



His Witness To Save

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Description: Mack's life goes even more off track when Brie is taken away by the brotherhood from right under his nose. After leaving to follow a lead, he leaves Brie, and she is immediately taken away. With the Brotherhood as active as ever, Mack's mind begins to go into overdrive when another woman is taken and murdered. How far will the Brotherhood go? What if Brie's next? He is scrambling against time and must find a way to save them without the FBI getting involved. All he has is himself, his best friend Dave, and a handful of trusty men. The rescue plan is set into action, and Mack is determined to bring back the woman he loves, but just like everything, it comes with a price. A hefty price... Mack was able to save Brie with a price that is paid in blood, but things have started to shift between them. Guilt-ridden, he is unable to face Brie as he once used to. Mack is filled with fiery determination, and he knows that in order to overcome his guilt, he must avenge his people. He makes a vow that he will take down The Brotherhood on his own. No more blood will be shed but his own... But with feelings that he can't deny, Mack knows that there's only one way to resolve this, but in doing so, he might lose Brie forever.

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CHAPTER ONE

For the fifth time in as many minutes, Mack reached for the glass of water on the table. He gulped it down hurriedly, barely feeling or tasting anything. With shaking hands, he carefully placed the cup back on the coaster, spilling a little on his sleeve.

Every minute that passed worsened his imagination of the horrors Brie and Rachel must have been put through already at the hands of the mad man who kidnapped them. He could not stop blaming himself for what had happened. He refused to stop blaming himself, going over the events of the previous night, thinking of a thousand things he could have done differently.

"Would they still be here if I had never left?" he wondered internally.

A splitting headache raced through the back of his skull, and he instinctively massaged it, grimacing as he did so.

He remembered the alarm he'd felt when he got to Rachel's townhouse and saw the lights off. He'd never been so afraid in his life.

He'd snuck in, hoping to catch the criminals off guard before they had the opportunity to do any real harm to Brie and Rachel. Unfortunately, he hadn't been ready for the hostage situation waiting for him inside.

He should have known that a killer as ruthless as the man he was after would not be working alone.

His eyes began to water as the headache threatened to blind him.

With some effort, he wrenched his mind back to the present, back to the meeting with the FBI leaders. All the head agents present in the Chicago area had been called in to discuss the next step. That only included six agents, and with the agents under them, it was barely a full team.

Most of the agents were all away on missions of their own, and most of them were not expected back until next week. It would be too late by then.

He forced himself to listen as suggestions flew back and forth, all of them sounding useless. He wanted to be gone now. Yesterday.

"They could be anywhere by now," he heard Dave Simmons, the leader of Omega Two, say from across the room.

Mack grimaced and reached for his glass of water again.

As the team leader of Alpha Team One stationed in Chicago, Mack felt the failure on a personal level that was deepened even more by his personal relationship with Brie. Over and over, he cursed himself for having not seen the trap coming.

After the argument he'd had with Brie in Destiny Falls, he'd dropped her off in Chicago and returned to the FBI office to check out a source.

A member of the terrorist agency he'd been after for years, "The Brotherhood of Blood," had finally been spotted in New York after weeks of running.

On returning to the office, he'd barely been able to concentrate, feeling like he'd left things unsettled with Brie. He'd taken the case files with him, deciding to see Brie and tell her how he felt before he left, unsure of how soon he'd be able to see her

again.

They'd had a big fight at his father's house after his ex-girlfriend had shown up, calling her names.

Had that really just been yesterday?

Everything felt surreal. Nothing that happened yesterday mattered right now. All he wanted was to get Brie back into his arms, to hold her warm, pliable body, and push her soft hair behind her ear.

He grimaced as he thought of the last time he'd seen her— afraid, lost, broken – in the killer's hands.

He could not get the monster's voice out of his head, the disturbing way his hands had brushed over her breasts. The way he'd leered at her.

Mack took off his sunglasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose, hoping to massage away the migraine that threatened to drive him mad. The pills he'd swallowed this morning seemed to be doing nothing for him, and he felt he'd have to take a few more before the day was done.

He flipped through the file on his desk. It was the same file he'd come back for the previous night, just before he'd gone back to find Brie.

The scarred face of the killer stared back at him defiantly.

His name was "Kamal."

Mack said the name over and over in his mind, trying to get a feel of the man to which the name belonged.

With his eyes, he followed the line of the tattoo snaking around Kamal's neck, trying to read his mind.

What are you thinking?he asked the picture in front of him.What have you done with Brie?

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The deputy chief of the Chicago FBI unit was making a suggestion.

"Why don't we put together a strike team of our top agents from across the country and try to track down this bastard?"

Next to the picture of Kamal was the note he'd found on Brie's bedroom floor.

Even when he closed his eyes, he could still see the words firmly imprinted behind them.

They bounced around and around in his head, mocking him in Kamal's wet, leering voice.

"They're dead, and you're next."

His headache worsened, the voice in his head growing to a loud crescendo until Mack heard himself explode, "We don't have time!"

He rushed on as he felt all eyes in the room turn to him.

"We don't have the time to pull in any more men. We need to move now!"

The deputy chief sighed wearily. "It would be foolhardy, not to mention stupid, to strike with the men we have now," he said, gesturing vaguely around the room.

The other men seated around the table shuffled uncomfortably in their seats, looking everywhere except at Mack.

He knew what they all thought of him.

He knew they thought of him as a lucky, country bumpkin who'd barely managed to crawl up the ranks of the FBI. Many of them didn't believe he deserved his success and position. It was something that had always bothered him, but this time, he didn't care. All that mattered to him now was getting Brie back in one piece.

