’t know why. Maybe it started out as a crush, like you said on the island.” I lifted my head, and his fingers tunneled through my hair. “When I finally told you about Zach, you wanted to fight for me. You weren’t disgusted or running away. You wanted to kill him for me. No one has ever cared that much. That’s what I love about you. I love you for your strength, because I have none. I love you for the way you make me feel, because I feel nothing when I’m not with you.”

“You’re not weak. You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for.” He tugged me closer by the hair, his clutch a deep burn in my scalp, and brought my mouth to his.

“I love you,” I whispered against his lips, “for wanting to make me hurt in the best ways possible.”

“I’ve never said it, Alex.”

“Said what?” My heart raced so fast, I thought my chest would rip in two.

“That I love you.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“Because I wasn’t sure that’s what it was.”

“But now you know?”

“Yeah,” he said, his lips teasing mine for an instant before he pulled away enough to

incinerate me with the heat in his eyes. “When you became more important to me than my own life, that’s when I knew. And it makes no fucking sense because I have so few memories of the two of us together.”

“Love doesn’t have to make sense. It just is. Something pulled us together. Maybe it was the darkness in each of us. Does it really matter?”

“No, sweetheart. It doesn’t fucking matter. C’mere.” He hoisted me on top of him and spread my thighs until I straddled his cock. “I’ll never get enough of you. Ride me, baby. Fucking ride me.”

“Did ya fuck her?”

*Source Creation Date: June 23, 2025, 6:33 am*

I stood in the living room entrance and folded my arms. Other than the light from the stove, darkness shrouded the room. Jax sat in the chair, shoulders hunched and the bottle of booze gripped in his hands, hanging between his knees. He'd blown through way too much of that shit already.

I stomped toward him, my bare feet vibrating the hardwood, and yanked the bottle from his hands. "You've hand enough."

"Prob'ly so." He lifted an arm, dangled it like a zombie, and jabbed a finger in the air. "So did ya?"

"That's none of your business." Instead of dumping the vodka down the drain, I plopped onto the futon and took a swig.

"You used to share shit with me," he said. "You used to be my friend."

I took another drink before setting the bottle on the floor with a loud thud. "Explain to me how a 'friend' sells you out to his psycho father to be killed?"

"I wasn't gonna let you die."

"Well that just makes it all better. Is this the part where we pretend you didn't let them torture Alex?"

Jax shrugged. "Girl's got kahunas. I knew she could handle it."

I squeezed my hands into fists, and it took everything in my power not to launch the

few feet between us and throttle his pathetic neck. “She shouldn’t have to handle anything. Aren’t you at least a little sorry for what you did?”

“Yeah I’m fucking sorry.” Jax bolted to his feet and veered sideways. He shot an arm out and steadied himself on the arm of the chair. “I didn’t know she’d been abused. I didn’t know shit because you didn’t tell me any of it.”

“I didn’t remember any of it, until she told me.” We were on a conversation merry-go-round.

“I’m talking about the island, before you lost your memory.” He flopped back into the chair and ran his fingers through his hair. “She changed you, man.” He raised his eyes and deep lines wrinkled his forehead. “You went from a fucking hard ass to a fucking pussy.”

“Why are you mad at me? What am I missing, Jax?”

He let out a cold, bitter laugh. “You’ve gotten up close and personal with my family. Mom’s dead, the old man will be dead if I can help it, my sister is—” His voice cracked. “You’re all I got left.”

Shit. Something about his tone tunneled beneath my anger. He didn’t resemble a man. He looked like a lost little boy—the same boy who’d experienced a childhood of hell down in that tunnel.

“I’m listening. You got something to say, well say it. Tell me how all of this went down.”

“Give me the bottle first.” He reached across the coffee table, his leg knocking into the wood.

I almost fought him about the booze, but fuck, he was a grown man. If he wanted to get shit-faced, who was I to tell him he couldn't? Especially after all the shit we'd been through. I grasped the bottle by the neck and passed it to him. Besides, I needed to keep him talking.

He wrapped his mouth around the opening and tossed his head back, gulping down a long swig of the burning liquid. Wiping his lips with the back of a hand, he shoved the bottle between his legs and settled into the chair again.

"Me and Cleft got busted for sex trafficking. That's why I was serving time."

"Did I know this?"

He shook his head. "I didn't talk about my fucked up family. Nikki was the first person who pulled it out of me, and that's just because I got stupid drunk after you got shot." He blinked rapidly. "She didn't fucking believe me, so I thought, no harm, no foul." He dragged another drink from the bottle, liquid sloshing as he tipped it. "Guess she thought twice about it after the island went up in smoke. I got her killed. That's on me."

Nikki's death burned in my gut like an ember, threatening to flare into an inferno if I gave it the chance. I ground my teeth together, refusing to fall to pieces until after Perrone paid for what he'd done.

"That still doesn't tell me why your father took us, why he was out for my blood. They said I did something in prison. What happened? Just be straight with me. I can handle it."

"I was planning to take the whole organization down. Cleft's dad was already on the inside. He figured something was up, so he tried to kill me before I could talk. You stopped him."



“Wait a second...I beat the crap out of your uncle, so your family goes psycho on me for it? That doesn't make any sense.”

He buried his head in his hands. “Can we not do this now? You really don't wanna hear this, trust me.”

“Spit it out, Jax.”

He raised his head. “You've had memory problems before. The infirmary docs thought it was from the concussions.”

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I sifted through my memories of my fighting days, but I couldn't recall more than two occasions where I'd had a concussion. I'd been cleared both times. "What concussions?"

"Guards were running a fight club. You were their favorite bet. Dude, it was brutal. You took some nasty beatings."

"I participated in unsanctioned fighting in there?" That didn't sound like me.

"Didn't have much choice." Jax rubbed his chin. "Guards used Cleft and his crew as enforcement. The rapes weren't stopping until you started fighting."

Holy fuck. No wonder I didn't want to remember any of this.

"That still doesn't explain why Perrone wanted me dead. C'mon, he's out for revenge because of a prison fight? What aren't you telling me?"

He sighed. "You thought it was a fight. Like I said—memory problems. Fuck, Rafe, you didn't want to remember."

"What are you saying?" But the implication dropped to the bottom of my stomach and formed a ball of dread. Some part of me, buried deep inside, already knew.

"You didn't beat the shit out of my uncle. You choked him to death."

I'd known what he was going to say, but those words banded around my chest anyway. I sucked in a breath, let it out in the space of five seconds. I'd had my hands

around Alex's throat, tempted as fuck to steal her air while I fucked her.

What had I done?

"You had my back in there," Jax said. "You fucking saved my ass, man."

"But you sold me out."

"I did it for Tawny."

"Who's Tawny?" I asked, thinking back to our conversation in my cellar before all of this went down. "Is she the one that got away?"

"Come again?"

"In my cellar, you said you had to let someone go."

"Tawny's my sister." He reached for the vodka again, and his gaze landed somewhere over my shoulder. "I was talking about you."

I blinked, fucking dumbfounded. Speechless.

"Yeah..." he said, letting out a breath that ruffled his hair. "You never did catch on about that. It's not that I'm averse to women—"

"Just their touch." That much, I remembered, and it still stunned me that I knew it, despite most everything else remaining a huge gaping blank.

"My old man tried fixing me when I was a teenager..."

I wasn't sure I wanted to hear more, but I remained quiet and waited for him to

unload.

