



Rampant

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

Description: Life is twisted. Cruel. After being ripped from the safe haven of Rafe's arms, my new kidnapper is waging a sick game. Unable to make my body do his bidding, he's resorting to psychological warfare. He'll bend my mind until I break, and when I do, that just might be my saving grace.

I'll forge through hell to get back to Rafe, body and spirit broken and bleeding, but I'm unprepared for what I find. He's done what I can't: he's erased eight years of pain and betrayal. I don't know how to bring him back to me, because bringing him back means ripping him to shreds all over again.

RAMPANT is a new adult dark romance with disturbing themes and explicit content, including sexual scenes and violence that may offend some. Intended for mature audiences. Part two of the CONDEMNED series. This is not a stand-alone read.

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Another drop of sweat crawled down my nose like a spider. In the stifling air of the trunk, I struggled to draw each breath. Perspiration pooled at my temples, irritating, flushing my cheeks with too much heat. I wiped the dampness on my sleeve. The vehicle swayed with the road, and I curled into a ball with a groan. At some point, the hum of the highway turned to gravel, then to a bumpy ride that rocked me back and forth. I shot an arm out to steady myself, and my belly protested the smothering heat and swerving motion. Chunks of what I'd eaten for dinner erupted from my mouth, souring the air. I scooted away so my cheek wouldn't smear in it.

Bump, bump, sway. Oh God...taking in shallow breaths didn't help. The air was too thick, and the overwhelming odor of vomit made me heave again, but my stomach had nothing left to purge. A few minutes later the car jerked to a stop and the engine shut off. The heavy thump-thump-thump of feet on gravel pounded through ears trained to recognize and dread that purposeful gait. When Zach lifted the lid, the black night engulfed him, yet I sensed the fury seeping from his being.

He grabbed my hair, angled my head back, and thrust a bottle against my lips. "Drink."

My mouth resembled the consistency of sandpaper, so I didn't hesitate. I clutched it, both hands covering his, and sucked down every last bit. Spent of energy, I dropped my head to the bed of the trunk, right into the expelled contents of my stomach.

"You've reached a new low, Lex. You're lying in your own puke." As I inched away from the vomit, he retreated a step. "Fuck. I've reached a new low. It wasn't supposed to be like this! What thefuckam I supposed to do now? Everyone thinks you're dead.Ithought you were dead!" Hands yanking at his mussed up brown

strands, he began to pace. His clothing clung to his body, as if still damp from the river.

Rafe's face infiltrated my mind, and I blinked to hold back the hot sting of tears. Devastation pressed on my breastbone, coiling around me and tightening until I couldn't move or speak. I tried shaking his image from my brain, but it stuck like tar.

I didn't want to think or feel.

Doing either would crush me, and I couldn't afford to break down. Not yet. I knew I would eventually, when I could no longer hold off the anguish strangling my wind pipe. When I had no choice but to confront the truth poking my insides with the burn of a hot fireplace poker.

Rafe was gone.

Zach muttered something indecipherable, pulling me from the dark place in my mind, and his agitated pacing continued. A bullfrog's call joined in, croaking through the night with the finesse of a chain-smoker. Frogs meant water was nearby, right? I followed Zach's movement, my heart racing even faster at the perceived threat. How close were we? I visualized jumping out and running...and falling in, just like I had the night I tried to flee the island. My limbs stiffened, and I scooted further into the depths of the trunk.

"It's gonna be okay. Everything's fine," he said, more to himself than to me. He started to lower the lid.

"Wait!" I cried, a moment away from sobbing. "Where are you taking me?"

"Enjoy the ride." A trace of malice tainted his sonorous tone.

The lid slammed down with a clunk, and the darkness suffocated me. The helplessness. Letting out a hiccupping mewl, I counted the seconds before Zach started up the engine. And I kept counting, as it was the only thing keeping me from totally unraveling as the car continued its winding path. After a while, I drifted in and out of consciousness. Or maybe it was a fog. I couldn't say if I slept or not. Part of me latched onto the hope that this night was a bad dream. But hope was dangerous. Hope made you do stupid things, all in the name of trying for a better outcome that would never come to fruition. Accepting reality was harsher but best in the long run.

I'd been kidnapped. Twice. I'd survived the first time because my captor had harbored a sadistic streak and a conscience. My chances of getting through this were nada. Zach would never let me go. Not with the world believing I was dead. Not after he'd found me with...

Don't think of him.

I squeezed my eyes shut, willed my mind blank. I must have fallen asleep because I awoke to Zach lugging me from the trunk. I fell to the ground and winced, rocks and dirt gouging my knees. He hefted me up by the back of my shirt, flung my aching body over his shoulder, and stalked toward a small cabin. I squinted against the morning gray, and the cool air on my face came as a relief after the confines of the trunk. Rolling slopes of timber enclosed us—a mixture of Douglas fir and pine. In the distance, the snowy peak of Mt. Hood offered a point of reference. But I found the utter quiet, interrupted only by the song of birds, especially unsettling. Besides the wildlife, not a hint of existence stirred beyond those trees.

“Home sweet home,” he said as he climbed the porch.

I cranked my neck as he ran a hand along the doorframe. He withdrew a key, steadied me with one hand, and used the other to shove it into the knob before kicking the door open. He stomped through the main room, dim in the dawning light barely

peeking through the curtains.

“Put me down!” I kicked my feet and dug my nails into his strong back as he entered a bedroom.

“Stop it, Lex.” He yanked my sweats down, baring my bottom, and smacked my ass hard. “Don’t try to run,” he said, letting me slide to the floor in the adjacent bathroom. “You won’t get far. No one’s around for miles.”

As I jerked my pants up, my gaze lowered to his muddy sneakers, but he gripped my chin and forced my attention on his face. “You understand me? No one will hear your screams up here. Nobody knows we’re here, and the owner’s in Europe for the summer, so it’s just you and me.”

Five in, hold, five out. Repeat.

I’d lived by the ritual since the day he’d stolen my innocence. Only now I was stuck on hold. If I didn’t breathe, then I wasn’t alive. If I wasn’t alive, then I couldn’t feel.

His gaze lowered to my filthy tee. “Take that damn thing off.”

Air whooshed from my lungs in a rebellious rush, and my chest resumed its natural rise and fall. But I wasn’t breathing, and I didn’t know how my arms moved without a heart that pumped life through it, how my fingers grasped the bottom of the shirt that belonged to Rafe.

His shirt. On my body.

If I closed my eyes and pretended, I could almost feel Rafe’s arms around me, his mouth moistening my neck, his warm palms on my breasts, brushing across hardened nipples. Could almost hear the husky way he spoke to me, his tone full of command

yet quiet with vulnerability. I chewed my lip to stop it from trembling, but my chest shook with the rising tide of grief.

“Now, Lex.”

I jerked my gaze to my brother’s hardened expression. Even after all he’d done, I couldn’t think of him differently. I still remembered him as the boy I’d latched onto when I was six, when our parents made the colossal mistake of merging our families. Reality demanded I think of him as a murderer, but that only brought me back to the fact that I wasn’t breathing. Still. Not. Breathing.

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Rafe's not dead. Not dead. Dead, dead, dead...

The thought fired through my synapses, on constant repeat.

"You fucking reek of him!" Zach's hazel eyes spit poison, as potent as the arsenic boiling in his soul. "Take it off."

I lifted Rafe's shirt over my head and stared, transfixed as the soft gray cotton dropped to the hardwood. I wanted to yank it back and bury my nose in it, inhale Rafe's essence the way lungs hungered for air. Zach pulled me from the trance by sliding my sweats down my legs. I stepped free, holding onto his shoulder to keep from tipping over.

"Get him off of you," he said with a rough shove into the shower stall.

A zipper lowered, clothing rustled, and the familiar sounds shivered through me. He switched on the water, and for a few blessed seconds the chaos in my mind fell silent, immersed in the roar of the spray. I crossed my arms over my chest and clawed at my biceps, dug my nails in deep until all that penetrated was pain. Leaning my forehead on the cold tile, I welcomed the numbness that blanketed me. I knew what was coming, and I didn't want to be present for it.

Numb, Alex. Pay no attention to his hand slithering down your spine.

My protective cocoon threatened to dissipate as he bent me over, his naked front pressed to my back. My palms slammed against the wall, and he wound an arm around me, his fingers dipping between my thighs. I clenched my teeth to keep from

crying. I wouldn't cry for Zach. There was only one man I wanted to spill tears for and he was...

I gasped a breath and held, clenching my jaw as Zach's cock pushed past my body's rigidity. Warm droplets of water coursed down my face and shoulders, but the space between my thighs remained dry as a desert. I pressed closer to the tile, wishing I could escape him, wishing I could melt into the wall and disappear forever.

"The hell, Lex? You're dry as fuck." He pulled out then shoved in so violently, I arched to my toes. My teeth tugged at my lower lip and the metallic tang of blood lingered on my tongue. "I spent years molding you," he said with a grunt, pumping a steady, harsh rhythm that punished from the inside out. "Bastard corrupted you."

A whimper escaped my tight lips. "You're hurting me."

"Isn't that how you like it? Come for me."

It wasn't going to happen. Icy fear doused my skin, battling the warmth of the water. How could I come if I wasn't breathing? Wasn't alive? I wasn't alive.

I'm not here. This isn't real. I'm safe in Rafe's arms right now, having the nightmare from hell. Wake up...

Zach roared his release with a final plunge, ramming to the hilt and triggering sharp pain that spread outward from my cervix. The fog in my head enveloped me, and I barely noticed him rubbing my body down with soap until he turned me in the spray to rinse it away. He shut off the water, ushered me from the stall, and hauled me to the bed, dripping wet.

"You're gonna scream my name." He shoved me to my back and grabbed my ankles, his fingers trapping like shackles, and dragged me to the edge of the mattress. Forcing

my thighs apart, he dropped to his knees. My mind left me, floated to the island and the memory of the dark abyss that had claimed Rafe. I visualized him breaking the surface and pulling himself onto land, but the daydream fractured, and I let out a startled yelp.

Something pinched my clit.

Zach, on his knees with his face buried in my pussy. His teeth clamped down unbearably hard, but the pain did nothing, didn't even ignite a spark. No feeling, no forbidden rush of adrenaline storming through me. It might have been minutes. It might have been hours. I never came, never even got close, and no amount of him slapping me, pinching flesh and twisting nipples, would bring about an orgasm. Some previously dormant switch had been tripped.

Rafe had done that in the week we'd had together, when the walls had crumbled between us and I'd learned what it was like to feel cherished.

Possibly even loved.

"Snap out of it!" Zach slammed his fist into my face, and I cried out as the blow echoed along my cheekbone. He'd never hit me in such a visible place. I gaped at him as his finger curled inside me, pressing the spot that usually sent me soaring. He returned my stare, eyes narrowed dangerously, waiting. "Squirt like a fucking whore."

"Never again," I said, gritting my teeth. "Not for you."

He jerked forward, fist raised.

"Go ahead! Hit me again. Kill me." Please, God, let him kill me. "I'd rather die than be with you."

A combination of hurt and violence darkened his features. I flinched, certain his knuckles were two seconds from connecting with my cheekbone again.

“You don’t mean that,” he said, his voice incongruent with the hard line of his jaw. “You’ll love me again. Somewhere inside you is the little girl who made me her world.”

“That girl was your sister!”

“I’ve never looked at you that way, Lex, and you know it. There’s no blood between us, so stop hiding behind shame. What we have is unstoppable.”

“What we have is fucked up. For God’s sake, Zach, we grew up together.” The echo of innocence pinged through my heart, leaving me bereft. Long ago, we’d been two kids playing in the yard, building forts that stood as tall as skyscrapers to my young eyes, yet they’d barely allowed Zach to stand inside the carefully constructed walls. He’d been my big brother, someone I always counted on and looked up to.

Until the day he’d wrecked me. I recalled that life-altering moment as if it happened yesterday. Only thirteen, too unsure of the change in his touch, struggling to understand what it meant. I’d sprawled stiffly beside him, incapable of moving as his fingers slipped beneath my panties. He’d smothered my fearful cry with a sweaty palm and had spread my thighs before burrowing past my innocence. Zach had taken something precious from me that night, and in turn I’d taken the freedom of the only man I’d ever love.

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I'd killed him.

The reality of what had happened at the river was too painful and a tear crept down my cheek, as if trying to sneak past Zach's watchful gaze.

"You never cry." He slowly lowered his fist. "In all the years we've fucked," he said, "you never cried. Not once. Why now? Because of him?" His mouth twisted into something ugly...something arrestingly terrifying. "He's your past, Lex. I'm your future, and I'll do whatever it takes to bring you back to me."

We slept the day away, Zach's naked body trapping my own. Several times, I tried to extricate myself from his grasp, but his arms always tightened in warning. At some point, I'd fallen into a restless sleep where images of Rafe and the island tormented me.

Still haunted by the echoes of convoluted dreams, I hugged my knees from my spot on the four poster bed as Zach raided the closet. "Who's cabin is this?" I asked, glancing at the window, where bright light had filtered through the curtains before we fell asleep. Now a strip of black peeked through where the material hung open, indicating the sun had set long ago.

"A friend's. He comes up here in the fall to hunt." As Zach sifted through flannel shirts, sweatshirts, and jackets, I wondered if the owner stored his rifles somewhere in the house. My gaze zoomed in on the closet, hoping to catch a glimpse of a gun.

"You're so transparent," Zach said. "You won't find a gun in this place. He doesn't keep them here." He removed a black wife-beater from the dresser and pulled it over

his defined pecs and abs. The sweats he wore swam on his toned frame, drawstring cinched tight. My brother was all hard muscle, and obviously, the owner of this place wasn't. He grabbed a white tee and tossed it at me. "All you need to know is we won't be interrupted for a few weeks." Pointing a finger in my direction, he told me to get dressed.

I tugged the soft cotton over my head and eyed the door. The dresser and the closet were on either side, and Zach stood smack in the middle of the doorway, effectively blocking the exit. Watching me with the air of a predator, he rubbed the stubble on his chin.

I avoided the intensity in his probing stare and instead took in the room, the unfamiliar cabin walls, the smooth oak furniture. That damn window that taunted me, whispering to my desperation to slide it open and crawl through, except I knew he'd stop me before I could. The adjacent bathroom was a dead end for escape as well, with only a small vent-type window to allow air in.

"A few weeks, Zach?" Maybe logic would penetrate his thick skull. "What about your career? Won't interrupting your training like this set you back?"

"My career is gone. It went down the drain the minute I thought I'd lost you."

"Dad won't be happy about that."

"I don't give a fuck what Dad's happy about. I don't about care about any of it, Lex. I'm done with MMA. You're all that matters to me."

I shook my head, feeling completely cornered. "I can't live like this. Don't make me." Clenching my hands to keep from gouging flesh, I gnawed on my lip instead. "C'mon, Zach. If you don't let me go, you'll be on the run for the rest of your life. That isn't a life."

“As far as the world knows, you’re dead.” He shifted his feet and poked a finger at his chest. “I don’t have to run at all—I just have to make sure no one finds out you’re still alive. We’ll lay low here for a couple of weeks and go from there.”

His twitchy gestures made me nervous, and I wondered if alcohol was the only substance he was withdrawing from.

“How’d you do it?” he asked, his sudden question derailing my train of thought.

“Do what?”

“Fake your death.” He leaned against the doorjamb, folded his arms, tapped his foot. A dragon breathed fire down his right bicep. Unlike Rafe’s tattoos, which were beautiful, symmetrical, and understated in their simplicity, Zach’s begged for attention with detail and flaming color. “Better yet, how’d you get past your fear to do it?” He clenched his jaw. “You must have been desperate to get to him, for you to go anywhere near the river, let alone crash your car into it.” He tilted his head. “Must have been desperate to get away from me to fake your own death.”

I averted my gaze. Zach read me too easily. What would he do if he found out Rafe had kidnapped me? He might read something into it that wasn’t true. Just because Rafe had taken me, that didn’t mean I hadn’t been where I’d wanted to be in the end. But even worse he might get the same idea as Rafe and use the phobia against me. If he hadn’t thought of that already.

“Answer me,” he said, bringing me back to the moment with his biting tone.

“It wasn’t easy.” I stood, straightened my shoulders, and the muscles in my thighs tightened, readying to fight, to flee. I quelled the urge, as he had me trapped and there was no way I’d get past him and out that door. My stomach grumbled, reminding me I hadn’t eaten in twenty-four hours, and it gave me the perfect excuse to try and get

out of the room. “Is there anything to eat in this place?”

He signaled for me to go to him, and I couldn’t help but notice the tremors in his fingers. I tried to pinpoint when he’d started drinking, but the onset of his alcoholism had been gradual, like a bad cold that begins with a sneeze and a vague ache in your glands until the next thing you know, you’re laid up in bed feeling like death incarnate. His drunken fits had been sporadic at first, beginning somewhere around the time I’d graduated college and escalating after I’d started dating Lucas.

“I’m sure there’s gotta be some soup or something.” He clamped his hand around my upper arm and ushered me from the bedroom. On the way to the kitchen, I eyed the front door, just a few feet away, yet it seemed like yards. The promise of escape disappeared from view too soon, leaving behind the fleeting idea of freedom. He pulled out a chair at the kitchen table, wooden legs scraping across the floor unnervingly, and shot me a pointed look, but he didn’t push me into the seat.

Rafe would’ve shoved my ass into it.

I gave myself a sound mental slap. I had to stop torturing myself with thoughts of him. It fucking maimed too much, but unbidden, his voice haunted my mind, his words gruff with sexual need.

Howl for me. Come undone. I’ll put you back together.

My knees buckled, and I choked back a sob as I slid into the chair. I hadn’t accepted the idea that he was gone. I didn’t feel it in my heart, and like a dope addict clamoring for another fix, I clung to the frayed thread of hope that he was alive and looking for me.

Zach either didn’t care about my rocky emotional state, or he didn’t notice. He turned his attention to the cupboards and chose two cans of soup. As he prepared our food,

he never quite turned his back on me. This was my brother, a guy I'd shared a house with for twelve years, which meant he knew me too well, knew what buttons to push, what words to use as weapons. He'd be stupid to let his guard down for a second.

I might have a sick attachment to him, but I despised him too. And I'd never felt so torn. Love for a brother, and hate for a twisted, obsessive...I didn't even know what to call him. The term *lover* came to mind, but that wasn't right either. He'd fucked me. A lot. And I'd let him.

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Maybe if I'd fought harder, Rafe would still be alive.

My stomach roiled with renewed self-loathing, and when he carried two bowls of steaming soup to the table, I couldn't fathom forcing the liquid down my throat. His gaze lifted and clashed with mine. I looked away, fearful my thoughts were plastered all over my face. He rounded the table, and his fingers brushed my cheek, making me flinch.

"I'm sorry I hit you."

He was always sorry, yet it never stopped him from doing it again. I edged away from his touch. Even the feather-like caress of his fingers against my cheekbone hurt.

"Don't pull away from me." He grabbed a fist full of hair and jerked my head forward. "I'm trying to apologize, Lex, but fuck, you sure know how to piss me off."

"It's not hard." I yanked violently from his grasp. The cost of freeing myself remained in his fist—several clumps of my hair. "You go off on the smallest things. Ever hear of anger management?" Or a cell for the criminally insane.

"Ever hear of the wordsshut up?" He stomped across the room and began rifling through drawers. As he busied himself with his frantic search for whatever he was looking for, my attention veered to the living room where the front door beckoned just beyond.

