



Holding His Forever

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Category: Erotic, Romance

Description: Derek aka Phoenix is a New York City fire fighter and has dedicated his life to saving people. When he loses two of his men in the line of duty, he doesn't know if he'll be able to see the light again.

However, when an angel in the form of a woman named Fia appears before him, his world as he knows it is turned upside down.

Fia has been working hard to make money so she can finish her last semester of school. A fire in her building sets her back to square one, but the fireman who saves her turns out to be more than she ever expected.

Once he gets his arms around her, there's no letting go. Because when you've got your forever in your arms, nothing else matters.

Warning: This is hot and fast insta-love that ignites the pages. It's burning heat that combusts into an inferno of lava. Okay, that's all the fire words I could come up with. Now insert a pun about a big hose. It's quick, dirty, and ridiculously over the top.

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Fia

“You finish your shit, Fia?”

Sam’s gravelly voice from years of smoking barks from behind me as I hang up the phone in his back office. A mixture of annoyance and relief fills me. I really didn’t want to have to cover Kim’s shift at the women’s shelter tonight and was thankful she was able to make it in. I would have done it if they needed me; I’d do anything for that place. But I’m dead on my feet as it is. I’ve been on my feet for the past twelve hours and haven’t slept in over twenty-four, and it would be my luck that if I went back to the shelter, it would be a busy night.

“Already clocked out.” I turn to look at Sam, whose eyes are trained on my ass. He slowly pulls them up to my face as a smirk plays at his lips, showing off his yellow-tinted teeth, not a care that he’s openly running his eyes over my body. Sadly, I’ve become used to it. It still creeps me out, but he’s never tried anything.

Or maybe my luck is about to change, I think, as he shuts the door to his office, trapping me in. The door is always open. The waitresses here at Moe’s always keep our stuff stored back here, where we clock in and out for our shifts.

“You think about my offer?” He cocks his head to the side like he’s giving me the world, not a management position at the diner. I’d stay later after waiting tables and help with paperwork and orders and get a raise, but I think Sam has a few more strings he wants to add to the position things I want no part of. I’ve turned down the

offer twice now, but he keeps telling me to think on it.

Normally I just mumble a, “no, thanks,” on my way out the door, but now it’s closed and I’m trapped. Trapped with a man twice my age, maybe even pushing three times my age. It’s hard to tell with his shaved head. He’s double my size, and I don’t mean in muscle or height. No, there’s a lot of gut on old Sam.

“I really don’t have the time.” I tell him the same thing I’ve said every time it’s been brought up. At least, not without giving up my shifts at the shelter, and that’s not something I’m willing to do, even if the pay is way worse over there. I love that shelter. I owe them so much after what they did for my mother and me. I’m just thankful they pay me at all, because I would do it for free. I hope that one day I can do it for free, but at the moment that just isn’t possible if I want to keep a roof over my head and food on my plate.

“We’ll cut your serving time,” he suggests, taking a step towards me. I try to match his in retreat but only hit the desk. I don’t want to cut my serving hours only to spend more time with him in his cramped little office alone. Hell, I’ve been in here for two minutes and I feel like I’m having a panic attack. I can feel my heartbeat pick up speed. My anxiety grows with each pull of my breath. I know all too well how men act when they don’t get the responses they want. I’ve seen it for years with my own father and how he treated my mother.

I just shake my head again, trying to push the words past my lips. “I really” My words are cut short when Tracy throws open the door.

“Who in the hell put the” She stops abruptly when she sees us both standing in the tiny office. Her eyes narrow, going back and forth between us. Tracy has been working at the diner for years. She trained me a few months back, and many might even think she owns the place by how she pushes everyone around. And I’m pretty sure she and Sam have a thing. I stay out of her way. I want my tables and tips and

nothing more from this place. It's a means to an end. A slow means, but I'm getting there, dollar by dollar, and this place has the best tips I've come across so far, so I put up with it.

"I'm having a meeting." Sam turns to look at her. Tracy purses her lips at him, clearly not liking what he's saying.

"No, it's fine. I really should be going. I'll miss the bus," I lie. I always walk home. I grab my purse and coat and don't even bother to put them on. I just hold them close to my body over my cheap polyester uniform that fits a little too snugly on me. "Maybe Tracy would like the manager position," I throw out.

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“What!” Tracy half-screams, her face scrunching up. I steal the moment to slip past them both as fast as I can and out the side door of the diner, into the chilled night. The street is empty now that it’s almost midnight on a Tuesday.

I slip my coat on and make the half-mile walk to my apartment, which sits over an old laundromat. Locking the door behind me, I waste no time pulling my uniform from my body and tossing my tips from tonight on the table before jumping into the shower. I have to get the smell of grease off my hair and body. I let the warm water run over me, relaxing my muscles as I wash away the day’s work.

When I’m done I grab a shirt and a pair of panties and pull them on. I sit at the small fold-out table in my half kitchen, if you can call it that. It doesn’t even have a full refrigerator, just one of those tiny ones you find in a hotel, which is probably where it came from. There’s a small sink and microwave, and that’s about it. My exhaustion outweighs my hunger as I count my tips. A hundred dollars on a double shift for a Tuesday isn’t too bad. Every dollar counts at this point. I’m so close to being able to pay for my last semester of college. Twelve more credits and I’m done, I remind myself. I can do this.

I grab the money and place it carefully, along with yesterday’s money, between the pages of a book I keep on the table. I still need to go to the bank and deposit it. After that, I walk the few feet to my bed in the corner of the room and fall face first into the cushioned surface.

“I miss you, Mom,” I whisper into the pillow before sleep takes me.

Phoenix

I sit on the edge of the cot and plant my feet on the floor. I'm sleeping in the firehouse tonight, even though it's not my turn. The department shrink would have something to say about this, but it's the only way I can move on. To move forward. To work until I'm exhausted enough that my dreams don't turn into nightmares and I wake up screaming.

The gold plate above my head reads, Phoenix 1st LT, Engine 20; Ladder 70 FDNY, and I reach up, tapping it for good luck. Most firefighters are superstitious, and even if I don't believe all the things that go along with it, I respect the hell out of tradition.

I stand up and walk past the rows of cots towards the chow room. Our firehouse is big, and I'm the first lieutenant here. I supervise the daily operations, training, and lead the emergency response of our engine company. Graham, our second LT, does swing shifts with me so that we're not both constantly on call. But I've been here for the past four months, regardless of whether it's been my turn on or not.

There are ten guys sleeping in the house tonight, all trying to catch some shut-eye while Brick snores the roof off the place. Most of us have gotten used to him though. After almost ten years working here, there's not much I can't sleep through. Except the dreams.

"You're up late, Phoenix," Graham says, not looking up from his crossword puzzle.

My last name is Phoenix, and everyone calls me that. My first name is Derek, but I don't think anyone's called me by that name since my mom died from ovarian cancer almost five years ago. My dad, who is staying busy since she passed, usually calls me "my boy" or "sunshine." He loves to tell everyone I had bleached blond hair as a kid and smiled all the time.

“I like to think of it as up early,” I say, reaching for a coffee mug. “You know me, glass-is-half-full kind of guy.”

He lets out a huff at my lame joke, knowing it’s the furthest thing from the truth. I pour myself some sludge from the machine. It’s probably been there for days, but I pretend it looks good.

“You know,” Graham says, but I interrupt him.

“Yes. I know I don’t have to be here. I know that I should get some sleep. I know that I should probably go back home and take some time off. And I know that I should probably be telling all of this to our shrink.” I tick off on my fingers all the things Graham is going to tell me. “Did I miss anything?”

He finally looks up at me and rolls his eyes. “You know, you can always make more coffee,” he says exasperatedly, but clearly I hit the target.

“And I could make more coffee.” I lift my mug up in cheers, and he leans back in his chair, eyeing me.

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“You’re first ranking lieutenant, so I can’t tell you what to do. You’ve already talked to the captain and everyone else you’re supposed to.” He sighs, and a look of concern crosses his face. “You’re not healing, Phoenix. We all lost men that day. Marcus and Vance were our brothers, and we should mourn them, but at some point life goes on.”

I just take a sip of the coffee that tastes more like tar, not acknowledging anything he just said. How can I? Marcus and Vance were two of my closest friends. We’d gone through school together, and we became firefighters at the same time. I was promoted to lieutenant of the station, and they were both so happy for me, even though we all came in at the same time. I’d had better marks on the physical tests, so I was given the position. Four months ago, we’d gotten a routine call in the middle of the night. There was a kitchen fire in a three-story walk-up, so we jumped to. When we got to the scene, everything seemed to go as normal. We made our way into the building, all by the book. We got up to the third floor and secured the area. We made sure everyone got out, but just as we were making our way back down, Marcus said he heard something. He was in the rear with Vance, and I heard him over my headset. I’d told him we had the headcount confirmed from the truck outside, but he insisted on going back. I turned in time to watch as he kicked in a door with Vance standing at his side. Suddenly, a small child ran out, and I pulled him into my arms just as the ceiling fell in.

When I woke up in the hospital the first thing, I asked was about my men and the little boy. I was on the landing below and had fallen in such a way that the boy was under me, so neither of us got the impact my two men did. I didn’t lose my life, but Marcus and Vance weren’t so lucky. I walked away with just a few bumps and bruises, and the little boy was safe, but we had to deliver the news to their families, tell them that they’d given their lives to save someone.

My dad was a firefighter, and I hero-worshiped him for as long as I could remember. I walked around in his turnout gear as soon as I could take my first step. He tried to tell me that this job would take a piece of me, but I never understood what he had meant. Not until I woke up in that hospital bed, knowing I'd led my men into that situation. Knowing that there was so much I could have done to stop them, but then maybe there wasn't. They saved a life that day, but it cost them theirs, and it just wasn't something I was coping with. At least that's what the shrink tells me.

Before I can say anything back to Graham, the alarm sounds.

3

Phoenix

"You're benching me?" I shout as Captain Thomas walks away from me.

I've got my feet in my boots and look around as all the guys around me move in a blur of red and yellow. I jump out of my turnout gear, knowing that I won't be able to catch up with them now. If you can't do it in under forty seconds, your ass is off the truck.

"Captain!" I shout over the sirens of the truck as the guys load up and take off.

He's almost to his office when he turns to face me. He's an older guy, bald on top with gray patches on either side. He's still pretty damn fit though, and I'm willing to bet he could still hold his own on that truck. But he's already put in his years of services and sits behind a desk now.

"What?" he says, looking into my eyes. He's also one of the only guys as tall as me, at nearly six-three. "I said you're off the truck."