“He forced a few of the slaves on me. This one...shit, I’ll never forget her. Sick bastard forced anal, and she was a fucking virgin.” He shuddered. “I didn’t actively participate, just laid there like a pathetic wuss while they forced her onto my dick.” He gritted his teeth, his whole face hardening in remembered horror. “It fucking hurt her like hell, but that didn’t stop me from coming in her ass. I’ve never heard anyone scream the way she did. Sometimes, I swear I hear her still.” He lifted the bottle to his lips again.

My gaze fell to his bare feet. The guy had been through some shit. “What happened to your sister?”

“My uncle wasn’t the only one who knew something was up. Old man sold her after I went to prison. He suspected I was gonna turn state’s evidence.” Jax chewed on his lip. “He’s dangled her location over my head ever since. Everything I’ve done...fuck man. It was you or my sister, and the only way he’d let me back into the underground was if I helped bring you in.”

“Damn,” I said, shaking my head. “What kind of bastard sells his own daughter? And why the fuck would you want back in?”

“I needed to find her. He keeps records of every girl he’s sold. I had to believe he’d done the same with Tawny.” A scowl darkened his face. “Cleft was her handler. He actually liked Tawny, protected her against the clients and their filthy wandering hands, but when it comes down to orders from the boss, they all scuttle.”

“That why you killed him?”

“He had it coming.”

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I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “Did you find what you needed down there?” If he had, at least all of this wouldn’t have been for nothing.

“No. I’m guessing he’s keeping the info somewhere in the mansion. Her file wasn’t in the office with the others. That was my next step—finding a window of opportunity to search the estate—but after Nikki...” He dropped his head into his hands. “I couldn’t do it anymore.”

I wasn’t about to tell him he was off the hook for Nikki’s death. Some part of me still blamed him, would probably always blame him, but I could understand the spot he’d been in.

He lifted his head. “There’s more, Rafe.” He paused long enough to rub his palms down his face. “Nikki has...had a son.”

“I know.”

His eyes widened.

“After what happened in that room, it came back to me. I don’t remember details, just that she had a son and he’s mine. You don’t think he’d hurt an innocent kid?” Even as the words left my mouth, I realized how ridiculous they sounded. Perrone had ruined his son and sold his daughter into sexual slavery. The man was the devil.

“He doesn’t know he’s yours,” he said. “I checked on Will after Nikki—”

“Will?” I asked, my heart pounding an erratic rhythm in my chest.

“The kid’s name.”

“My middle name.”

He nodded. “He’s with Nikki’s parents.”

I rose and paced the length of the futon, both hands pulling at my hair. “Your bastard father is gonna pay for all of this. We’ve gotta bring him down.” Perrone had ruined so many lives, including the lives of his children. But he’d fucked up by killing Nikki. He’d fucked up by bringing Alex into it.

He’d messed with the wrong motherfucker.

As I pulled the rolls from the oven, I blatantly eavesdropped on the tense conversation coming from the living room. Rafe and Jax had turned the television on low, but their voices rose above the white noise of the news.

“This is seriously whacked,” Jax said. “It’s risky, might even get us killed...but it could work.”

“Assuming he hasn’t already cleared the tunnel.”

“Doubtful. He thinks he’s invincible.” Jax scowled. “He’s got so many guys in his pocket, I’m surprised he has room for anything else. But that does present a problem. We can’t call in the cops to catch those assholes when they leave the tunnel.”

Rafe jerked his hand out. “Give me your cell.”

“What?”

“Your cell,” he said. “I know you have one.”

Jax dug into his pocket. “Who’re you calling?”

“Lyle Fucking Lewis. You said Nik’s body is out there somewhere in the woods, right?”

“They’ve got a dumping spot, but I don’t know where it is.”

“Lyle was going to marry Nikki. I don’t trust him to spit right, but he’s always had a weak spot for her. Hopefully he’ll be good for something besides wasting space in the sheriff’s station.”

“You’re twisted, man, calling in your enemy as the cavalry.”

“I don’t see what choice we have. There’s no telling how many cops your father has on his payroll, but I doubt he’s got the sheriff of Dante’s Pass in his fucking pocket. And like I said, Lyle has a personal stake in this—he just doesn’t know it yet.”

Rafe dialed information before stepping outside to make the call.

Chili simmered on the stovetop. Cook dinner, he’d said. He had a monster to take down and slaves to free.

How was this our life?

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My belly in knots, I knew I wouldn't be able to stomach the food, so I dished up two bowls and carried them to the table. "Food's ready."

Jax scraped a chair across the floor and sat down. He grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl and pulled out a pocketknife to slice it. My attention lingered on that knife, on the blade slicing through the proverbial forbidden fruit.

I envied that apple.

Rafe entered the room, startling me from my fixation on the knife, though the image stuck to my brain like crazy glue. He joined Jax at the table.

"You get him on the phone?"

Sliding the cell across the table, Rafe nodded.

"That must have been an interesting conversation."

"Kept it short and anonymous. I told him I had info on Nikki, and if he wanted to know more, he'd better wait for a call tomorrow and have some of his guys ready 'cause something's going down." Rafe absently pulled the bowl of chili closer. "Trust me. He'll be on his toes waiting."

I set the rolls on the table, and a chill traveled down my spine at the mention of Nikki. She'd been Rafe's girlfriend at one point, and now she was dead.

Because of my lie.



I went to move away, but Rafe grabbed my arm.

“Aren’t you eating?” His gaze swerved between the food and me.

“I’m not hungry.”

Shaking his head, Jax let out a low whistle. “She’s anorexic, man.”

“What?” Rafe bolted upright, and I shrank back, pulling from his grasp. His expression softened, and he reached out a hand. “C’mere. I’m not gonna hurt you. I was just caught off guard and...”

“Angry with me.”

He grabbed me around the waist and sat back down, planting my ass on his lap. “Why would you do that to yourself?”

“I didn’t,” I said, but Jax snorted. I shot him a glare. “You think you know all about me, but you don’t.”

He held his hands up. “If you say so.”

I returned my attention to Rafe. “After what happened with Zach, my dad admitted he’d manipulated me into believing I had a problem with anorexia. Some people stress-eat. I do the opposite.”

“Why would he do that?”

“To protect Zach, I guess. He made me think I was sick so he could shut me away in a treatment center.”

Rafe pushed his bowl away. “I’m not eating until you do. How’s that for manipulation?”

“I told you, I don’t—”

“Your father is an ass. He probably did play you, but that doesn’t change the fact that you need to eat. You’re not starving yourself under my watch.” He raised an eyebrow. “I’ve said that before, haven’t I?”

“Sort of, yeah.”

He closed his eyes for a moment. “That’s why I made you eat off the floor.”

My breath caught in my throat. His memories were slowly trickling in, and the idea of him regaining those missing years excited and scared me in equal amounts. I slid from his lap. “I’ll fix myself a bowl.”

“Good girl.” He smacked my ass. Hard.

I peeked over my shoulder, expecting to find a teasing grin curving his mouth. Instead I found the glint of dark temptation dilating his pupils. His green eyes were a deep jade. I recognized that look. I hadn’t seen it in a while, but that right there was the guy who’d bent me backwards on the island. The man who’d promised pain, indefinite imprisonment, and a thirst for my tears.

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Swallowing hard, I scooped some chili into a bowl as he and Jax returned to debating the best way to break into Lucas' estate without setting off the alarms.

On my way back to the table, the image of my father's face on TV froze me. The newscaster's lips moved, but I couldn't hear what she was saying. I moved across the room and flipped up the volume.