One by one, he looked at all their faces and felt the familiar anger rise within him.

He realized he could not wait for them to decide if they wanted to be alone or not. This was his job, his mission, and he'd be damned before he'd let anyone jeopardize it for him.

He took a deep breath and spat, "Send me."

They all looked up at him.

"Send me alone," he said again. "I'll go alone. I'll bring them home."

CHAPTER TWO

Mack felt the heat rise to his face as all pairs of eyes in the room swiveled in his direction and remained fixed on his face.

He forced himself to stand his ground and continue speaking, steadying his hands on the heavy oak table in front of him.

"I'm the best chance you have to bring those women home in one piece. I know how this bastard's mind works. I've fought him. I've been tracking him for years. I can do this. You know I can."

The deputy chief shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He was a short, squat, round-faced man with small dark eyes and equally small fingers. It was said that he'd risen through the ranks using a variety of despicable means, including, but not limited to, blackmail. He ruled his division with an iron hand that had earned him several colorful nicknames, none of which were repeated within his hearing.

Now, he trained those eyes on Mack and spoke slowly as though speaking to an uncooperative child.

"Mack, you're the leader of our Alpha team. We can't afford to let you be captured, or worse, killed. I can't authorize a solo mission."

"Then let me take my own men," Mack pleaded.

The older man shook his head in a gesture he imagined conveyed sadness.

"I'm sorry, but you know I can't do that. The Alpha team has been deployed to Yemen to take care of the crisis there. Pulling them back in now to chase after ghosts would be disastrous. Years and years of research and planning would be compromised."

Mack gritted his teeth and bit back the caustic response that had risen to his lips.

The deputy chief went on, "Everyone knows about your involvement with that Brie woman. You should know better than anyone not to get involved with witnesses, particularly those related to sensitive cases."

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The man went on berating him, telling him how much he had failed, while the rest of the officers in the room pretended not to notice what was going on.

The man was still talking. "If there's anyone to blame for this mess, it's you. No one else but you. If you'd only acted professionally like you were trained to do, this mad man would never have known of your connection to that woman, and none of us would need to be here today."

Mack's eyes glinted dangerously as he came perilously close to telling the older man off. The accusations were unfair, and the chief knew it.

Granted, he'd let himself get too close to Brie, something he'd been berating himself for since she'd been taken but still, it was no secret that Kamal had already had his eyes on her even before Mack came into the picture. It wasn't his fault she fit the profile of the kind of women The Brotherhood usually went for, and the deputy chief knew it.

There was no love lost between Mack and the deputy chief. Mack could remember several occasions when they'd clashed previously before. The deputy chief was one of the higher-ups who'd constantly tried to halt Mack's progress through the FBI.

Mack knew it was because the man's own cousin had been up for promotion the same time Mack had been, but he wasn't qualified enough, and so Mack had gotten the job as the team leader of Alpha Team One, a job he'd held for just under five years.

He could not stand the self-satisfied smirk on the older man's face. He knew the man was secretly pleased with his failure and was enjoying making him suffer this way.

He wondered if the oldman was going to let his pride stop him from taking the opportunity to stop The Brotherhood.

He was trying to think of an appropriate response to give the man when he heard a voice cut through the tension, "I'll go with him."

The voice belonged to Dave, the leader of Omega Team Two.

"I'll go with him," Dave repeated, looking at the deputy chief now.

Dave was a strong man, a good man; possibly the closest Mack had come to having a best friend since he'd joined the FBI after his brother died.

They'd known each other since they were just trainee cadets hoping to get into the FBI. They'd worked together on one or two missions in the past, and Mack trusted him as much as he trusted himself. If there was anyone he'd want to have on a solo mission, it would be Dave, and he was grateful that he spoke up.

Dave could barely stand the deputy chief and had been waiting for a chance to defy the man openly. This was the perfect opportunity to do it without being accused of insubordination. Plus, he genuinely liked Mack, and he thought of him as more than a brother. He knew the entire story behind the death of Mack's brother and understood the importance of this mission to him. He was willing to help in any way he could.

He wanted to nail The Brotherhood almost as much as Mack did because he'd lost a few teammates to them as well. He didn't mind risking his life to go after them, particularly now that innocent people were involved. There was nothing he hated as much as senseless violence.

Mack shot a grateful look in the man's direction as Dave continued, "I understand that this is impromptu, but we need to act now. Every minute we waste debating makes

the odds of those women coming out alive even slimmer. I'll go with Mack to track down the bastard."

He turned to face Mack, "I have a team of five men ready on standby. They're good men, reliable; they should be enough to make a difference."

Mack struggled to keep the relief from showing on his face. He didn't really want to go on his own, and he'd been wondering how on earth he was going to take down a group of terrorists on his own.

He nodded in Dave's direction, hoping his eyes conveyed the gratitude he felt.

He turned back toward the deputy chief, barely suppressing the smile that had risen to his lips.

"There you have it. I won't be alone. We'll be a team of seven men. Surely you can't say no to that.Sir."

The deputy chief's small beady eyes flashed, knowing he'd been beaten.

"Fine. Take your men. Go on your suicide mission, but I expect you to take full responsibility if anything goes wrong. There's no way I'm taking the fall for your lot."

Mack locked eyes with him and smiled triumphantly. "You won't have to."

CHAPTER THREE

Outside the FBI office, Mack and Dave sat at a cafe discussing their strategy.

So far, the only thing they knew about The Brotherhood was that they were a US-based terrorist group that sold weapons and especially enjoyed torturing women.

Beyond that, they knew nothing.

Their location, mode of operations, and their members had always been shrouded in mystery until Kamal.