“Why?” I’m ten shades of pissed off, but deep down I know exactly why.

“You’ve skipped your last two meetings with the psychiatrist. You’ve been sleeping upstairs every night for four months, and to be honest, you look like total shit. You need some time off, Phoenix. I thought letting you work through it was going to get it done, but nothing has changed. I’m this close,” he takes a step towards me and holds his fingers a hair’s width apart right in front of my eyes, “to putting you on mandatory leave. Don’t give me a reason. Take the night off, go home, and get your shit together. You’ll meet with Doctor Birch in the morning, and if he gives you the all clear, then I might think about putting you back on my truck. But I swear to God, if he so much as hesitates when giving me the report, I’ll have your ass out of here for a month. You got me?”

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“Yes, sir.”

It’s the only thing I can say. I have no ground to stand on. He’s right, and I know it, but I just haven’t been willing to accept it. I’ve let this all fall on my shoulders, and I haven’t been dealing with it since it happened.

Letting out a sigh, I watch as Captain Thomas goes into his office and slams the door. I know he’s not happy about having to do this to me. I’m his first lieutenant, and his next in command. He needs me with my head on, and I’m not doing all I should be for the remaining men here. What kind of example am I setting if this is how I go on living?

I go upstairs, grab my shit, and head home.

When I get to my apartment, I walk in and see it’s exactly how I left it four months ago. I can tell by the stack of mail and how clean it is that my dad’s been coming by and taking care of things for me. Feeling the guilt stir in the pit of my stomach, I call him.

“Hey, sunshine. You doing okay?”

“Yeah, Dad. Thanks for taking care of the place.”

“No problem. I put on clean sheets just yesterday. Figured you might be headed home soon.”

I can’t help but laugh darkly. He’s best friends with Captain Thomas, so I’m sure

they've had a good bit to talk about when it comes to how I'm doing.

"Love you, Dad."

"Love you too, my boy."

I toss my phone on the counter and go to the shower, stripping down and letting the hot water scald me. I feel bone tired, but anxious at the same time. I want to sleep, but I don't want the nightmares to take hold. After I'm finished, I go to my backpack and grab the bottle the shrink prescribed for me after the accident. He said I needed to go home, get some rest, and take these when I wasn't on call. I hadn't felt safe taking them in the firehouse, but this may be the only way I get some sleep tonight.

Popping one of them, I go to my bedroom and fall face first on the mattress.

I close my eyes, feeling the exhaustion taking me, but before I slip under I mumble, "I miss you, Mom."

4

Phoenix

"I'm reluctantly putting you back on the truck. But I've got my eyes on you, Phoenix. Dr. Birch said you're making progress and that he's comfortable with putting you back on full time."

My meeting with the shrink went okay. I don't like to sit down and talk about my feelings, but I've only ever wanted to do one job, and that's being a firefighter. I'll do anything to get back to that, including talking to a stranger about my grief. I'm still not one-hundred-percent inside, but I've got to have this, because otherwise, I'm nothing.

“Thank you, sir,” I say, trying not to push him too far. I want to stay on Captain’s good side, and the best way to do that is to shut my mouth.

“I’m giving Graham the night off, so you’re up. You think you can handle that?”

I nod, and he waves a hand at me, telling me to get out of his office.

When I get upstairs I talk to a few of the guys and read over Graham’s report from the night before. I go over some new training steps with them, and we do a gear check. It takes the better part of the day and into the night to review it all. Then we get to work on pulling hoses and checking the trucks. There is always work to be done in a firehouse, and it’s exactly what I need. The distraction keeps my brain from going to dark places, and the routine makes me feel like I’m getting back to the old me.

“What about you, Phoenix?”

I look up at Gordon, one of the young guys. “Huh?”

“I said, you up for drinks on Friday? We’re going out after shift change to find some pussy. You in?”

I laugh and shake my head, going back to checking the rear engine.

“Come on, man. How long has it been since you got laid? You never talk about getting any.”

He and a few of the guys laugh, and I just keep working while I answer him.

“Two things, Gordon. First, a man doesn’t need to tell his friends that it happened to prove that it happened. And second, if a woman is willing to take her clothes off and

let you fuck her, you'd do well to treat that with some respect. Because that woman is probably a saint."

I look over at him and see his cheeks turn a little pink as the other guys give him shit. It's been a long time since I had a woman, but that's not anyone's business. I think about holding a woman in my arms and making love, but it's always followed by the "what ifs." If I had someone, then I'd have something to lose, and with my job, so would they. If I was in love and had a family, what would happen if one day I didn't come home? The pain of those thoughts is enough to have me pulling back from any woman who's tried to do more than say hello to me. I know it's a part of the job, and it's a fear we all have. But at least this is one thing I can control.

5

Phoenix

When the alarm sounds, I'm in motion. I've been doing this so long I don't even have to think. My body just goes. Everyone's hauling ass out of bed, doing the same routine we've done hundreds of times. It's just ingrained deep into us. Not until I'm on the back of the truck do I really start using my head, thinking about what we might be going into. The adrenalin pumps through me, racing through my body. It's the only thing I seem to feel anymore. Almost like a small high that brings me to life for just a moment in time. A rush of something that isn't laced with grief and death. That is, until I stop moving and remember where I'm heading. That lives depend on me. Not just the ones I'm racing to, but the ones following me into fire.

We haven't had a call all day or night, and we already know this one is a live fire. This isn't just a response, someone having smacked their car into someone else, or even someone having a heart attack. We are always first on scene, but this time we know. We're going into danger. I smell the smoke before I see the fire lighting up the sky as we take the sharp turn around the corner.

"I smell gas," I say into my headset. Arson. "Eyes open." I scan the street as the fire truck comes to a stop in front of the old Laundromat that sits on the corner, only one other building connecting to it. I check if anything looks out of place, but the street is already starting to fill with people wanting to know what's going on.

"We got rentals," I bark into my mic, taking in the windows above the Laundromat as I drop from the truck. "Gordon and Nick, take the connecting building to the right." I

scan the windows of the Laundromat, thankful that it's closed. "Rich, see if you can check the ground floor. It looks closed," I order as I head for the door that leads to the rentals above.

"I'm guessing two apartments, Phoenix," Mitch says into my ear.

"I'll take the second door. You take the first," I say in agreement as he follows me to the door leading up to the apartments upstairs. We don't hesitate, knowing the ground door will be locked. We both kick in unison, and the door easily gives way as I follow the shattered wood in and up the stairs with Mitch hot on my ass. The smoke hits us hard. When I reach the top floor, I head for the second door. I hear Mitch bust into the first room. I look up and see a woman stumbling out of the apartment I was just about to enter.

Her blonde hair falls all around her, looking like a halo. The smoke eats up my vision of her, and for just a moment I think she's an angel. The light on my helmet hits her face, and it's as if her ice-blue eyes look right through me. It's like a punch to my system, knocking the air out of my lungs, making me think I've finally lost it.

Then she's falling.

I dive to catch her, making sure my body hits the hard floor and not hers. Turning quickly, I have us both back on my feet, with her cradled in my arms.

"There anyone else in there with you?" I yell as loud as I can through the mask. Her eyes flutter open, and her mouth barely moves, but I easily read the "no."

The echoes of the word "clear" sound in my headset, letting me know the building has been searched. I carry the woman in my arms as I head down the stairs, and Mitch follows me.

“Got one. We’ll need an ambulance,” I bark out.

“One’s here,” someone shouts back, and I see it when I hit the bottom of the stairs. I keep running towards it, reluctant to hand her over to the EMT, who has his arms open for her. I don’t want to hand her over, but I do. Once she’s out of my arms, I rip off my mask and turn to Mitch.

“Fire’s out,” he informs me.

“Run a second search.” I turn back and look down at the blonde angel, whose eyes are wide open now. She’s staring right at me while the EMT tries to put a mask on her, but she keeps trying to push it away. Clear confusion is all over her face. She looks lost and confused, a feeling I know all too well.

I strip off my coat and part of my gear, dropping it between the ambulance and the fire truck. Her hand reaches out to me, like she thinks I’m leaving. I’m not sure I could, even if Mitch tried to pull me away. Something about her. She needs me. I tell myself that’s what’s happening, but a voice deeper inside me tells me that’s a lie. I need her.

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“Ma’am, you need to put the mask on,” I hear the EMT tell her, but she keeps trying to push it away with her other hand, the other one still reaching for me. “I’m going with her,” I throw over my shoulder to Mitch.

“Sir,” he says. I turn and cut him off with a look.

“Take my shit.” I drop a few more things down onto my coat. I’m going. The building is clear, and the fire is out.

He just nods and does as he’s told. “You got this,” I tell him, because he does. He nods again and heads back to the truck. I turn and grab her hand.

“Put the mask on,” I say, leaning down next to her. Even through the smoke smell, I get the hint of peaches coming from her. Her skin looks as soft, and I can’t stop from moving my thumb on the hand that is holding hers. It’s as if I have to feel her to confirm what I was thinking.

Her full lips open just a little. “Don’t leave me,” she whispers before closing her eyes and passing out.

“Never.”

6

Phoenix

I hold her hand all the way to the hospital as the EMT checks her over. I watch each

breath she takes, unable to look away from her. She hasn't woken up by the time we get to the hospital, but they assure me she's okay. I still can't seem to not worry about her.

"Pulse is strong. Looks like she's going to be fine. Probably just some minor smoke inhalation," the EMT says, but I don't even glance over at him. I'm physically unable to do so.

When the back doors open, they wheel her off, and I stay with her. I go all the way back until the nurses take over and pull her into an emergency area. One of the nurses looks at me and sees I'm a firefighter.

"Family?" she asks, raising an eyebrow in question.

I want to lie and say yes, but then she'll probably start asking me questions, and I have no idea what to say. I don't even know her name. This is the craziest thing I've ever done, and I don't have any sort of explanation for it. I just walked off location. The fire was done and taken care of, but it still wasn't protocol.

I let out a breath looking down at her and then back to the nurse. "No. But I have to stay with her."

She must see in the plea in my eyes, and she nods.

"You can stay, but you'll have to go to the other side of the curtain for a bit. There's a seat in the hall. I'll keep you updated."

Giving my angel one last look, I let go of her hand and walk out into the hallway. Something in my chest aches, and I don't want to leave her side. I can't reasonably stay there while they are checking her over, but the irrational part of my brain doesn't care.

There was a moment during the fire, as the adrenaline and chaos kicked in, that I crossed over from doing my job to doing something selfish. I saw the desperate, scared look in her eyes, and I don't know how or why, but we connected. I should have been focused on helping her instead of wanting to take her, but I wasn't able to think straight. I was struck by her beauty, yes, but something stronger was pulling me in her direction.