"...was arrested on charges of corporate conspiracy and embezzlement. Authorities say De Luca—"

"That's another example of the old man's power," Jax said, pointing toward the TV. "He learned De Luca paid off a judge in your trial, so he went after him too. He's been planning his downfall from the beginning."

I stared in shock at the image of my father's face. "That's why Lucas wormed his way into the business, got on my dad's good side...wanted to marry me? To Ruin us?"

Jax didn't answer, but he didn't have to.

Rafe cursed under his breath. "Abbott's arrest is the only good thing that came out of this." He crossed the space between us and tilted my chin up, forcing me to meet his eyes. "Your father can't hurt you anymore, and once I find Zach, he won't be a threat either." His mouth formed a determined line.

"No." The idea of Rafe going after my brother terrified me. The moment Zach shot him replayed in my mind. Rafe had lost his memory because of what happened that

night. We'd both lost so much. "Let's just get far away from here. I don't want you going after Zach."

I didn't want him going after Jax's father either, but I understood why they needed to do it. Those women were still prisoners, their whole lives spreading before them, just out of reach because sick and perverted men saw them as nothing more than possessions.

"Where's this coming from?" Rafe asked. "After everything that happened, you know as well as I do that Zach won't give up. Don't you want him to pay for what he did?" He narrowed his eyes. "Or is it something more? You feel something for him?"

"No!" I blinked, fighting tears. "He shot you. I just...I can't—"

The newscaster's voice interrupted, and we both focused our attention on the TV at the mention of Mason Vineyards.

"A devastating fire broke out at Mason Vineyards early this morning. It's not clear yet if the fire was accidental, according to Deputy Fire Chief Stanton, who says his department is still investigating. There were no reported deaths from the fire..."

The bowl of chili slipped from my fingers and cracked at my feet. Rafe sank into the chair and buried his head in his hands. Jax shut off the TV, and the silence that tore through the room disturbed me on such a deep level, I wanted to scream just to break it. I lowered to my haunches and placed my hands on his knees.

"I'm sorry."

He looked up, his eyes tired and defeated. "They already burned the island, and now the vineyard. Perrone is systematically destroying my family's legacy." My hands fell away as he stood.

He began pacing, but Jax gripped his shoulder. “And tomorrow, we’re gonna destroy my legacy.”

Rafe’s soft snores should have offered me comfort. They assured me he was beside me, alive. Breathing. Still with me. But it wasn’t enough. Everything pressed on me too heavily—the destruction of Mason Vineyards, my dad’s arrest, Rafe and Jax planning to go after Lucas.

The turmoil inside me was a beast, its teeth gnawing from the inside, claws scratching to get free. I’d conditioned myself to keep my eyes dry for years, even while Zach thrust his cock into every part of me. Especially then. I’d learned to deal with emotions another way.

It was unhealthy and abnormal, but causing pain was the only way I knew to dampen the clutch of the beast inside me that stole my breath and turned my chest into a pressure cooker. Pain brought a blessed sigh of relief as my skin tingled and burned. It was like a drug. I caught a whiff of my next fix now, except gouging flesh with the sharp edge of my fingernails wouldn’t be enough this time.

I couldn’t unglue my mind from Jax slicing into that apple with a blade.

Slipping from bed, I made my way quietly into the bathroom, shut the door, and switched on the light. The mirror above the sink whispered to me, and I stared at the damage Zach had done to my abdomen. I craved the sting, craved the sharp bite of a blade drawing a line of crimson. I wanted red to wipe away those carved letters, thirsted for the subsequent relief that would follow the cut.

I wanted the death of his fucking name.

Spurned on by the need raging in my blood, I switched off the light and left the bathroom, my bare feet padding across the hardwood toward the hall. I cracked open

the door and waited a few seconds, listening.

Rafe's breathing continued, uninterrupted.

I crept toward the kitchen with soundless steps, navigating through the shadows of night, and prayed Jax wouldn't find me wandering the house naked. My blood begged to be spilled, cried from within my veins, an accomplice of the ever-thirsty beast that possessed me. I pulled a drawer open and grabbed the biggest butcher knife I could find, then I tiptoed back to the bathroom, praying I wouldn't wake Rafe.

I had to do this, needed it with a driving force I barely grasped, so how could I expect him to understand it? No doubt, he'd be furious, and this would probably hurt him as much as me, if not more, but that didn't stop me from shutting myself in the bathroom and slicing down my stomach, right through the ~~Ain~~ Zach's name. I closed my eyes and sighed as the sting radiated from that spot, breathed easy for a few glorious moments when reality narrowed to the pain and overshadowed the hollow ache in my chest.

Yet the tears still wouldn't come. I needed more. More, more, more.

Teeth grinding, I slashed again, this time horizontally through every single letter. My fingers shook around the handle, knuckles whitening from holding it so tightly, and I used my free hand to smear the blood. Finally, hot and bitter drops fell from my eyes, one after the other in an endless stream that fed the beast.

Like a finger painting, the red obscured Zach's name, though it still weighed heavily on my skin, a constant reminder that he'd always be with me no matter how far I ran from his memory. No matter how much time passed and the rest of me healed.

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Letting out a sob, I sliced again...again and again and again. God, it wasn't enough. I might be erasing Zach, but what about everything else? The days spent in the dark with Rafe, certain we were going to die? I couldn't breathe, but I didn't want to halt the ambush of sorrow flowing down my face in rivulets of shame either. My lids shuttered, and I embraced the release, cherished the thrill of power I got from that blade.

A fist clamped around my wrist, and my eyes flew open. Rafe squeezed hard until I involuntarily dropped the knife. Through the chaos barreling through my being, I had trouble registering his presence, or what the tick in his jaw meant.

His hooded gaze pinned mine by way of our reflections in the mirror until he spun me around to face him. He wrenched my arms behind me and held my wrists together. Something sparked alive in my veins, trilled deliciously in my ears.

“Don't move an inch.”

With a quick nod, I swallowed hard. He slowly let go of my hands, framed my cheeks with warm palms, and kissed the tears from my face.

“Why are you in here unraveling on your own?” His tongue darted out and caught another drop.

“I don't know.” I forced the words beyond the lump in my throat. “I need the pain. I need his name gone. I need it all gone.”

Letting go of me, he opened the medicine cabinet. Neither of us spoke as he cleaned

up the blood. I stood, my hands clasped behind me, while he applied antibiotic ointment and taped a bandage over the reddening slashes.

“At least you didn’t slash too deep.” He stood back, arms falling to his sides, and I burned under his fierce scrutiny. “You could’ve really hurt yourself. There are other ways to remove his name, Alex. Cosmetic surgery, ink. This isn’t the way.”

“I’m sorry.” I bit my lip, my cheeks flaming. His disappointment stung.

“I won’t let you self-destruct, so you’ve only got one option. You’re gonna let it out right now. All of it.”

I shook my head, eyes downcast.

He gripped my shoulder and pushed me from the bathroom. My heartbeat raced as the shadows reached from the corners of the room, threatening to choke me, but I wasn’t afraid. Not while Rafe was with me, his body warm and steady at my back. The strength in his capable grip grounded me.

He pushed me toward the bed. “Bend over the end.”

I tumbled onto the bed, palms bracing myself, and laid my cheek on the soft comforter.

His determined steps thumped across the floor. He didn’t have to tell me not to move as he rifled through the dresser drawers, his back to me, body cast in silhouette. We both knew I wasn’t going anywhere. He pulled out a belt and moved toward me, the thick strap of leather looped in his fist, ready to unleash punishment.

A drift of cool air blasted my backside as he stepped behind me, out of sight. I drew in a quick breath, preparing for the jolt of pain I knew was coming.