They opened the file on him and skimmed through it, horrified by the history of violence it detailed.

Most of the stories from him had needed to be pried and pieced together slowly by people who'd known him throughout his lifetime.

Most of them seemed terrified of him, only agreeing to talk once they were sure that their identities would be kept secret.

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Going through the file with Dave, Mack could understand why they were so afraid. The man was a psychopath, a ticking time bomb.

Kamal had been orphaned after his entire family was killed in the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

His mother, father, and older sister had been present on one of the airplanes that crashed into the twin towers.

He'd been away at an expensive boarding school when he'd been told the news and had grown up as an angry teenager – getting into fights, almost getting expelled three times. The only reason why he'd been allowed to remain in school was the tragic circumstances surrounding his parents' death and the fact that his father had been a close friend of his principal, making several donations to the school during his lifetime.

Kamal was said to have displayed a deep hatred toward women. A hatred his high school therapist concluded was born from unresolved anger toward his mother.

He claimed his mother was to blame for what had happened to his family, insisting that it was her fault his family had been on that plane at all.

She'd been hounding his father for months about buying a new chain of hotels after his most recent promotion. He deserved it, and he could afford it, she'd insisted over and over.

They'd been on their way to check out a few choice locations and had decided to take

Kamal's sister along and make it a mini family vacation. The only thing that had saved Kamal was he'd been in the middle of the school year and could not leave.

If his mother hadn't been so insistent, he said, his father would still be alive, and he wouldn't have had to grow up alone.

It was a statement he'd been quoted to have made several times throughout his stay in high school, where he'd been known to terrorize and bully girls. Most of them had lived in fear of him, too afraid to even pass him in the halls. They didn't want to be subject to his inventive means of torture.

They'd all been too afraid to report him to the school authorities. Most of the stories had come out after he'd left and not immediately.

Kamal had never gone to college. After high school, he'd gone on to join the army, where he had few friends. His teammates reported him to be taciturn, never talking to anybody except for when he wanted to rant about how much of an inconvenience women were.

He'd been good at his job, though. He was especially good with weapons and hand-to-hand combat, and he took special pleasure in torturing his victims.

He never dated, but he visited brothels often, leaving their occupants afraid and traumatized.

Coincidentally, he'd been part of the seal team that attacked and killed Osama Bin Laden.

Apparently, the poetic justice did nothing to soothe his rage, getting angrier and more bitter after the operation. He seemed to have lost all reason, and he felt like his life had lost purpose.

He'd spent the entirety of his life angry, and now that he'd helped in killing the man responsible for his parent's death, he seemed lost.

He then directed his anger back toward women, calling them derogatory names whenever he felt like, even without provocation.

Several complaints were filed against him, but he'd charmed his way through several summonses until he couldn't hide his nature any longer.

He'd attacked a female superior one day in her office, and he'd eventually had to be discharged from the army on the grounds of insubordination and gross misconduct.

He was assigned a psychiatrist, another woman he'd visited only once before disappearing. No one heard anything from him for years, most of them relieved to finally be rid of him.

He'd stayed under the radar for a long time before reappearing as one of The Brotherhood.

By then, he'd become a cold-blooded killer with no respect for life of any kind.

How he became one of The Brotherhood, no one could tell, but it was rumored that he was especially close to the second in command.

His knowledge of the US army and his dexterity with weapons had made him a prized soldier. He thrived in the toxic environment created by The Brotherhood and was always ready to do whatever dirty work they required of him, no matter how disturbing.

Kamal had been a part of the men who'd killed Mack's brother. He felt particularly angry about that operation. It had been one of their biggest weapons deals in years

and, if it had gone successful, would have set him up for life.

Instead, Mack's brother had refused to let it go, meddling and thwarting their deals until they'd lost it.

Enraged, he'd sworn to deal with him and had personally planted the bombs in the warehouse where he'd been killed.

He'd also been the one to plant the fake intel that led the man to his demise.

Now, he seemed to be working on his own, solely deriving pleasure from torturing and killing women who tickled his fancy. He always had the same mode of operation – stalking them, playing mind games with them, making them paranoid, before finally kidnapping them.

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He'd then rape them and take demeaning pictures of them in compromising positions before murdering them in cold blood.

The interesting thing was all his victims bore a striking resemblance to his mother. They all had the same blond hair, the same plump bodies, and nerdy demeanor.

Apparently, Kamal had unresolved mommy issues.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mack and Dave read and digested the information with dread. They closed the case file and stared at the busy street; neither man said anything for a long time.

They sat sipping their now cold coffee, neither of them willing to break the silence just yet.

Mack gazed at the little girl skipping along the pavement ahead of her mother, pushing a stroller. The woman half-heartedly called out to her daughter, warning her to slow down.

How many little girls would never see their mothers again?he wondered.How many would need to be lost before the mad man was finally taken down?

He pulled out the note again and read the childish scrawl over and over, the words familiar to him by now.

They're dead.

They're dead.

They're dead.

He felt his head begin to throb again and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Sighing, he tore his eyes away from the little girl and her mother and forced his eyes back to the face of the man in the file.

Dave watched him for a few minutes, genuinely worried. He broke the silence. "Do you really think we can do this?" Dave questioned, taking a loud, obviously nervous sip from his coffee.

"I'd have more lies under my nose than Pinocchio if I said I was sure," Mack said, trying to ease the gut-wrenching tension they felt with a little humor, but nothing seemed like it could ever make him relax unless he saw Brie – alive at most, and smiling back at him for making such a lame joke.

Dave set down his cup and stretched his hand over to rest on Mack's shoulder. He gave his buddy a squeeze and let out a heavy sigh.