I sit there nervously, bouncing my knee, waiting on something to change. I can't sit here not knowing what's happening any longer, and I start to get up. Just as I put my palms on the armrests to push myself up, the nurse comes out and gives me a smile.

"She's asking for you."

I jolt up and take three long steps into her room. There's another nurse writing some things down on a chart and asking her questions, but when she sees me, her blue eyes light up.

"I thought I dreamed you up," she says, a slight blush hitting her cheeks. "I just asked the nurse if a firefighter came in with me, and she said you were in the hall. Thanks for staying. You can leave now if you need to. I'm sorry I asked you to stay with me. I think I was just panicking."

She looks away, and I step closer, taking her hand. I look down and don't see a ring on her finger, so I'm assuming she's single.

"I wanted to stay and make sure you were okay." I hesitate, hating to ask. "Is there someone I can call for you? A husband? Boyfriend?"

I see the nurse give me a sly smile, like she knows my game. "We've already asked Ms. Clover about next of kin," the nurse says, still scribbling on her chart.

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“Fia. Fia Clover,” she says. “And no, I don’t have anyone else to contact.”

My heart both aches and jumps for joy. I don’t like that she has no one else she can call in an emergency, but I’m all too happy she’s single.

“I’m...” I hesitate for half a second. I was about to tell her my last name, then change my mind. “Derek.”

She gives me a shy smile and squeezes my hand. The warm feeling of her soft palm in mine is much better than anything I could have expected. It’s borderline erotic, and I’m just holding her hand. God, what would it feel like to rub my hand around her waist to the small of her back?

“Sir?”

I look up to see the nurse looking at me expectantly, like she’s asked me a question several times.

“Excuse me?” I clear my throat and blink a few times, hoping she’ll say it again.

“I said, do you mind moving over a bit? I need to see the machine behind you.”

Stepping to the side, I have to let go of Fia’s hand, and I immediately miss the connection. I’m a little embarrassed she had to ask me to move, but Fia is biting her lip, trying to hide a smile. I must have just completely zoned out.

“Okay, Ms. Clover, I don’t see any reason not to release you back into the wild.” The

nurse smiles softly at her. “Do you have somewhere you can stay tonight? From what the EMTs said, your building will be closed off for at least a night while they investigate the cause of the fire.”

I’d heard some chatter on the radio but hadn’t bothered to click over and listen. I should have, because this was her home. I look down at Fia and see the indecision on her face.

“I’m sure I can come up with something,” she answers quietly.

The nurse indicates to the chart and starts to head towards the door. “I’m going to process this, and then you’ll be on your way.”

She doesn’t notice the pale look on Fia’s face, or the fear in her eyes. I catch it, and I can tell something is wrong. My heart aches that she’s worried, and I step closer, taking her hand again to try to comfort her.

As if she remembers I’m in the room, she startles at my touch and looks up at me. She smiles quickly and then looks away.

“Thank you for your help. If you don’t mind, I’m going to get out of here now.”

She tries to pull her hand back, but I just hold it tighter, not letting her go.

“Hey, do you have some place to stay?” I ask softly.

She nods, but doesn’t meet my gaze, and I’m almost sure I can see what looks like tears forming at the corners of her eyes. Her nose turns red like she’s fighting them, and I can’t just stand by anymore.

I sit on the edge of the bed and gently touch her chin, making her look up at me. It’s

then a tear falls, and I see the grief in her eyes.

“Everything is gone, isn’t it?”

I’ve seen this countless times with victims of a fire. They’ve lost all their possessions, and the thought hits them all at once that they have nothing.

“Everything in the apartment, maybe. But you’re here, and you’re safe, Fia. That’s the most important thing.”

She closes her eyes at my words and takes a deep breath. “I just don’t know if that’s true anymore.” Her shoulders sag with the weight of her words, and it’s as if she’s been carrying something around for so long that she’s just exhausted.

“Hey, hey. Don’t talk like that.” I rub my thumb on her wrist and then with my other hand wipe away the tears that have fallen.

“I’ve got to go. It’s late.” She starts to pull away from me, but again, I don’t let her go.

“Where are you going? I can take you somewhere.”

She looks up at me, and I can see her indecision about telling me. She lets out another breath like she’s giving up, and waves her hand dismissively.

“There’s a shelter I volunteer at. I’m sure I can grab a bed for the night until I get this sorted out.”

I don’t know her enough to make her do something, but I can offer a better solution.

“I’ve got a friend who’s got a place that’s free if you want it. He’s at the firehouse a

lot and it just sits empty. If you want, I can give you the key and you can crash there for a few nights. Just until this gets sorted out.”

She looks hopeful, but then she just shakes her head no. “Thanks, but I’ll manage.” She looks away, not meeting my eyes.

“Seriously. We all stay at the station most nights, and he’s on for the next week. So it’s completely free to use. I wouldn’t offer if it wasn’t okay.”

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She bites her lips as if thinking on it. If she doesn't have any family or friends, and all she had in the world was in that crappy apartment, then I'd venture a guess and say she doesn't like taking handouts. She must want to work for what she's got, or at least feel like she's not trying to catch a free ride.

"Look, if you'd feel better about it, you can make him some cookies or something as a thank you. Unless you can't cook, then maybe you could just clean the place as payment."

Fia smiles at my words, and a spark of hope hits her eyes. She nods and then clears her throat.

"Yeah, that would be really great actually. It's late, so the shelter is probably full for the night. I'm sure I can make arrangements in the next day or two."

"Like I said, it stays empty for weeks at a time. Don't worry about it. We'll go by the fire station to get the key, and then to the apartment. I'll take care of everything."

It's like another weight of bricks has been removed from her shoulders as she sighs with relief. I don't know how long it's been since someone has taken care of her, but I'm glad I'm the one doing it now.

I think she might be doing the same to me, too. For some reason, being near her pushes away my dark thoughts and keeps all the sadness that's been consuming me at bay. Being in her presence has taken away all the cold inside and brought light and warmth to me. I don't know what she's doing, or how she's doing it, but I don't want it to stop. Maybe she really is an angel.

Just then, the nurse walks in and gives her the discharge papers. She explains in detail the signs to look for and the dangers of smoke inhalation. Once she's released, I hold her hand and walk her out of the hospital.

She tries to pull her hand away once we're outside, but I just hold it tighter. "No use in trying to get away now," I say, giving her a wink.

Her cheeks flush red, but she just stands by my side, not fighting me.

"I don't even know you," she whispers as we stand at the curb. I throw my free hand out for a cab. We took the ambulance here, so this is the only way to get back to the station to get the keys.

A cab pulls up, and I open the back door for Fia, but she stands there a second before we get in.

"Do you trust me?" I ask, looking into her beautiful blue eyes.

For a second I panic, thinking about what she might say, but she gives me a small smile and puts her hand on my chest.

"I don't know why, but yes, Derek, I trust you."

I pull her hand off my chest and kiss her palm, feeling the warmth of her skin spread to my lips and through my body. Her touch does wild things to me. Smiling, I help her into the cab and give the driver the station address.

Then I stare at her, with the goofiest grin on my face, the whole way there.

Fia

“This place is really nice,” I say, looking over and up at Derek. He looks like a warrior towering over me, the top of my head barely meeting his shoulder. His dark hair is cut short. His facial features are all hard lines, but when a small smile pulls at his lips, his face completely changes, making his dark brown eyes seem soft. The ring of green on the outside of his irises seem to come to life. It makes me want to do something to make him smile again.

When I’d come stumbling out of my apartment, he was just standing there, looking like my savior. I thought for a moment he wasn’t real. Everything seemed to happen in a fog.

The only reason I’d woken up was because the sounds of the sirens had jolted me awake. Then I’d smelt the smoke, and everything became a fog. Literally and figuratively. There was only him, and everything went black until he was there again. Every time I opened my eyes, he was there, and I’d felt like everything was going to be okay in that moment. That I didn’t have to worry. As long as I kept hold of him, I’d be fine.

He’d kept me safe. A feeling I hadn’t had in a long time, one that left when my mother left this world. But the reality of it is, he isn’t mine, and I’m not sure I want to wake up from that fog and face the world again. Or take stock of what pieces of the world I used to have are now left.

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“Ah, yeah, I guess.” He turns from looking at me to look around the apartment like he’s never seen it before. I’m not sure it’s even an apartment. It’s more of a townhome. It’s better than any place I’ve ever stayed before.

It’s modern but clean. It has an open living area with a giant TV mounted on the wall, and a dining room and kitchen flow into each other. Everything matches and has a place. You could easily fit my little place into this four times over.

The furnishings are all in deep wood colors, making it look masculine. It almost looks unlivd in, as if it’s one of those houses to show people the home’s potential.

I don’t want to touch anything in case I mess it up. It makes me feel a little out of place, like I shouldn’t be in here. “Are you sure this is okay? I can really just”

“No, it’s fine,” he says, cutting me off and pulling me further into the home. “Kitchen, dining room, and living room.” He points to each area, then starts to pull me down the hall.

“An office here and spare bathroom here.” He points to two closed doors, but keeps pulling me down the hall. “This room is just empty.” He points to another closed door, not bothering to open it. We get to the last door in the hallway. He pushes to the door open, pulling me in with him.

I don’t know why I’m not scared. I should be freaking out, letting a man I don’t know drag me around an unfamiliar home. We are completely alone, but all I feel is safe.

“The bedroom,” he says, releasing my hand and walking over to the bed.

The bedroom looks just like the rest of the house. Pretty but simple.

I look down at myself, thinking about crawling into the perfectly made bed. The hospital gave me some tie pants and a baggy shirt that reads Mercy West Hospital across the chest, but it was a pointless endeavor because I've made them smell like smoke.

The reminder makes me want to cry. I have no freaking clothes, and the ones I do have, smell. I push down the lump rising in my throat. I'll make the bed smell just as bad if I crawl into it, and right now that's all I want to do.

Sleep, if only for a few hours, before I need to get to my first job of the day.

When I look back up, Derek is standing right in front of me.

"You want a shower, angel?" His words are soft and sweet, such a contrast to his giant size.

"I smell like smoke. I don't want to get it on the bed." I think about the leather sofa in the living room. Maybe I could shower and sleep on that. It feels wrong to sleep in someone else's bed. Intimate.

"Alright. Take a shower." He nods to a door, which I'm guessing leads to the bathroom. "And I'll find you something to wear. I'll put it on the bed. Towels should be in there."

"Thank you for everything. I promise I'll be out of your hair in no time."