“If you need me to stop, tell me, okay?”

The pressure built in my chest again, and the sting in my eyes became unbearable, so I squeezed them shut. “Make it hurt.”

“Why?” His voice cracked, his anguish and confusion bleeding through that single word. “God, Alex. I’ve got a fucking hard-on from hell right now. The thought of hurting you shouldn’t do this to me. I don’t understand why you need it, why I do.”

“Then don’t question it.”

His rapid breaths filled my ears. “Don’t you ever cut yourself again.” The strap of leather bit into my ass with a harsh crack.

I jerked upright with a cry, my legs quaking from the force of the strike. He shoved me back to the mattress with a firm hand, and another lash landed on my ass, as unforgiving as the first.

Panting, I cursed the heat igniting between my thighs and pressed them together, waiting for the next strike.

“Don’t hide from me. Spread your legs.”

I groaned but did as instructed, certain my arousal was on full display, despite the cloak of shadows from nighttime. He shifted, pushing a draft of cool air toward my core, and trailed the belt down my back, tickling my spine. Gooseflesh broke out on my skin, and shivers wracked my body as he dragged the leather between my ass cheeks.

“Do you want more?”

“Yes.”

“I won’t strike you again until you tell me what you’re getting from this.”

I opened my mouth but couldn’t find an explanation. The silence, along with the loss of each second, coalesced into a standoff. “Please, Rafe.”

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“You can beg all you want.” His finger slid through my wetness, dragging it to my clit, and I groaned. “I’m not giving you more until you tell me why pain does this to you.”

“It’s not just the pain. It’s...” I clenched my teeth, despising myself for being so weak as I moved against his finger. “It’s the loss of control. It’s knowing you’ll take care of me, even if it’s all on your terms. The pain...is a painkiller.”

Inserting a finger inside me, he brushed his lips at the small of my back, and his need for me puffed out in hot breaths that moistened my skin. He slipped another finger in, eliciting a moan, and increased the tempo. My hips bucked recklessly, my cries escalating with each forceful plunder. I arched my back, on the verge of convulsing around his fingers.

Abruptly, he stepped back, and the cruel bite of his belt stole my breath. I gasped, air suspended in my lungs, legs trembling. I closed my thighs again, and he blasted the leather even harder on my ass.

“Wide open, sweetheart.”

The endearment hit the most vulnerable part of my being, and I cried out something unintelligible. Holy hell, I was burning.

“More?” he asked, his voice a low growl.

“More,” I groaned.

Crack!

I wailed louder with each lashing, and something inside me finally broke free. He hit me until my eyes willingly bled the pain from my soul, until I could breathe again without the pressure crushing my heart.

“That’s it, baby. Just let it out.”

He placed the belt on the bed then gathered my wrists in his huge hand. He caged me with his body, his chest rubbing my skin, the heat of his thighs irritating my stinging ass. He wound my hair around a fist and tilted my face toward his. And he just kissed me. Long and slow, with the kind of patience I didn’t share because the throb between my legs was the most unbearable type of pain possible.

“I need you,” I said.

He jerked my head back, pulling tight on my scalp. “Every time you self-destruct, I’m gonna make you ache here.” He let go of my hair and slid his hand between my thighs to cup me. “I’ll make damn sure you hurt here until you’re out of your fucking mind.”

“Please...”

“You will never pull the bullshit you just did again, do you understand me?”

All I could manage was a whimper.

“I expect an answer.”

“Yes.”

He kissed me again, his moan of desire lost on our tongues. “You have no idea how badly I want to fuck you right now.” He let go of my wrists and stood back. “Turn over.”

I flopped to my back, a pulse of excitement zapping straight to my core.

“Remember this, Alex. When you punish yourself, you punish me too. I want inside you so fucking much right now, but it’s not happening.” His words washed over me like a tidal wave of disappointment I should have seen coming.

“Why?”

His gaze fell to the bandage hiding the ugliness on my abdomen, and my skin blazed with renewed shame. “Spread your legs.”

I parted my thighs, my breath catching, and sensed him reeling me in.

Her legs parted before my eyes like an unwrapped present. She was in the perfect position; round ass, still red from my belt, practically kissing the edge of the mattress, and her thighs unabashedly spread wide, pussy glistening in tempting beauty. She sprawled there—opening her heart, body, soul—with her hair fanning her face in a sea of dark curls. I dropped to my knees and lapped up her juices, sucked her swollen clit into my mouth, prepared to lick her until she moaned like a slut.

She panted, holding it in, but I wasn’t about to let her. She was going to wail my name, writhe against my tongue, and beg until she couldn’t beg anymore.

Fucking hell, I was lost.

I dipped my fingers inside her and flicked my tongue over her clit in a way I knew would drive her mad. She bucked, ass rising several inches off the bed, and I smiled

against her cunt. She let out a shrieking plea, but I rose to my feet before she had the chance to tip over the edge. Leaning over her, I grabbed my belt, thighs pressing into the mattress, and the heat of her skin seared through me. I stared into her eyes—two green orbs that held so much trust—and my hands trembled.

“You know I’d never hurt you, right?”

She nodded.

I lifted her head, wound my belt around her neck, and jerked the leather strap, bringing the back of her skull flush with the mattress. Her mouth formed a surprised O. I couldn't resist claiming her lips. She jutted her face forward, trying to deepen the kiss, but I yanked the belt and held her down.

"No," I said, fists gouging the bed to hold me upright. "You're gonna lay here and take what I give you." I plunged my tongue into her mouth and battled hers into submission. "Touch yourself for me."

With a breathless cry, she reached between us and obeyed. My cock brushed the back of her frantic hand. She worked her fingers over her clit so fast, the motion rivaled a vibrator. Whimpers sounded in the back of her throat, and her breasts heaved, nipples pebbling against my chest.

"Alex," I whispered, my lips trailing across her cheekbone to her ear. "Do you want me inside you?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"You aren't getting my cock."

She let out an adorable growl, and her hand stilled. "Then why am I touching myself?"

"Because I told you to." I inched back, keeping a firm grasp on the belt. I wanted to

wrap my hands around her neck, but I didn't trust myself with that responsibility yet, especially after the things Jax had told me.

"That's enough. Hands above your head." With a groan, she raised her arms again. I overpowered her with the sheer size of my body and settled between her legs, and she eyed my cock as if it were a prize, her tits heaving, tongue darting out to wet her lips. She'd gladly take me in her mouth, and holy hell how I wanted to sink inside that wet, hot place and lose myself. But not if it gave her any satisfaction. I had the job of protecting her, whether she liked it or not.

I folded my fist around the base of my dick and slowly ran up the length, watching her reaction. "Donotmove your hands." I leaned toward her mound, as if I were about to sink inside her, but pumped my cock instead, the tip just inches from her drenched opening.

"Rafe?"

"Shut up and watch me."

She pressed her lips together, and I worked my shaft, overcome with the need to connect with her in a way other than intense eye contact. I wanted to shove my cock in every part of her—her mouth, cunt...her tight little ass.

I wanted to own her body, command her mind, and make her drunk off me. Shame flushed my skin, swift and hot. I shouldn't want any of that—she shouldn't want any of that. Maybe we were both beyond screwed up. Maybe I should just give in because we couldn't go back after all the shit we'd been through together. Maybe I should say to hell with it, sink inside her, and lose my fucking mind.

Or maybe I should just choke the fuck out of her.