"We will get them back, okay?" he said with a weak smile.

"I really hope we do," Mack said in a mutter. No matter how hard he tried looking at the entire situation, every moment leading up to this point, he couldn't shake off that voice in his head, constantly reminding him that this was his fault. Maybe the deputy chief was right after all.

He looked outside the window once again while Dave got up to make a phone call. He noticed that the little girl he saw skipping past earlier had fallen and scraped her knee on the pavement while her worried mother kept trying to calm the crying child, scolding her for refusing to heed her warning. In a few minutes, the little drama was

over, and the girl was giggling once again, flashing a big grin to her mother as she took her hand and followed at her pace.

Somehow, that scene had sent a subliminal message to Mack, telling him to pick himself back up after the rough 'fall' he had with Brie and Rachel getting kidnapped by Kamal. He got a sudden rush of energy, and the will to give his all in the rescue mission came back. He had to start planning and fast.

Dave walked back into the room with an expression difficult to decipher on his face. He held his phone tightly in his right hand and scratched his thick brunette hair with the other. Mack hadn't noticed his presence and, for some strange reason, still had his eyes out the window.

"Ummm, Mack?" Dave called out in a nervous tone.

Swiftly, Mack turned his head to face his friend.

"News getting to us is that another woman has been abducted in the early hours of the morning," he said. "On her way to Walmart."

Mack's blood started to boil. He didn't know what upset him more; Brie and Rachel still in the serial killer's clutches or the fact that he had the nerve to abduct another barely 48 hours after.

Dave could read Mack like an open book. He could feel the same mixed feelings of rage, worry, and stress he did, and he didn't regret it one bit that he was barely a few workable plans away from a mission that could either make or maim his future with the FBI.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mack couldn't sleep. He hadn't been able to for two days because of the horrific hallucinations he had. He kept seeing Brie and Rachel getting raped by Kamal and his gang, and the images he saw of her at Rachel's townhouse didn't help matters at all.

He paced restlessly across the room as he tried to think of the suitable weapons he could request from the FBI higher-ups for this mission. He wasn't authorized to request for the high-grade weapons whose names he had written down in his journal, but he was willing to try anyway –anything to get Brie back.

As the new day dawned, he wasted no time in calling for a meeting with the six men he was about to rope into his 'suicide mission,' as the deputy chief called it. He was grateful for their presence in his office, and it even gave him a little confidence boost when the men helped in drawing out the inception plan for the mission.

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After nearly exhausting the entire day, drawing up plans and awaiting the arrival of the weapons the FBI had surprisingly approved, Mack felt fulfilled for the first time in a while as they concluded on pinpointing the hideout the following day and planning to lay ambush as soon as they were certain on their location, but all confidence went down the drain as Dave turned up the volume of the TV that was tuned in to the NYC Evening News Hour.

BREAKING NEWS: WOMAN ABDUCTED ON HER WAY TO SUPERMARKET FOUND DEAD IN NYC ALLEY

As if the headline wasn't bad enough, the cold, emotionless voice of the reporter pierced through all their enthusiastic spirits as she mentioned that it looked as though the victim was tortured and raped before she was brutally murdered. She also mentioned that a message was left beside the victim's body. It appeared to be written in the victim's blood, and it read:

MORE ON THE WAY.

Dave shook his head and sent a punch to the table as Mack stood from his seat and walked slowly toward the giant plasma TV mounted at the other end of the room, staring at it as if his eyes could change what was written. He had had enough. He was sick and tired of the mind games Kamal was playing on him, tired of waiting a moment longer like the voice in his head kept on telling him that Brie and Rachel were as cold and stiff as the lady on the TV screen, and he couldn't help but burst into tears.

"Chief!" one of the men blurted out in the middle of Mack's mental breakdown. He

quickly wiped up his tears and answered as sternly as he possibly could. "What is it?" he asked.

"My intel has pinpointed the exact location of the Brotherhood of Blood, sir!" he said anxiously, totally oblivious to what Mack's response would be.

Mack stared at him wide-eyed and silent. He couldn't believe what he was hearing but managed to ask, "How?"

"The hidden CCTV camera at Walmart captured two suspicious-looking figures exiting the premises, sir!" he said. "A face scan was done, and one of the suspects was identified to be Kamal himself."

The entire room went silent as he finished talking, and Mack broke the silence by saying, "We leave tomorrow by dusk."

The information was sent to the deputy chief, and Mack was called up to his office in the middle of another meeting with his team about their choice of evasive attack. Mack was hesitant about coming face to face with the deputy chief again because he had a feeling he was going to chew on more than a few of his bones if he tried tossing the hot potato at him again. But Dave advised him to go, at least to update him on their recent conclusion about invading the proposed den of the Brotherhood of Blood.

As soon as Mack approached the office, a few light knocks were all it took for the door to fly open and shut, and he found himself in the middle of the office, staring eye to eye with the deputy chief.

"Good day, chief," Mack began.

"I think you should cancel the mission," Deputy Chief Rodgers said without a response to his greeting.

"What?" Mack asked with an obvious look of surprise on his face.

"You heard me loud and clear, son," he said, "I can't authorize you to go there until we have a solid lead on how to tackle them."

Mack lost it. The look of rage was evident in his face as he landed his hands forcefully on the DC'S desk, sending a few stationeries rolling to the ground.

"I don't care if you authorize this mission or not!" Mack yelled. "I have my team ready, and if you think one dead body is going to stop us from going in, then you must be horribly mistaken."

Deputy Chief Rodgers was caught off-guard. He had expected him to be angry about his instruction, but he hadn't seen this level of rage from Agent Mack before.