"No rush." His hand comes up and cups my cheek for just a second as he brushes a thumb across it. He leaves the room and shuts the door behind him.

I turn, going into the bathroom and looking at myself in the mirror. The sight makes me cringe. I normally don't care what I look like, but I look a freaking hot mess. My eyes are red underneath, and smudges of smoke mar my face and arms. My blonde hair almost looks a shade darker than its usual color.

I turn away and flip on the shower, dropping my clothes to the floor, wanting them and the smoke removed from my body as fast as possible. I don't know how many times I wash my hair, trying to make sure the smell is gone, but when exhaustion finally catches up to me, I give in. I turn off the water and pull myself from the bathroom.

I see the clothes sitting on the side of the bed, and the bedroom door is closed once again. I let myself fall into bed. I just want to rest my eyes for a second before I get dressed and pull myself to the living room.

But before I know it, sleep takes me.

8

Phoenix

I wait a long time, longer than I thought possible, before going and knocking on the bedroom door. I put my ear to it, and when I don't hear anything, I crack it slightly and call out her name.

"Fia? Are you decent?"

Reluctantly I look in and see that she's tucked in under the covers, fast asleep, even though the overhead light is on and the sun is coming up outside. I'm used to going without sleep, but she must be utterly exhausted. She looks right in my bed. Like she belongs there. Giving my plain bedroom life. Making it feel like a home, and not a

place I dread. It's been months since I've wanted to crawl into my own bed, but that's all I want to do in this moment.

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I turn off the light in the room and walk over beside the bed. I touch her cheek, and she leans into me a little, making my heart swell. I kiss my finger, then place the finger on her lips, whispering goodnight.

Before I leave, I tape a note to the door, hoping that she'll see it when she finally wakes up.

Fia,

Headed to work, but there's a phone in the kitchen if you need anything. I've left my number on the table next to it, along with the key to the apartment. Call me when you get up, maybe we can meet for dinner?

Derek

I think about the note all the way to work, wondering if I said the right thing. She's probably too traumatized about losing all her stuff to think about dinner. Maybe I should go back and just wait for her to wake up. If she's got no one, then she may not have a way to get more clothes or food. She may need help getting around.

By the time I reach the fire station, I'm in a state of anxiety about leaving her alone. I need to get back to her, to make sure she has everything she might need. So instead of going in and getting to work, I head to the Captain's office.

"Sir, I'm going to need a couple of days off."

He looks at me like I've suddenly grown two heads.

“Wasn’t it just yesterday we were talking about me pulling you if I thought you weren’t up to it? Then last night I hear about you taking a woman from that arson fire to the hospital?”

“Yeah, about that,” I say, walking into his office and taking a seat. “The guys had it under control, and one of the victims wanted me to stay with her until she was released. She didn’t have anyone else with her and no next of kin. I gave her a place to stay, and I wanted to take some time off to make sure she’s settled before I come back to work.”

He taps a folder next to him. “This is the report I’m sending over to the police department this afternoon on the findings from the fire. The guys from last night jumped on the paperwork for the investigation. It’s definitely arson, so I’m sure you’ll be asked a few questions. Just keep close to your phone until this settles.”

I nod, standing up and turning to leave his office. Before I get out the door, he calls my name.

“Phoenix.”

“Yes, sir?” I ask, looking back.

“Be careful.”

I nod, not really understanding. He never tells us that, even when we’re about to walk into a burning building. He usually just tells us to suit up and keep our heads on straight. But by the time I’m back out and headed to the store, his words of caution are already forgotten.

“Strawberry or mango?”

The old lady looks at me and smiles, shrugging her shoulders. “I’m not sure, but I’m sure she’ll be happy you made the effort either way. Good luck, handsome.”

She reaches up, squeezing my cheek, and I still feel lost. I’ve got a cart overflowing with things for Fia. I already bought her some clothes and shoes—basic things that I know can help her get through a few days. Then I came to the drug store, and I’ve loaded up on what I hope is something close to what she needs. Lotions and soaps, hairbrushes, a blow dryer. Women need so many things, and I want her to have what she wants. But I can’t decide between strawberry and mango shampoo.

Giving up, I throw both into the cart and head for the candy aisle.

I don’t know anything about Fia, but something about her has taken hold of me. Maybe it’s the need to protect and care for her because she’s in a vulnerable situation, but something deeper in my heart is feeling the connection. I’ve got fears that come with it though. That she might reject me, or that I could get attached to her, and the worst thought of all is that maybe she doesn’t feel this pull, too.

I’ve steered clear of dating women for most of my career because of the kind of job I have. In the blink of an eye, it can all be taken away, and I’d never wanted to put someone through that before. But then I think of my mom and dad and what an amazing marriage they had. And it wasn’t a fire that separated them, it was my mother’s cancer.

Looking to their relationship always made me long for my own. Fear has kept any possibility of that at arm’s length. But last night, Fia was thrown into my arms, and I wasn’t given a choice. Suddenly all the worry and dark clouds that have been hanging over me have been lifted, and something new and bright has replaced them. My angel found me, and suddenly I’m alive for the first time. I want to grab onto any part of it, even if I can only have it for a moment. I’ll take whatever I can get, but I’m going to fight like hell to make sure it’s forever.

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My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I look down, hoping it's her. When I see it's my dad, I answer and think briefly what it would be like to introduce her to him.

"Hey, Dad."

"Sunshine! I've heard you made a lady friend."

I roll my eyes, thinking about how Captain Thomas have been friends for forty years, so nothing passes by either of them.

"Did you? Wonder where you got that information." I half-smile. People think only women gossip. That's complete bullshit. Get ten men in a room and all they have to do is talk, they'll start going on about all kinds of shit. I think some men at the firehouse could give the ladies down at the church potluck a run for their money.

"You know a gentleman never reveals his sources. But never mind that. Just wanted to call and tell you that I love you and I can't wait to meet her."

I feel myself smile when I hear his own happiness. My father said my mom wanted more than anything for me to find happiness with someone. And then I think, maybe she had a hand in all this. God knows it would take someone being thrown at me, for me to recognize someone standing right in front of me. But then I picture Fia's beautiful blue eyes, and I know there's no way I would miss her. Not in a crowd of a thousand people. I'd always find her and want her in my arms. But I like the idea that maybe my mom sent an angel, and I'm going to make sure I take care of that gift.

"Why don't you let me meet her first? And then I'll bring her to see you."

God, this is all happening so fast, and what if it's only happening in my head? What if, when I get back to the apartment, she takes one look at me and decides I'm not worth it?

Shaking off that thought, I know that's not going to happen. She felt that connection, too. There's something between us that both of need to figure out, and I plan on doing just that.

"Fine, fine, take your time, my boy. But don't keep me waiting. I've got grandbaby fever already."

Sighing, I get off the phone, promising to bring her by as soon as I can. If the old man wasn't so adorable, I'd probably go crazy.

"Okay," I say to myself, looking at the candy. "What does a beautiful woman who's lost everything in a fire and who's currently asleep in my bed want as a snack?"

9

Fia

I snuggle deeper into the softest bed I've ever slept in, feeling the morning sun hitting my face. Rolling over onto my back, I stretch, a smile spreading across my face. I haven't felt this relaxed in...

My eyes pop open, and memories of last night flood my brain. I bolt from the bed, looking around the room for a clock.

Ten o'clock. Shit! I'm late! It's then I realize I'm stark naked, the fluffy towel I used last night lying discarded on the floor. I'm naked in a man's home. I just crashed last night, not even thinking about what I was doing. I'd only meant to rest my eyes for a

moment. Maybe because while last night might have been a mess and set me back months and months, I'd never felt safer in my life. In that moment when I was in Derek's arms, and when he just held my hand, I knew nothing could happen to me. From the sheer determination in his eyes, I knew he'd never let anything touch me.

It was the first time I could ever remember feeling nothing but calm in a man's presence. Unafraid. It was refreshing and just felt so right with him. The thought of leaving here makes a knot form in my stomach. I don't want to leave. I want to crawl back into the bed and sleep for a few more hours, maybe even days, but that just isn't an option.

I grab the clothes still sitting in a pile at the end of the bed and slide the shirt from the firehouse over my head, making me miss Derek even more. The thing falls to my knees and looks more like a dress. Next I grab the sweatpants and pull them up my legs. I have to roll them a million times to get them to fit.

I walk into the bathroom and look for the slippers the hospital gave me. I put them on, then grab the clothes off the floor. I want to make sure I don't leave anything a mess, so I quickly put the towel in the laundry basket and make the bed back right before leaving the room and heading towards the kitchen. I'm hoping Derek will be here, but when I enter I see no one.

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I won't even get to say goodbye. I know he said I could stay here a few days, but it doesn't feel right. I don't even know whose place this is, and Derek is gone. After tossing the hospital clothes into the trash, knowing I'll never get the smoke smell out, I look for a piece of paper and pen. That's when I see a note from him taped to the front door. I pick it up and read it.

The note makes butterflies take flight in my stomach. He's so nice, and I don't want to take advantage of that. He's obviously just doing his job. He's a fireman. He saves people for a living. I've already overstayed my welcome. I debate taking his number, but I worry that in a moment of weakness I might take advantage of him. I could tell that Derek has a few of his own demons. I know the look of pain and loss. I could see it in Derek's eyes. I'd seen it in my mother's, and even mine. He doesn't need any of my demons to add to the pile.

Derek,

Thank you for everything you did for me last night. It means more to me than you'll ever know. Your small act of kindness reminds me that there are decent men still out there in the world.

Fia

I stare down at the note, wondering if this will be the last contact I'll ever have with him. The knot in my stomach grows more at the idea, and I feel a little nauseated. I shake my head and let the note fall to the counter before making my way to the front door to exit the townhouse. The door locks behind me, and it's then I realize I have no idea where I am and that I have no money. Or anything, for that matter. All that

safety I was feeling in that house slips away, leaving a cold anxiety behind.

Luckily a taxi passes, and I flag it down. I'm just going to have to ask one of the girls at the women's shelter to cover my fare until I get a chance to go to the bank at some point. When I get to the shelter, Nora is standing outside and covers the tab for me while I give her the Cliff Notes of last night.

"You alright?" she asks, looking me over. I look a mess, and I know it.

"I will be," I tell her as she follows me into the shelter after entering the code to get into the building. Things might be a mess, but I know I can pick myself up. I've been in worse situations in my life, and my mom and I picked ourselves up and pulled through. I'll do the same. I head to one of the storage rooms in search of clothes. I hate to take from the bin, but I really don't have an option right now.

"I'm just glad you're okay." I look over at her and see the worry in her face.