A strangled cry escaped my mouth, and I closed my eyes. Thick cum coated my shaft. I was so close, driven by the need inside me, by the images hurtling through my head of her fighting me, nails digging into my skin, my name tearing from her lips in a silent scream as I took her air.

“Rafe, stop shutting me out. Look at me.”

If I looked at her now, I’d be a goner. My lips tightened, spreading over my teeth, and I groaned—long, hard, guttural—as I spilled onto her mound. The release was so powerful it pulled me under for a few seconds, and my grasp on the belt slipped.

She veered up, pushing against my chest, and licked my shaft with a greedy tongue. My eyes shot open, and she returned my stare, her gaze huge and round and never fucking leaving my face. I thought I was punishing her by withholding, by making her watch me get off on my own, but I’d underestimated her conniving prowess. It was hard to punish someone whose only aim in life was to please.

I yanked her head back to the bed, gripping the leather strap tight, and pushed her dainty fingers between her legs again. “See what you did? You wear my cum like a fucking prize, Alex.”

She pressed a finger over her clit and furrowed a brow. “You’re still angry with me.”

“Damn right I’m angry with you. You drive me fucking crazy.” I slapped her thigh. “Tell me why you’re being punished.”

She moaned, her hand stalling on her clit, and thrashed her head back and forth. A wayward curl fell across her forehead. “I hurt myself.”

“Not just yourself. It kills me to see you like that.” Anger burned through my chest until I shook with it, but I wasn’t really angry at her—I was angry that she felt the

need to harm herself.

I was angry that I had to leave her tomorrow in order to keep her safe. She was going to be pissed when she realized I wasn't bringing her with me. Keeping her far away from Perrone was my top priority, but now she'd given me a new problem to face.

How could I leave her alone, even for a few hours, while Jax and I put our plan into motion? What if she went fucking slice happy on her skin again?

Shit. I'd have to restrain her.

"Alex..." With a sigh, I dropped my head between her tits and slid my hand over hers, into the mixture of our desire for each other. "The next time you feel like you're gonna break, come to me. I'll help you break, baby, then I'll put you back together afterward." I lifted my head. "No more hiding."

Her lower lip trembled, and she pulled it between her teeth.

“Say it, Alex.”

“No more hiding. I’ll come to you. I promise.”

The stench of tobacco ruined the crispness of approaching dawn, though considering what Jax and I were about to do, I wasn’t going to tell him to snuff out his cigarette.

“She cut herself last night.” I rubbed my arms for warmth. Birds chirped an annoying morning song of delight, and I wished for a fucking pellet gun.

Jax took a drag from his cancer stick, and his lips rounded as he blew it out into the chilly morning air, creating rings. “Did you put a stop to it?”

“Fuck yeah, I shut it down.” I frowned. “Probably went too soft on her.”

“How’d you handle it?”

“Took my belt to her ass. Withheld orgasm.”

He snickered around another drag. “From what I remember, that works on her.”

I gave him a funny look. “How close were you to that fucked up situation on the island?”

“Not as close as you’re thinking. I was busy juggling work and the old man’s demands. But like I said, you and I used to talk. You told me things.”

“Fuck, Jax, when I saw her slicing herself up...I can’t fuck this up.”

“You’ll get there. You guys are still figuring shit out.”

“Yeah, well this latest disaster is creating a new problem. I don’t trust her to leave her alone. Not so soon after what happened.”

“Sounds like a simple fix to me. You rigged that bedroom to restrain her. Check underneath the end of the bed.”

I arched a brow. “Why’d we get this place?”

“In case shit went to hell on the island. I kinda pushed for it. You couldn’t see past imprisoning her on that island. Talk about single-minded focus.”

That seemed to be my problem when it came to her. Even back when she was fifteen, before I’d gone to prison, I couldn’t go near the De Luca mansion without my head getting stuck on the seductively forbidden jailbait of Alex fucking De Luca.

How ironic I’d gone away for something I hadn’t yet done. My pulse skyrocketed. Maybe I’d deserved that prison sentence. Eventually, I would have crossed the line.

Probably.

Definitely.

“Check under the bed, man. Do it before she wakes up. It’ll make things easier.” He reached for the doorknob. “We need to get going soon. Bastard never misses his morning jog. It’s fucking clockwork.”

“You don’t think he allowed access to any of the other guys?”

“Not a chance.” He chewed on his lip. “He allows very few people inside the estate, and now with Cleft gone...”

Now he had a chance to get inside, unobstructed, in hopes of finding his sister’s whereabouts.

We entered the shadowed house, and I padded down the hall, hoping Alex hadn’t awakened yet. Considering her late night date with a knife, and the subsequent lashing and sexual mind-fuck I’d put on her, I expected to find her out cold for at least another hour. The sun had barely crawled an inch above the horizon.

So I was caught off guard when I found her by the window, arms folded around her body as if she could ward off the next attack with sheer willpower alone. It would take a while before she believed no one was coming to hurt her. Perrone and the rest of his men would pay for what they’d done, and Jax and I would free those slaves today.

The real question though, was how far was I willing to go?

Gawking at Alex’s nude form, cast in silhouette in front of the window, I knew I’d go to the blazing pits of Lucifer’s den to ensure her safety, to give her peace of mind in knowing Lucas Perrone would never threaten her again.

I crossed to the bed and bent to search underneath, where I found a hook in the floor and a coiled chain attached. Despite my quiet presence, she didn’t stir from her stance. I sank to the hardwood and reached behind me, curling my fingers around a shackle.

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“Alex?” God, how I wanted to wrap her in my arms and never let go. I’d failed her. No one should have to go through what she’d been through, the horrors she’d experienced, beginning with her own brother at the age of thirteen. But knowing what had happened to her all those years ago was vastly different from witnessing those bastards trying to break her.

How the fuck was I supposed to deal with that? How was she?

Maybe that was the problem. Neither one of us knew how to get beyond this. She’d finally let it out last night, but at what cost? More scars on her skin.

“Alex,” I said again.

She jumped, as if my voice was just now registering. “Sorry...I was thinking.”

“C’mere.” I patted the floor next to me. “What’s on your mind?”

Her feet glided across the hardwood, and she lowered next to me. “You.”

“What about me?”

“The way you made me feel last night. You helped me breathe, Rafe.”

“I left you fucking aroused as hell.”

“That part I’m not thrilled about, but the rest of it...”

“Sweetheart,” I said, pulling her to me so our mouths hovered close together, “then don’t piss me off again.”

Her breath escaped in a moist whisper against my lips. “Why are we sitting on the floor?”

“Give me your ankle, baby.”

“Why?”

“Don’t question or argue. Just do it.”

She scooted her butt and rested her foot in my lap. I pulled the shackle from underneath the bed, and she tried yanking away, but I held firm and locked the metal around her ankle.

“What’s that for?” Her voice shook, and she glanced around us, eyes wide.

“To keep you safe.” I jumped to my feet and headed toward the bathroom. The chain slid along the floor as she followed, and my fucking cock wanted out to play.

Damn. Chaining her up was a turn-on.

Before she could enter behind me, I slammed the door and locked it. Her fists pounded on the wood, her voice high-pitched with frantic questions. I ignored them, and for the moment, I ignored her.

Taking stock of the bathroom, I began by studying the mirror. If she broke it, she might try to slit her wrists like she had in that cabin, when Zach had taken her.

I shook my head, letting out a long breath. I didn’t think she’d do it. She loved me,

was happy here with me, but something had set her off last night. I didn't want to chance her doing something stupid while Jax and I were gone. I grabbed the plunger, turned it around, and used the handle to break the mirror. The pieces fell into the sink, and a few chunks dropped to the floor.