Before he could say anything, Mack continued, "Brie and Rachel have been in captivity for almost three days, which is already enough time for them to be butchered to bits!" he blurted out. "I don't know if you truly care about me or if you are just looking for a way to pin all this on me again, but my team and I are going, and there is nothing you can say or do to stop us!"

And with that, Mack stormed out of the office without even a glance back at the stunned deputy chief.

Mack walked back into the room with his team, and they all stopped to cast him a look of hope. Dave walked over to Mack, and with a light pat on this back, he said, "Let's do this."

CHAPTER SIX

You didn't need a shaman to tell you about the anxiety Mack felt that night. He didn't

want to be alone, so he begged Dave to stay the night at his place, at least running the plan over with him again and again until he was satisfied that it would work to a reasonable extent.

After running through the plan for the hundredth time, Dave saw Mack do something he was sure he had never seen him do until now – pray. Mack suddenly got down on his knees and stayed still, pressing his hands tightly together and muttering inaudible words to a supernatural being he suddenly believed existed. Mack grew up in a Christian home but didn't see the need to pray until now, asking for one thing and one thing only – the safety of Brie and her friend.

Dave didn't interrupt him as the success of this mission depended on him, so it was only fair he asked for assistance from God.

A few minutes later, Mack got up and walked over to sit on the bed with his head down. Dave knew he was lost in thought and only offered a reassuring pat to the back, as Mack envisioned the worst for the mission.

Dawn arrived, and so did the rest of the team, double-checking that all the weapons they had were properly functional. Running over the plan as a team now, Mack gave a little pep talk, and the other men cheered him on, even though they knew deep within that they were about to embark on one of the most dangerous missions in their entire FBI career.

The day got darker, and every member of the team said a silent prayer as they approached the supposed hideout of the Brotherhood of Blood. A surveillance agent in the team had placed every corner outside the dilapidated two-story building on a 24/7 watch, and every being that entered or exited the building had their face scanned through the database, and their identity sent back to the headquarters.

The black bullion van pulled up a few blocks away from the building, and everybody

except the surveillance agent alighted from the vehicle. It was now or never as they split up into two teams; Mack, Dave, and another member named Stan walked into the building and started climbing the staircase equipped from head to toe with guns, shields, and bulletproof vests while the other three members scouted the ground floor of the building.

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As Mack and Dave climbed higher up the staircase, Stan volunteered to stay in the middle of the staircase to ward off anybody suspicious, and they continued their ascent.

The building was dark and had this chilling feeling to it as though they were in a horror movie. The walls were a faded shade of seaweed green color and covered in what appeared to be dried blood. The air smelt like death and acid – something sulfuric they assumed as it was burning their nostrils down to their chest – and Dave had to hold himself as the mere sight of this place made him want to throw up.

The building seemed empty, and Mack was scared that the suspects were not here, or worse, that they were being led into a trap, but all those thoughts immediately vanished as he heard the muffled sobs of a woman coming from the room at the end of the hallway.

Mack signaled to Dave as they slowly approached the room, guns cocked and ready to shoot at any attacker. As soon as Mack turned the doorknob, he saw a woman with her brunette hair allover her face, concealing her identity, dressed in rags and sobbing profusely as she tried futilely to untie the ropes around her hands and legs. She seemed exhausted as she didn't even bother to look up even when Mack and Dave entered the small, dimly-lit room.

Dave stood by the door while Mack kept taking steps toward the woman who desperately just wanted to get out of there. As soon as he got close enough to slightly raise her head up, he got hit with a mixture of feelings he didn't even know was possible.

There he was face to face with a swollen and exhausted Rachel who started crying as soon as she realized he had recognized her. She was in the worst shape possible; her soft plush lips were swollen with what looked like bite marks, she had a black eye in her right eye, which seemed swollen shut as she struggled to focus on the teary-eyed Mack in front of her.

Her beautiful skin had lots of bruises, especially down her neck and thighs, and Mack couldn't help but break down and cry at the horrible sight of Rachel sitting on the floor in front of him. He was so caught up with untying Rachel that he didn't notice Dave was being dragged away from the room's entrance by an unidentified person.

As soon as Mack untied Rachel, he pulled her into a tight hug, and a rush of relief flowed through his veins as if expecting her to get healed by his touch. He scanned around the room for any sight of Brie, but there was none, which killed the spirit of relief he had. Then he pulled himself back together and instructed Rachel to stay close behind him while he made his way out the door, protecting her.

Dave wasn't there anymore, and there was no sight of him in the hallway either. Mack wondered where he disappeared until he heard noises coming from the staircase that sounded like a tussle. Mack rushed toward the staircase with Rachel following closely behind, and he could see Dave struggling with his gun in the hands of an unidentified man in a black ski mask.

Mack fumbled with his gun and didn't seem to have a good grip on it. He was preparing to shoot, but before he could pull the trigger, a loud BANG! shook the walls of the stairway, and Dave fell to the bottom of the stairs.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mack and Rachel were left speechless until Rachel started screaming at the top of her lungs and crying uncontrollably. Dave had just been shot by this unidentified man,

and before they could think of anything else, the man in the ski mask had pointed Dave's gun at them, ready to shoot again, but Mack shot first, the bullet lodging in between his eyes as the unidentified man lost his footing and fell down the staircase too, landing on top of Dave, who appeared to be motionless.

Mack was heartbroken. Dave was dead because of him, and even though he wore a bulletproof vest, the tussle had planted a bullet under his chin before he fell down about three flights of stairs. Mack tried so hard to hold back his tears as he led Rachel down the staircase, and while stepping over Dave's dead body, he performed a salute to him as a final tribute.