He took out a roll of duct tape, and I flew from my seat, my feet carrying me into the next room before I'd given thought to the consequences. The exit pulled at me like a

net, as if dragging me from the depths of terrifying deep sea. My momentum slammed me into the door, shaking the coat rack in the corner by the closet. I hoisted it, launched it behind me, and prayed the obstacle slowed his thundering footfalls.

That's when I spotted the keys hanging on the wall. I grasped at them with one trembling hand while the other fought with the knob, panic taking root in my fingertips. Finally, I flung the door open, catapulted off the porch, and ran toward his BMW.

"I disconnected the battery, Lex."

His words halted me, and I whirled, expecting to find him on my heels, but he hadn't ventured further than a foot from the porch.

"There's nowhere to run!" he yelled, throwing his hands in the air and turning in a slow circle. I followed with my gaze, taking in the nothingness surrounding us. The black nothingness that came with nightfall. Above, a vast canvas of stars lit the sky, but without the moon to light the way, getting lost wasn't just a possibility, it was an inevitability.

Maybe he's lying...

I could try the car, but if he was telling the truth, I'd be trapped for sure. Tightening my grip on the keys, I pushed one out to use as a weapon and took a step away from him, toward the edge of the trees.

"We're in the middle of nowhere, baby! Where're you gonna go? You wouldn't last the night in this forest."

He underestimated what I was capable of surviving, but he had a point. The nights were notoriously chilly, even during the summer months, and I didn't know where I

was. I also didn't have any shoes—another nail in the coffin of things that would slow me down.

I could make a run for it, hope to find help. Hope he didn't have a spare set of keys in his possession. Eventually, the gravel road had to lead to civilization. But knowing Zach, he did have a spare set, and he'd pick up my sorry ass in no time.

As if my desperate thoughts blinked on my forehead in neon glory, the curve of his mouth turned cruel. "You know I'll find you." A threat dangled in that statement. A promise. I could run, but if he caught me, I'd find out what he was truly capable of.

I took another step anyway, despite the unmistakable lump of fear clogging my throat. Despite the rocks digging into my bare feet. My gaze zigzagged in every direction, searching, hoping. So many trees, and I had no idea what waited beyond them. Hopelessness crawled down my spine, an inescapable chill that threatened to ice my blood.

He had nothing holding him back now. The facade our father created, society's watchful eye—none of it mattered out here, in this desolate place no one would think to look for me, because according to the world, I was dead.

In the twitch of an eye, I turned and fled.

My feet skidded across rock and dirt, and I heard him pound the ground behind me.

"Are we really doing this, Lex?"

I cranked my head, horrified to discover him gaining so fast, and doubled my efforts, picking up speed as I careened down the slope of the road. Sharp rocks tore into my bare feet with every frantic step. But I was an easy target, in plain sight, no matter how much distance I managed to put between us. Getting lost in the woods was my

only shot at escaping.

My gaze swerved to the blackness beyond the trees, and I gulped. Get lost, or turn around and face him? Face possible years under his control. Endless years that would surely break me. Another glance over my shoulder told me I had but seconds to decide.

Pure adrenaline spurred me to jump into the foliage. I sprinted over roots, swerved around boulders, and stumbled to the ground, still damp from the torrent of rain last week. I didn't remember getting up, though mud caked my bare knees. The ground became especially treacherous. I lost my balance and hurtled down an embankment, a victim of gravity, rolling over rocks, gouged by sticks, and grunting with each strike. I smashed into the trunk of a tree, finally coming to a stop. Stars burst in my vision, and the night narrowed until blinding light battled the dizziness.

His voice seared the air, my name a furious epithet bleeding from his lips. He sounded too close, but in the darkness, disoriented as my head throbbed from striking the tree, I couldn't tell if he was three inches or three yards away.

Clenching my teeth against the pain, I pushed to my hands and knees, key still tightly wedged between my knuckles, and peeked around the massive tree trunk. Without the luminescence of moonlight, visibility was a bitch out here, which turned out to be a blessing and a curse. If I couldn't see him, then he couldn't see me. That also meant I couldn't see my way out of there.

Who was I kidding? I wasn't getting out of this. Even if he wasn't waiting, hunting me like prey, I didn't have the skills to make it out. Not on foot. Not without proper clothing, food and water, a compass at the least. I closed my eyes and brought a fist to my mouth to keep from totally losing it.

Don't you dare give up. If you don't get out of here, then Rafe's dea—A sob ached in

my throat, but I forced myself to finish the thought. Then Rafe's death was for nothing.

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He died protecting me. Oh God. I was going to get sick. My pulse quickened, and my chest squeezed as every last memory of him edged into my soul. Not just the way he'd made me feel, but the gentleness that lingered inside him. The spark of compassion I'd seen in his eyes years ago, before I'd ruined his life. What I'd felt for him back then was real, was still as real as the scent of pine teasing my nostrils.

I wanted to lay down and give up, let the wilderness claim me. How could I fight knowing he was gone?

“Game’s over!” Zach shouted. “Your ass is going to pay for this stunt.”

I sucked in a breath, counted to five, then jumped to my feet. I'd find a way to survive. I'd do it for Rafe. I took off running again, and the forest whirled around me in a kaleidoscope of doom—every way I looked seemed the same. A huge boulder blocked my path straight ahead, and I was pretty certain going right would take me too close to the road. The easier way, for sure, but also the one that would expose me the most. I made a sharp left and bumped into another tree.

A warm tree. An angry tree with arms that reached out and folded me in a crushing and possessive embrace. “Stupid, stupid girl.”

His hand gripped the back of my neck. I lashed out with the keys, screaming, and did little more than swipe the air until his fingers banded around my wrist painfully. My grip loosened, allowing him to apprehend my makeshift weapon. He turned me around and propelled me forward, back in the direction I'd come.

“Let me go!”

“Sure thing, love.” He forced me to my knees and backed away. “I find it interesting you’re trying to run. Didn’t you tell me we’d get far away from the island, just the two of us?” Breathing hard, I angled my head and watched as he tested the branches. He paused long enough to glower at me. “Or were you lying?”

“I-I didn’t—”

“Shut your deceitful mouth, or I’ll shut it for you.”

I pressed my lips closed, and dread coiled in my belly, intensifying after he broke off a switch. With a cruel growl, he hefted me up by the back of my shirt. “Zach—”

“I said shut up! Not another fucking word.”

I was familiar enough with that tone to know when to give in. A deep ache tore through my chest. I held my fists to my breasts, as if I could keep my heart from beating through my ribcage. We cleared the last of the trees, and I realized I hadn’t run as far as I thought. I stumbled toward the cabin on trembling legs. Adrenaline seeped from my bones, leaving behind a coward who nearly sank to the ground with each step. Once we reached the porch, I fell to my filthy knees. Zach pulled me to my feet, dragged me up the stairs, and kicked the door open. He shoved me toward the bedroom and left me in the middle of the floor where I turned to a puddle of skin, bones, and a heart that beat too rapidly.

“Don’t you fucking move. If I have to chase you through those woods again, I’ll beat you unconscious.” He dropped the stick, as if to taunt me with its promise and the reminder of how little of a threat I posed to him.

After he left the room, another surge of adrenaline fueled my veins, and I crawled to the stick. But it was flimsy, barely thick enough to pass as a branch. What was I going to do? Whip him to death with it?

“Playing with your implement of punishment?”

I pushed to my feet and wielded the switch as if I could cause real damage. “Stay away from me.”

In one hand, he fisted a coil of rope. In the other, he gripped a bottle of what looked like cheap whiskey. He brought it to his lips, took a long swig as if his life depended on it, and placed the bottle precariously on the edge of the dresser. Reaching out a hand, he appeared unworried as he gestured toward me. “Hand it over and I’ll go easy on you.”

“You call whipping me going easy?”

He launched himself across the room, grabbed my arms, and the stick fell to the floor as he slammed me against the bedpost, facing outward.

“Zach!” I pleaded as he wrapped the rope around my wrists, tightening the knots with quick and jerky movements. He secured my hands to the post above my head, and the smile that graced his face was so cruel, I flinched from its impact alone. He withdrew a knife from his pocket and snapped open the blade.

“Zach, no!” I recoiled, but the sharp edge didn’t sear my flesh. Instead, the rip of fabric slashed through my ears. He slit my tee down to the navel, parted the material, and slapped my breasts once they swung free.

“God, I love your tits.” With a moan, he rubbed his rough cheek against them. Retrieving the switch from the floor, he took a step back, and we exchanged a moment of understanding, of silent communication between punisher and punished. Still, I wasn’t ready.

He’d hurt me before, with his hands, his teeth, but when he swung that stick down on

my breasts, the point of contact served as an epicenter, and every muscle in my body spasmed from the deep ache. I clenched my teeth to keep silent.

He lifted his arm again, a tilt to his head as he regarded me, and I yanked at the bindings, composure slipping. “Don’t.” I twisted my hands, but that only made the rope dig into my wrists. “Please, please, please! Oh God—” The stick cut across my nipples, and I screamed his name. For the first time ever, he made me cry. More than cry. I bawled, begged, sobbed under each brutal lash.

“Shhhh.” He kneeled, bringing him eye level with my heaving chest. “Lex...” His whisper carried a strangled plea, and I wondered what the hell he had to plead for. He wasn’t the one on the receiving end of that stick. “Why do you make me hurt you? I should be inside your tight cunt, exactly where I belong.” He wedged my thighs apart and dipped his fingers into dry heat, then pulled back with a frown. “I want you drenched. You know how hard it gets me.”

Fingers spreading the lips of my mound, he buried his face there and dragged his tongue over my clit. I groaned, repulsed by the slick heat of his mouth. He kissed up my stomach, leaving a wet path to my breasts, and I stiffened. He licked the peaks, first the left then the right, and when he moved away, crimson stained his lips. My blood.

“This hurts me as much as you.” The muscles in his left arm tensed, fist tightening around the switch, readying for another swing.

Nothing on Earth prepared me for strike after strike on my breasts and stomach. “Stop!” Fire danced across my flesh, and I howled at the excruciating sting. I resisted glancing down, scared to see the blood smearing my skin, the ugly red welts he must have left behind. Instead, I focused on him, on the rapid rise and fall of his chest, the rigid set of his jaw. The regret in his eyes that made me want to gouge them out. He had no right to feel regret or pity. If either of those elusive emotions existed inside his

cold heart, they were fleeting—like dust obliterated by an unstoppable storm.

The stick struck the floor an instant before he gingerly probed my pussy. His frustrated gaze clashed with mine, and I knew I was in deep shit.

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“Zach,” I whispered. “Please...”

“Please what? What do I need to do to make you wet? What didhedo?”

I shook my head. No, I couldn’t talk about Rafe. A sob broke free, then another. Tears slid down my cheeks, and each one amplified the grief simmering in my soul until all I felt was denial. Anger.

Rage.

“You killed him! I hate you.” I lifted a knee and struck his erection. “I fuckinghateyou! Do you hear me?”

Zach stumbled back, out of striking distance. While he doubled over, wheezing between lips tightened in pain, I unraveled, my gut-wrenching sobs tearing through the air, my feet uselessly kicking as acceptance finally penetrated.

Rafe was really gone.

I wailed, aching to clutch my breasts and contain the agony pouring from me. Zach might as well cut my chest open and carve my heart out with his teeth. It wouldn’t devastate any less. Nothing mattered anymore. He could beat me, cut me, kill me...I felt nothing beyond hatred and the remnants of despair.

I lifted my head, peering through tears and the messy curls clinging to my face, and caught his gaze, blasted all my hatred in that stare. He turned away, as if he couldn’t stand to look at me. But was it the sight of me that bothered him, or the truth that

stared him in the face?

“You have a condition called dissociative amnesia.”

Before I could ask what the heck that meant, my brother beat me to it. Typical Adam behavior. He’d just arrived, but he was already taking over. Clearing his throat, he leaned forward, dark hair brushing his brows as he cast a glance in my direction. “What does that mean, exactly?” His get-to-the-point tone commanded Dr. Brady’s attention.

“Dissociative amnesia usually occurs due to a psychological trauma, rather than a physiological one.” The doctor gestured toward me. “In the case of your brother, it’s unusual, as it’s neither generalized nor selective. He hasn’t forgotten his entire life, or bits and pieces, he’s lost a large segment of it instead.”

“And you’re positive this isn’t from physical trauma?” Adam asked.

“Going by the MRI results, no. Everything looks good.”

I shifted carefully so the hole in my shoulder wouldn’t throb too much. “Then why the fuck can’t I remember the last eight years?” The doc’s brows furrowed, and I winced. “Sorry, I’m just...”Pissed that you guys are talking like I’m not here. “This doesn’t make any sense.”

His ruddy face hardened. “This type of disorder doesn’t always make sense.”

“Now you’re calling it a disorder? Am I crazy? Is that it?”

“No, Mr. Mason.” He crossed his arms over his broad chest, and I was certain he meant to intimidate with the firm set of his mouth. He didn’t approve of me, that much was obvious. Maybe he took issue with my career as an MMA fighter. Or the

tats. Possibly, he detested foul language and the pricks who spewed it. “For whatever reason, your brain is burying part of your life.”

“What can I do about it? Is there some sort of treatment or medication? When will I get my memory back?”

“There isn’t a specific treatment for amnesia. Surrounding yourself with familiar people and places, getting back to your normal routine, those things might help your memory return. I recommend consulting with a psychologist. I believe working with a professional will help you get to the root of the cause.”

So he was saying I was crazy. Fucking wonderful.

Adam stepped forward and shook Dr. Brady’s hand. “Thank you.”

The doctor nodded, his stony expression unchanging. “I’ll be back soon with those referrals.” He directed his cool blue eyes on me. “Tell the nurses if you change your mind about the pain meds.”

“Sure.” The psychoanalysis wasn’t happening, and neither were the drugs. I couldn’t stand the drowsy, looped, out-of-control state they put me in.

Dr. Brady left and shut the door upon his exit. The dead silence that engulfed the room weighed on my nerves. I didn’t know how much longer I could take in this place, gunshot wound or not. I’d regained consciousness a few hours ago to find a stranger at my bedside who claimed it was 2014. Imagine my shock when I learned it was true. He’d informed me I’d been out for three days, spouted a bunch of other stuff, things that didn’t make much sense, and then the doctor had come in, followed by the nurses, who all poked and prodded. Tests were ordered, more words said, and it all hazed in my mind like smoke.

“You’re refusing medication for pain?” Adam frowned as he took a seat. “You’ve got nothing to prove. No one’s going to care if the big, bad RafeThe ChokerMason takes a pain pill. There’s no reason for you to suffer.”

If I listened beyond the condescending tone, he almost sounded like he gave a shit. I met his tired green eyes, noting the pronounced wrinkles surrounding them. He’d certainly aged since the last time I remembered seeing him.

Which was eight years ago...wait, longer.

“I’m fine, Adam.” At least I knew his name. Fuck, at least I knew my own. My memory had a warped sense of humor. How could eight years just disappear? It pissed me off that everyone seemed to know more about those missing years than I did, including a guy I knew nothing about. Jax wanted to talk. I felt it in my marrow, but I wasn’t sure I was ready to hear what he had to say. The doctors, the nurses—they all treated me with a professional air, but underneath, I sensed an undercurrent of hostility. Disgust even.

Who had I become? And what was up with the way my brother was looking at me? Like he fucking cared. Most of all, the absence of one person ate at me like a maggot.

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“Where’s Dad?”

Adam perched his elbows on his knees. “Dad is...he’s...busy.”

I pushed myself up despite the pain, needing to be on equal ground. “Don’t feed me that bullshit.” Jax had been dodging the question since I’d first opened my eyes in this place. Now Adam was doing the same.

He dropped his head into his hands then dragged his fingers through his hair. When he looked up, stress etched across his features, tightening his mouth and jaw. “We’re on much better terms than we used to be, so you can cut the attitude.”

“Since when?”

“Since you got out—” He cursed under his breath.

“Got out of what?”

“I think Jax should be the one to tell you about that. He should be back soon.”

“I don’t even know the guy.”

“You know him better than you think. He was your cellmate.” Adam closed his eyes.
“Shit.”

A heavy glob of dread pressed on my chest. “Cellmate?”

He rose from the chair. “I realize this is horrible timing, but I have a meeting I need to get to. I just stopped in to check on you. I heard you were awake.”

“Some things never change,” I muttered. “Whatever you’re keeping from me, just tell me. It couldn’t get any worse than this.”

“I’m not sure how much you should know. We don’t know what caused the amnesia. Maybe you should take the doc’s advice and talk to someone who specializes in this stuff.”

“You mean a shrink?”

“Yes, I’m talking about a shrink.” Sarcasm dripped from the last word. “Excuse me for worrying about my little brother.” He wandered around the room, and each second of disquiet niggled at my irritation. I didn’t like being left in the dark.

“The sheriff’s waiting to talk to you,” he said, clearly changing the subject. “And speaking of, so is Nik. Are you up to seeing her yet?”

I shook my head. The last memory I had of Nikki involved a night of the wildest, roughest sex of my life—the kind that marred skin with bruises.

Eight. Fucking. Years. Ago.

I was scared shitless to find out what had happened since that night.

Had I made it to the UFC?

Were Nikki and I a...thing? A thing didn’t encompass how I felt about her. I was far from ready to settle down, but if that day ever came, it was too easy to see her filling that role. Easier to think of her than the brunette who tested my sanity and willpower

every time I saw her. I wasn't about to touch jailbait.

Except she wasn't jailbait anymore.

My head spun, though whether from the puzzle pieces of my own mind, or the constant ache in my shoulder, I didn't know.

The door suddenly opened, and Jax stepped inside. "How're you feeling?"

I glanced down at the bandage covering the area where a bullet had passed clean through. "Good as can be expected." My gaze veered to my brother. "Adam won't tell me shit."

They exchanged a look, and I gritted my teeth.

"This is getting old. Spill, or I'll find out on my own."

Adam looked at his watch, and the shuffle of his feet told me he was itching to ditch. "I think you should fill him in, Jax. You know him best anyway."

What the hell? How could this stranger know me better than my own brother? Okay, so we weren't exactly close, but still. We were family.

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“I’ll call you after my meeting ends.” He reached for the door.

“Adam,” I said, sitting up straighter. “Where the fuck is Dad?”

“I don’t think now is the time...” He swallowed hard.

“Just tell me. Is he sick? Out of state on business? What the fuck is going on?”

“Dad passed a year ago.” His voice was so soft and low, it took a few seconds for those words to penetrate. Strength fled my body, and I sank into the pillows. A lump formed in my throat, preventing me from speaking. Something foreign burned behind my eyes. Tears. Grief. I never cried. Crying was a weakness. Crying was for pansies.

Adam dropped his head, one hand on the open door. “Rafe? Did you hear what I said?”

Through my blurry vision, I saw a nurse move past in the hall. “How did it happen?” I didn’t recognize the thick quality of my voice.

“Cancer.”

I thought back to all the years I’d seen a cigarette dangling from Dad’s mouth, all the times Adam and I tried to convince him to give up the habit. “He never quit, did he?”

“He was the definition of stubborn,” Adam said, shaking his head.

“Did he suffer?” I knew it was a ridiculous question, but I had to hear it.

My brother lifted his eyes, so like my own, and the weight of his sorrow crushed me.
“You know Dad. He fought with everything he had.”

“Did we get to say goodbye?” The thought of him passing alone was too much, and I swallowed hard before clearing my throat. “Was he at peace with it?”

Again, Adam and Jax traded a glance. My brother nodded. “Yeah.”

Jax scowled. “Don’t lie to him. Not about this.”