"I'm fine, promise. I'm just a little lost on what to do next. I lost everything. I don't even have an ID." Without an ID, how am I even going to get money from my own bank account? I let out a long breath as I dig through the bin, finally finding a pair of jeans in my size and a shirt.

"Your old ID is still in your desk."

"Oh, my God, you're right!" A splash of relief hits me at that. I'd gotten a new ID when I'd moved into my apartment.

"C-cup?" Nora asks, motioning to my boobs. I just nod as she goes to the closet that houses all the new bras and underwear. She finds me some and tosses them to me.

I'm going to have to make a donation after this. Guilt from taking from here weighs

heavily on me. Women and kids here have it way worse than I do. They need these things and don't even have a penny to their names. I work here because I want to give back, not take. I quickly dress, wanting to get to my desk and see what needs to be done. I hate being behind, and I know work will take my mind off of everything, including this empty feeling that has settled in since I left the townhouse.

"Where are you staying?" Nora asks, following me into the office.

"I'm not sure," I admit. I haven't gotten that far yet. Hell, I haven't gotten anywhere it seems.

"You know you can stay here," Nora offers. She is always on call and has a little cot in our shared office. She loves this place just as much as I do. Nora left her abusive husband a few years back but still doesn't like to be alone, so being on call and staying here works for her and makes her feel safe. I am not taking her cot. She needs this place. I can make do. I will make do.

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“How many beds you got open right now?” I ask her, and I know from the look on her face the answer is zero. I’m not taking a bed from a woman who is here hiding from her husband or lover. Not going to happen.

“I got it covered. Don’t worry about it.” I try to reassure her because she has enough to worry about as it is. I can either get a hotel for the night or go over to one of the normal shelters in the city. Either way, I know I’ll figure it out. I always do.

This fire might have set me back, but I’ll pick myself up and get it together. It might drain the meager savings I have to buy new clothes and a deposit on a new place. I’d planned to use that money on finishing my last semester of college this fall, but I’ll be able to do that once I get back on my feet.

Oddly, the thought of missing out on enrolling this fall doesn’t seem to bother me as much as never seeing Derek again. His face comes to my mind once again. It never fully leaves me. There was just something about him.

“New family just got here. She has three kids,” Nora says, breaking into my thoughts. Grabbing my clipboard off my desk, I go to meet the new family. I hope I can stop thinking about how I miss a man I barely even know.

“Seems like you’re kind of in a bind,” Sam says, running his eyes over me with that look a cat gets when it’s finally caught a mouse. Tracy just stands there and stares at both of us, looking just as pissed as she did the other night when she walked into the office and found out Sam had offered me the managing position. I’m thankful she’s pissed, because now she’s like a freaking hawk, watching everything that’s going on, and Sam can’t get me alone to ask me questions or press me about taking the job, or

anything else he might have in mind.

I really wish I could quit this place, but now that really isn't an option at all. In fact, I have to make enough tips tonight to cover a hotel room. After the new family came into the shelter, I hadn't been able to slip away to the bank to get cash before it closed. For a few hours, everything had slipped my mind but them. I was trying to make them feel welcome and safe, trying to make it seem less like an upheaval.

"I'll be okay. Luckily there are a few extra uniforms here," I say smiling, trying to hide how uncomfortable this whole situation is. I just want to work and be left alone, maybe just go back to daydreaming about Derek. I wonder what he's up to, if he's thought about me at all. I regret not taking his number. Maybe there could have been something. A deep loss hits me again.

10

Phoenix

When I get back to my place, I knock on the door and wait for Fia to answer it. She hasn't called me, but she could still be sleeping. I can't help but picture how I'd left her in my bed, and a sweet hum takes over my body. She had looked exhausted when I'd gotten her back her last night.

I wait for a few moments, but don't hear any movement on the other side of the door. I've got tons of bags in my hands from all the stuff I bought today, so I decide to just go ahead and use my key to let myself in.

When I get inside, I go to the kitchen, wanting to put some of the food away, and spot her note. My stomach drops to my knees when I see that she's left and isn't coming back.

Panic starts to pump through my veins, and I stand still for a moment, trying to assess the situation. I read the note over and over again, hoping that I read it wrong. Just then my phone buzzes, and I grab it out of my pocket without bothering to see who it is.

“Yo, Phoenix. It’s Jim. Captain called me from the station earlier and asked me to pass on my preliminary report to you about the investigation. You got a second to go over it?”

I want to hang up and run out to find Fia, but then I realize I have nothing to go on. I only know her first name, which feels crazy to me with all the things I’m feeling for her. Jim, the lead investigator for the police department, is my best chance at any kind of information about her.

“Yeah, that was good of him to let you know. I’ve got a personal interest in finding out what happened, so let me know everything you’ve got.”

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He spends a few minutes going over his technical analysis of the damage and what he thinks started it. Then he gets into possible suspects, and my interest is piqued.

“So, from all that we can safely say that the trigger was an accelerant in the Laundromat attached to the apartment complex on the top floor. There were only three people living in the building at the time, thank God, because it was far from up to code. The owner of the laundromat is being questioned this afternoon. From what we can tell, he’s got a stack of back taxes and liens. We’re still looking for the owner of the apartments, but our investigation assumes him as the lead suspect. It sounds like this guy is trying to cash in on the insurance and cut his losses.”

Anger boils through me as I think of Fia being in a place that’s unsafe. I think I may need to pay this guy a visit and see for myself if he’s guilty or not. And then figure out who owns the apartment building so I can get some information from them.

“Do you have anything on the tenants? Names, numbers?”

Jim rustles some papers and makes a noise. “No, nothing. Looks like the people living there cleared out, but we’re sending someone over there today to try to locate and question any witnesses. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Thanks, Jim. Anything I can do to help, you let me know. I appreciate it.”

“Anytime, Phoenix.”

I stand outside of Moe’s diner, just watching the place for a second before I go in. I’ve heard of this place before, that it stays busy. Looking inside, I see it’s packed

with people for the dinner rush, making me think the food must be really good. The waitresses are buzzing around dressed in fifties-style diner uniforms, and suddenly a blonde catches my eye.

“Fia?” I whisper.

Then I spot the owner over her shoulder looking at her ass. I glare at him, my vision turning red with anger, and I clench my fists at my side.

As if she hears me say her name, she freezes in place, staring back at me. Her mouth makes a perfect circle. She’s clearly shocked to see me. I’m wondering if it’s really such a coincidence that the owner of the Laundromat happens to own the diner where she works.

Looking back, I see his greasy eyes are still looking down her body, and I feel like I need to remove them from their sockets.

Charging in, I walk up to him, ready to punch him in the mouth. Just before I get to him, Fia steps in front of me.

“Derek, what are you doing here?” She looks around at the crowded diner, but nobody is looking at us. She looks over her shoulder at her boss, and then looks to me. She understands.

“I’m taking my break now. Why don’t you come with me outside so we can talk?”

Sensing my tension and that something was about to happen, she slips her soft hand in mine, and I immediately turn to dough, the anger slipping from me at her simple touch. She pulls me with her, away from her boss, and I watch as he talks to a redheaded waitress, completely unaware of what nearly happened.

Fia pulls me down a long hall, past the kitchen and out the back door to an alley. As soon as we are outside and the door clicks closed behind us, I'm on her.

"Fia," I whisper against her lips, right before my mouth finds her. I have to taste, too. To reassure myself that I've found her. The tension and black clouds that had been building since I last saw her are washing away.

One hand goes to her waist to pull her flush against me while my other hand goes to the back of her neck to keep her from getting away. My whole body leans over her, towering her small frame and shielding her from view.

Her full lips are as soft as satin, and I taste her warm tongue as she opens for me. I suck her bottom lip into my mouth and bite down just a little. Then I sweep my tongue back inside, needing her more than I need my next breath. She lets out a moan, and I devour it, consuming her pleasure and letting it feed my soul. I want to inhale her passion and keep it only for myself, my inner caveman coming forward, needing to claim her.

When I need to taste more of her skin, my mouth moves down her chin, across her jaw, and down her throat. I've still got a grip on the nape of her neck, and I move her head so that I can take what I want. I'm not waiting for her to give me anything, though I probably should. Somewhere, very quietly in the back of my mind, I know I should be slowing down. But I push that thought farther back and keep selfishly taking her. Needing her.

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“Derek,” she moans, and I nearly cum from the sound. “God, I don’t know you, but I can’t stop this feeling.”

Her fingers go to my hair as I lick and suck at her neck. I’m going to leave a mark, and the thought turns me on more.

“Don’t stop,” she whispers and pushes her body against mine.

“Never,” I growl. I wonder where that came from. I’ve not once been this possessive of anything in my life, and I suddenly find myself wanting to throw her over my shoulder and carry her to a tower in a castle so no one else can so much as look at her beauty.

I feel her hands on me, and her little body trying to rub against mine, and I can’t think straight.

“We need a bed,” I grit out before moving to the other side of her neck. I want to lick and bite all of her like some caged animal.

“I...oh, God, right there.”

I sweep my tongue over the spot just below her earlobe and feel her shiver.

“An hour,” she pants, like she’s running a marathon. “Give me one hour to finish up at work and I’m yours.”

Pulling back, I look into her crisp blue eyes. Her hair has come loose from her

ponytail, and her cheeks are flushed. Her lips are full, and she looks like she's been roughly kissed. Good. She looks like she belongs to someone. Me.

"Mine," I say, not breaking eye contact. It's not a question, but I want her to know the gravity of what she's just said. "You better mean it, Fia. Because we both know something is happening here. And if you're telling me that you're mine, you better mean that in every sense of the word." I'm being too forward and hard, but I can't help it. When I didn't know where she was for those few hours, it was torture, and now I can't lose her again.

She lets out a shaky breath, and I feel her fingers move against my chest. She gives me a shy smile and then nods.

"One hour," I say, my voice rough with need.

"One hour," she confirms.

11

Fia

My heart's still racing thirty minutes later. I can still feel his lips and hands on me, sending feelings I've never had before never thought I'd have – through my body. I glance over at Derek, who's sitting in the corner booth. His bulk takes up one side of the bench. He's unmissable. He doesn't even have to say a word. I can just feel him in the room. He looks just as handsome without his uniform on, wearing casual jeans that grip his thick thighs, and a firehouse shirt that stretches across his broad chest. It looks like the same one he'd given me to wear last night.