Stan, who claimed he would stand guard in the middle of the stairway, was nowhere to be found. Mack worried that he, too, had been killed by some suspects of the Brotherhood of Blood who had been hiding out in the building all along.

As soon as he safely got Rachel out of the building and into the bullion van, he realized that as soon as the other team members saw Dave drop lifeless to the bottom of the staircase, they retreated to the van and requested backup from headquarters. They were waiting in the van until help arrived, which they advised Mack to do as well, but he wasn't listening. He charged back in, in search of Brie, who he prayed wasn't dead yet. He wasn't sure he would be able to handle it if he found Brie in an equally horrible state as he had found Rachel.

As soon as he re-entered the building, he could hear voices as he ascended the staircase. Voices that weren't there when he entered initially, and he felt extremely uncomfortable thinking about Brie being in the midst of them. The voices seemed to be coming from the room a few steps away from where he found Rachel, and the door was locked from the inside.

Mack peeped through the peephole, and he could make out the voice of a woman buried under the thick voices of the men in the room with her. He couldn't make out

her face through the peephole, but he was sure she was kneeling in the middle of the men, who all had black ski masks on.

In a sudden burst of anger, he kicked down the door and tossed a smoke bomb into the room, which sent every single person in the room coughing while he made his way through the smoke and struck down every male in the room.

When the smoke cleared down, he could now see the motionless and unconscious bodies of the men he struck down in the room but not one sight of a woman. Mack was confused as he was sure he saw a woman in the room with the men, and he ran out to see the shadow of a woman being held by the neck and dragged down the staircase by a huge guy.

He followed the shadow and ended up in one of the rooms on the ground floor, face to face with a woman who had a sack over her head struggling to free herself from the grip of a man with a ski mask on. He had a tiny pistol in his hand, and it was pointed directly at him.

"Let go of her!" Mack shouted, but the man remained silent while the woman kept on in her struggle for freedom.

Cocking his gun at the guy, he didn't plan to shoot so he wouldn't hurt the woman in his grip, but he needed to find a way to set her free.

A few seconds later and the entire environs of the building were covered with police cars blaring their sirens, and a voice over the megaphone was heard.

"Drop your weapons and come out with your hands up in the air!" the police officer said.

Mack kept staring at the man in the mask who had the physique that reminded him a

lot of Kamal, and then, he suddenly let go of the woman, who quickly pulled off the sack from her head and ran as fast as she could toward the door.

Mack's eyes followed the woman right from the moment she pulled the sack off her head. It was Brie, and he felt that pool of relief again, but as Brie tried running out the door, the man shot her in the leg, and she fell to the ground, letting out a loud cry as she held on to her bleeding leg. Mack was shocked at the sudden attack, and in a wave of defense, he shot back at the man, the bullet piercing his left shoulder, and he fell to the ground also, groaning in pain.

The voice from the megaphone came again, amidst the loud sirens, "You have 10 seconds to drop your weapons, or we will be forced to resort to violent means."

Mack dropped his gun and ran toward Brie, pushing his hand down on her wound, trying to stop the bleeding coming from her leg, but Brie couldn't move.

As soon as Mack stood up and went to help Brie up, she screamed as the man got up and used the back of Mack's gun to hit him on the back of his head.

Mack fell to the floor and couldn't move as he watched the man lift Brie by her hair, pointing the gun at her. That was the last thing he saw before he slowly closed his eyes and blacked out.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The bright white light shone through, illuminating everything as bits of the room started coming into focus.

Mack had regained his consciousness, and frankly, he didn't know where he was; all he knew was that he was in a not-so-comfortable bed with a light shining directly at his face. He tried moving his head to the side but felt a sharp pain at the back of his head. It took him a moment to realize that he was actually in a hospital, and as he lifted his hand to touch his head, he could feel the bandage wrapped around it, and as if out of shock, he jumped into a swift sitting position.

"Brie!" was the first thing he said while he jerked himself up to sit. "Where is she?" he questioned, looking around and realizing that there was only one nurse in the room, who left to hurriedly fetch the doctor and inform him of Mack's awakening.

Mack's eyes darted across the room and suddenly got a flashback of what happened before. He had been unconscious for a few days, but he remembered every single detail – from rescuing an emaciated and injured Rachel to Dave being shot and trying to rescue Brie from the clutches of a man in a ski mask.

The doctor walked in on Mack, trying to pull out the IV drop to his hand, and stopped him, explaining the severity of his injury and how crucial his treatment was, but Mack didn't want to hear any of it. He just wanted to know if Brie was alright.

In a sudden switch, Mack turned violent and wanted to push the doctor out of his way, but some nurses held him down while the doctor injected something into his

arm that made his eyes extremely heavy until he drifted off to sleep.

Sometime later, he opened his eyes again, and the first person he saw was Deputy Chief Rodgers sitting beside his bed with his head buried inside his phone.

Mack muttered a barely audible 'hello,' and the deputy chief immediately noticed he was awake and put away his phone.

"Hi there, champ," he said in a calm and friendly voice. He had never heard the deputy chief use that tone before, but he didn't complain.

"You had it in really rough out there, didn't you?" he asked Mack with a look of sincere compassion and sympathy, but Mack merely replied with a nod.

"Where... Where is... Where is she?" Mack forced himself to speak, still fighting off the drowsiness caused by the sedative the doctor injected him with.

"Rachel Cooper is recuperating a few rooms away from yours. Doctors say she had it really bad because she was abused both physically and mentally. Heck, she was even near death with all the stuff they did to her. What a terrible thing to happen to a young lady," the deputy chief said, staring outside the window beside Mack's bed.