The pounding on the door grew in intensity.

Grabbing the wastebasket, I carefully picked up the glass and tossed the pieces into the trash. Next, I searched the medicine cabinet and drawers for anything she could use against herself. The razors went the way of the mirror. The tub was the only danger left, but I couldn't see her drowning herself. She was too terrified of water. Besides, I didn't think she was suicidal, just unpredictable when it came to coping.

Satisfied the bathroom was safe, I unlocked the door, yanked it open, and squeezed past her. She pitter-pattered after me, on my heels as I carried the trashcan toward the hall.

"Please don't go," she said. "I need you. Let's just run away and leave this place."

The chain stopped her from pursuing me, and she let out a curse. I entered the kitchen and dumped the glass and razors into the trash. Jax raised a brow, one corner of his mouth curving up in a smirk. A cup of coffee steamed between his hands. "I knew your badass self was still in there somewhere."

"Shut up," I said as I grabbed some granola bars and a few other food items to get her by for a few hours.

Jax's laugh carried into the hall, and I shut the door, silencing his know-it-all attitude. She sat on the bed, the picture of defeat, though her eyes spit fire at me. I set the food on the dresser, along with Jax's cell.



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“I’m only leaving the phone in case of an emergency.”

“You mean in case you don’t come back.”

“I will come back, Alex. But if it takes longer, or...”

“I get it. You want me to be safe. It’s always about that, isn’t it?” She lifted her foot. “Hence the fucking leash.” She drew in a deep breath. “If I never see another chain again, it’ll be too soon.”

“I’m sorry, baby.” I crawled onto the bed, but she turned her head away.

Grabbing her chin, I forced her mouth my way and captured her lips. She turned to liquid in my arms, her body sinking into the bed under me. I followed, my hands and knees depressing the mattress on either side of her. She brought a leg up and flung it over my back, and the chain clinked through the devious parts of my mind.

I nibbled her lips, lowered to her tits and caught a nipple between my teeth. She cried out, and her fingers gripped my shoulders, holding me to her.

“Stay with me. Please, Rafe. I have a bad feeling. Every time we think things are gonna get better, something bad happens.”

“Not this time.” I inched down her body, lowering between her legs, and buried my face in her pussy. I fucking made her forget everything—what Jax and I were about to do, how I was going to leave her chained to my bed. I made her forget her own name because she was too busy crying out mine.

I glided my tongue between her folds, my fingers working her cunt, and she shuddered, muscles spasming as the orgasm claimed her. I sat up and licked my lips. “That was me saying I’m sorry.” Before she could stop me, I slipped from bed and spanned the distance to the door.

“I’ll never forgive you for this!” She threw a pillow at my head, but I easily dodged it and tossed it back.

“Yes you will. Our whole fucking existence is based on forgiveness. I love you,” I said, pulling the door open. “See you soon.”

Nothing bad would happen this time. I kept picturing Alex, her face bunched in fury at the way I’d manhandled her, though desolation had lurked underneath her ire.

I had to make it back to her. I had to.

“Having second thoughts, man?” Jax asked as he hammered on the padlock that blocked our way into the crawl space. To avoid tripping the alarm, we’d chosen to break into the estate by way of the passage Jax said led to the basement.

“Third and fourths too.” I shook my head and sighed. “Let’s just do this.”

Any way we looked at it, getting those women out of there wouldn’t be easy. Breaking into the tunnel would put them at risk, since Perrone’s men outnumbered us, and calling the cops carried a whole other set of problems—mainly that we didn’t know who Perrone had in his pocket.

“How much time do we have again?” I asked, shuffling my feet. Jax wanted to find info on his sister, and I wanted him to find what he needed.

“Maybe thirty minutes.”

“That’s shit for time.”

“Tell me about it. Old man’s runs are getting shorter.” He hacked at the lock some more. “I was clocking his jogs before I busted you guys out, but getting past Cleft was a different matter.” Jax finally broke the lock and lifted the door to the crawl space. A black square of nothingness faced us. Shit, I hated the thought of squeezing through that tight space.

Jax fell to all fours and disappeared inside. I followed suit, batting away cobwebs, and tried not to let the dark get to me.

“This seemed much bigger when I was eight.” Jax slowed and aimed his flashlight above. A square hatch called from overhead, whispering for us to shove it open and escape this claustrophobic grave. “Here, shine this up there, would ya?” He handed the light to me.

I aimed the beam upward while he pushed against the hatch, his face straining.

“Shit,” he said, slumping. “I’m positive this end wasn’t locked.”

Didn’t mean Perrone hadn’t secured it since we’d escaped.

Jax tried again, and the door finally creaked. Dust rained down and covered his face. He shook his head until his shaggy hair fell into his eyes. Brushing it aside, he threw his shoulder into the hatch and lifted, and it slammed to the floor of the basement with a vibrating thud. More dirt fell on us.

Jax disappeared into the opening, then he popped his head back through. “Bring in the cans, would ya?”

“Yeah, sure.” I scooted backward through the passage and touched down on the hard

earth behind the estate. We'd hauled in four cans of gasoline, and they sat untouched, lined up against the side of the mansion. I slid them forward through the space, scraping over rock and dirt.

Jax lifted them one by one into the basement, and I hefted my body through the opening and dropped to the cold cement. I didn't like that we were so fucking close to that tunnel. I eyed the door hiding the staircase, and for an insane moment I imagined someone bursting through and dragging me back.

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Imagined Alex still down there, chained in their torture room, her flesh taking the brunt force of Brock's whip.

No. I had to keep my head in the game. Alex was safe, chained to my fucking bed like the temptress she was. The sooner we finished this, the sooner I could get back to her.

Jax headed toward the door leading upstairs, and I tailed him, following his lead as we made our way to the main floor. Early morning sunlight gleamed off the counters in the kitchen. I checked to make sure the gun was still jammed into the waistband of my jeans.

He shot me a worried look. "You sure you can handle this?"

Murdering Lucas Perrone in cold blood? Not really, but I wasn't about to back down. He'd destroyed too many lives, and I didn't hold out much hope that law enforcement would dole out justice. He probably had judges in his pocket, in addition to cops.

"You don't have to watch," Jax said. "I've been waiting for this day for a long time. The fucker deserves to burn."

A shiver went through me at his tone. He talked about killing his father as if it were a chore we were debating. And I got it, I did. I'd wanted to kill Perrone and his men too, but when faced with the actuality of taking someone's life...

"Maybe we should try the Feds, someone higher up."

“He’ll never stop until we’re dead. Even if we get lucky and they put him away, he’s got too many connections. I would’ve run long ago, if I thought I could.”

Standing in Perrone’s kitchen, discussing his impending demise, made me twitchy. I didn’t want his psycho father coming after Alex. In fact, I wouldn’t be satisfied until he couldn’t speak her name.

But killing the bastard...

That only reminded me that I had killed a man—I just didn’t remember it. My mind had blocked it out, buried the memory long before I’d wiped out the whole fucking eight years.

We stepped down a few steps, crossed the humongous living room, and Jax halted at a door. He tried the handle, but it didn’t budge. Stepping back, he kicked below the knob, just like I’d done with the shed, and repeated the blows until the door broke under the onslaught of his boot. He shoved it open and glanced at his watch.

“We have maybe fifteen minutes.” Perrone worked from home, so his morning jog was the only time Jax knew he’d be gone with certainty. Jax strode over to the built-in bookshelves and began flinging open cupboards, rifling through files.