“Jax,” he warned.

“No. He deserves the truth, no matter how much it sucks.” Settling into the chair Adam had vacated only moments ago, Jax rubbed a hand down his face. “You weren’t there when your old man died. They denied your request for furlough.”

As I tried to process what he’d said, what they’d both said, my gaze swerved between them.

Furlough.

Cellmate.

Eight years gone.

I wasn’t there for Dad.

Wasn’t there for Dad...

“Somebody start talking.”

The slam of a door sent a shot of adrenaline through my veins, and my heart galloped in time to his steps coming closer in the hall. Rope pulled at my sore wrists, rubbed raw from hours of trying to get free. We'd spent the last three...maybe four days in this room, fucking, fighting, and fucking some more, barely taking time to fuel our bodies with what little canned goods Zach found in the cabin. It was like a nymphomaniac had taken over his being. Now that he had me here to himself, he couldn't stop thrusting his cock into me.

Or beating me when my body wouldn't turn to liquid for him.

The bedroom door opened and banged against the wall, and Zach set two paper bags on the dresser. He'd tied me to the bed before leaving to "get supplies." My stomach grumbled, and I hoped he bought something other than soup, chili, or SpaghettiOs.

As he stumbled toward me, a sheen of sweat broke out on my skin. I recognized that glazed-over expression, the off-kilter sway of his body as he moved. "You've been drinking and driving?" As the hours passed, I'd started to wonder if he'd ever return. "What would happen to me if you never came back?"

The mattress depressed under his weight, and the stench of whiskey drifted to my nose as he fumbled with the complex knots keeping me prisoner on the bed. "I can drive just fine." He cursed under his breath. "The reason it took me so long was because Dad's being Dad." His lips tightened as he pulled the rope from my wrists.

"What do you mean?"

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“He’s about to put an APB out on my ass if I don’t go home. I told him I needed some time to deal with everything, but he isn’t letting this go.”

As soon as my wrists were free, I massaged some circulation into them. But my attention veered to Zach’s hands, the pockets of his jeans, even the dresser. A sense of defeat threatened to strangle me. No phone, no keys. After my last attempt to get away, he wouldn’t be so careless, even while intoxicated.

He grabbed my chin. “Are you listening to me? My fucking career means more to him than it ever did to me. He’s furious that I disappeared.”

“What are you gonna do?”

His mouth curved into a smirk. “Don’t get any ideas. I’m not letting you go, if that’s what you’re hoping for. I held him off for a while longer.” He planted a kiss on my mouth before backing away. “Get up.”

“Dad won’t stay silent forever. He’ll find you,” I said, sliding off the bed to stand on weak legs. I folded my arms. “When he does he’ll see I’m still alive.”

“Don’t worry about Dad. I can handle him.” The nasty smirk never left his face. “And I can handle you too.” He wrapped his hands around my hips and pushed forward. I shot my arms behind me, palms pressing into the mattress to keep from sprawling onto the bed. Not an inch of space separated our bodies, and I was grateful for the T-shirt he’d allowed me before he left.

“I’m gonna make you love me again, Lex.” He dipped his head, gaze zeroing in on

my mouth. “We’ll be together, just like we were always meant to be.”

“You’re delusional.”

“I’m pragmatic. If pain doesn’t do it for you anymore, we’ll try pleasure.”

“Stop.” As his lips neared, my hands left the mattress and pressed against his chest. “I can barely stomach the sight of you after what you’ve done.” I choked on the last word, the thought of Rafe trying to creep in again, and cleared my throat. “You forced me, Zach. For years.”

He jerked his head back and forth. “You can’t fake this kind of connection.” His palms slid along my cheeks, his fingers tangling in my hair as he tilted my head back. The intensity of his stare pummeled me. “You’re the only one who’s ever cared about me. Dad sure as hell doesn’t.”

“That’s not true. You’re his whole world.”

“I’m fucking tired of being his world. I’m tired of it all. You don’t know him like I do.” He swallowed hard, and his eyes glistened with a lifetime of resentment. If I thought Dad had been tough on me, he’d been harder on Zach. Pushing him to be the best, to fight rougher, meaner. Never back down, son! Don’t be an embarrassment. Losing isn’t an option.

He rested his forehead against mine. “Quitting is a relief. I don’t want to fight. The belts, the championships, none of it matters. I just want you. Everything is so easy with you, second nature, like breathing. Remember when we were kids and we’d hide under the covers every time they’d get into another fight? You made me feel needed. Wanted. Let’s just hide here forever, Lex.”

Damn him. I blinked, suppressing the burning tears in my eyes. How could one

person pull me in so many directions? He repulsed me, made me furious, made me feel the most intense hatred a person could harbor...yet he still made me care. What would it take before I forgot the good times, the years when he was there for me as a brother should be? While our parents had waged war in the house, he'd been my safe place, the one who held me and told me to hang on a little longer because it would be over soon. If I'd known back then how dark he'd turn, if I'd been capable of understanding what that darkness meant, I wouldn't have gone to him for comfort. I wouldn't have looked at him as a brother, because that connection made hating him messy and complicated.

Zach was a minefield of which I was stuck in the middle. It didn't matter which way I stepped, an explosion strong enough to dismember was bound to happen.

"I have to pee," I said, needing the distraction, needing distance. I squirmed, and my bladder begged for release.

He pulled away and gestured toward the bathroom. "Come back naked. I have a surprise for you."

"I don't want your surprises. I want you to let me go."

Thick brows furrowed over intense eyes filled with determination. "That's not gonna happen."

I turned my back to him, thinking how the eyes of someone so rotten to the soul shouldn't hold so much beauty. The weight of his scrutiny followed me into the bathroom. After I took care of business, I deliberated removing my clothing, but self-preservation won the battle. The thought of igniting his wrath made the decision for me. I took my time undressing, then glanced down at my breasts with a cringe. Fading bruises and crisscrossed welts covered my skin in a grotesque mural of purple and yellow. I feathered my fingers over the marks of his rage, and my feet refused to

move, as if they sensed the pain waiting for me. But stalling would only delay the inescapable. I had no way out.

I returned to him, avoiding eye contact, and folded my arms to hide my breasts. Not fighting him seemed wrong. I had nothing left to lose and everything to gain with my freedom.

“Bend over the bed.”

I gave a swift shake of my head.

In three strides, he grabbed my arms before hauling me across the room. I dug in my heels, pulled against his strength, but in the end he shoved me against the bed. “This is happening, Lex. Bend the fuck over and hold still, or I’ll beat the fight out of you.”

I went limp under the threat. My breasts flamed with the memory of his strikes, as if the wounds were hours old instead of a few days. Even now, each sharp bite of his switch ghosted through me. It hadn’t been a paddle to my ass, a punch to my gut or face, or a slap or bite. He’d lost his mind when he’d wailed on my body with that stick. I bent over the mattress, gripped the bedding, and waited, hoping he’d fuck me instead of beat me.

No warning. He pushed a finger in my ass, and I shrieked from the scorching burn of dry skin forcing entry into my rectum. He splayed one hand on my back, holding me in place while his finger stilled in my hole. “Don’t move.”

“Ow! What are you doing?”

“In a few minutes, you won’t give a shit what I’m doing.” He burrowed his finger in deeper, intensifying the sting. I let out a wail, terrified he was about to rape me anally.

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“Please don’t do this!” My voice trembled so badly, the words came out wobbled and unrecognizable. Every spark of my being told me to flee, yet my body wouldn’t jump into motion. He didn’t have to threaten bodily harm—he’d already beaten the fight out of me the other night, when he’d drawn blood with his switch.

“Zach?” His name fell from my lips with uncertainty, an inquiry that sounded far off. A strange heat wave flushed my skin, and my pulse thumped at my throat. A flood of...something washed over me, making my head swim. I couldn’t explain or describe it, but my surroundings held new meaning. Fear evaporated, and things that were previously hidden, like the gold strands in the pattern of the bedspread or the knots in the walls, sprouted in a burst of vibrancy. Like a rosebud unfurling its petals in slow motion. I licked my lips and tasted the air. God. Nothing had ever fired up my taste buds so good.

The pressure in my ass subsided, but I remained sprawled on the bed, held captive by the details burgeoning around me.

Zach helped me stand, and the ground wobbled, the room warping in a blur...it was the most amazing feeling in the world. I didn’t care if I tipped. I was one with the floor, the hardwood incredibly smooth against the soles of my feet. He brushed me from behind, and I moaned at the velvety texture of his skin. Silk covered my eyes, so fluid it could have been milk, and cast me into a pit of sinfully dark bliss.

“Zach?” The name was wrong, and it rang through my ears, causing a hint of fear, but mostly a question, one I couldn’t formulate verbally.

What had he done to me?

“Shhh, it’s okay. Just feel me. Feel how much I want you. How much you want me.”

A whirl of air caressed my nakedness, and his breath feathered over my parted mouth. I inhaled his heady scent, like decadent chocolate, and darted my tongue out to lick the richness of his lips. Mmm...lips. I reached forward and thrust my tongue between them.

A groan rumbled from his throat. He commanded my tongue, sucked me in so far I fell into the cavity of his mouth. I pictured my body curled in a ball, as precious as a pearl and enclosed in slick heat, buoyed by his tongue.

“Baby, I need you.” His hands fell on my shoulders, two heavy weights I welcomed. I buckled to his demand, and my knees kissed the floor. His fingers crept up my neck, slid into my hair. Every inch of my skin came alive from the follicles of my scalp to the rough pads of my heels.

I purred under his caress. “Do that again.”

“This?” He repeated the motion, his fingertips dancing over my skin like a ballerina. I hummed the music that matched the steps, imagining my fingers flying over piano keys. The dance peaked at my chin and tilted me upward to greet the soft, wet mushroom seeking entrance to my mouth. My hum vibrated against the silky tip, and I envisioned the notes as colors, spirals of reds that glowed incandescent.

His moan mixed with the symphony. Rafe and I, we were creating a masterpiece.

Rafe...Rafe...Rafe...

His name echoed though my head, a tick, a glimmer of truth, as if that single thought was trying to tell me something.

“Love my cock.”

Rainbows of color swirled behind my eyes. In the darkness, I found freedom. Found the most unbelievable ecstasy possible. I parted my mouth, and when he pushed in, my pussy tingled, letting loose liquid fire between my thighs. I fastened my lips around his shaft, never tasting anything so sweet, and continued humming my notes, vibrating my masterpiece around the hardened silk filling my mouth.

What was that sound coming from him? Guttural, painful, sexy. I felt that low groaning in the flutter of my racing heart, the sweat on my back, deep in my belly where the ballerinas practiced pirouettes. My tongue lapped and lapped. I couldn't get enough of his taste, his texture.

This was madness. I'd never be able to stop. I sucked harder, pulled his tip into my throat, and gagged.

Holy hell. I drew him further down and gagged again.

“Shit, Lex!”

I choked on his cum, thrown off by the nickname, but it was so flavorful, like nothing I'd ever sampled before. I didn't want to miss a drop. He withdrew, and I whimpered, following with my tongue, still lapping. Lapping, lapping, lapping. Still tasting, stillneeding.

“Enough.” He picked me up and tossed me onto the bed where my body sank into heaven. Fluidity surrounded me, enfolding my skin in cool satin. I fisted my hands in it, suddenly discovering their existence. Why had it taken me so long? Fingers curled, smooth texture clenched in palms—everything exquisite, especially the inflexible expanse of his chest brushing the tips of my breasts.

His breaths whispered across my face, rustling my hair like a summer-laced breeze. My jaw slackened, tongue relaxed against my teeth, and a finger pressed inside. I closed my lips and sucked the salt from his skin. “Mmm.”

“God, I love you so much,” he said.

Soaring at his declaration, my mouth pulled on his finger, drawing him deeper. Tasting. I never wanted to stop tasting.

“No, baby.” He withdrew his finger. With a frown of displeasure, I chased it with my mouth. “Say what I want to hear.”

“Mmm, you taste so good.”

His laughter rumbled like a trombone. “I like you this way.”

“What way?” I almost told him to stop talking and let me taste again, but his voice was a drug I couldn’t resist.

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“Higher than Mt. Fucking Everest.”

The curve of my lips felt alluring. “That’s pretty high.”

“Tell me you love me,” he demanded.

I loved everything about him. His taste, his touch, his voice. The way he made me feel, how he openly wore his vulnerability. The way he still loved me, protected me, even after all I’d done to him. Somewhere in the darkest corner of my mind, a siren sounded. A warning. Feeling this way was wrong...but I couldn’t recall why.

“I love you.” My chest squeezed as I uttered the words, and I imagined not only the love in Rafe’s green eyes, but the promise of forgiveness.

The promise of forever.

He smothered my grin with his mouth, and I was pretty sure Mt. Fucking Everest was a speck of dust in my brilliant world.

“I was sixteen the last time I set foot in this cabin.” The door shut behind me with a soft thud of finality, and I turned and faced the stranger who, apparently, knew me better than my own brother. After the things he’d told me about the elusive years my psyche refused to acknowledge, I was beginning to think he just might.

“As far as your memory goes, yeah, but before the shooting, you were living here.”

“Right,” I said with a sigh, dragging a hand through my unruly hair. A sling trapped

my left arm, rendering it useless. I wandered into the living room, cursing the huge gaping hole in my life, and studied my dad's cabin with new perspective. In so many ways it appeared unchanged. Same sturdy furniture, crafted by my grandfather's hands and worn from many summers of use.

Standing in this place was akin to setting one foot in the present while the other planted firmly in the past. So much remained as I remembered, yet the subtle changes—the uncluttered space, free of Dad's disorganized, spread-out existence—made my head swim with the evidence of what Jax had told me.

I'd been in prison.

My dad died while I was in there.

And I had no chance at ever fighting again—not in the way I'd dreamed of since I was old enough to throw a punch. Irritatingly, both Jax and Adam remained tight-lipped about why I'd been locked up, but Adam had made that last point abundantly clear; I'd left the world of fighting and had joined him in the family business. I was still trying to wrap my head around that piece of information.

"After your dad passed," Jax said, halting beside me, "you offered me a place to stay. I've been doing the upkeep since."

"Yeah, I can see that. Things look...different but the same. It's strange." I swerved my head toward him and he shrugged.

I moved toward the kitchen and sensed him following my slow steps. The room where Dad, Adam, and I had shared dirty jokes as we ate the day's catch appeared the same too, though impeccably clean compared to what I remembered. The disorderly array of tackle boxes, fishing poles, and Dad's overflowing ashtrays and beer bottles were absent. So was the musky scent of smoke. The paddle hanging by the back door

was the only notable evidence of him.

An eerie chill drifted over my skin, almost as if someone had opened the door to the dead cold of winter, though the weather was mild for early June. I studied the kitchen table, drawn to it like a magnet, and the feeling I should recall something hit me with such significance, I froze, my feet stuck in place.

Drops of water pooling on the table, tangled hair, wet and wild, rioting down creamy skin. A perfectly round ass, reddened from the slap of wood. I blinked but the weird vision tingled down my spine in an odd way, making my dick stir.

I glanced out the windows and almost expected to see rain pummeling the ground, but the morning was just as clear and bright as it'd been when they released me from the hospital an hour ago. With a shake of my head, I lowered into a chair, being careful not to knock my sling into the table, and smoothed my palm across the course red oak surface, hoping to bring back that niggle of...something.

Jax pulled two beers from the fridge, popped the caps off both, and slid one over to me.

"Isn't it a little early for that?" I asked, gesturing toward the dark ale. It was barely 10 a.m.

"For this conversation?" He raised a brow. "Doubt it." He turned the chair around and straddled it, and again I willed my mind to reach out and catch a memory.

"Did something happen here?" I gestured to the table spanning the distance between us.

"Lots of stuff happened here." His mouth quirked into a half smile, half smirk as he tipped the bottle back and took a swig. He set the beer back on the table with a loud

clunk. “Look, I said we’d talk once you got out. I know you have questions, so let’s get to it. What do you wanna know?”

That was a fucking loaded question. “Let’s start with why I was locked up.”

“The sheriff didn’t tell you?”

I shook my head, remembering how he’d questioned me in the hospital, as if I were guilty of shooting myself or something. Lyle Lewis hadn’t changed a bit, from what I could tell. His contemptuous attitude really dug under my skin. Fucking ridiculous that the town bully would become sheriff. “He didn’t tell me shit, and he didn’t give a rat’s ass about finding the fucker who shot me either.”

“I’m not surprised. Nikki told me about the uproar he’s stirred in town. He’s the reason half of Dante’s Pass hates your guts, man.” Jax winced. “Sorry, probably too brutal. Never been good with tact.”

“When did you talk to Nik? Do you guys know each other?”

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He took a long drink of his beer before answering. “We talked at the hospital.”

The idea of Jax getting close to her bothered me, but I couldn’t say why. Maybe because I still thought of her as mine, even though Lyle the-fucking-sheriff Lewis had made it a point to tell me they were engaged to be married in a few weeks.

“What’d you talk about?”

“You, mostly. She was pissed you wouldn’t see her.”

Shame fissured me. I hadn’t wanted her to see me like that. I still didn’t, but too much history existed between us to avoid seeing her forever, and refusing her visit had been a low, cowardly move.

Jax cleared his throat, the sound shattering more than just the unspoken stuff between us; it obliterated the facade. The sheriff, Nikki, and even Jax’s involvement with her—none of it mattered as much as filling in the blanks of the last eight years.

“So we met in prison?” I asked, finally tiptoeing toward the core of the matter.

He nodded. “We were cellmates. We’ve had each other’s back since the day you saved my life.”

My eyes widened. “What happened?”

Jax wouldn’t look at me. “Prison was tough on both of us. I think we should leave it in the past. What’s done is done. All that matters is I owe you my life.”

I wanted to push for an explanation, details of my time in there, but I left it for now.
“How long was I in for? What was I in for?”

Jax lifted his brown eyes to mine, and his stare never wavered. “You sure you’re ready to hear this? I’m thinking your brother might be right. Losing your memory is heavy shit.”

“I didn’t take advice from Adam back then and I’m sure as hell not gonna start now. Tell me what happened.”

He drew in a breath, let it out. “You were in eight years for rape.”

What the...?

His words lingered, an echo that wouldn’t stop bouncing between my ears.
“There’s...no. I couldn’t have done it. That’s just...”

“You didn’t do it.”

He sounded so matter-of-fact. I narrowed my brows, gripping the table to keep from springing to my feet. “How do you know? You said we met in there. Everyone in prison says they’re innocent.”

“Trust me. I know. You don’t have an iota of rapist gene in you. Well, you didn’t until she had you locked up for it. Her accusation tore your life apart. Dude, I’m being straight with you about this. You’ve done some fucked up shit, but you didn’t do that.”

“Who accused me?”

He took another draw from his beer, and the ensuing silence made me want to scream

at him to spit it out.

“I’m not sure we should get into that shitstorm yet. Maybe you should give it some time. Wait for the memories to resurface on their own.”

“Who was it, Jax?”

He lowered his head with a sigh, as if he regretted the words before he said them. “Alex De Luca.”

I pushed back from the table so suddenly, the chair toppled over in my haste to get away. But there was no getting away from this. I might not remember the last eight years, but I remembered her. I recalled the delicate features of her face—high cheekbones, a kissable mouth I still ached to taste, and the sensual tones of her voice. Her image burned in my brain, as if I’d seen her just yesterday, and in a way, I had. My last memory of Alex wasn’t from eight years ago; it was from a few weeks ago.