Mack could feel a stream of tears falling down the sides of his face. Rachel was badly hurt because of him because he had somehow managed to rope her and Brie into this serial killer case. He couldn't help but feel guilty...

"As for Brianna Miller...", the deputy chief's voice trailed off.

Mack was cut off in the middle of his thoughts. What about Brie? he wanted to say, but it felt as though he couldn't move his lips to say words anymore.

"Brianna Miller is safe with her parents," Deputy Chief Rodgers said, grinning.

Mack let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

Although he'd wanted to be the one to save her, to finally hold her, he was glad to know she was safe at last.

His joy would have been absolute, but he remembered Dave's death.

As if on cue, Deputy Chief Rodgers shifted uncomfortably and cast a sorry look at him before continuing. "Agent David Peterson is dead. Died of a brain hemorrhage from the gunshot wound he sustained."

The memory of Dave's death sent a sharp pain through his heart. He could not stop blaming himself. He'd loved him like a brother, and his heart ached to realize that he might have prevented all these if he had just listened to the deputy chief and not infiltrated their den in the first place.

Now he was crying, so much that his chest kept tightening with every breath he took. Deputy Chief Rodgers placed a hand on his on the bed and handed him a box of tissues.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, champ. You did your best on this. On the bright side, we have some of the members of the Brotherhood of Blood in our custody. We will take them into interrogation when you're up and running, alright? Now focus on getting out of here," the deputy chief said with a weak smile, and with that, he walked out of the room, wiping away the tears in his eyes.

Mack was devastated.

He watched the chief walk away, unable to say anything. He wanted to apologize,

scream, say something, but he couldn't make any sound. He shuddered to think of how he'd almost lost Brie, how Rachel had suffered. He didn't know what he'd have done if Brie hadn't been saved. He didn't want to think about it, but his mind would not shut up. It seemed to have an endless supply of images and questions designed specifically to torture him.

What if Brie didn't make it out alive? What if she'd died because of him? He would never be able to live with himself. She meant the world to him in such little time, and he couldn't afford to lose her now.

The knowledge that Brie was still alive and his constant determination to destroy the Brotherhood of Blood was his drive now.

He now had two reasons to want to bring them down.

He had no doubt in his mind that the man who'd held Brie hostage in the building was Kamal. He had the same height and physique as he remembered him to have. With that, he swore he was going to hunt him down the ends of the earth and avenge the men who'd died.

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He'd now lost two brothers to them, and he'd be damned if he'd let them go.

He thought of Brie and Rachel, and another tear escaped his eyes. He could not imagine the horrors they'd been through, and it hurt to imagine that he'd put them there.

It felt like he was a beacon for disaster, putting everyone he cared about in danger.

"Never again," he swore out loud. He'd never let anyone get hurt because of him again, even if it meant he had to be alone.

All these thoughts ran through his mind before he closed his eyes and drifted back to sleep.

CHAPTER NINE

One Month Later

Brie sat on a rocking chair in her parent's backyard in Destiny Falls, absently stroking the cat on her lap as two dogs danced around her legs.

These days, when she thought about the events leading up to her kidnap and rescue, it was with a sense of detachment. She couldn't help but be amazed at everything she'd been through. Sometimes, it felt like they'd happened to a total stranger.

She thought of Mack and winced.

They hadn't spoken at all in the one month since she'd been rescued. She'd tried to reach out a lot of times. The few times she'd called his apartment, he'd hung up the moment he heard her voice.

She'd switched to calling his office, where she was told that he'd been transferred. She suspected it was probably a lie he'd asked his secretary to tell. She'd looked up the Chicago FBI database, and his name was still listed as one of the agents.

Afterward, she'd resorted to calling his apartment again, where she was greeted by the answering machine.

"Hey, it's Mack. Leave a message," his curt baritone said to her over and over.

And leave messages she did. Brie left so many messages she started to repeat herself. It no longer mattered to her what she said; she just wanted to hear him speak. All her messages went unanswered until she'd finally given up last week.

She accepted that he probably wanted nothing to do with her anymore, and she thought she knew why but it didn't stop her from hurting. It didn't stop the pain of the heartbreak.

Every night she'd spent with those monsters, she'd dreamt of Mack finally being in his arms. She'd longed for him so intensely; she couldn't believe he hadn't felt the same.

She replayed all their conversations over and over in her head, wondering if she'd misread his signals. She didn't want to believe she'd misread their chemistry.

She reached up a finger to wipe off a lone tear that had escaped from her eyes and was rolling slowly down her chin when she heard his voice a few steps behind her, "Thank you, Mrs. Miller."

Brie nearly toppled out of the chair. She scrambled to her feet and turned around, not quite sure she didn't imagine it.

A part of her was convinced her mind had simply conjured his voice because she'd been dwelling on him for so long, but there he was, standing in her backyard, staring at her so intently her face colored.

He was here in Destiny Falls. Mack was here.

She made a step toward him and stopped, not quite sure of what to do. Her body seemed to belong to someone else. Gingerly, she dropped the cat and shooed the dogs away, all the while thinking of what to do.

She stood up again and looked at him. He was still there, leaning against her backdoor, still so beautiful in the light of the sunset, looking like a men's magazine model.

She took another step toward him and took another before she stopped. She couldn't stop staring at him.

Finally, he moved and walked toward her. She watched him walk agonizingly slow toward her until he was right in front of her.

"I had to see you," he whispered, looking at her intensely. "I couldn't stay away. I needed to see you. Brie, I'm so sorry."

Brie stuttered. She raised a hand to her own cheek and cupped it. Then she placed the hand on his chest and pinched him to convince herself he was really there.