I checked out the rest of the room. The space was free of Perrone’s nefarious nature—no signs of his thirst for sexual slavery. Deep mahogany paneling decorated the walls. The desk sat front and center, oversized and as masculine as the rest of the study, which reeked of prestige and money. I hated it on sight because it was so perfectly Perrone. Blatantly pretentious with an even larger collection of artwork and antiques than the wretched square box in the underground.

“Rafe, you’re gonna wanna see this.”

Keeping an ear out for his father's arrival, I moved to stand next to Jax. He extended a file to me. "He's got one on Alex."

Letting out a curse, I took the folder and turned away. The photos I found inside were all of Alex. Sleeping, picking at her food, staring off into space with that faraway look in her eyes—the look she wore when she was sad, worried, or scared. I shuffled through the pictures, and when I came to a few displaying the naked expanse of her skin, drops of water trailing between her breasts from showering, I wanted to punch something.

No. I wanted to fucking rearrange Perrone's face. He'd obviously been stalking her, putting her under surveillance, all while dating her.

The sick fuck.

I removed the photos and pocketed them before snapping the folder shut. "Anything on your sister?"

Jax slammed a drawer shut and opened another. "Nothing."

"I'm sorry, man." I handed him the empty file, but the chirping sound of an alarm froze us both. A series of beeps sounded, a door shut, and footsteps thumped over polished floors, drawing closer. I pulled the gun out and moved across the room with the stealth of a tiger in mid-hunt. The door shielded me from view, but Jax stood directly in front of the desk, arms crossed, preparing to confront his father.

Perrone stepped inside, still decked out in his drenched running shorts and T-shirt. I almost didn't recognize him without his trousers, shiny shoes, and air of superiority.

"How did you get in here? I know I changed the codes, boy." He wiped his face with a towel, and I used the distraction to come out of my hiding place.

“Go take a seat,” I said, jabbing the back of his sweaty head with the barrel.

“You’ve got some balls to break into my home. Into my office.”

“You’ve got some balls to take photos of naked women.” I propelled him forward, and the asshole laughed.

“Found the file, did you?” He meandered to the executive chair, his expression smug, casual, as if he didn’t have anything to fear.

“Shut the fuck up.” I shoved him to his ass and trained the gun on his temple. My gaze flickered to Jax.



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“Where’s Tawny?” Jax placed both hands flat on the desk and glared at his father. He grabbed the pen and notepad sitting to his right and thrust them toward Perrone. “Details, old man. Address, the men who bought her, how much she went for. I want all of it.”

Perrone eased back in his seat, as if the barrel of my gun didn’t bother him, and picked up the pen. He tapped it against the desk in a rhythmic beat that set me on edge.

“She went for a hundred grand. You should be proud of that. The buyer went by the last name of Perez. He took her to Mexico where the whiny bitch died.” Perrone smiled. “I heard she died just like Nikki Malone did. Perez didn’t have the patience to train someone as strong-willed as Tawny.”

Jax stumbled back, his face blanching in denial. “You’re lying.”

“Fraid not, boy. Your sister’s dead.”

Tap, tap, tap with that fucking pen.

Perrone leaned forward, unfazed with how his words impacted his own blood.

“I don’t believe you,” Jax said, hands bunched at his sides.

I knocked him in the temple with the gun. Wincing, Perrone dropped the pen, and it slowly rolled toward him. He regarded me from the corner of his eye. “Did Alex tell you how she enjoyed sucking me off? I’ve got a big dick, and I rammed it so far

down her throat, she cried.”

The thought of Alex crying for anyone besides me filled my veins with too much energy—the dangerous kind that sparked and singed until I nearly blew.

“Bitch gagged on my cum.”

Images of urine trickling down her legs, her screams as Brock’s whip tore through her flesh, sent me into a tailspin.

I’d failed her.

This scum bucket had worn her down, made her give him something she’d resisted giving me—her fucking tears. He’d taken everything; the island, my family’s vineyard, Alex’s last shred of self-respect. The bastard had ruined his own children’s lives.

As that pen drew closer, as Jax’s shoulders drooped in defeat, I saw Nikki in my mind’s eye. The mischievous spark in her gaze, the way her laughter used to fill me with contentment. She’d been the mother of my child.

And Perrone had taken her from our son in a bloody display of horror. One quick swipe of a knife, and she was gone, her life gurgling from her throat, hands wrapping around her neck as if she could contain her own life-force. Jax’s grief as it slid down his cheeks...the way he’d held her, bawling like a broken man.

Everything hurtled through my head in a turbulent mural of rage.

I lurched forward, grabbed the pen, and stabbed Perrone in the neck, right where his veins pumped corrupted, evil blood to his brain. He jerked over the desk, fingers clawing at the pen, and pulled it out amidst a gush of blood.

Red...that's all I saw as I wrapped an arm around his neck and squeezed with every bit of strength I possessed. Letting the fucker bleed out wasn't enough. Jax shouted something, but I couldn't hear shit beyond the roar in my head.

Perrone struggled for a few intense seconds, a blip in the grand scheme of things, before he slumped over the smooth surface of the desk, gone to the world.

Dead.

Unable to hurt anyone else.

"You killed him." Jax grasped his blond hair and stared at me, mouth gaping.

I stepped back and lifted my blood-drenched hands. The sticky red bathed my arms and shirt. Outwardly, I was the picture of calm, as if I'd taken a life without a second thought, but on the inside, I cowered in a corner and silently screamed.

Heartbeat racing way too fucking fast, I pulled out the throwaway phone we'd bought on the way to Portland. A tremor seized my fingers, and I had to punch in the sheriff's number twice before it went through.

He answered on the third ring with a barked, "Lewis."

"You'll find Nikki Malone's remains somewhere in Forrest Park. You'll need—"

"Who is this?" he shouted through the earpiece.

"Shut up and listen." The plan relied heavily on chance and Lyle Lewis actually acting on an anonymous tip. "You'll need several men, probably a few ATVs. There's an underground tunnel being used for sex trafficking." I relayed the general whereabouts of the entrance, though Jax and I had a hard time pinpointing the area on

a map, which made explaining it over the phone next to impossible. If they didn't show, or if they did but couldn't find the right spot...

He began interrogating me, so I ended the call, and that's when the shaking started, the rush of heat flushing my skin. My stomach revolted, and my knees buckled.

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Jax blinked, hands still clutching his hair as he stared in horror at his father. He blinked again, shook his head, and closed the distance between us. “C’mon. We gotta move.”

He had to drag me down to that slab of a room, because I’d checked out. Whispers of the past taunted the edges of my sanity, and the mustiness of the basement incited flashes of my cellar on the island.

Alex. God, I could see her so clearly, her body shivering next to me, skin damp as I fisted her stringy hair in a tight grip. The clank of a lock. Her desperate pleas for me not to leave her in that cage.

Jax picked up a gas can and held it out to me.

We started in the basement, spilling gas into the crawl space since the other end was closest to the generator. Next, we hit the kitchen, the living room, dousing the furniture and curtains. The throw rugs.

But it was too much.

The putrid scent of gas reminded me of the night they’d taken us, and I relived that island going up in smoke. I dropped the last can, still half full. “Sorry, I need to get outta here.”

“It’s okay, man. Wait outside. I need to do this anyway.”

“Don’t blow yourself up.”

Jax shot me a sad, crooked smile. “I’ll try not to.”

As soon as I opened the front door, the countdown for the alarm sounded, and Jax hurried to finish spreading the gasoline.