Turning my back to Jax, I propped my good arm against the counter and hung my head. Closed my eyes. Focused so intently, I gave myself a headache that rivaled the throb in my shoulder.

Nothing.

Just an empty vault where eight years of memories should reside. No matter what Jax said, I doubted my innocence. I couldn’t believe I’d force myself on her, but she was...she’d been underage, and I wanted her with an uncontrollable urge so sharp, it sliced me up every time I got within ten feet of her.

I held that secret close. No one knew, except for maybe Alex herself. I gave a slight jerk of my head. I still hadn’t reconciled the shift in time. Then. Now. It confused the heck out of me.

“You okay?” Jax asked.

I clenched my jaw. “Yeah.”

She had to have known how I felt, especially considering the way we’d gravitated toward each other, orbiting with a forbidden vibe. How we’d pounced on every chance to banter and tease. Those intense glances she’d sent my way were too familiar. They’d imparted the same need I’d kept hidden since the day I noticed her as more than a child...more than the kid sister of my best friend.

No. Impossible. I wouldn’t have done that, no matter how much I’d wanted to.

“You don’t seem okay.”

Was I okay? I had no fucking clue. I turned around. “What kind of ‘fucked up shit’ did I do?”

Jax hesitated, only for a moment, but it was long enough to make me squirm. “Maybe you should take a peek in the cellar.”

“What the fuck does that have to do with any of this?”

He rose, scooting the chair back in a grating manner, and chugged the rest of his beer. He glanced at mine, still untouched on the table, and lifted a brow. But he didn’t say anything about my aversion to drinking the day away. “Come see for yourself.”

It felt odd to follow someone else in Dad’s cabin, but I didn’t complain as he led the way to the cellar door. He pulled it open and switched on the light. We descended the stairs, and upon first sight of a cage that closely resembled a prison cell, my mouth

dropped open.

“What the hell is that?”

“That's where you kept Alex after we kidnapped her.”

“Wewhat?”

“Dude, she ruined your career and your reputation. One little lie from a De Luca and your life went up in smoke. Losing your dad was the final hit. I don't blame you for wanting revenge.”

He continued speaking, but I couldn't hear the words through the blaring noise in my ears, the throbbing pain at my temples. My attention cut to the cage again. Had I built it? It was sturdy, the sort of prison that wouldn't be easy to escape from, and I didn't miss the hook in the ceiling or the cuffs dangling from it. What the fuck had I done? Who had I become?

A feeling I couldn't pin down fell upon my chest, making it difficult to breathe, and the fantasies I'd ignored since early adolescence surfaced. Those cuffs, the ability to lock away another human being...a sexy, vulnerable woman...I squeezed my free hand into a fist as my dick hardened. Fuck me and my deviant thoughts.

Just fantasies.

They didn't mean anything, and they sure as fuck didn't mean I'd lost my damn mind by acting on them. I stumbled back, gripped my head, and told myself to breathe. “I wouldn't have done this.” My voice sounded far away, as if filtering through the hollow of a tunnel. Someone else's voice. Someone else's life.

Someone else did this.

“I’m sorry, man. This was what I was afraid of. I shouldn’t have brought you down here.”

With morbid curiosity, my eyes veered to the cage again, and one glaring detail finally punched me in the face. A locked up prison cell, but no prisoner cowering inside. If I’d kidnapped her...then where the fuck was she?

The fall from euphoria was like hurtling through the air without a parachute. Hitting bottom hurt worse than anything. I remembered everything. How deliriously I’d wanted him, how strong our connection was during those hours when only an infinite amount of pleasure existed. Sorrow, grief, guilt...none of it had burdened me.

I didn’t have to open my eyes to know the warm body against mine, clutching me possessively, was Zach’s and not Rafe’s. His hangover stench attacked my sense of smell. With a deep groan, I leaned over the side of the bed and vomited every last memory onto the hardwood, purged it all from my system. But my system refused to stop spiraling into the depths of horror.

I’d sucked his cock. Willingly, wantonly. Like the whore he always accused me of being. Somehow, in the confusion of my fucked up mind, I’d thought he was Rafe. How was that even possible?

“What did you give me?” I asked, my voice raspy from deep sleep. After we’d fucked half the night away and the restless energy in my veins subsided, I’d conked out like the dead.

“Just a little ecstasy.”

I shook my head, untangling from his hold. “I’ve tried E before. That was...something else.”

“That was the purest shit you’ll ever come across.” He rolled me until we lay face to face. “Plus I gave it to you anally. I knew it would open you up.” He slid a hand down my hip, around my upper leg, and burrowed between my clenched thighs.

I shrank from his touch, and his eyes darkened. His hand inched higher while he tangled his other in my hair, yanking until my eyes watered.

“Let me go.”

His hairy leg slid between mine, giving him enough room to shove his fingers in me. “You’re gonna get wet for me, Lex.”

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I closed my eyes, clicked my teeth together, and tried to tune out his heavy breathing, but I couldn't ignore his touch. He spread me wide, thrust deep, pulled out, brushed my clit, and repeated the process over and over at an unyielding pace. A subtle pressure built in my core, increasing with the slide of his fingers. I drew blood from my lip to keep from rocking my hips.

Oh God. Why? Where had my armor of apathy gone?

He leaned forward, his lips expelling rapid breaths into my ear, and whispered, "Welcome back." Withdrawing his hand from my pussy, he forced his fingers into my mouth. "Taste that. That's want. That's need."

I chomped down hard. As he jerked away, trying to save himself from another vicious bite, I scrambled in the opposite direction and crashed to the floor. "I hate you!"

"Last night, you said you loved me."

"You drugged me!"

"No, I freed your mind and worked past all the shit you carry around with you. You think it's wrong for us to be together?" He propped himself up on his elbows and glared down at me from the edge of the mattress. "Last night, you didn't feel that way." He reached out and ran his thumb across my trembling lips. "And you weren't thinking of him, were you?"

Rafe. It was Rafe. I wouldn't have done that with Zach. Only Rafe. I blinked rapidly and pushed away, ass sliding across the floor in desperation. My spine hit a wall. The

corner beckoned me, offering the illusion of safety, of escape. I huddled there, arms snaking around my knees as memories from the night before hit me with full force.

For a few hours, Rafe had been alive. In my arms, in my hands, in my mouth. Alive. Warm. Mine. I pulled in a breath, tried to force it deep into my lungs, and panicked when I couldn't. Tears blurred my vision, grief choked my throat, and the glaring truth flooded my senses. It had all been a drug-induced illusion my psyche had used to trick me. A pitiful sound escaped, part snuffle, part sob.

Zach climbed to his feet, the tangled sheets and bedding coming with him to hang over the side, taunting me with the evidence of our wild night of sex, one in which I'd been a full participant. The observation almost made me retch again, but I swallowed the sour taste of disgust burning my throat.

"Get up," he demanded, his tone leaving no room for argument. Once I stood on jittery legs, he herded me into the bathroom and switched on the shower. I clenched my hands into fists, eyes firmly shut as water flowed over me. The sobs wouldn't subside. They drummed out in soft shudders I couldn't control. If I didn't open my eyes, if I blocked out his touch, maybe I wouldn't totally lose it.

No, I was losing it. Pain was not a new entity, but this type of crushing anguish—the kind that made it nearly impossible to breathe, to think, too see beyond the next second, minute, hour—would make the strongest person crumble. And I wasn't strong. Not in this moment. My thoughts jumbled, zipping through my mind so fast I couldn't grasp any of them.

Save for one. Rafe was dead. Last night I'd lived a dream, so vivid I could still feel him against me. But I'd never feel him again. Never hear his voice, his laughter. Never breathe in the musk of his skin, feel the sweat of his brow at my breasts. Never again lose my breath to the vise of his hands around my throat. I'd give anything to get that back, even if giving up control terrified me.

Zach ran a blade up my leg, startling me. “Dry it up, Lex. You’re pissing me off.”

“I-I c-can’t.” A hiccup echoed in the stall, followed by another.

He took his time shaving my legs, and I let him. And he let me cry it out. Every atom of my body was fightless. Worthless. Eventually, he finished grooming me and tugged on my hand, urging me from the shower with a gentleness that penetrated the crazy state of my head. A towel landed around my shoulders, pulled tight in front, and he wrapped another around his waist before threading our fingers together. A hint of tenderness softened his expression as he led me into the bedroom.

“I know it feels like the end of the world,” he said, leaving me standing at the side of the bed, “but it isn’t. Things will get better. You’ll adjust.” He strolled to the dresser and withdrew clothing from the paper bags he’d brought in last night. “Get dressed.” He tossed a sundress at me.

I held up the garment by a spaghetti strap, not only taking note of the short hem, but how oddly similar it was to a dress I’d owned as a teenager. That particular dress had disappeared after some random guy had complimented my legs while wearing it. “It’s too short.”

“That’s the point. Put it on.” His mouth curved into a wicked line. “No panties. You won’t need them.”

Something about his demanding tone, along with the fact he was choosing my clothes for me, made my back straighten. “You wear it,” I said, throwing it at him, “since you like it so much.” The towel didn’t cover enough, so I grabbed the sheet from where it cascaded down the side of the mattress and tucked it around my body.

He crossed the room and stood before me, but I kept my gaze trained on my bare feet, refusing to raise my eyes to his. Anger radiated off him in palpable waves, and in my

periphery, I saw his hands clench before unfurling. He yanked the sheet and pulled, rolling me with it until I fell onto the bed with my back facing him. The dress landed by my head. “Get dressed before I beat your ass.”

“I’m not your fucking puppet, Zach.”

Feet stomped across the room, and I heard a drawer open and slam shut. The ominous sound cringed through me like fingernails on a chalkboard. I curled into a protective ball, preparing for the strike of whatever he’d removed from the dresser. A belt? I stiffened as his strong hands pulled me toward him, rear end first. He inserted a finger in my ass, and I cried out, squirming to dislodge it, panicked at the thought of repeating last night. His body pressed me into the mattress as his finger flamed in my rectum.

“Hold still. Soon, you’ll fly for me.” He swept my hair back, and his mouth opened over the sensitive skin underneath my ear, hot tongue searing flesh. “You always taste so good.”

Oh God...no...

The soaring feeling from the night before trickled in, and my body felt weightless.

Oh shit...yes...

“Grmmddd...”Fuuuuck...

What was I trying to say?

“I’ll take care of you,” his deep voice said, each word pronounced in slow motion. “I can make you happy, Lex.” He withdrew his finger, and I heard the unmistakable sound of him spitting before he dipped it in again, making my insides clench in a

blissful ache. “No one loves you like I do. I just wish it didn’t take this to lower your guard.”

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Somewhere in my hazy brain, I knew I should feel shame at the moan that poured from me—long and continuous as his finger fucked my asshole. His palm kneaded my butt cheeks, and his other hand spread my legs, fingers reaching for my clit.

I fisted the messy bedding and groaned, my teeth clamping down on the twisted sheets. My hips bucked and tension coiled low in my belly as I impaled myself on his fingers. Again. Again. Shit...harder.

So close. Ooooh...good God. I didn't want this. It was wrong. So horribly detestable. A deep burn ignited in my chest, threatening to turn to me to ash. Rafe's face pulled at the edges of my mind, compelling me to follow, to free-fall into the memory of him.

I squeezed my eyes shut and allowed the fantasy to take over. Rafe's hands, his skin on mine, his breath in my ear. His fingers pulling at my hair. "More," I groaned. "I need to come."

He pulled away, and I cried out in protest, begging him not to stop. Every part of my body tensed, readying for release, needing it, and the longer he delayed, the more the ache intensified.

"Put the dress on." He tickled my back with what felt like silk before dropping the garment on the mattress. "Then I'll make you come." His steps retreated, gently padding away. The creak of a door sounded. I crawled to my hands and knees, turned my head, but he was gone. How could he leave me like this? I needed him, but needing him hurt too much.

My heart pounded at an alarming rate, and the burn still simmered in my chest, a moment away from incinerating. I doused the dark thoughts and clutched the dress, slid from bed, and my body poured like fluid onto the floor. With a sigh, I lifted the silky material and pushed my head through, wondering why I'd put up such a fight. Pure sin encased my flushed body, and I rubbed the silk between thumb and forefinger, over and over again, entranced by the texture, certain I could never stop touching it. Slowly, tension ebbed from my bones, my limbs, my hands. The fire in my chest was but an ember.

The door opened, and I blinked, the silk forgotten. I gazed at him in the doorway, and his crooked smile hit me in the chest. It was so open and free. So fucking sexy. In that moment, he resembled someone else, someone who struck a cord of comfort in me. I peered through the warped glass and tried to figure out the puzzle of the man standing on the other side.

"Come here," he demanded, holding out a hand. I moved with effortless grace, my feet gliding across the floor, and slid my palm into his. He lifted a cup to my lips, and the water that poured down my throat extinguished the fire.

"Your feelings for me are real." His fingers wiped my brow. "What I gave you doesn't make you feel things that aren't there. It frees your mind." He pulled me against him. "It's making you mine again."

Ever since Jax showed me the horrors hidden in my cellar, I'd spent every waking moment digging into the past my brain refused to remember. I'd spent hours on the Internet reading about the rape trial, watching it unfold from the seat of a spectator, though I was the main star. I'd watched the police haul me from a training session, hands cuffed at my back. What I found most disturbing about that piece of footage was the guilty look on my own damn face.

As if reading about the trial wasn't torturous enough, I dug into Jax's background too,

which I found nothing on. I wasn't sure he'd understand my need to know more about him, so I didn't tell him I was looking into his life, but I couldn't swallow the idea of a stranger living on my father's island.

What bothered me most, however, was Alex's disappearance. The media had yet to report on her miraculous return from the dead. Going by the news reports of her "death," authorities had found her car in the Columbia River two and a half weeks ago. Jax said we'd pushed her Volvo in after taking her from Portland. He also said I'd decided to let her go hours before I got shot.

So where the fuck was she?

I could think of only two possibilities. Either she was terrified by what I'd done and had gone into hiding...or something unimaginable had happened to her. While I agonized over her whereabouts, my partner in crime was too busy working or disappearing to care about what had happened. Jax's only concern was staying out of jail. As long as Alex didn't surface, we were safe from being charged for kidnapping. He also suspected she'd had something to do with the shooting, which didn't make him her biggest fan.

My amnesia ensured I didn't remember shit, and it was frustrating as hell.

There was only one person in this new reality I trusted. Certainly not the stranger at my side, or my own brother. No matter what Adam said about reconciled differences or how he thought I should come back and work at Mason Vineyards—familiar routines and all of that—I couldn't talk to him.

But fuck, I needed to get out of my own head or I was going to go crazy.

I took a deep breath and climbed the steep staircase that led to the front door of Nikki Malone's house. It had taken some needling of old friends, but I eventually got her

address out of a girl who'd had a crush on me in high school. Nikki's place was up the mountain, nestled between clusters of Douglas firs. The Columbia River peeked through the branches, and I wondered if she had a view of the island from the porch wrapping around her home. The place was huge, built more recently if the modern angles and vinyl siding accented with stone was any indication. She'd done well for herself.

I hesitated, feet planted on the welcome mat, my fist poised to knock. She was engaged to the enemy. Jax would probably rip me a new one for trusting her, but I'd known her too many years not to. I rapped on the door and waited. A white BMW sat in the driveway, and I assumed it belonged to her. She had to be home.

I lifted my hand again, knuckles nearing the wood, and halted at the unmistakable thud of steps.

She pulled the door open, and her eyes widened, her mouth gaping. Same golden hair, same seductive brown eyes, but something fundamental had changed in them. Like most things these days, I couldn't put my finger on it. Nikki was not the same Nikki I'd known before my mind decided to check out on me.

"Rafe," she said with a smile that lacked the warmth I remembered. She ran a thumb along the edge of the door.

"I should've let you visit me at the hospital," I said, figuring her less-than-enthusiastic welcome stemmed from my turning her away. "I'm an ass."

"It's okay. I can't imagine what it must be like to lose so much of your memory. Confusing?"

"Something like that." I gestured toward the door she held close to her body. "Can I come in? I really need to talk to someone, and you're the only one I trust."

“What about Jax?”

I tilted my head. “How much do you know about him?”

She shrugged. “We talked at the hospital. But he goes on about you like you’re his brother or something. Guess you guys are close.”

“Were close, maybe. I don’t remember him at all.”

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She glanced over her shoulder, and something oddly familiar slid down my spine. Like I was the one who should have been watching my back...hiding something from her? I shook the idea from my mind. It happened often—a seemingly inconsequential phrase, gesture, or object, such as the table in my own damn kitchen. There was history on that slab of wood, and I wasn't talking about the many years I'd spent there with my dad and brother. Something about it bothered me, yet excited me all the same.

“I could use some air,” she said. “Want to walk?”

Why did this seem so familiar? I nodded, shaking off the weird feeling.

As she slipped into a pair of sandals, I saw into her home. Open, airy, with vaulted ceilings, a stone fireplace, and wide windows that overlooked the river. The sun cast a beam of light into her great room. She stepped outside and pulled the door shut, then wrapped her arms around me.

“I'm so glad you're okay.” Her lips brushed my cheek as she backed away. “Do you remember anything at all about that night?”

“Afraid not.”

We reached the stairs at the same time. I indicated for her to go first, but she halted, lifting a hand toward my face. “Wait, you've got a little...” She brushed her thumb on my cheek. “Wouldn't want people talking about how you were wearing my lipstick.”

“People here talk,” I said, thinking of the icy reception I’d received from the townsfolk—some who’d known me since I was a kid. “Regardless of lipstick malfunctions.”

“No need to give them more fodder.” Nikki withdrew her hand. “I think you’re decent now.”

The corner of my mouth curled up. “You and I both know I’m far from decent. The last memory I have of you proves that.”

“And what’s that?”

“Seattle.” I raised my brows.

She ducked her head, an unmistakable flush coloring her cheeks. “I remember Seattle.”

“What happened between us while I was locked up?”

“Let’s not get into all of that.” She descended the steps, and apparently that thread of conversation was off the table.

I followed, close on her heels. “How about we start with you and the sheriff then? Lyle Lewis, Nikki?”

“We already had this conversation.”

“Except I don’t remember that conversation.”

“Your brother and Jax say you’re pushing too hard. They’re worried you’re going to make the amnesia worse.”

Once we reached the bottom, I grabbed her hand and pulled her around. “You’ve been talking to them about me?”

“I’ve been doing the bookkeeping at the vineyard. Your condition came up.”

“It’s not a fucking condition, Nik. It’s not like I’m crazy. I’m still me.”

“Language and all,” she muttered, disentangling from my grip. She strode ahead several paces and gravel crunched under our feet until we reached the paved shoulder of the road.

“Are you and Jax friends?”

“I barely know him, but I guess you could say that.”

“Like you and I are friends?” I shook my head. “Werefriends.”

She stopped and turned, hands on her hips. “We still are, Rafe. There’s too much history between us.” Her defensive stance eased. “I can’t imagine ever just walking away.”

I reached out and tugged on her arm, bringing her against my chest. Her hands rested on my shoulders, and I stiffened under her touch. Though I no longer needed the sling, my shoulder still ached.

“Nikki...” I licked my lips, tantalized by the thought of losing myself in her, and I almost forgot she was eight years older from the last time I saw her. The last time I fucked her. I tilted my head, closing the distance between us, and moved in for a taste of something I hoped would bring back a spark of sanity to my life.

She gripped my shirt. “What are you—?”

“Shut up and fucking kiss me.”