He covered her hand with his and held it there. He wiped away the tears on her cheek and pulled her to himself as Brie started to sob.

"I'm sorry," he whispered over and over into her hair as she cried loudly.

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They stood there for a long time, just the two of them in her parent's backyard. The whole world fell away for them. All that mattered was this moment they had together.

Brie finally calmed down a little and said, in a voice thick with tears, "I thought you'd never come back."

"I'm sorry," was all Mack could whisper.

She said again, "I called so many times."

"I know. I know. I'm sorry, Brie. My love, I'm so sorry."

Brie gasped and looked up at him.

He continued, "Yes, I love you. I've been stupid, and it took being away from you to realize it. I love you so so much."

"Oh Mack," she cried, "I love you, too. Every day, I have loved you."

Mack cupped her chin and leaned down to kiss her softly, once, twice, until she yielded, and he felt her open up to him.

The kiss was electric, unlike anything Brie had ever felt before. She felt it all the way down to her belly, and she gasped into his mouth.

She could not quite believe that a man could make her feel this way, and she nearly cried with joy.

She kissed him back deeply, sweetly, reluctant to break the spell until he leaned back gently, smiling at her gently.

CHAPTER TEN

Brie eased her fingers around Mack's neck as she gazed up at him. She could barely believe he was actually here. She kissed him gently and laced her fingers through his hair.

They were in her dimly lit bedroom.

After they'd held each other and kissed in the backyard, she'd held him by the hand and led him inside.

Her parents had wisely made themselves scarce somewhere else in the house.

So now, they lay in a tangle of sheets on her bed. Mack kissed each of her breasts gently, running his tongue over each soft ridge.

Brie gasped and held on to him even tighter.

"You're so beautiful; you know that right?" he said as he kissed her neck. Brie squirmed beneath him and ran her hands down his chest.

Mack groaned above her as he caressed her soft skin. Then he buried his face in her neck and inhaled her scent deeply.

His hands went lower and lower until he found her center, and he probed her wet heat until she started to call his name softly.

He silenced her with even more kisses, and she held on to him tightly.

"Mack," she gasped in between kisses. "I want you. I want you now."

"I know, sweetheart, me too," Mack muttered.

Slowly, ever so gently, he guided himself inside her, and she stilled before letting out a breath in one long hiss.

Together, they moved as one, their bodies in perfect sync as he began to find his release inside her.

She cried out with each gentle thrust, and her fingernails raked his back.

Together, they went higher and higher, seeing nothing else but each other, feeling nothing else but each other until she unraveled around him, and he shuddered.

"Brie," Mack whispered before she fell asleep, "I love you. Never forget it. No matter what happens."

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When Brie woke up, she immediately sensed something was wrong. The morning sun's rays across her face roused her from her slumber, and she struggled to open her eyes.

When she finally did, it was with a blush on her face as she remembered the events of the previous night.

She opened her eyes fully, expecting to see Mack next to her, but all she saw was an empty bed. Confused, she looked around the room for traces of him. There was nothing.

The only evidence of his presence was her clothes lying on the floor of her bedroom. His own clothes were nowhere to be found.

Still groggy from sleep, she dressed, wincing a little at the sweet soreness between her legs. She pressed her thighs together and rubbed her belly as she thought of all the sweet nothings they'd said to each other.

She came out of the room and followed the scent of cookies baking to the kitchen, where her mother was bent over the oven, and her father sat reading a newspaper at the table.

"Good morning, Mom. Good morning, Dad," she greeted them, a little embarrassed because she wasn't sure how loud she'd been the previous night or if they'd heard her.

"Baby, good morning. I trust you had a lovely night," her mother said, smiling as she brought the cookies out of the oven and placed them on the table in front of her dad.

"I'm fine, mom," she hesitated before she continued. "Um, have you seen Mack? He wasn't there when I woke up this morning."

This time, it was her father who answered, not quite meeting her eyes. "Oh uh. Good morning, Pumpkin. How are you?"

A bit worried now; Brie answered, "I'm fine, dad. Where's Mack?"

Brie's mother came around the table to put her arms around Brie.

Brie struggled for a minute before she stopped and settled into the hug.

"He left, didn't he?" she asked, not really wanting or expecting an answer.

Her father put his newspaper down and came around to put his hands around them.

"I'm sorry, honey. He said he was sorry. He said he had to leave, and he didn't want to put you in any more danger, not after what happened to Rachel."

Her mother cut in, "I think it's for the best. You've been through so much already because of that young man. You deserve peace; you deserve to be happy and safe."

Brie could barely hear them over the blood rushing through her ears. For some reason, their hug felt too tight, suffocating; she needed air.

"I need to go outside for a minute," she mumbled without looking at them. "I'll be alright. I just need some air."

She stumbled out through the back to the chair she'd been sitting in when Mack found her yesterday.

She held on to the chair as she cried and rocked herself back and forth, whispering his

name over and over.

The pain was more than she'd thought herself capable of experiencing. She hated herself for loving him so deeply, and she hated Mack for leaving her this way over and over.

She doubled over in pain as tears blurred her vision, and she stumbled, the chair her only source of support.

She leaned against it and slid slowly down until she was sitting on the floor.

Her dogs shuffled closer and rubbed their bodies against her.

She picked one up and buried her face in its coat while the other licked her fingers. She raised her face as she continued to weep softly.

Her mother came out and sat on the floor next to her while her father watched from the door.

She placed her head on her mother's shoulder, and they all stayed that way for a long time, none of them saying anything until Brie was done crying.

Somehow, she knew Mack was gone for good.

To be continued...