I stumbled down the steps and fell to my hands and knees in the driveway. The red on my hands struck me in the face. Groaning, I rolled to my back and stared up at the azure sky.

I’d killed a man.

My heart pounded a slow, laborious rhythm. An airplane crawled across the sky, and I wondered what it would be like to be on that plane, to be someone else who had a future.

Jax hurtled down the stairs, boots thumping. “Get up!” he yelled.

I struggled to my feet as he struck a match and tossed it toward the mansion. The gasoline ignited and fire spread rapidly, licking the beams propping up the balcony over the front stoop, flaring inside the entrance, eating the curtains in a violent blaze.

Something crackled, then a thunderous crash sounded. We backed away from the heat, but an explosion went off, the force powerful enough to knock us to the ground, and I realized the generator must have blown. Pain jolted my head, my limbs, straight to my bones. Garbled noise seized my ears, muffling Jax’s shouts for me to get up.

Cops were on their way, he said.

I pushed to my knees and swayed.

And I remembered.

Everything.

As if the memories had always been with me.

I'd choked Jax's uncle in prison, my rage over Alex's betrayal a nasty entity that drove me in that moment. I'd squeezed his beefy neck, despite Jax trying to pull me off him, and hadn't stopped even when the vessels in his eyes burst.

I'd lost control and killed a man.

Devastation consumed me, making me dry-heave. It didn't matter if the guy had been on the verge of killing Jax. I'd taken the life of another human being, using nothing more than the strength in my own hands. Then I'd blocked it out, and Jax had let me exist in oblivion. But his uncle hadn't gone to the infirmary that day. He'd gone to the fucking morgue.

Then there were the rapes. God, the fucking rapes. I doubled over, holding my stomach, and the dry-heaves turned into full-fledged vomiting.

Alex.

This was hell.

I pulled at my hair, rose to my feet, and turned in circles as the urge to break something overcame me. The memories shredded what was left of my mind. I'd fucking tortured her. I'd forced her under water, had brutally fucked her. I'd left her cold, shivering, and freezing inside that cage, even after she'd nearly drowned. Holy fuck. I'd almost made her suck Jax's cock.

I'd treated her worse than a dog.

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The truth was so much worse than what I'd feared. What kind of man does that?

The kind of man I'd become.

The kind of man who'd stabbed a guy in the neck, choked him out like it was nothing, then burned down his fucking house.

Jax staggered to me, holding a hand to his bloodied head. "You okay?"

"Rafe Mason is dead."

"Dude, how bad did you hit your head? You're fine, but you won't be if we don't get the fuck outta here."

"I remember."

His eyes widened. "What? Seriously?" He wiped the bloody hair from his eyes. "What do you remember?"

"Everything."

Since I wasn't moving, he grabbed my arm and hauled me to the street. We walked the four blocks to his van, and thankfully any passerby was too worried about the billow of smoke pummeling the sky to pay us much attention.

Jax pointed to the passenger side of the van. "Get in."



Sirens blared as I slid into the seat. Jax started the engine and jerked away from the curb, tires spinning. He shot down the street, made a turn, then another, and the wail of sirens grew faint.

“I can’t go back, Jax. I can’t face her.”

“You just got your memory back.”

“I’ve taken enough from her. She’s better off without me.” I waved behind us, at the dark cloud of doom attacking the sky. “The threat is gone. She can move on, free from this, from her father, from me.”

“She fucking loves you. Do you really think she’ll just get over it?” He braked hard on a yellow light, and I shot my hand out to keep from careening into the dash.

“It’ll be hard at first, but I have to believe she’ll find happiness, live a normal life. Fucking find some closure and heal. As long as I’m around, she’ll never give me up.”

“And her brother will never give her up,” Jax pointed out.

I balled my fists. “I’ll take care of him. He’ll never hurt her again.”

“I’ll help you take care of him, but you need to get your ass back to her. You left her chained to your bed, man.”

I railed against the idea of her restrained to my bed. I didn’t think of freeing her. No, I thought of taking advantage, of choking her while simultaneously ramming my cock into her.

And she’d let me because she trusted me.

Ididn't trust me.

"I can't do it, Jax." I shook my head, mouth forming a stubborn line. "Part of me wants to go back eight years and shake some fucking truth into her. None of this would have happened. She wouldn't have been so fucking broken. I wouldn't have gone through hell in prison." I paused, dragging my hands through my hair, and tamped down the strangling overflow of emotion. "I wouldn't have killed your uncle. None of this would—"

"And I'd be dead."

Jax's gaze held mine, and the utter quiet that settled over that moment was spine-tingling. The light turned green, and we rolled forward again. "I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you." He scrunched his brows. "Or her. Fuck, Rafe. I've hated her for all kinds of reasons, but I never stopped to think about it like that. If she'd told the truth, you wouldn't have been there to save my ass."

There was no easy way to look at the fucked up mess we'd created. Any way I contemplated it, someone ended up dead. But I couldn't help but wonder how things would have turned out if Alex had told the truth. Zach would've gone to jail, and I was positive my pull toward Alex would have brought us together. Could we have ended up happy? Normal? Me, living the dream in the UFC with a hot, kinky wife and a couple of kids at my side?

It sounded good, but it didn't sound like us.

We couldn't bury our history. It was a fucking zombie that would just keep coming, no matter how many times we thought we'd laid it to rest. Unlocking my memory had screwed us. The anger, the agony, the fucking pain of betrayal that squeezed my chest until I couldn't fucking breathe...

I wanted to choke her for it all.

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I'd kidnapped her for a reason. I'd craved an outlet, and that gravitational pull that ensured Alex and I orbited each other wouldn't be denied. I'd needed her, only she'd needed a sane man who could put her back together again.

How could I fix her if I couldn't fix myself? How could I be the man she needed when all I wanted to do was bend her until she snapped?

"It's too late for us. What's done is done. Someday, she'll see it's for the best."

Jax sighed. "You think she's strong enough to stand on her own?"

"I know she is. She's stronger than me. I'm the one who needs her."

"Then fucking take what she wants to give. I don't see the problem here."

"The problem is me! I'm fucked. I've done too much."

"We've all done too much," he shouted, banging on the steering wheel. "Every one of us has done shit we'd take back if we could. You're just running away because you're scared." He jabbed his finger in my direction. "You're scared because you know she can handle what you want to dish out. Even more, she wants it. But you're scared of the responsibility."

"Fuck yeah, I'm scared! I'm terrified I'll hurt her. Every bone in my body wants to make her cry. I want her on her knees, chained to my damn bed not because I'm trying to keep her safe, but because that's where she fucking belongs. That isn't normal!"

“You,” he said, “have never been normal.”

I drew in a deep breath. “I can’t do it.” I gave Jax a pointed look. “I lost control with your uncle. I remember it all like it was yesterday. It was an accident, but what I did back there...” I gazed at the blood on my hands. The literal fucking blood. “I won’t risk her life.”

“You’d never hurt her.”

“Not willingly.”

“Okay then,” he said.

“Okay?” I raised an incredulous brow.

“I ain’t changing your mind about this, so why try?”

“Finally, something we agree on.”

“I still think you’re making a mistake. She’s gonna come undone when you leave, man.”

“You say you owe your life to me?”

Jax rubbed a hand down his face. “Yeah, I owe you.”

“Then make sure she stays in one fucking piece. Until she’s on her feet, watch her for me. Be there for her. You’re not the one who wants to fuck and strangle her.”

He glanced at me, slack-jawed.

“Jax, you’re the only one I trust.”

“What am I supposed to tell her?”

“The truth. The man she loves is dead.”