Nikki stared at me for a few seconds that beat in my head like a gavel. She deliberated, indecision warring on her face—in the squint of her brown eyes, the downturn of her lips. All at once, she met me halfway, open-mouthed and as far from shy as I remembered. Her tongue thrashed with mine, trying to get the upper hand until she gave in. She always gave in. I gripped her hips, pulled her into the hard ridge of my jeans, and the whimper that escaped her throat told me all I needed to know.

I could conquer her right now, in broad daylight as the occasional car rolled past, and she'd let me. I lowered my zipper, pushed up the flirty skirt that hugged her ass too tightly, and wound her strong legs around my waist. We swayed for a moment, both hanging on until we regained balance. I was a moment away from tugging her panties to the side and thrusting into her, except something about this didn't feel right—beside the fact it was an insane, irresponsible public display of indecency. In my gut, it felt like a betrayal to someone else.

Our mouths disconnected, and her legs slid down my jeans slowly. My chest rose and fell in rapid succession, matching the movement of hers. I wiped the sweat from my brow and returned her perplexed gaze.

“I'm sorry.” I gestured to the ring on her finger. “You're engaged, and I'm...” I paused long enough to yank up my zipper. “Really fucked up in the head.”

She smoothed her hair, patted down her skirt, and stood up straighter. “You're not the only one. I kissed you back.”

“I guess we have unresolved issues,” I said, waving a hand between us.

“Our issues were forgotten a long time ago.”

“Nothing seemed forgotten when I had your legs wrapped around me. Except for the last eight fucking years of my life, that is. Whathappenedto us?”

“You went to prison!” She stumbled back, still fidgeting with her clothing. “That’s what happened. Doing this again, it’s too painful.”

“Doing what?”

Angling her head downward, she tried to hide her sorrow. “I’m glad you don’t remember, Rafe. That place did something to you.”

“I can’t stand the blankness.” I pointed to my head. “There’s nothing here and it’s driving me insane. I’m imagining all sorts of things. How could I have gone away forthat?” I swallowed hard. “Do you believe I did it?DidI do it? Please, just tell me.”

She covered her trembling mouth with a hand and shook her head.

“You do, don’t you? You believe I raped her.”

“No!” She closed her eyes. “I’ve never doubted your innocence. I just...can’t. You shut me out eight years ago and I refuse to open myself up to that again.”

“Nikki—”

“No, you need to hear me. When you got out and came back home, I wasn’t sure I’d survive it. But then we talked, and I put up the biggest front of my life. You didn’t even blink. It was obvious you’d moved on from us, and youdefinitelydidn’t kiss me.

I tried to let you go, Rafe. But seeing you now, it's like seeing the man you were before those bars closed on you. What happens when you remember?"

"I don't know, Nik, but being with you is the only thing that feels...normal."

She shook her head. "I won't be your crutch. You're just turning to me because you're scared."

"Who says I'm scared?"

"Please. I know fear when I see it." She jumped into motion and stalked past me in the direction of her house. As she climbed the stairs, I stood on the side of the road feeling like an idiot who couldn't break an old habit.

Fuck it. I went after her, feet pounding the ground as I covered the distance. I bolted up the staircase and shot out a foot to keep the door from closing at the last second.

"We're not done."

"Move your foot."

"No!" I shoved the door until it gave. Feeling like a Neanderthal, I forced my way into her foyer. She could run from me in public, but not here in her own home. "All I'm asking for is—"

She wasn't alone.

Jax stood in the middle of her living room, barefoot, his mural of tats disappearing from view as he pulled a shirt over his chest. His jeans hung open in the front. It wasn't his state of undress that bothered me as much as the guilty expression on his face.

Zach's psychological warfare took a toll on my entire being. I often lost hours while he forced my body and spirit into an uncontrollable pleasure zone. Maybe I'd retain a small amount of sanity if my memory would only disappear into that dark hole.

But it didn't. I always recalled the total mind-fuck he put me through daily. Time soared past, as if it had wings, and while on the ecstasy, I not only believed I had wings, but I used them to fly. It was ironic, really. Zach drugged me because he thought doing so would bring me back to him, but when I was high, I fell into an alternate reality where Rafe was still alive for a few precious hours.

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The crash back to Earth never failed to gut me. I stared at the waterfall in horror, unable to stop shuddering. Thick foliage protected us from discovery, but that rush of water, toppling over rocks and crashing below, threatened to pull me into its depths. The thought was irrational, yet every bone in my body believed the lie—the facade my phobia enforced.

It wasn't that long ago that Zach had laid me near the ledge, lifting the skirt of my dress up past my breasts. I'd been so high on his reality-altering cocktail, I'd opened my mouth to catch the spray misting down on us, unmindful of the threat that existed only a few feet away as he'd hunched between my spread thighs and feasted.

Again, some sick and twisted part of my psyche had believed it was Rafe. Maybe it was my subconscious tricking me in order to cope. All that remained was shame. Sadness. Sorrow that ran so deep, my muscles ached with it. I tried to hide my pathetic state from Zach, knowing how my tears pissed him off. He expected the old me—the girl who clenched her jaw and took his cock like a trooper—not this blubbing, serotonin-depleted shell of myself who pretended he was another man to keep from wanting to slit my wrists.

But the pain in my soul wouldn't stop overflowing from my eyes, and incurring his wrath was an inevitability.

“Time to snap the fuck out of it!” He lifted me from behind, arms winding around my waist, and carried me down the steep path to the water's edge. I kicked and screamed, nearly causing him to lose his balance on the way.

“No!” I shrieked. “You can't do this! Stop!” My shouting came out as sputters once

he dumped me in the shallow part. I clawed my way to the rocky shore, hands and knees sinking into slimy dirt. My heart beat so fast, it caused a physical ache in my chest. Little by little, I scrambled away from the water, as if it called to the dark place in my mind that tempted me to sink into the depths and die.

For an instant, I considered it.

As I sprawled onto the rocks, Zach grabbed my wet hair, bringing me back from the perilous idea of death. He yanked my neck back until I gazed at him instead of the waterhole. “The moping is gonna stop. I gave you ecstasy so we could get beyond the bullshit, not so you could turn into a depressed zombie while straight. I’ve had to force you out of bed for the last three days. Enough is enough, Lex.” He let me go and threw his hands in the air. “I don’t know what to do. You’re fucking sexy as hell when high, but you want nothing to do with me otherwise.”

“What do you expect? You’re drugging me all the time. I can’t cope like this.” I shoved my hair out of my burning eyes and hoped the water dripping down my face hid the tears.

“I just want you back.”

“You never had me!”

“I did.” He clenched his teeth, and tension spiraled off him in currents. “I had you. You can lie to me and to yourself, but you loved me.”

“You killed Rafe! I could never love you. Never.”

“Your precious boy toy isn’t dead.” Zach scoffed, rolling his eyes. “I had to know if he lived or not, so I went to Dante’s Pass yesterday.” He crouched in front of me, tilting his head. “You know what I found, Lex? I saw him strolling through town

without a care in the world. Didn't take him long to wind up on the doorstep of Nikki Malone. Remember her? I guess old habits die hard."

I shook my head, refusing to let hope rush in.

"It's true, so you can let go of the guilt and blame game because he survived." Zach stood again and gestured to the vast wilderness that enclosed us in hell. "But where is he now, huh?"

My heart leapt, despite knowing better. "Don't mess with my head like that. You're lying."

"It's the truth. He's not coming for you. Why would he? He has Nikki to keep his dick occupied. For fuck's sake, you sent him to prison. Do you honestly think he'd love you after you had him locked up?"

My sobs escaped in gasping, pathetic hiccups. I struggled to my knees and gripped my midsection, unable to catch my breath as the echo of his words struck me in the gut with sharp-edged truth.

Zach knelt down and held my face in his hands. "I love you. No matter what. No matter how much you say you hate me or try to push me away, I love you. Always."

"You hurt me."

"You used to like pain."

With tears streaming down my face, I saw Zach in a warped light, blurred from the product of my sorrow. He believed every word he'd said. An image surfaced, a blip in time in which I saw him as my brother, the boy I remembered from what seemed like a different lifetime. The brother who would do anything to make me feel better.

But that boy was gone. Not a facet of his innocence remained. A chill spread over me, and goose bumps broke out on every inch of flesh.

“Just because my body is fucked up, that doesn’t mean I love you.”

His hands slipped from my face. He stood, brows narrowed as he glared down at me. “He will never love you like I do. Never.”

“You’re right. He won’t. But I’ll never love you like I do him.”

It took four of them to hold me down, my cheek pressed to the gritty cement. The biggest and meanest straddled my thighs, his rough hands spreading my ass cheeks as he worked his cock between them. I tried to buck him off. His laughter gave him away; he was enjoying the struggle. More laughter sounded, deeper, gruffer, but it didn’t come from the assholes doing this. No, it came from the assholes allowing this to happen. The scent of tobacco blanketed the shower room, wafting in the air so thickly, I nearly choked.

No choking. No sound. I’d fight, but they wouldn’t drag a plea from me. I gritted my teeth, pulled against the vise grip of the other three pricks restraining me, and closed my eyes as a scorching burn ignited in my rectum...

I shot up in bed, my hands fisting the sweat-drenched sheets. With a shudder, I let a breath out and fell against the headboard. The same nightmare had plagued me for the last four nights, but I didn’t want to analyze it. I wanted to forget every fucking detail. I pulled deep breaths into my lungs and waited for the pounding thud of my heartbeat to slow, to stop hammering at my throat. Flinging the damp, gnarled sheet to the side, I slipped from bed and padded across the loft bedroom to the stairs that lowered to the first floor.

Two things beckoned me: a bottle of vodka I’d found stashed away in the back of a

cupboard, and the smoking gun in the cellar—the cage. Landing on the bottom step, I glanced around the empty living room.

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Jax hadn't been back since I'd caught him with Nikki, and I hadn't stuck around to hear their explanations.

Absently, I grabbed the stashed vodka, unscrewed the lid, and took a drink straight from the bottle. Darkness blanketed the cabin, as not a single bulb highlighted the shadows. I didn't feel inclined to turn on a lamp. The darkness called to me, the unassuming companionship it offered. Quiet solitude didn't pester me about my state of mind like my brother's phone calls did. It didn't ask if I remembered anything. But it also didn't tell me shit. That damn cage in the cellar might, if I could only force my brain to cooperate.

I swayed for an instant and did a double take at the bottle. Who knew vodka could go down so well. As I stumbled a path to the cellar door, I kicked myself for turning to alcohol. Booze only numbed the problem temporarily, and it turned smart people into fucked up stupid people. I pulled the door open and took an unsteady jaunt down the stairs, then came to a stop in front of the evidence I wanted so badly to deny.

Maybe you should take a peek in the cellar.

Jax's words from last week echoed through the space between my ears. I stared at the cage, my mind trapped inside, a prisoner to the unknown as I willed it to impart the things my brain refused to remember.

When Jax told me about my eight-year prison sentence, I'd had a difficult time believing him. When he'd told me about Alex's accusation, that had been even harder to accept. But the bigger part of myself, the part that was still stuck in the past by eight years, was horrified by what he claimed I'd done. To Alex.

I still remembered her as this too-tempting not-so-innocent girl that liked to play with my head. Alex and her jade come-hither gaze that never failed to burrow beneath my skin like a first degree burn. Constantly flirting, teasing, driving me fucked up crazy.

It might have been nothing more than a schoolgirl's crush, but underneath the flirting, I sensed she'd cared about me. I had no idea why. I was a ticking time bomb with too much pent up anger. Fighting was the only thing that gave me relief. If I psychoanalyzed myself long enough, I'd probably find an insecure little boy with abandonment issues. Just another statistic who's mommy left when he was too young. And the deviant sexual appetite...well fuck, I was shot to hell once I added that into the mix. If I was this fucked up now...back then...shit this was confusing, then how badly had eight years of prison messed me up?

I glared at the cage, but it continued to engage me in a silent standoff. I lifted the vodka and took another swig. Maybe the alcohol would facilitate my traitorous psyche. Those bars would tell me the secrets they held, tell me how I could have turned into the kind of man who would kidnap a woman and lock her inside.

Not just any woman. Alex...who still hadn't emerged. If I'd let her go, as Jax speculated, then where was she? Had I tortured her so badly that she'd put a bullet in me and left me for dead? Was she hiding somewhere, terrified I'd find her and bring her back to the island?

And finally, it clicked. The island, water...fuck. I really had tormented her.

"Tell me why I did it," I said, raising a hand menacingly, finger pointing in accusation at the prison. I tipped the bottle back and chugged. Jax said I'd wanted revenge. I didn't buy it. If I'd truly wanted retribution or comeuppance, there were other ways. I could have dug until I proved my innocence. I could have unleashed public humiliation on her.

Or maybe I'd been guilty all along.

I might not remember taking and locking her inside that homemade prison, but deep down I knew why I'd done it. I'd taken her because I'd wanted to. My hand fell, no longer accusing metal and concrete of unspoken sins, and drifted to the front of my tented boxers.

Closing my eyes, I imagined her helpless behind those bars, her arms pulled above her head tightly, painfully, feet arching as she tried to balance on her toes. Creamy, round breasts, perfect nipples erect, waiting to be punished. Her mouth spread wide with a gag, and my belt secure around her throat. Tight and inescapable.

Her body, her will, her freedom, trapped to my every whim.

I'd force her legs apart, rub my cock between them, taunting, taking power and leaving her with none, all the while pulling her head back by the strap of leather imprisoning her delicate neck.

With a groan, I freed my dick and slid a palm over the wet tip before closing frantic fingers around the base. I tightened my hold, pretended her fingers stroked me. More pre-cum escaped, and I swiped my thumb over the soft head, envisioning Alex on her knees, lips surrendering to my cock, her tongue lapping while her small hands encased my shaft in warm ecstasy as she sucked and bobbed. Shit, what I wouldn't give to yank at her curls right now.

"Fuuuuck...Alex..."

I shot my load all over the ground, wishing like hell my dick was shoved down her throat for real. After my breathing settled and I'd adjusted my boxers, I returned to the bottle of vodka. A few long swigs later, I eyed the mind-numbing liquid with narrowed eyes. I didn't know what prompted me to launch it across the room. Maybe

the crushing shame of my fantasy and the equally shameful desire of wishing it was real.

The vodka collided with several wine bottles on the rack, and the shattering glass echoed in my ears with a haunting omen. For a split second, I saw an older version of Alex, naked, body shaking as she aimed the jagged edge of a broken bottleneck at me. The flash left just as suddenly, and I wished I had something else to throw. I fell into the wall, eyes squeezed shut as my fist pounded concrete. Why couldn't I remember? Some part of me was desperate to remember, as if my life depended on it.

“Remember anything?”

I jumped at the sound of his voice. Squinting through my drunkenness and the shadowed space, I saw Jax leaning against the wall near the stairs, stocky figure hidden in darkness.

I let my hands fall to my sides. “How long have you been standing there?”

He pulled a cigarette from behind his ear and stuck it between his lips. A second later, a lighter sparked. “Long enough,” he mumbled around the butt. He took a drag then exhaled with the ease of a practiced smoker. “Thought I’d come back for some stuff, but I heard a noise down here.”

“I didn’t know you smoked.”

“I quit months ago. Guess I’m taking up the habit again.” He lifted a finger toward me. “Guess you are too.”

“Whaddya mean?” I glanced toward the broken glass. The heavy scent of tobacco mingled with the vodka tainting my floor. “Did I hit the bottle a lot? Do I drink a lot?” I found that hard to believe. I never drank, as alcohol interfered with training. Except

I wasn't training anymore and I'd just finished off a good portion like it was nothing.

"No, beyond the occasional beer or two, you're not a drinker." His lips curled. "I was referring to your private moment with the ole Alex De Luca fantasy."

I rubbed both hands down my face. "What am I doing?"

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“Hopefully remembering something.”

“Not even close.” My attention swerved to the broken glass again. “Except...”

He stood up straighter. “What is it?”

“A flash of something...no. Never mind. It’s nothing.”

“Spit it out, Mason.”

“It doesn’t make any sense. I saw Alex threatening me with a wine bottle, and she was”—I summoned the image, and my fucking cock came to life again—“naked.”

Jax laughed, an unexpected reaction. “I’d say that’s a memory. You didn’t let that piece of ass wear a thing up until the day you decided to let her go.”

“Did I fuck her?” As soon as the words tumbled from my mouth, I wanted to yank them back.

Jax lifted an incredulous brow, and the wicked grin that spread across his face sent a gob of dread to my gut. “Damn right you fucked her.” He pointed upward. “You fucked her right on the kitchen table while I watched. That was after you paddled her ass for trying to escape.”

I gaped at him, shaking my head. “I can’t believe I did that.” I lowered to the floor and parked my ass on the cold cement.

“You did that and a lot more.” He wandered to where I sat and took the space next to me. “Are we gonna talk about Nikki?”

“You mean are you gonna tell me why you’re sneaking around with her?”

He took one last drag of his smoke before grounding it into the concrete. “It just happened.”

“I didn’t figure you for the cliché type.”

“Look,” he said with a sigh, “I know she used to be your girl, but not long ago, Alex was your girl.”

“No, Alex was my prisoner.” My attention stalled on the cage, eyes narrowed. “You and Nik...that just doesn’t make sense. You can’t stand to be touched, for one.”

“What’d you say?”

“It doesn’t make sense.”

“No, the last part.”

I turned back to him, head tilted. “You can’t stand to be touched?” The words hung between us, but Jax didn’t say anything. I opened my mouth, my mind struggling to comprehend what I’d just said. “How do I know that?”

“You tell me.”

“I don’t know, I just...do.”

“Anything else you suddenly just know?”

I reached inward, poking at the blank spots in my past, and came up empty. “I guess not.”

“It’ll come back. Maybe you’re trying too hard.”

“Maybe.” I dangled my hands between my bent knees. “Do you care about her?”

Slowly, he nodded. “Yeah, I do. She’s the first person since...”

“Since what?” I asked, not about to let him toss out that tidbit of information just to pull it back.

“Since I had to let go of someone else.”

“What happened?” I probably already knew the details, somewhere in the locked area of my brain.

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Jax returned my gaze, and something about the intense longing there made me shiver. I missed the warmth of my buzz. The booze still corrupted my veins, but the shield of not-giving-a-fuck was long gone.

“Wasn’t meant to be,” he said. “I’ve accepted it.”

“And you think sneaking around with Nikki is smart? She’s engaged.” Fucking hypocrite. Hadn’t I stuck my tongue down her throat a few days ago? If not for the unnerving sense that being with her was wrong, I would have done a lot more than that.

Jax’s mouth formed an angry line. “Lyle Lewis is scum. All the shit-talk he’s done about you. He had half the town believing you were involved in Alex’s death.”

“From what you told me, I was involved in her ‘death.’” I added air quotes on the last word.

Jax waved off my logic. “Yeah, but he didn’t know shit, Rafe. We covered our tracks. He wasn’t pointing the finger at you because he thought you were guilty. He used what happened to tear what little reputation you had left to shreds. He was trying to run you out of town.”

“Why would he do that? It’s not like I’m causing him any problems living here on the island.”

“You’re a threat to him.”

“Because of Nikki?”

Jax raised a brow.

I shook my head, laughing. “Yet you’re the one seeing her. How fucking ironic is that?”

Jax wasn’t laughing. “Does it bother you?” He shifted, hunching over his knees, and tilted his head. “Because if it does, I won’t see her again.”

“But you’re in to her.”