Whenever I look over at him he's either looking at me or giving my boss a death glare. Sam just seems uncomfortable, which is nice. I like seeing the tables turn on

him for once. I have to bite my lip to keep from smiling. I want to ask him how he found me, but I'm guessing it wouldn't take much for him to find out who I am given that he already knew where I lived. I'm still shocked he showed up here. At first I thought it was because he had to ask me questions about the fire or something, but then I saw the jealousy flicker in his eyes when he looked at Sam.

He must have seen him staring at me or something, because he went right for him. I should have been scared. Normally when I come up against a man with anger on his face, I run. It was something I'd faced many times with my own father, and later with some of the women's husbands and lovers at the shelter, but I didn't feel even a trace of fear. In fact, for the first time that day, I felt safe. I didn't have to worry about Sam cornering me because it was clear Derek wouldn't let that happen.

He watches me like he has every right to. Like I belong to him. Like it's his responsibility. And it makes something deep inside me settle. It's been too long since anyone has really looked out for me. It's as if a small burden has been lifted from my shoulders. I don't even care if it's only for a small window of time, I'm going to enjoy it. I'll take what I can get because life hasn't been handing me many great things lately. I'm going to take this ray of sunshine, because that's what Derek is.

I walk over to him with my pot of coffee to refresh his drink, or maybe it's just because I want to be near him again.

"He stares too fucking much." He says it loud enough for anyone to hear. He doesn't appear to care. I feel heat hit my cheeks. I ignore his words. What can I say to that? Sam does stare too much, and I hate it, but I don't think it's against the law to stare.

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“He always do that?” This time his words are soft and low and only for me. I just nod at his question. His jaw clenches. “He ever do anything else?” I just look down at him, not sure what to say. “Never mind. Don’t answer that or I’ll be out of this seat. Just finish your shift, angel.”

He gives me a warm smile, but I can tell it’s forced. I like that what Sam does pisses him off. That it bothers him. That someone seems to care and finds it not okay. Not like Tracy, who is only upset because she wants Sam’s attention, and I don’t even think it’s his attention she wants. More like his money, but Sam doesn’t seem like he’s loaded or anything, so I really don’t get it at all.

I go back to waiting on my tables and try to stay clear of Sam as much as I can. I don’t want there to be a problem. I just want to finish my shift and be done. I’m really going to have to find a new second job. This just isn’t working, and the tension and unease I’m feeling is only getting worse. It doesn’t matter at this point that I make the best tips here, I’m just going to have to find something else.

“Stay away from Sam,” Tracy growls next to me as I start a new batch of coffee. I look over at her, and if looks could kill I’d be six feet under.

“There is nothing between Sam and me,” I tell her. I don’t want to argue with her about it because it’s not worth fighting over. None of it is. It’s silly.

“Just watch yourself, or maybe I’ll go tell your flavor of the week over there about how you sleep around to get what you want.” I just stare at her. Do people even talk like that? Flavor? “Guess it doesn’t matter. Someone like that isn’t going to stick around with the likes of you,” she huffs before turning to leave with a smile pasted on

her face like she just won something.

The woman is in her mid-fifties and is trying to fight over a man with me. I'm not ever fighting for Sam, but she's trying to take me down a peg or two. And as much as I hate to admit it, the cuts sting a little.

I look down at my cheap waitress uniform that makes me itchy and irritates my skin. This one is even smaller than my normal one. This was all that was left, and I undoubtedly look like I'm stuffed into it. It really brings home how different Derek and I are. We're from different worlds, but I hadn't seen that. I'd just been lost in him.

I glance up and see it's finally time to go. I counted my money earlier and saw that I'd made enough to cover a hotel room if need be. I'm done for the night. I make my way to the front to get Derek, a nervous excitement coursing through me. I'm not sure what's going to happen.

I don't know if I'm going home with him. I have to find a place to stay tonight, and it seems rude to just assume that I'll go to his place. It would be even odder to ask him if he wants to go to whatever hotel I check into. My excitement starts to turn into anxiety. I'm not sure how to handle any of this.

Caught up in my thoughts, I run right into a wall of a man, and I know from his smell that it's Derek. His hands go to my sides, making sure I don't fall on my butt. I look up at him. Jesus, I'd have no idea what to do with this man if I went home with him. I want to. God, do I want to. But my experience with men is less than zero. Heck, I avoid them as much as I can.

"Careful," he says, pulling me closer to him, his warmth seeping into me, going all the way to my bones.

“Fia, I need you in my office before you leave,” Sam yells across the diner, bringing me out of my Derek fog.

Derek makes no move to release me. Instead, his fingers sink deeper into my waist, his head starts to lower, and his mouth takes mine in a soft kiss. I easily open to him as his tongue enters my mouth. My body comes to life once again. I want to push further into him, but I’m already plastered to his front. When he pulls back, I’m breathless and have forgotten where I am or what I was doing. I didn’t know a kiss like that was possible.

“She can’t. My fiancée and I have plans.”

I’m so knocked by his words I don’t speak as he pulls me from the diner and shuffles me into a truck, quickly shutting the door behind me. When he enters the other side, he locks the doors before putting his key in the ignition and taking off.

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“Fiancée?” I finally find my words. Derek’s hands grip the steering wheel so tightly I can see his knuckles turning white. He glances over at me like he is trying to read my face.

He just shrugs. Maybe he said it so Sam will leave me alone. If he thinks I’m with someone, he might back off. I don’t think that will work, but I know him a little better than Derek. I don’t think Sam will stop until he gets what he wants or I quit. I can feel it. I should have seen it before and paid better attention. Maybe I should have had a few job possibilities lined up and not let it get to this point.

“Has a nice ring to it,” he says, his little tease making my whole world tilt. His hands loosen on the steering wheel and he gives me a playful smile. I can’t help but blush and look away out the window.

I feel his hand take mine. I look back at him, but his eyes are on the road. His fingers lace with mine and give me a little squeeze.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“Home,” he says simply, like it’s my home, too. I haven’t had a place that felt like home in forever. Maybe I never really did. I’ve had places I stayed with my mother, but I will never call the house I lived with my father a home. That wasn’t a home at all.

“Where is your home?”

A sheepish look crosses his face, and I could swear he blushes a little, but it’s hard to

tell in the dark interior of the truck.

“Yeah, about that.” A moment of panic hits me at what he is about to say. That sweet little bubble I’m in with him might be about to burst. I try to pull my hand from his, but he only tightens his hold. What if he’s married or something?

“Where you slept last night is my home. Well that, or the firehouse, and I’m sure as fuck not taking you back there.”

“You said”

“I know. I just didn’t want you to be unconformable and wanted you to have a safe place for the night,” he admits, and the now-familiar warm feeling wraps around me.

“You make me feel safe,” I confess. I feel the furthest thing from uncomfortable around him.

“You make me feel whole again.” He brings my hand up to his mouth, kissing it, never taking his eyes off the road. It almost sounds like he was in pain and I’ve taken it away. The idea that I have that kind of power is intoxicating. I wish I could see his face right now because that was the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me in my whole life.

We sit in silence for a little as he makes the drive across town.

“You hungry?” he asks, pulling up to the front of his house “I can order us something or take you somewhere, if you like.”

“I ate, so I’m okay, unless you want to get something.” He ate at the diner while he watched me, but I wouldn’t be surprised if a man as big as him ate every few hours. Firemen must work out a lot.

“The only thing I want to eat right now is you.” His words are deep and sensual and send a thrill up my spine. My face heats. I don’t think he knows I have no idea what I’m doing. Maybe I could fake it. I know about sex, I just haven’t done it. I don’t want to disappoint him, but the way he looks at me makes me think I could just stand here and he’d be happy with me. Whole, like he said.

“Don’t move,” he says before hopping out of his truck and coming around to my side and opening the door, giving me his hand to help me down. It’s not even a high truck, so his attentiveness has me fighting a giggle.

“You always this sweet?” I ask, looking up at him through my lashes.

He wraps an arm around me, pulling me close as we walk towards his door.

“My mom taught me manners, but I don’t recall anyone ever calling me sweet.” When we get to his door, he unlocks it and pulls me into his place. He shuts and locks the door behind me. The lock has barely clicked into place when he’s on me, caging me in with his big body. His hands rest on the door behind me, bracketing my head.

I still don’t feel a trace of fear. My hands go to his chest, my fingers digging into his shirt.

“Strawberry or mango?” he says, and I raise an eyebrow at the odd question.

“Thought you weren’t hungry.”

“I meant, which smell do you like more?” He presses into me.

“I’m partial to both,” I tell him, unsure what this is about.

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“Good. I got you both. I’d get you anything you asked for,” he says, then his mouth is on mine once again. The kiss is just like our first one. The same need clawing at us both. Before I know it my legs are wrapped around him and he’s carrying me through the house, my back hitting his bed. I still don’t let go of him, keeping my body wrapped around him. I don’t want any space between us, and I need this contact more than my next breath.

He looks down at me with the most intense look I’ve ever seen, and it steals my breath.

“You look like an angel. I shouldn’t want to do all these things to an angel, but I don’t think I can stop myself. I don’t even think God could stop me at this point,” he admits. I can see he’s trying to fight himself. He’s trying to pull back, but I don’t want that. I want him.

I wiggle under him, desperate for him to keep going. I want more of him, wanting all of the things he makes me feel.

“Then don’t.” I’ll be his as long as he wants me. I’d give him anything if he always made me feel like this.

12

Phoenix

I’d done some digging while I waited for Fia to finish her shift at the diner. I’d talked to Jim again and given him her name and gotten as much as I could. I knew her dad

had died and had been reported for abuse on several occasions, and that she and her mom had been in and out of shelters before finally getting on her feet when she was old enough to start working. I also found out that she is close to finishing college, but had dropped out when her mom passed away. I'd checked and she was preregistered for the fall semester in school, but I'm willing to bet the fire sent those dreams up in smoke and set her back to where she was.

Seeing her under me right now and knowing that she's willing to give herself over to me has me feeling things I've never dared feel before. When I said "fiancée" earlier, I'd done so without thinking about what it might do to her. If it might scare Fia away, or make her think I was crazy. But that's exactly what this is. Crazy ridiculous. But damn if it doesn't feel like the absolute right decision. I'd wanted her before I'd found out about her past, but as I find out more about her, I want to make sure no hurt ever touches her again.

"This is all moving so fast," I say, feeling myself pushing towards the edge of no return. "Don't give me something and then take it back, Fia. I don't care what this makes me sound like, but I need to know that you won't run out on me. That if we do this, and you give yourself to me, this means something to you."

She smiles at me, running her fingers through my hair. "I'm not going anywhere, Derek. Just please don't break my heart."

"The only thing I plan on breaking is this headboard."