He smiled, the first genuine, care-free grin I’d seen him wear. “I still can’t handle her touch, but yeah. I like her. Fucking crazy that she seems to feel the same way.” The smile bled from his face, and he pierced me with his deep stare. “But I’m not burying my head in the sand. She’ll run if you snap your fingers. I know it, and Lyle knows it.”

“His ring is on her fucking finger, so maybe he should get over it.”

Jax sighed. “I have no idea why she’s wearing that asshole’s ring. I doubt we know the whole story. She talks about the jerk like she’s scared of him.”

That made me sit up straighter. “You think he’s hurting her?”

“I don’t know.” He shook his head, gaze on the ground between his feet. “How did everything go to hell so fast?”

“Fuck if I know,” I said, glancing at the broken glass on my floor. “But I can’t sit around and do nothing.” Missing so many years was dangerous. Even though we sat in a cellar full of incriminating evidence, talking about women and the screwed up

shit we'd done together, Jax still felt like a stranger to me.

And Alex...

Her disappearance wasn't going away on its own. "I have to find out what happened to her, Jax. Maybe I should talk to Abbott."

"Are you insane? You were convicted of raping his daughter. You can't just knock on his door and say, 'Hey, how's it going? By the way, have you seen your dead daughter lately?'"

"No shit." With a sigh, I sank both hands into my hair and pulled. "But I've gotta do something. I'm responsible for her."

"No," Jax said. "I'll do something. I've already been looking into it. You stay away from this."

I studied his profile. Shaggy blond hair brushed his brows, and the scruff on his face, combined with a crooked nose, gave him an unkempt look. He managed to pull it off. How could I have shared a cell with this guy and not remember him? "You'd do that for me?"

He swept his hair back from his eyes. "I'd be dead if it weren't for you. I'll always have your back."

Under the influence of pure ignorant bliss, I'd slipped up and called him Rafe. The silence that blasted from Zach was so loud, I cowered in the corner with my hands over my ears.

Time was an elusive concept while high. I had no idea how long I'd been sitting like this. I vaguely recalled dragging myself across the floor, far, far away from the rage

surging through the veins cording his arms. I peeked through the messy curls obscuring my sight and found him hunched on the bed, his head clutched in his hands. I swiped the damp strands from my face.

“Zach—”

He jumped to his feet, and I shrank against the wall, pressing so tightly I felt as if I could melt through to the other side.

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He grabbed a bottle of water from the nightstand and came toward me, the floor quaking with every stomp of his feet.

“Drink this. As soon as you crash, I’ll deal with you.” When he stalked across the room and slammed the door, the vibration rattled through my bones.

I was already crashing. Crying out one man’s name while another fucked me had a dousing effect on the high. Unscrewing the cap, I sat up straighter and brought the mouth of the bottle to my lips. God. So fucking thirsty. Unable to sit still any longer, especially since he’d left me alone, I stood and wandered toward the bed as I emptied the bottle.

The familiar weight of desolation landed on my chest, making it difficult to breathe. I climbed onto the mattress, drew up my knees, and stifled my wailing into a pillow. Every thought and feeling raced through my being, muddying my sense of reality. I tried to latch on to something tangible, something I could form, if only mentally, but I couldn’t snatch anything in the chaotic processes of my mind.

Time continued its useless ticking. Zach returned and found me curled into a ball, eyes staring unblinkingly ahead, though I saw nothing. This room, my whole existence, blurred until only shapes and shadows emerged.

My life had shape-shifted into something distorted and sick.

So had Zach. He’d been morphing all along, I just hadn’t realized to what extent until it was too late.

He didn't say a word as he rolled me to my back. He positioned me on the bed so my thighs draped open and the bottom of my ass nearly hung off the mattress. I tried to sit up, but he shoved me down with such little effort, I didn't try moving again. A rip sounded and the unyielding stickiness of duct tape attached to my skin. He rendered my limbs useless by restraining me, wrist to ankle on either side.

He leaned over, fists depressing the mattress by my head, and a hint of fear scattered through me. He reeked of the whiskey he loved so much. Rage and alcohol didn't mesh well in people, and that was especially true for Zach.

"I'm going to fuck your brains out. No drugs to numb your agony, baby girl. Just my cock ripping through you." One hand clutched my hair as he unzipped his jeans and let them fall down his muscular thighs. He fisted his erection. I tried moving my face to the side, but his grip tightened in my hair. "Don't you fucking take your eyes off of me."

He pushed in with a fierce plunge, and I grunted from the grating burn. My foggy state dissolved, whisked away by the harshness of his thrusts.

"Feel that, Lex?" He ground out as he pumped, his gaze commanding mine, challenging me to break the contact. I didn't dare. "That's my cock in you. Not his. Mine."

Tears leaked from my eyes as he plowed into me mercilessly. The salty drops trailed down the sides of my face and pooled at my ears.

"Apologize for being a whore, and maybe I won't choke you with my dick."

"I'm sorry," I said, despising the whining plea of my tone. I wasn't sorry at all—I was only sorry I'd let Rafe's name slip from my lips. He plowed against my cervix, and I shrieked.

“What the fuck is my name?”

“Zach.”

He withdrew, removed the belt from his loops as he shuffled back, and brought the strap down on my pussy. I squealed like a pig, the pain so searing, he might as well have used an electric prod.

“Say it again.”

“Zach!”

“Scream it!”

“Zach!” I sobbed. “This isn’t you. Please, remember us. Please. You used to make me feel safe.”

“And you never appreciated it.” He tossed the belt on the floor then rammed me so hard, my ass slid up the mattress a few inches. My cries echoed, hoarse from screaming for him to stop. I don’t think he even heard me.

He’d snapped, and I couldn’t reach the human part of him. The part that was my brother. This untamed creature was unrecognizable, blind with bloodlust and rage. He’d waited until I crashed from the ecstasy to unleash the beast, mouth snarling and teeth gnashing, knowing how I’d be incapable of becoming aroused after coming off the drug. Every thrust of his cock bruised, burned, and rubbed me raw. Whatever tenderness he’d shown in the past couple of weeks had vanished. He was wasted and pissed, and no one was coming to save me.

“Zach...stop...” My voice failed me, coming out as nothing more than a whimper.

“Stop.”

“You don’t fuckin’ tell me what to do.” The rip of tape screeched through my ears, and he secured a strip over my mouth. “Go on, Lex. Say his name now. I dare you to try.” His laughter tingled down my spine. He withdrew his knife from the pocket of his jeans. “I’ll make sure you never forget who’s fucking you again.”

The cool edge of his blade pressed into my stomach. On the inside, I screamed in agony, but only a pathetic whine escaped my sealed lips. My heart pounded in my chest, panic rising as I struggled, digging my feet into the mattress and pushing up the bed a couple of inches. His forceful hands grabbed my thighs and yanked me back in place, and his cock plunged in again.

“Hold the fuck still.” His knife sliced into my skin, deeper this time. I kept my attention on his face, terrified of seeing the damage he was doing, but also giving one last attempt at reaching him with my eyes.

“Fucking gorgeous.” He swiveled his hips and moaned. “Fuck...your cunt never felt this good.” He continued carving, saying more, but the words were indiscernible beyond my smothered cries. I feared he would kill me, dig the blade in too deeply, slash an organ. With that last thought came the disturbing discovery that maybe he’d finally give me a way out. No more pain. No more guilt or shame. No more surviving.

I’d been surviving for ten years, and I was tired. Second by second, my body grew limp, hands and feet losing strength, limbs going listless. The broken organ in my chest was ready to give up. I didn’t have any fight left. Only acceptance. I’d never get out of this hell. The days would continue, erasing any remnant of my brother, only to be permanently replaced by this brutal impostor driven by alcohol, obsession, and the most dangerous of all—jealousy. The will to fight abandoned me.

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As he slashed and fucked, his thrusts slow and erratic, I closed my eyes and gave up.

“Mmm, this is gonna be my favorite way to fuck you. You’re so sexy, vulnerable, with my name carved in your skin.” He bent down, and the wet slide of his tongue lapped at where he’d sliced. “You’re mine to brand. Shit, baby. I should’ve taken you years ago. No one’s standing in our way now.” Sliding up my body, his stomach smeared the blood I knew tainted my belly, and he pushed his cock deeper.

I gave in to the blank place in my mind where I didn’t exist. The small cubbyhole where I could hibernate for the rest of my life. But something wouldn’t let me go. Hope licked the edges of my consciousness, demanding more.

I don’t have anything left to give.

Fight, dammit! Find a way to escape.

Can’t.

Rafe is still alive.

My heart skipped. He doesn’t want me.

Zach lied to you. Of course he wants you. He would never turn his back.

I hurt him too much. He couldn’t forgive me.

You need to forgive yourself first. After you get the hell out of here.

I tried! Zach will never let me go.

Try harder.

Shut up, shut up, shut up! I mentally screamed as laughter rumbled in my chest. God, I was losing my mind. But I didn't need the crazy phantom in my head giving me false hope. Rafe wasn't coming. I wasn't worth it.

You don't know that.

Shut up!

I was on my own, and I couldn't even blame Rafe. He'd had to deal with eight years of imprisonment. Just because his incarceration had been at the hands of the system didn't make it any less horrific than what I suffered now. He'd been raped, just like me.

Zach grunted, pulling me from the turmoil of my mind, and his cock stilled in my bruised cunt. He let out a frustrated growl. The alcohol flooding his system messed with his libido, making it difficult for him to come. I preferred when he stuck it in and got it over with. But he'd wanted to unleash his anger, and I was his favorite plaything. His hands moved to my burning wrists.

"Every time you say his fucking name, I'll carve mine into your body." His knife, tainted with my blood, cut through the tape and freed me. He ripped the strip from my mouth, tugged on my arms, and forced me into a kneeling position on the bed. His large hand fisted my hair and brought my mouth to his glistening cock.

"Need you to suck me off." He pushed between my lips and shoved to the back of my throat. Gagging, I slapped at his hard abs, hands uselessly pressing against his stomach, but he used both fists to hold me flush with his abdomen, smothering my

airway as he choked me with his girth.

I flailed, panicking as my lungs burned, as vomit rose in my throat. He yanked out only to thrust in again. In that moment, I no longer existed. I was just a shell, a thing made up of skin and bones, my sole purpose to submit while he pummeled my holes.

Fight, Alex! Find a way out before he completely destroys you.

Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop! I covered my ears, my frantic scream gurgling in my throat. His erection gagged me again, and I was certain I'd drown in my own vomit.

"Oh fuuuuck, Lex..." His cum shot down my throat, but I couldn't stop screaming. He pulled out, and I spewed cum and what little I'd eaten that day onto the floor. He wrenched my hands free from my ears, and I realized I was still wailing. Hysteria didn't touch the state I was in.

"Knock it off!" He brought his face within inches of mine. "What is wrong with you?"

What was wrong with me?

Everything. Every decision I'd made, every mistake, spawned from cowardice, led to this moment. I was too stupid to live. My gaze flickered to the bed where he'd dropped the knife between cutting me and making me choke on his cum.

Find a way out.

I sucked air into my lungs, catching my breath, and tramped down the need to throw up again. "Water," I blurted, holding my throbbing head. "I'm too hot. I'm gonna get sick again."

He glanced down at the vomit at his feet, his mouth twisting with disgust. “It was just a fucking blow job, Lex. Does my dick repulse you that much?”

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I shook my head quickly. “No, it-it’s the drugs. I need water.” I hated the meek sound of my voice, despised it. Why couldn’t I be stronger? Why couldn’t I jump to my feet and pound my fist into his face?

Don’t enrage the beast further. There’s only one way out, and you know it.

That was not the same voice of hope from a few minutes ago. That was the real me, the voice of despair who gave cold, hard truth.

Zach stood and his expression softened, as if a hint of my brother had returned. Or maybe he was sobering up, now that the frenzy had passed. Now that he’d emptied his cum and his rage into me. I tried not to glance at the knife again, and prayed he’d leave it behind.

“Be right back.” He grabbed it and left the room, taking my hope with him. My heartbeat thudded as his quiet steps receded down the hall. Desperation corrupted my soul, and the overwhelming need to end this possessed me.

Do it now. Before he comes back.

I sprinted to the bathroom, shut and locked the door, then searched the cabinets and drawers for a razor. Empty. Empty, empty, empty! He’d shaved my legs days ago. Where were the razors? I found nothing, save for a lone Q-tip. I flung it to the floor in disgust then scoured the tiny space for something to break the mirror with, my whole body shaking. Finding nothing, I settled for pounding my fist on the glass, wincing against the pain, though it didn’t compare to what Zach had put me through.

What he'll put you through if you don't succeed.

A piece broke free, and I clutched it in my bloodied hand. I birthed an unknown creature inside me, one who thirsted for my death. That creature whispered in my ear and told me to turn on the faucet in the tub. Told me to ignore the panic squeezing my chest as the water splashed into the bottom. I stepped over the side, placing one trembling foot inside, before lifting the other over the rim.

Zach banged on the door, words I couldn't make out screeching through the wood. I couldn't hear him above the roar in my head—the scream that told me to sink into the depths of my phobia and let it dispose of me. My back slammed against the cold porcelain, and as the door shook under his weight, I took the piece of mirror and gouged it into my left arm, dragging the sharp edge up my forearm to my wrist.

Just like Mom.

I wept, chest heaving uncontrollably, and a tremor of remorse went through me, but it was fleeting. I took the glass, held awkwardly in my left hand, and tore into the opposite wrist. Blood bathed my skin, hiding the faint scars from years of silently screaming.

Free. Finally free.

The glass fell from my fingers. I slumped into the tub, arms plopping into rising water, and closed my eyes as my head dropped against the rim. I wondered if Mom had felt this way. Had she experienced this same clarifying sense of relief? The certainty that the suffering would end soon. I couldn't wait to see her. I ached to feel her arms around me, craved the sweet scent I still remembered, even to this day. Jasmine. God, I could already smell it.

A crash sounded, and Zach's scream tore me from my serenity. "Lex!"

He lifted me from the water and held my body to his quaking chest. “Why?” Gut wrenching remorse coated that single word. I cracked my lids open, and through the haze I found his cheeks wet with grief.

I blinked several times until he came into sharper focus. “Can’t do this anymore.” The room narrowed, shadows deepening around the edges. “Zach,” I said, my voice growing weaker. “I’m scared.”

“No”—a sob burst from his mouth—“hang on, baby!”

I felt weightless in his arms, jostled like a rag doll, as he strode from the bathroom. I clung to the protective shell of numbness enclosing my heart, chasing the fear away. I was safe, as light as a feather and floating toward the promise of infinite peace. He laid my drenched body on the bed, where I crashed back to Earth before he disappeared from sight.

What had I done? I lifted my arms, rotated them so the bloody gashes in my skin faced me, and shivered. Cold. Why was I so cold? Why was I still awake? Still alive? Had I done it wrong?

No! I couldn’t even kill myself right. I should have dug deeper.

You did the best you could. Now use this to get out of here.

Why was the voice back? I cried out, horrified by the desperation choking me.

Zach returned, a phone wedged between his shoulder and ear. He held my wrists to the mattress and applied pressure. “Oh God, hurry!” His shoulders shook as tears careened down his face, and the phone toppled to the floor.

“Don’t leave me. Please...I’m sorry. Don’t go. Please don’t go. Lex?” His hands

banded around my wrists with incredible strength, as if he could hold the life inside me. “Help’s coming.” He dropped his head onto my stomach, his cheek smearing the bloody product of his madness, and bawled.

Help’s coming.

Those two words echoed like a blessed chant. His lips moved against my skin, but I didn’t hear what he said. All I heard was his promise.

I was getting out of here.

Voices surrounded me, some asking questions. I tried to open my eyes, but my lids were so heavy, as heavy as the weight of my thudding heart.

“Zach?”

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What was happening? My body jostled on a thinly padded surface, and a siren blared in my ears. I swayed, and my stomach dropped. Felt like I was being transported. I spaced in and out of consciousness, and the crisp scent of pine and nature disappeared, replaced by a hint of fresh water and fish. It reminded me of being on Rafe's island.

Was I near a river? Where was he taking me this time?

"Zach?" Why wasn't he answering me?

"Hang on," an unfamiliar voice said. His tone was deep, reassuring. "We're almost there."

I must have blacked out again, though I vaguely recalled the shout of voices, commands, and haste motion.

"Alexandra."

That voice I recognized, and it drifted to me faintly. I tried to lift my lids, but they stuck to my eyeballs. "Dad." I moaned, turning my head and finally forcing my eyes open.

The fuzzy bulk of his form sat to my left. He leaned to one side and brought a hand to his chin, stroking the graying stubble there. The gesture reminded me of Zach and caused a chill to go down my spine. He leaned forward and settled his much larger hand over mine. "I can't believe you're here. I thought I lost you."

“What happened?” My gaze darted around the nondescript room. The blinds were cracked slightly to allow the sunlight in. I angled my head back and noticed the medical equipment above the bed.

“You don’t remember?” he asked.

Coming fully alert, images went off like flashes in my mind. Rafe, the island, Zach...my last desperate attempt to free myself from him forever. A horrified cry tumbled from my mouth, and I lifted my arms. White bandages covered both to a few inches below my elbows, wrapping in mummy-like fashion.

“The doctor said you were lucky you didn’t damage any tendons.” He cleared his throat. “Thank God it appeared worse than it was.”

“How...” I met Dad’s gaze. “How did I get here?” Memories surfaced as soon as the words left my mouth. Zach sobbing his grief and remorse onto my stomach as he used his hands to stem the flow of blood, how he’d pleaded with me not to leave him. The same hands that inflicted so much pain had banded around my wounds to save me. Even now his actions seemed counterproductive, considering all he’d done.

But he had saved me. In his own sick and twisted way, he’d loved me enough to let me go, if letting me go meant I wouldn’t die.

“A ranger found you. You were in a cabin near Mt. Hood. An anonymous caller reported your suicide attempt, but you were alone when they found you. Do you have any memory of how you got there, or how your car ended up in the Columbia River?”

Rafe...he’d freed me from a life I’d wanted to escape, then Zach had imprisoned me with the shackles of his obsession. I nodded slowly, looking at the last few weeks from all angles. “I remember, but it’s not what you think.”

He gave a pointed look at my arms. “Talk to me.”

“It was Zach. He wouldn’t let me go. Dad”—I lowered my head, facing away in shame—“he took me. It was all him. He’s been r-rap—”

“Alexandra.” His tone made me gulp, and I felt like I was twelve again. “Your brother has been busy at our new MMA training camp in Seattle for the past month. We announced it formally this morning.”

His words hit me with the force of a sledgehammer. He was doing it again. Protecting Zach. No doubt paying people to say what needed to be said. Fabricating photos and controlling what the media reported. I didn’t have to see the evidence—he’d done it so many times already, hiding Zach’s downward spiral into alcoholism, his erratic behavior during training sessions and events, but I never thought he’d throw me under the bus.

His own daughter.

You’re not his daughter though. Not by blood.

I trembled at the voice in my head, and I hated how my eyes burned from hurt. Struggling to sit up, I hefted my legs over the side of the bed and stood. On wobbly limbs, I turned to confront him. “I can prove Zach did it. His fucking sperm is still inside me.”

I lifted my gown to just below my breasts and put Zach’s carving on display. Glancing down almost made me retch, but I swallowed the rancid taste in my mouth. Zach hadn’t exaggerated; he’d carved his name into my skin so clearly, a first grader would be able to read it. “I suppose I did this to myself too, right? Or maybe it was another man name Zach who took me, raped me, and drugged me out of my mind.”

Dad wouldn't even look at me, and that pissed me off more than anything. "He can't get away with this. I can't keep living this way."

"My poor girl." He shook his head. "I'll get you the help you need."

"It was Zach!" I screamed, losing my balance and stumbling into the side of the bed. Propping myself up with both hands, I tried to ignore the bandages, but they sat between us, as if to perpetuate the deception. I hadn't wanted to die. I'd just wanted...free.

He rose from the chair and stepped to my side. "Get back in bed before you fall down."

I yanked away from his touch and climbed beneath the blanket under my own steam. "This isn't my fault. I didn't do this."

"It's okay to admit you need help," he said, his voice unusually soft. "Your mother fought it too, but you don't have to make the same mistake. And you don't have to fight this battle alone. You have your family. You have Lucas. He still wants to marry you."

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“That’s not happening. I don’t want to see him again.” The wedding was off the moment I removed his ring from my finger, before Rafe had shown up on my doorstep.

Dad placed a palm on my shoulder, and his fingers curled, gouging bone as I tried to inch away. “I had hoped marrying Lucas would help you move past your unhealthy fixation with your brother.”

My mouth hung open. “Myfixation with him? Are you crazy?”

He was twisting everything around, making me look like I was the one with the problem. Just the crazy daughter who’d come too close to repeating the same suicide attempt as her loony mother. He would always protect Zach. Always. Even if it meant I got trampled in the process. I bit my lip to hold back tears and finally let go of the hope he’d someday love me like he did Zach.

I clenched my hands. “You can lie to society,” I said, proud at the strength in my tone. “Even make the media do your bidding, but you can’t lie to me. Zach kidnapped me, herapedme, and he faked my death. I’ve been his prisoner for weeks.” At his unchanging expression, the familiar pang of rejection tore through me. “And I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure he rots in jail for it. I was only thirteen when it started.” I’d wanted to tell him for so long and now that the words were out there, dirtying the air with their horror, I felt the weight lift from my chest.

I had someone else to cover for. Someone who deserved it. Rafe deserved a full exoneration, and if stepping so close to death had brought anything to light, it was him. He might have done someeversick and questionable things to me, but he’d had

eight years of his own hell haunting him, driving him to seek what he'd believed was due retribution. In some sane crevice of my mind I understood I was justifying what he'd done, making excuses because I loved him. If I had an unhealthy fixation on anyone, it was Rafe Mason.

My father leaned forward and pierced me with the same hazel-eyed stare as Zach, though his held a shrewdness his son's lacked. "Since we're being so candid, let me make something perfectly clear, Alexandra. I love you. I've always loved you like a daughter. But you and I both know Zach didn't sink your car into the river."

I opened my mouth, but words failed me.

"Rafe did." He straightened to his full height and folded his arms over his chest. The ink in his corded muscles appeared harsher than usual under the lighting. "If my son goes down for this, so does Rafe." He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a bundle of envelopes I'd never planned for anyone to find, least of all my father. He tossed them next to me on the mattress. "Judging by your own words, he matters a great deal to you."

I shook my head back and forth in disbelief, in denial, like a pathetic Bobblehead. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know exactly what I'm talking about." Dad grabbed my hand and squeezed so hard, his knuckles whitened. "You had a mental breakdown, understand me? I don't care what you come up with, but you did this. If you want to keep Rafe out of prison, you'll do the same for your brother." His calculating stare knocked the breath from my lungs, and his grip tightened further. "That sperm you talked about? Rafe's name will be the one attached to it."

My eyes widened, and I gaped at him, barely breathing. "How?"

“Wouldn’t be the first time, Alexandra. How do you think he was so easily convicted? Because of your word?” He thrust his face close. “Your word means nothing. I control you. I’ve always controlled you. Your bout with anorexia? That was my doing, and you fell for it like the naive little girl you are.”

“But I wasn’t eating...” Why did my tone come out so uncertain? “I was anorexic.”

“No, dear daughter. You’d lost your appetite after the abortion and trial. It wasn’t hard to fill your impressionable head with the idea that you had a problem.”

I blinked, feeling sick to my stomach. “Why would you do that?”

“For Zach, of course. While you were locked away in that treatment center, he finally yanked the stick from his ass and took the Chandler Vs. De Luca fight seriously. For a few weeks, he wasn’t thinking with his dick.”

Footsteps sounded outside the door to my room. A doctor stepped inside, and Dad let go of my hand. The coldness in his features instantly melted. I shouldn’t have been surprised at how quickly he shifted personas, but I was. The threatening, ice-hearted bastard I’d yearned to love me since I was six was absent, replaced by the caring and doting father I’d allowed myself to believe in all these years.

The father who’d known about Zach raping me all along. The father who’d somehow known about Rafe kidnapping me. He’d left me on that island to be tortured. I sank into the pillows and closed my eyes, too exhausted and disheartened to analyze the implications, though one thing I knew for certain.

Abbott De Luca hadn’t just fooled the world; he’d fooled his own daughter.

“Are you sure you wanna do this?” Jax stalled outside the entrance of the hospital.

“I’m not sure of anything, but I can’t not see her.” Gritting my teeth, I stared through narrowed eyes at the building. News of Alex’s resurrection from the dead hit the media that morning. I was hoping she’d give me answers, but mostly, I had to know she was okay.

“Have you stopped to consider this stunt might land us both in jail?”

“Yeah, I have. Look, you don’t need to go in there. I won’t blame you for taking off.” We’d cleared the air the other night, but things were far from settled between us. He still hadn’t moved back into the cabin, and the subject of Nikki seemed to have moved into taboo territory.

Jax slumped his shoulders, and his sigh ruffled his hair. “Dude, this is a bad idea.”

“Undoubtedly.” I stepped past him, and the sliding doors opened. Jax hurried after, his steps thumping quietly on the polished floors. I didn’t know what had happened to Alex, how or where she’d been found. According to the media, she was in stable condition, but that was all I’d found out.

After a quick stop at the information desk to ask which floor she was on, my heart pounded as Jax and I waited for the elevator. He shuffled his feet, looking like he wanted to be anywhere but here. The arrow lit up, and the doors opened with a ding. A group of people exited, each giving us weird glances, their eyes roving over our bare arms and the ink on our skin.

Never failed to get a reaction from some people.

“I’m telling you, this is a mistake,” Jax said once the heavy doors slid shut and we were the only two that remained.

“I don’t care. After everything I put her through, I owe her this much.”

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“Bullshit,” he muttered. “Whatyouputherthrough?” He leaned against the wall, arms crossed. “She screwed you over, man. She had it coming.”

“No one deserves that.”

“Her spoiled ass did.”

“A couple of days ago you cared enough about her ‘spoiled ass’ to look into her whereabouts.”

Jax sighed. “I did it for you. Not like it did any good though. She must’ve been hiding on the moon.”

We arrived on the fourth floor, and I stepped out before Jax could further needle me. His footfalls landed with more attitude than usual. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but something about the situation rubbed him the wrong way—besides the whole we-could-go-to-jail aspect. Something aboutAlexrubbed him the wrong way.

We turned the corner and headed down another hall. Up ahead, a circular reception desk took up the middle. A woman sat on the other side of the counter, eyeing me behind feminine pink glasses, when a bulky form stepped in the way.

“You’ve got balls to show up here.”

I met the hard-as-nails gaze of Abbott De Luca, a man I’d once admired. The calendar told me a lot of time had passed since then, but it seemed like only yesterday his opinion of me mattered. The man I remembered had given me his utmost respect.

Time and accusations sure had a way of changing things. Now he stared me down as if I were a cockroach that needed exterminated.

“I’ve always had balls. You know that.” He’d been impressed with the way I handled myself during fights. Determined with a ruthless edge, was what he used to say about me. Though Zach never admitted it, I knew my relationship with his father had bothered him.

“What are you doing here, Mason?”

“I came to see Alex.” I cleared my throat, wondering if she’d told him about the kidnapping. “Is she okay?”

His gaze darted left then right. “Let’s go into the lounge.” His attention glanced off Jax, and I introduced them as we moved into the vacant room. Abbott closed the door before turning to me with a glare capable of icing the bowels of Lucifer.

“You’ve got one minute to explain yourself before I have you removed by force.”

I held up my hands. “I’m not here to cause trouble. I don’t remember shit about the last eight years. Doctor calls it dissociative amnesia.”

“How convenient.”

“Just tell me, is she all right?”

“She’s fine. She’ll recover.”

His tone hit me in the chest hard. It was so...unfeeling. “I want to see her.” I had to see her. Something wasn’t right about all of this.

He lifted a brow. “Do you honestly think I’d let my daughter’s convicted rapist anywhere near her? You’re lucky I don’t call the cops.” He stepped forward, bringing his chest inches from mine. I held my ground, refusing to back down.

I opened my mouth, ready to defend myself, to say how I was innocent...except I didn’t know for sure. How could I know what I was guilty of if I couldn’t remember?

He poked a finger at my chest. “I want you out of Alexandra’s life.”

I tilted my head. “I’m not in her life.”

He thrust his face into mine. “I know you kidnapped her. I don’t give a shit if you remember or not, but if you come anywhere near her again, I’ll do far worse than have you arrested.”

Jax slumped into a chair. “Told you this was a bad idea.”

I returned Abbott’s hard stare. “She told you?”

“Please,” he scoffed. “She didn’t have to.”

“Why aren’t you pressing charges?”

“Alexandra has been through enough. The last thing she needs right now is another trial. She needs treatment. Because of you, she almost killed herself, just like her mother.”

His words punched me in the gut. I turned away, unable to return his disgusted gaze. Or maybe the disgust I saw in his eyes was a reflection of my own. Jax hadn’t given me details on what I’d put her through after we’d taken her, but for her to feel the need to end her life...

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“Please, just let me see her once. I need to know she’s okay.” I needed to fucking tell her how sorry I was. I faced him again, but my plea didn’t soften his stance.

“You want her to be ‘okay’? Then give her a clean break. She has some sort of misplaced infatuation with you because of the kidnapping. If I let you in to see her, make it clear whatever this thing is between the two of you is over. Can you do that?”

I nodded.

“She’s in room 427.”

I traded a glance with Jax before exiting the lounge, which was really just a space where families waited in agony to hear news on their loved ones. Other than a middle-aged couple speaking to the woman at the reception desk, the area was empty. She pushed her glasses up on her nose and eyed me. I gave her my I’m-a-nice-guy smile, but I wasn’t sure she bought it. Spanning the hall in seconds, I slowed as the numbers climbed. 423, 424, 425, 426...

Once I reached her closed door, my feet refused to move. Something told me to turn around and run. Never look back. Did I really want to open that door and look inside? I lifted a hand, curled my fingers around the handle, and prepared for the worst.

She’d scream at me, say I was the reason she was in the hospital. She probably hated me.

I pushed the heavy door open and was unprepared for the sight of the frail girl swallowed up by the bed. Her eyes were closed, long lashes fanning over pale cheeks.

Her curly hair lacked the vibrancy I remembered. Even the flash of her I'd seen in the cellar didn't compare to the brokenness of the girl...woman lying in that bed.

Moving slowly so I wouldn't startle her, I pushed the door shut until it made the slightest click, then I stepped to her side. Her chest rose and fell in perfect rhythm. My gaze landed on her delicate collarbone and an intense vision of choking her hit me. To my horror, my dick hardened, straining against the zipper of my jeans. I clenched my hands at my sides. The mental picture was so vivid it could have been straight from my fantasies.

I knew it wasn't. It was a memory. I retreated several steps, my heartbeat pulsing in my ears. Alex was laid up in the hospital, and my fucking cock wanted out to play. What the fuck was wrong with me?

"Rafe?"

My gaze shot to her wide, green eyes. God, those eyes...I remembered them well. Still full of mystery and shining with innate strength. I wanted to delve in and unearth all her secrets.

Her mouth parted slightly, as if she wanted to say something, or maybe, like me, she was having trouble drawing in a deep breath. She lifted an arm, covered in white bandages from wrist to just below her elbow. An identical bandage wrapped her other arm. My heart dropped to my stomach, landing somewhere in the dregs of my gut.

"What happened to you?" The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them, my feet across the floor and at her bedside before the second hand on the clock above the door could move two spots. I took her arm in my hands, my fingers sliding along the bandages.

And I forgot that I didn't remember, that I was supposed to tell her to move on with

her life and forget about me. Getting into the subject of my amnesia wasn't part of the clean break Abbott insisted on.

"Alex?" My gaze landed on her face. Hurt and something else pooled in her eyes. It could have been so many things, a plethora of emotion all vying for residence in that stare.

Which told me shit, except that my presence made her cry.

She grabbed my hand in hers and squeezed hard, as if she feared I'd slip away. A tear slipped down her colorless cheek. "I thought you were dead. When he told me you weren't, I wanted to believe it, but I was scared."

"What happened?" How the fuck had she ended up in the hospital with bandages that suggested she'd slit her wrists? Why was she not furious or terrified of me? "Where have you been?"

"Doesn't matter. Oh God...you're real, right? I'm not dreaming?"

Something about the desperation in her tone fucked with my head. I pulled my hand away and stepped back. "I just came to make sure you were okay."

She blinked, her expression blanking for a few seconds before confusion took hold of her features. "What are you saying?"

I dropped my gaze to my feet. "You're better off without me. What I did, what you did, whatever we did together, we need to move on."

"No," she said with a resolved shake of her head. "Before Zach showed up, things were finally settling between us. I wanted to be with you. I still want that, more than anything."

I almost asked what Zach had to do with any of this. Maybe he was responsible for shooting me. He'd always been protective of her. I bit my tongue, holding back those questions and more. I didn't want to say anything that could give away my memory loss. She'd been through enough. I didn't know much else, but I knew I wanted to stay out of jail, and I wanted her to be whole again. Somehow, I got the feeling those two things contradicted each other.

“My father knows you were involved in my disappearance.”

Inevitability was a bitch. I knew this was coming. I wanted to ask her if I'd raped her all those years ago, but I didn't want to burden her with my issues. She'd been through hell, and I'd put her there. I didn't know the details of how or why, but she was in that hospital bed because of me.

She'd tried to kill herself because of me.

“I'll turn myself in, if that's what you want.”

Her startled gaze punched me in the gut. “No! Why would you think I'd want that?”

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“After what I did to you, how can you not want me locked up?”

“You know how I feel about you. I want to be with you so badly, it hurts.” She reached a hand out and curled her tiny fingers around my larger ones. “I thought you were dead, then Zach said you weren’t. He said you couldn’t forgive me, and I fell for it, Rafe. He had me so far out of my mind that I believed you didn’t care enough to come after me.”

I didn’t know what she was talking about, so I treaded carefully. “Alex, what do you need me to do?”

“Forgive me. Take me away from here.” She started sobbing, and the sound clashed in my chest, two warring emotions. Part of me glorified in those tears, a feeling that disturbed me on such a deep level, I thought I might vomit. The other part wanted to wrestle away her demons and pound them to dust.

“Alex.” Her name escaped the vise strangling my throat. “I don’t wanna hurt you.”

She rolled to her side, her back facing me, and curled into a tight, protective ball. “You can’t forgive me. I understand.”

I clenched my teeth, wanting to ask what she wanted forgiveness for. I wanted to ask her about the night I was shot. Had she shot me? Had Zach? I needed those answers, but faced with the situation, with how much I’d fucked up when it came to her, the only thing left to do was say goodbye and end this. Let her move on and heal without the memory of me hanging over her shoulder.

Leaning over, I brushed my lips beneath her ear, inhaled a scent that sparked a memory my stubborn mind believed took place just a few months ago, when I'd held her as she cried over her mother's death. Even grief smelled good on her.

She twisted her head and pressed her mouth to mine. Breath stalled in my lungs, and the need to pin her to the bed nearly outweighed my sense of decency. Whatever my head didn't remember, being this close to her, our mouths moving together in hunger, the taste of her rioting through me, revived something primal inside my being.

A snarling beast that wanted to claim.

I tore my lips from hers. "I can't do this. I'm sorry." I stumbled across the room and wrenched the door open, and a heavy weight pressed on my chest, urging me to get the fuck out of there while I still could.

Her gut-splitting wails haunted me down the hall, long after I shut the door.

"How are you sleeping, Alexandra?"

I sat in one corner of the shrink's couch, feet curled under me. Feigning indifference, I shrugged. "Same." I'd left the hospital eleven days ago. The first few had been pure hell while my mind and body adjusted to going without a daily dose of ecstasy. I'd barely left my bed, despite feeling restless and unable to sleep much. Every part of me hurt, from the pieces of my fractured heart to the deep ache in my muscles.

"Still having nightmares?"

"Uh-huh."

Sandra crossed her legs. "Do you want to talk about them?"

I shook my head. I still had a difficult time addressing her by her first name, but she'd insisted. This was my second visit and I didn't want to be there, but my father made it clear I didn't have a choice. The hospital discharged me under his care, especially after I fed his bullshit to the police. My years of lying had worked in my favor; they'd bought the story.

Alexandra De Luca had suffered an episodic break, just like her mother. With shame, I remembered how I'd confessed to pushing my car into the river before hiding out at a cabin I'd heard my brother talk about. I'd even confessed to carving Zach's name into my stomach.

There were holes in my story, of course. Like how I'd arrived at the cabin, or how someone just happened to find me in time to call 9-1-1. They accused me of withholding information, of protecting an accomplice in my disappearance. But ultimately, they believed what my father wanted them to, and because of my warped version of the truth that didn't point the finger at anyone other than myself, Zach was safe from prosecution. So was Rafe.

So long as I cooperated and did everything my father asked, which included weekly appointments with the stranger sitting across from me. Anything to perpetuate the facade of a mental breakdown. At least I'd gotten to choose the shrink studying me, trying to read me with her analytical stare.

"How are you doing on the anti-depressants?"

I shrugged again. "Okay, I guess." I was starting to feel like me again, so that was probably a good thing, though being me wasn't much better than the version of myself who'd hit rock bottom while Zach held me captive.

"I'm here to help you," Sandra said, as if I needed to be reminded. "Part of you must want my help, or you wouldn't have sought treatment."

“I don’t want to be here.”

“Then why are you here?”

“It’s complicated. My father thought I should come.”

She wrote something down on the annoying notepad propped on her knee. A long black and white skirt flowed down her legs, the hem brushing her sandaled heels. From the decor in her office to the hip clothing she wore, she displayed a chic and competent style.

“Are you close to your father?”

A bitter laugh escaped. “Definitely not.”

“But you’d like to be.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Coming to see me on your father’s wish indicates a need to please him. It sounds like you’re seeking his attention and approval.” She leaned forward, chin propped in one hand, and an auburn curl fell across her forehead. “But what do you want, Alexandra?”

“I want to turn back time.”

“What would you change?”

“Everything.”

“How about we start with the one thing you’d want to change most?”

I eyed her, some part of me yearning to spill. It would be a relief to tell my story and have someone listen, believe me, maybe even reassure me it was okay to cry, okay to scream in the middle of the night after another nightmare in which I still lived trapped inside Zach’s madness. Most of all, I wanted her to tell me it was okay to forgive myself for nearly taking the easy way out, the way my mom had.

“I wish...”

Our eyes met, and in hers I found quiet patience. She waited, giving me room to forge ahead when I was ready. Rafe’s rejection edged to the forefront of my mind. The

ache in my chest became unbearable, only this time I couldn't push it aside.

I sucked in a breath then cleared my throat. "I wish I could undo the hurt I caused someone."

"If that person was here right now, willing to listen, what would you say?"

Cursing the tremble in my lips, I hid behind a fist and closed my eyes, taking deep breaths through my nose until the burn of tears subsided. "I'd beg his forgiveness."