She starts to laugh, but it turns into a moan as my mouth goes to her neck and starts to kiss her. I'm ravenous for her, but I'm trying to go slow. However, three seconds into my plan, I give up, pulling off her clothes as quickly as I can.

"I can't go slow, Fia. I'm trying, but it's not working."

I pull at my own clothes as she starts to strip down the rest of hers, taking off her simple white panties and white cotton bra. I nearly rip my shirt off to get my skin against hers, wanting my naked chest against her breasts.

She lies back, and I sit up on my knees to look down on her. Her pale skin is unmarked, almost like porcelain. Her breasts are full, with nipples the color of her blushing cheeks. They're tight, and quiver as she takes in a shaky breath.

I look into her eyes, and she smiles at me nervously. "I've never done this before," she confesses, shrugging a shoulder.

Gazing down her body to her waist, and then lower, I see a small patch of blonde curls and the dewy lips of her pussy. I reach down and rub her there, feeling how soft she is.

Without taking my eyes off her pussy, I lick my lips. "This is fresh? Never been kissed?" My voice is husky, and even I hardly recognize it. My throbbing cock is still trapped in my jeans, but being inside there won't stop me from cumming.

"Yes," she whispers, and I can hear the desire in her voice. The nervousness from seconds ago has faded away.

"My sweet Fia. I'm going to love every inch of you. Taste every inch."

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Moving down her body, I kiss her stomach and hips, then kiss the inside of her thighs to get them to spread for me. When she relaxes enough, they fall open for me, revealing her pretty pink pussy and her hard little clit. That will only ever be mine until the end of time.

Her hands move down, and she shyly tries to cover herself, but I just gently intertwine our fingers and keep kissing the insides of her thighs, moving closer to her center. She takes a few more shaky breaths, and I can feel her tension coiling just before my mouth opens, and I give her one long, slow lick with the flat of my tongue.

Her warm sweet taste hits me, and I inhale her scent. Her hips rise, and she moans out my name just before my whole mouth covers her. One taste is enough to drive me insane. My hands grip her tighter as my mouth moves over her pussy, licking and tasting all of her. My lower half starts to rub against the mattress, trying to find some kind of relief, but it's useless. My cock wants inside the sweet heaven that my mouth is making love to, and he won't be happy until he's in there.

"So sweet," I growl against her before going back to sucking on her clit.

Before I know it, she's the one gripping my hands harder and pressing her pussy into my mouth.

"So," she gasps, "close!"

The thought of her having an orgasm on my face has cum dripping out of the end of my cock. I can't hold back when I feel her pussy pulsing and she cries out my name. The sounds of her pleasure and the rush of sweetness from her pussy into my waiting

mouth have thick cum smearing the inside of my jeans. I can feel the hot mess all over my cock as she grinds out her pleasure on my mouth.

I have to blink a few times to clear my vision because I've gone foggy with one of the strongest orgasms of my life. And she didn't even touch me.

Giving her pussy one last soft kiss, I let go of her hands and move down off the bed to take off my jeans. Fia opens her sleepy eyes, giving me a very satisfied smile.

I push the material over my hips, taking the sticky underwear with it and kicking them away. Her eyes widen at my hard cock, which is nearly purple with excitement and pointing right at her. Reaching down, I stroke him a few times as I crawl back onto the bed. Fia doesn't take her eyes off me until I'm between her legs and the head of my cock is at her opening.

I kiss her, letting her taste the passion she just gave me. It's so fucking erotic when she moans at the flavor. Her pussy on my face and her tongue in my mouth are my undoing.

When I pull back, I look deeply into her eyes. "I'm clean. I had my last full checkup a year ago, and I haven't touched anyone since. And it was a long time before that test, too. I want you bare, angel, and I want you to know that I'll take care of you. Tonight and every night after this, I'll be the one you lean on."

I push into her opening but with all my strength will my body to stop. I've never felt someone else's bare flesh against my cock before. I want this closeness with her, something neither one of us has shared before. I just hold myself there, not wanting to hurt her.

"I don't know how this happened so fast, but I love you, Fia. And I promise to be with you and take care of you, always and forever." I confess my truth.

She smiles up at me, tears twinkling in her eyes. She nods and runs her fingers through my hair, not answering me in words, but I can feel it in her heart. She doesn't have to say it back, not yet. Right now I just need her to know that I'll be by her side.

I take her lips in another deep kiss as I push through her virginity and thrust all the way inside her. She cries out, and I hold myself still as she clings to me. I bury my face in her neck, trying to breathe through the tight grip her pussy has on my cock. It's clenching me harder than anything I've ever felt, and it's so tight it's nearly painful. I have to breathe along with her, both of us adjusting to the new fit. It rips at me that I've hurt her. I want to be the one to make sure pain never touches her again.

"It's just the first time, angel. The more we make love, the easier it gets. So it's incentive to let me inside you."

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I feel her smile against my neck, and she places a kiss there. “Go slow. I think I’m okay.”

As slowly as I’m capable of, I pull my thick cock out of her entrance, but she’s gripping me so tight it’s as if I’m stuck. I have to pull back with a little more force, and when I do, it causes us both to moan.

The slide back in is just as tight as the first time, but I feel Fia relax a little around me. Her legs move up around my hips, opening herself and letting me in. The smooth glide is easier after a few shallow thrusts, and I grit my teeth at the sweet agony.

“I want to cum with you inside me,” she whispers in my ear, and I moan again.

“Goddamn it, angel. Don’t say that. I’ll cum in two seconds if you talk dirty to me.”

She clenches around me like she’s trying to make me cum, and I groan. I can’t hold off much longer, and I want to make this good for her.

Reaching between us, I rub her clit with my thumb and continue to thrust in and out of her. With my free hand, I take one of hers and entwine our fingers together.

“Derek, I’m close. I want to feel you cum, too.”

“Fuck,” I grit out into the pillow. I love hearing her dirty mouth for me, that I’m making her say these words. “Keep talking.”

“Right there! Oh, God. You feel so good inside me. More.”

“Shit, shit, shit.” I start to cum, but I try to hold it back, and then I feel her tongue on my neck.

Her pussy clenches around me, and then she’s shouting my name, her orgasm taking over. I finally let go, cumming inside her and giving us both what our bodies were begging for. Release.

I hold myself up so I don’t crush her as wave after wave of pleasure shoots up my cock and into her warm, waiting pussy. The pulses of her climax pull my cum from me. The thought has me cumming even more, wanting to give her what she wants.

When I finally come back from the edge, I feel her soft lips placing feather-light kisses on my neck and shoulder. I lean up and look down into her beautiful blue eyes, feeling more connected to her than I have to anything in my life. I rub my thumb across her cheek and lean down, kissing her gently.

I thrust slowly, moving in and out of her again, and after a moment she lets out a giggle.

“Again?” she asks with a look of surprise on her face.

“Fia, my angel, once was never going to be enough.”

13

Fia

“You sore, angel?” Derek asks, placing kisses all over my face and slowly waking me up. He doesn’t wait for an answer, taking my mouth in a deep kiss and leaving me breathless. I finally open my eyes fully and see the morning sun coating the room. This is the second night in a row I’ve woken up in this bed, and I want to do it for the

rest of my life, with him in it here with me like this morning.

“Probably not where you think,” I admit, smiling up at him. I’m a little tender between my legs, but not enough to turn down another round, if that’s what he’s looking for. I could stay wrapped up in this bed with him forever with the way he’s been treating me and the things he’s been saying. I think he wants that, too. In fact, I think he wants everything.

His eyebrows rise, concern crossing his handsome face. I can’t stop myself from reaching up and running my fingers along the stubble on his face.

“My mouth.”

His eyes drop to my lips, and a full-blown smile spreads across his face. This one makes his eyes light up.

“Your mouth does look like it’s been ravished. Sorry angel.” He doesn’t look sorry at all. “I can’t seem to help myself.” To prove his point, he kisses me again. He’s been doing it all night. I’d woken in the middle of the night a few times to him just kissing me, then falling back asleep.

“Glad someone is perky and rested today,” I tease. I could definitely snuggle back into the bed for a few more hours. His face changes at my words. His eyes go even softer.

“No nightmares.” He says it like he can’t even believe it. “Not one since my angel came into my life. I haven’t slept like this for as long as I can remember.”

“I didn’t know you had nightmares.” It’s then I realize I don’t know a lot about him, but why does it feel like I can’t remember a time without him? How is that possible? It’s crazy and intense, and I love it. I love him.

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“Lost a few men a while back, and I’ve been living in the misery of it.” He leans in, placing another kiss on my lips. “Then an angel walked into my life and woke me up. You saved me.”

“Pretty sure you saved me.” The idea of saving him warms me all over. He makes me feel like I do so much, just by being near him, but I get it, because I feel like that too. Just knowing he’s near me makes me feel safe. Complete. Fills something I didn’t know I was missing.

“If you let me, I’ll save you for the rest of our lives.”

“You love me.” I remember the words he said to me last night.

“I do. How can I not? Never knew something like you could exist. You were made for me to love.” He says it so easily, like he’s been saying it his whole life. My mother loved me, but it wasn’t something that was said very much. I knew it was there, but we didn’t say it enough.

“I love you, too.” I give him the words I’ve never said to another man before, not wanting to live a life without them. I want them to come as easily as they do for him.

“Say it again.” His voice is gravelly now, and filled with so much emotion.

“I love you. I’ve never said that to anyone but my mom,” I admit, wanting him to know how much it means to me to say it to someone.

“I’ve never said it to someone I wasn’t related to.”

“This is crazy,” I tell him, but there’s no power behind it, because I don’t care if it’s crazy. I knew I loved him last night when I told him to cum inside of me. I wanted all of him, wanted every last drop to bind us together.

“It’s perfect.” He leans in, nuzzling my neck. “You still sleepy, angel?”

I nod against him as he trails kisses down my neck, down to the center of my chest, his ticklish facial hair making me giggle.

“You sleep a little bit, and I’m going to run to the bakery down the street and get us breakfast.”

“I’ll go with you,” I halfheartedly say. I don’t want to move, but I want to be with him.

“Sleep. I’ll only be gone a minute.” He pulls himself from me. I roll to my side and watch him get dressed. I don’t care that I’m naked. My shyness died last night. An unknown part of me revealed itself. I hate each piece of clothing he puts on as it covers his magnificent body.

“You working today?” he asks while slipping on his shoes.

“Just the diner today.” I want to groan just thinking about it. God, I hate that place. I’m going to have to quit and find something else.

“I want you to think about quitting.” He says it like he just read my mind.

“I”

He holds up his hand, cutting me off. “Just think about it, angel, before saying anything. I want you to stay with me, so you don’t have to worry about that.”

“I can’t just stay here. I have to help pay the bills.” I don’t want to be a mooch. I’m all for staying with him, but I want to do my part.

He walks over to the side of the bed, towering over me before dropping down so we’re at eye level. “You gave me what I’ve been looking for in life. Let me do the same. Stay with me. Quit the fucking diner before I end up in jail for snapping your boss’s neck, and let me give you what you are looking for in life.”

“I just need you.”

“But you want more, and I can give it to you. If you don’t let me, it will just drive me crazy. I’ll be sitting in that diner every day you work,” he challenges.

I don’t even know what to say to that, but God, I love how freaking protective he is over me. It’s nice.

“Just think about it, okay?”

I nod, making him give me one of those full-face smiles. I know I’m going to crack. I’m not sure there is a thing I wouldn’t agree to just to see that smile light up his face.

He grabs his wallet, keys, and phone, and gives me one last kiss before he heads out of the room, leaving me all alone.

I snuggle into the bed, thinking about waking up like this every day. A knock sounds at the door, and I pull myself from the bed, grabbing Derek’s discarded shirt from the floor. I slip it over my head as I make my way towards the door.

“You forget something?” I ask, pulling the door open.

Sam has a hand around my throat instantly, pushing me back into the townhouse. I

can smell the booze on his breath. I grab and scratch at his arm, trying to free myself.

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“You fucking whore!” he yells in my face before pushing me back, releasing his grip around my neck and sending me falling to the floor. “You were supposed to be mine. Mine!” His face turns red, and a look of pure evil crosses it.

“You had to do this the hard way, didn’t you?” He starts walking towards me, and I scramble backwards.

“You motherfucker.” Derek’s deep voice growls through the room, and it even sends a chill down my spine.

Sam turns, only to come into contact with Derek’s fist. A loud crunch sounds, before Sam hits the ground, knocked out from the single punch.

Derek goes for him again, but I whisper his name, making him look towards me.

“Please,” I tell him. I don’t want him to do something he can’t take back, because the way he is looking right now, he won’t stop until Sam isn’t breathing.

I reach my hand out to him, and he comes towards me and picks me up. I wrap myself around him. I can feel some of the tension leave his body, the sound of sirens in the distance.

“Are you sure you’re okay, angel?” Derek asks for the millionth time since the cops finally left, taking Sam with them. His face has a pained look on it. I can sense some of the adrenaline still running through his body. He’s wound up tight.

“I’m fine.” I try to wiggle a little, but Derek’s arms only hold me tighter. I’ve been in

his lap since the cops got here. Well, after he made me put pants on. Then he put me in his lap and wouldn't let me go. Even when I had to tell the story over and over again to the police. Luckily they didn't make us go down to the station, but I think that was Derek's doing.

"Sunshine, you're eventually going to have to let her go," Derek's dad, Marshall, says, making my cheeks warm. He showed up shortly after the cops did. He's been sitting in a chair beside us, watching us with a smile on his face.

"The fuck I do," is all Derek says, proving his point and not letting me go. His dad laughs.

"How'd you know to come back?" I finally ask. Derek had gotten here before Sam could really do anything, and he didn't look like he'd been to the bakery because he didn't have anything with him.

"I got a call from a friend on the police force on my way to the bakery. He's been working the investigation on the fire that burned your old building. Told him to keep me updated." He lets out a long breath. "They went to question Sam, seeing as he owns the apartments."

"What?" That was news to me.

"Yeah, angel, he owned the apartments above the laundromat, as well as the diner."

How did I not know that? Then again, I only ever dealt with the apartment manager. I did find out about the diner needing a waitress because of the apartments. There was a sign hanging in the hallway one day. It was close, and I thought it would be perfect. I'd be able to walk to work. Why hadn't Sam ever told me that?

"When they got to his place, the door was ajar, so they went in. He wasn't there, but

there was..." He stalls, looking like he doesn't want to finish his sentence. "Some evidence. A sort of shrine with pictures and all kinds of shit of you." He growls the last part, and I just stare at him.

"They don't think you're the first woman he's done this to. Let's just say, he'll never be a free man again."

I reach up and cup Derek's face. "Always saving me," I tease, trying to relieve some of the tension. I should be freaking out about what just happened, but just like the moment I laid eyes on him, I know I'll forever be safe. He won't let anything happen to me.

"God, angel." He leans forward, pressing his forehead to mine, one hand going to the back of my neck, holding me in place. "If I'd lost you..." His voice cracks on the last word, and my heart squeezes.

"I'd never leave you. Ever," I reassure him.

"You gonna marry me?" he whispers, but I know from the intake of breath from my left that his dad heard.

"Right now if you want."

He leans back, looking into my eyes. "Dad, you should leave," he says, never looking away from me.

"Fine, but you better not get hitched without me being there," he says in a half growl, and I realize it sounds just like Derek's.

"We won't," I say, never taking my eyes from Derek either. I hear the door click, and we're finally alone.

Fia

I think for a second Derek is going to pick me up and take me to bed, but all he does is lower me to the floor right where we are.

Source Creation Date: May 18, 2025, 5:54 am

“I can’t wait, angel. I have to get inside you.”

I smile as I watch him strip off his clothes, impatient to get naked and take me. I can’t say that I’m not in just as much of a hurry as he is as I grab at his shirt.

I help him pull it off his head, I take off the one I’m wearing, and he pulls off the sweats I have on. Then the two of us pull at his jeans and he pushes them down his hips just enough for his cock to spring free.

His thick cock is long and hard, the tip glistening with need. I hold him in my hand, pumping him a few times before guiding him to my opening. He hisses at the touch, and we both moan with need as he enters me. My hands go to his back, holding to him as he wets his cock on my arousal and plunges deep inside me.

I’m lying on the hardwood floor, but even with as rough as his thrusts are becoming, he’s holding me gently.

I kiss his chest and neck, licking up to his ear. The feeling of my mouth of him makes him shiver, and I know it drives him wild. I love the control I have over him in this area and how he melts at my touch.

“Will you cum in me again?” I whisper in his ear.

“Fuck, angel.” He thrusts hard three times and then grits his teeth. “Don’t make me cum so fast.”

He adjusts the angle of his hips, and now his cock is rubbing my clit with every

stroke. The feeling of his warm heat going in and out of me in perfect tempo is enough to have me barreling towards the edge of climax.

“That’s it, Derek. So perfect.”

I arch my back as much as I can, trying to hold on to the sensation. I feel my orgasm building, and it’s so close. I slide my hands down his hips and grip his ass cheeks as he thrusts into me. It only takes a few more strokes and I’m falling over the edge.

I cum, saying his name in a tangle of moans and pleas. I don’t know what I’m begging for, but he gives it to me over and over. One climax turns into another, and I swear I see stars. Derek above me keeps pumping away, stretching my orgasm out into the most intense sensations of my life. I feel his heat flood me as he thrusts, and knowing that my orgasm gives him so much pleasure it triggers his makes the experience even hotter.

He places soft kisses across my chest and breasts, tracing his tongue around my nipples. He starts to move inside me again, and I wrap my legs around him, knowing that once won’t be enough.

Some people might look at this and think we are insane. We probably are. But a feeling like this comes once in a lifetime, if that. We’ve got our whole lives to get to know one another and everything about our pasts. What we share isn’t based on liking the same movies or enjoying the same foods. Our love is based on our souls being connected and not being able to be apart. It’s as if we searched our whole lives for this, and now that we’ve found it, there’s no going back.

He makes love to me slowly this time, less hurried than before. And when I find my next peak, he picks me up and carries me to bed, only to start all over again.

Our passion is fierce, just like our love. And after hours of it, we finally sleep. But

just as I'm closing my eyes, Derek tightens his arms around me.

"You're my forever," he whispers, and I'm safe.

Epilogue

Derek

About nine months later...

"Just real quick, angel."

I kneel on the floor in front of Fia and push her dress up over her very pregnant belly. I put one of her legs over my shoulder and brace her other one while she leans back against the wall. I pull her panties to the side, and my mouth is on her pussy right away. I don't tease her, licking and sucking her off just how she likes it.

"Derek, right there, baby. That's it."

We're in the hallway of the townhouse, and we were supposed to leave ten minutes ago. But I had to have one more taste before we left.

Three days a week, I volunteer at the women's shelter as the security officer. I make sure the staff is safe and ensure that the women who are coming in are protected from any outside threats. Fia told me how important the shelter is to her, and I wanted to help her be more involved. She finished up her degree in social work two months ago, and now she can finally help make a difference within the system and just volunteer her time.

Source Creation Date: May 18, 2025, 5:54 am

I work at the fire department two days a week now, training the new guys. After Fia and I talked, and I explained my fear about working in a dangerous line of work and starting a family, I took a step back and decided what was more important. I had enough money saved in order to take care of us for a long time, so this was something I was comfortable doing. I'd be able to be there for her. For our baby.

We got married the day after her attack and found out we were having a little baby boy not too long after that day. My dad was bursting with excitement, and even though it was sad our moms couldn't be there, it was still a perfect day.

My dad has welcomed Fia as his own daughter, and I see how much he means to her. She was hesitant at first, and after learning about her real father, I understood. But as time has gone on, she's started to call him Dad, and their relationship is really beautiful. We haven't told my dad yet, but Fia wants to name the little boy after him.

She's been a trouper, working until the very end of her pregnancy, and I swear her pussy gets sweeter the further along she gets. I know she needs to get to work, but I had to have just one more taste before we left.

"Please! Oh, God. That's it."

I slip two fingers inside of her, rubbing that sweet spot inside her channel. She clenches down on me, and I feel her juices start to run down my fingers. Her climax is hot and fast, and her sweet nectar hits my tongue.

When she's finished climaxing, I pull my fingers out and lick them clean, and then give her pussy one last kiss before covering it back up with her panties. I pull her

dress back into place and stand up, giving her a satisfied smile.

“You look so smug for someone who’s going to be walking around with a boner the size of the Washington Monument all day.”

She winks at me and walks past, and I smack her ass.

“Guess you’ll just have to make it up to me tonight.”

I grab the keys and her bag, carrying them for her as we exit.

“Only if you promise to give me a foot rub in the bathtub.”

I wiggle my eyebrows at her, thinking about getting her all wet and bubbly. “Deal.”

She leans up on her tippy toes and places a soft kiss on my chin.

“Sucker,” she says before pulling back and making me chase after her.

I’d follow her to the ends of the earth as long as I’d end up with my arms around her. Holding her is the only thing that heals my soul, and I’ll do it until my last breath.

THE END