"Have you asked him for it?"

I nodded.

"What did he say?"

"Which time?"

She raised a brow. "So you've asked more than once?"

I thought back to the island, but all I remembered was the raging need he'd ignited inside me. I remembered his hands on me, his mouth, his body sheltering mine. The breathless quality of his words as he'd slid inside my soul, where even now, he still resided. I couldn't bear to relive those fleeting minutes in the hospital when his kiss had breathed life into me.

"I don't remember." I didn't know this woman, and I wasn't about to tell her my most intimate moments.

Her pen scraped across the page, stroke after stroke, nicking my sanity. I imagined jumping from the couch and ripping that pen from her hands. Tearing the paper to

shreds.

“Alexandra—”

“It’s Alex.” I clenched my hands. “My dad is the only one who calls me that.”

The lines around her mouth softened. “Alex, why don’t you tell me about what happened at the cabin?”

I tugged at my sleeves, making sure they still covered my arms and the hideous destruction marring my skin. “I told you last week I wasn’t talking about that.”

She lifted a hand in my direction. “Yet here you are again.”

“I don’t have a choice.”

“You always have a choice. You’re not court ordered to be here. I believe I can help you, but I can’t do it alone. You have to put some effort in too.” She tilted her head. “Okay?”

I nodded, but my throat swelled, preventing me from saying anything.

“Why did you try to kill yourself?”

“You won’t believe me.”

“You won’t know until you try.”

I pulled a hand through my curls, yanking my fingers through the tangles. “I didn’t do it because I wanted to end my life. I just wanted him to stop.”

She sat up straighter. “Someone was hurting you?”

Chewing on my lip, I nodded. “I can’t say who.”

“Whatever you tell me is confidential, Alex.”

“I can’t say.”

Scribble, scribble, scribble.

“Do you have to write everything down?” Regretting the bite of my tone, I winced.

“This bothers you?” She lifted the notepad.

“Haven’t you switched to an iPad or something by now?” I crossed my arms. “You know, something password protected?”

Her tiny mouth curved up. “I find the simple task of writing soothing. Maybe you should try it. Jotting down your thoughts and feelings can be very therapeutic.”

I thought of the letters I'd written to Rafe while he was in prison, the ones Dad found after I disappeared. Those words, written with the intent that they never be read, had given him ammunition. He'd discovered how Rafe was my biggest weakness. It was a reminder that nothing was private. Anything and everything could be used against you. My fingers brushed the purse beside me, where the letters were now safely tucked inside.

I pointed at the notepad. "I don't want you writing down the stuff I say. Can't we just talk?"

"Sure." She set the pad and pen aside. "You don't have to tell me anything you're not comfortable disclosing. And you don't have to give names either."

I let out a breath and stood. Strolling to the window, left partially open to allow a warm breeze in, I tried to ignore the tingles going down my spine, but her scrutiny blasted my back like a physical blow. Only once I stopped at the window, mindlessly gazing at the tree-lined street below, did I speak.

"He did things to me, bad, shameful things, and part of me liked it." I folded my arms around myself, cold despite the nice weather. "He made me do things that ruined another man's life." I shook my head as tears pooled in my eyes. "No, that's not entirely true. He made me, but I could have stopped it. I was too weak."

"You don't strike me as being weak."

"I was a coward. Label it however you want. When I think about saying the words out loud, my throat tightens"—I swallowed hard—"and I can't say shit. My silence enabled him for years."

"Speaking out and standing up for yourself is hard. It's brave. Is he still hurting you, Alex?"

“No.” The single word came out strangled. I hadn’t seen or heard from Zach since the night he carved his name into my stomach. Dad assured me he was far away receiving treatment for his alcoholism. Just because he wasn’t physically hurting me any longer didn’t mean my wounds had stopped bleeding. They still existed, as tangible as the wind—felt but not seen.

“I think you’re a survivor,” she said. “Your self-worth has taken a hit, but I believe you have what it takes to heal. The first step is asking for help, and you’ve done that. You’re here.”

I turned around, her words causing a spark of empowerment inside me. “You think so?”

“Most definitely.” She shifted, crossing her legs on the other side. “You have a right to feel safe in your own skin. If the abuse starts again—”

“It won’t.” Not because Zach would never come back, not because my father would keep him away. I was done. Done being his silent victim. Done being a fucking coward. Now that the fog was clearing from my head, I had a lot to think about.

My father’s actions.

Zach’s actions.

My actions.

“But if it does, you can tell me, okay?”

“Okay.”

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Her eyes veered to the clock on the wall, a circular piece of art crafted with gold numbers. “We’re out of time for now,” she said, rising to stand, “but I’d like to see you again next week. I hope you’ll come, and not because your father wants you to.”

“I’ll think about it.” I shuffled my feet, itching to escape the confines of this room and the eerie way she had of pulling information from me, of making me look at myself differently. I followed her to the door. She pulled it open but hovered.

“This other man you talked about? Consider giving him another chance to forgive you. Maybe then you can forgive yourself.”

“I’m so glad you called.”

I pushed the lettuce around on my plate until I found another cherry tomato. “It’s been ages,” I said. After my appointment with my therapist, I hadn’t been ready to go home to my father, so I’d called Evelyn. The last time I remembered seeing her was...

I couldn’t remember the last time. Not in specific detail, anyway. We were never really close. Not like friends should be, but we’d spent occasional afternoons together having coffee or lunch. She’d talk my ear off about her latest boyfriends, and I’d quietly listen. That was the interesting thing about people who liked to talk a lot—they never expected me to contribute much because they were too busy going on about their own lives.

Their men.

Their new jobs.

Their gossip.

Their life-altering moments.

They, they, they. Most people would probably get tired of it, and Evelyn was especially self-focused. But I wouldn't call her selfish. Out of the few friends I'd managed to keep over the years, she was the first one willing to listen whenever I did get the inkling to unload something.

I had that inkling now, but the words lodged in my throat and refused to be spoken, so I continued to sit in silence and let her catch me up on her life.

She was going on about her latest boyfriend's prowess in bed, in particular, the size of his cock and some super-powered move he did with it, when she paused mid-sentence and gave me a funny look. "Are you going to chase that tomato around your plate all day, or are you going to eat it?"

I stabbed it with a fork, and a piece of lettuce fell victim to its spilled guts. Guttled. That's how I felt. Unloading on Sandra had been a dangerous thing. An addictive thing, because I wanted to do it again, only I didn't want to stick to vague answers this time. I wanted to tell someone all the shit life had thrown at me.

Besides Rafe, Evelyn was the closest thing I had to a real friend. Weren't friends supposed to tell each other their secrets? I wouldn't know. My secret had been too huge, too horrific, to share with anyone for years.

Until Rafe had tortured it out of me.

"Okay, something's on your mind. It was weird enough that you called out of the

blue, but you're never this quiet, and that's saying a lot." She sipped her iced tea and settled back in the chair. "I heard about what happened in the papers. I wanted to call you. Truth is, I didn't know what to say. We'd drifted apart, and I just..."

"It's okay," I whispered.

"No," she said, her mouth set in a firm line as she shook her head. "It's not okay. My friend had a mental breakdown of epic proportions and I couldn't even bring myself to pick up the goddamn phone. I'm sorry, Alex. I'm here now."

"I didn't have a mental breakdown."

Her brows crinkled in confusion. "What happened then? Everyone thought you were dead."

A sheen of sweat broke out on my skin, and I felt a trickle sliding down my temple. I opened my mouth, commanded my tongue to work right and spill the words my brother kidnapped and raped me, but I couldn't. I had many reasons to keep it bottled inside, mainly, the threat my father held over my head. Over Rafe's head.

I'd been protecting him in some way or another for a nearly a decade, but he wanted nothing to do with me. Hurt infiltrated my chest and choked the life from my heart. How could he walk away so easily after what we'd shared? After what he'd done? Wasn't he afraid I'd turn him in?

Don't be stupid. He knows he has you wrapped.

"Alex?"

I jumped, only then noticing the mangled napkin in my hands. I'd managed to shred it while wrestling with my thoughts. Evelyn still waited. Choosing to take the familiar

coward's way out, I was about to make up a story when my cell beeped.

"I should get this. I'll be right back." I scooted back from the table with a sigh of relief. My phone continued to chirp as I walked through the busy restaurant, out the front doors, and into the summer heat. The instant I answered the call and heard his breathing, I couldn't move.

"Don't hang up."

Hang up? I could barely function. My gaze darted around, studying the bystanders and taking a modicum of comfort in their presence. I tightened my fingers around the phone, willed my hand to pull it away from my ear and hit the end button, but somewhere between thought and action, the signal in my brain got its wires crossed.

"I miss you," he said, making my fingers freeze. "And I'm so, so sorry." His voice cracked on the last word. He sniffled, and I was pretty certain the bastard was crying.

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“Dad said you’d leave me alone.” I cleared my throat and infused my tone with a dauntless edge I didn’t feel. “You can’t hurt me anymore. Too many people are watching.”

“Especially the guy to your right. The one in the Beaver’s hat and dark sunglasses? He’s practically got his tongue hanging out.”

Standing in ninety-degree weather, I shivered as if snow blanketed the ground. I’d meant the public in general, even the police, since they suspected I’d left out parts of the story. Slowly, I turned and found a man matching Zach’s description watching me. He looked away the instant he realized I’d caught him staring. But he wasn’t the real threat.

The real threat lingered somewhere nearby, preying on my fear. I scoured both sides of the street but found nothing. Just normal people going about their business. Numerous shops, cafes, and businesses lined the row, and Zach could be in any one of them right now, ogling me with the eyes of a wolf.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said. “But I’m not here to hurt you. I just had to see you. I had to know you were okay.”

“Why?” I fisted my left hand. “You didn’t care if I was ‘okay’ when you beat me, when you raped me, when you sliced me up with your fucking knife.”

“I fucked up, Lex. I know I went too far.”

“You went too far ten years ago. What you did in that cabin was a hundred levels past

deranged.”

I heard him suck in a breath. “It wasn’t always bad between us. After Rafe went away, you wanted me.”

“I never wanted that. Get that through your head.” My gaze veered left and right, cheeks flaming at having this conversation in public, but there was no way in hell I’d do this in an isolated area. “I despise myself for what we did, for what I did to him. I couldn’t even control my own damn body, Zach.”

“Please, Lex. I’m dying without you. It’ll be different this time. Dad’s making sure I’m getting treatment. I haven’t had a drink since that night. Please—”

“Stop!” I began pacing, though I never stopped searching my surroundings. A group of college-aged kids came out of the restaurant and bumped into me. Instead of becoming irritated, I welcomed their proximity.

Stupid, Alex. Go back inside and tell Evelyn. Get help.

“You can’t just say ‘I’m sorry’ after everything. It doesn’t work like that.” I should know—sorry hadn’t worked on Rafe.

“I know.” He sighed. “But I love you. I want you back. Can we just sit down somewhere and talk?”

“Even if I didn’t think of you like my brother”—I lowered my voice—“I could never be with someone who did what you did.” The hypocrisy of my words pinged through my head. Rafe had done acts deemed unforgivable too, but I didn’t feel the same way toward him. My heart wanted what it wanted, despite logic or reason, despite right or wrong. I supposed in that aspect, I could relate to Zach.

My chest tightened, squeezing the air from my lungs. I also understood why Rafe couldn't forgive me.

"I'll do anything," he said, his plea high-pitched and awash with regret. "Please, forgive me. You're the only thing in this world I care about."

Unable to speak, I ended the call with a press of a button then walked inside the restaurant, passing by people that blurred around me. They didn't seem real. I didn't seem real.

"Everything okay?" Evelyn asked.

I shook my head. "My dad..." I cleared the fear constricting my throat. "My dad needs me home. He's got the flu or something." I let out an awkward laugh. "He's a big baby." For perfecting the art of lying, I sure sucked at it now.

She tilted her head. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah." I forced my lips into a smile. "Just family stuff. Can I get a rain check?"

"Sure, but I'm holding you to it." She pulled me into a hug. "You can call me anytime."

"I know."

We parted ways out front, and as soon as she got in her SUV and pulled away, I scurried back inside the restaurant and reclaimed my seat at the table, body shaking as I deliberated on what to do. I was scared to walk to my own car. I gazed out the window at the new Volvo parked by the curb on the side of the restaurant. Dad bought it last week to replace the one destroyed by the river, once I agreed to the appointments with the shrink.

Someone slid into the chair Evelyn had vacated, making me jump. Zach's hazel eyes stared back.

"Don't freak out and make a scene," he said. "I just want to talk to you." He must have taken my stunned silence as permission to continue. And to touch me. His hand crept across the table and clamped around mine, like a snake constricting the life from my fingers. "I never meant for things to go so far."

I opened my mouth but nothing came out. A voice screeched in my head, demanding that I do something. Knock my barely touched salad on the floor, tip over a glass of water. Shout for help. For the love of God, at least remove my hand from his grip.

Instead, I sat like a statute, barely breathing.

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He leaned forward, closing some of the distance between us, and lowered his voice. "I've never been so scared as when I saw what you'd done. Lex..." He let out a breath. "I know you think of me as your brother and that's why you fight this so much. But your body doesn't lie. I know there's room in your heart for me." He lifted his head, gaze searching mine. "I hate that you love him, but I can accept it because I know you love me too. Please come back to me. I won't force you. I won't do anything you don't want me to. I just need you in my life. Please, Lex. Please."

I jerked my hand from his and edged away. "I almost killed myself over you."

"Fuck, Lex..." He dropped his face into his hands.

Clutching my purse, I shot a glance through the window, where the sun beat down on my car, and wished I'd parked out front. I calculated how long it would take to cover the distance if I ran, but Zach looked up.

"I know I can't take it back, but you need to come with me. Please."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"I don't want you around him," he said.

"Leave Rafe out of it!" I stood. "He wants nothing to do with me, so you have no reason to go off the deep end again over him."

Zach also rose, his body rigid, mouth tight in a straight line. "I wasn't talking about Rafe. I'm talking about Dad. Get the fuck out of that house, Lex. He's the last person

you should trust.”

“If you’re talking about his threat to have me committed, I already know about it.” He’d made that abundantly clear when I’d fought him about seeing the therapist.

Zach grabbed my bicep. “I’m talking about something much worse. You need to come with me.” He began yanking on my arm.

“Help!” I screamed, gaze zigzagging around the restaurant before landing on a beefy guy who looked like he could take my brother. He rose, expression startled, and Zach let go of my arm. I backed away as the guy neared. Zach came after me again until my rescuer detained him.

I whirled, the front door appearing so far away. Someone shouted, and I heard a ruckus indicating a fight had begun. People stood, mouths gaping as I flew past. I didn’t remember leaving the restaurant, didn’t remember rounding the building and getting into my car, or thrusting the key into the ignition. I stomped on the gas and shot into traffic.

I spent thirty mindless minutes driving east along the Columbia River. Every couple of miles, I gazed into my rearview, but as far as I could tell, Zach’s car wasn’t part of the mid-day traffic. I pulled off at a rest stop, hands shaking too much to drive further, and tried three times to punch in the correct code on my cell. Finally, I unlocked my phone and dialed Dad’s number.

As soon as he answered, all the adrenaline pumping through me crashed and burned, and I started crying, my whole body trembling.

“Dad! Zach was there.” A black Beemer pulled into the spot next to me, and I almost jumped out of my skin, fearing it was my brother. But a young redhead exited the vehicle, pushing huge sunglasses on top of her head as she walked to the restrooms,

hips swaying. “Dad...I’m really scared right now.” I held my breath, waiting for him to say something.

Please, for once, let him give a shit about me.

“What happened?” he finally asked.

“After my appointment, I met up with Evelyn. We were having lunch when he called—”

“Alexandra,” he interrupted. “I’ll talk to your brother. It was just a phone call, but he knows better. I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“No, he was there. He caused a scene after Evelyn left. He won’t stop. Please, Dad, I need to tell the truth about what happened. It’s eating me up—”

“Come home and we’ll talk about it.”

I shook my head, though I knew he couldn’t see me. My father’s gigantic estate was the last place I’d feel safe. I could only think of one place I equated with safety, which was really ironic, considering I’d have to cross a river to get to it. My subconscious knew exactly what it was doing—I’d already driven halfway to Dante’s Pass.

“Alexandra!” His voice rose, irritation more than apparent in the bite of his tone. Abbott De Luca wasn’t someone used to being ignored. “You need to come home now.”

“Okay,” I said, the word coming out a whisper. “I’ll be there soon.” I hung up before he figured out I was lying. I made one more phone call to arrange for a boat rental, then drove onto the highway again. By the time my father realized I wasn’t coming

home, I'd already be on Rafe's island. Of course, that depended on my ability to go near the river and set foot in a boat without having a full-blown panic attack.

My heart fluttered the whole way to Dante's Pass and turned into an unbearable pounding as I braked in the parking lot next to the boat ramp. I shut off the ignition, and my anxiety thundered in my ears for several minutes. I kept my head straight, focusing on the restroom and the woman that came out holding a little girl's hand. Sweat coated my palms, and my grip slipped from the steering wheel. To my left, I knew what waited for me.

How was I supposed to get into a boat when I couldn't even bring myself to look at the river?

Sucking in a noisy breath, I swiveled my head before I chickened out. It was only water, and I wouldn't even be alone, as the man I'd called on the way to take me to the island waited on the dock. Normally, his company only rented out boats, but I'd offered to pay extra if he'd take me.

If only I could get out of the stupid car and walk to the dock.

Quit being such a pussy.

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The need to get to Rafe was more powerful than my phobia. I pulled on the handle then pushed open the door. One shaky leg lifted into the breeze. Another maneuver, a scoot of my butt, and both feet touched solid ground. I armed the alarm and crept down the slope toward the dock next to the ramp.

Images of suffocating, of dense blackness, assaulted me with each step, making me cringe, and I chanted stop it, stop it, stop it to wipe the stubborn thoughts from my mind, but they stuck to my brain with the strength of crazy glue. The only way to push past the terror was to chant until I heard nothing else. If I appeared on the verge of a total meltdown, the guy wouldn't take me to Rafe.

I stepped onto the dock, keeping my eyes trained on the man waiting for me, and purposefully ignored the gentle lapping of water on either side. It wasn't going to jump out and drown me.

Stop it, stop it, stop it.

"You the one wanting a lift to Mason Island?"

Unable to find my voice just yet, I nodded.

He frowned. "You sure that's wise? You know the guy who lives on that island is a sex offender, right?"

"I know what everyone thinks he is. They're wrong."

He gave me a perplexed look. "He know you're coming?"

“Yes.” Not a chance in hell. I could barely believe I was about to willingly get into a boat. No one else would believe it.

“You sure?”

“Y-yes. He’s expecting me.” I clasped my hands together to hide the tremors in them. “I haven’t been in a boat in a while. I’m just nervous.”

“Nothing to it.” He held out his hand and helped me inside. As soon as the boat wobbled under my weight, I slid my fingers under my sleeve and dug my nails in so hard, I came away with skin underneath them.

He narrowed his eyes. “I’m thinking you should rethink this, lady.”

With a quick shake of my head, I plopped into one of the four seats. “I’m fine. Can we please go?” I fastened my gaze on the vinyl flooring—the only thing separating me from the murky depths of nothingness—and failed to see his expression.

Stop it, stop it, stop it...

“Do you know how to swim?”

I gave a quick nod, still refusing to look at him, and heard him sigh. He placed a life jacket in the seat next to mine before starting the motor, and we were off. I squeezed my eyes shut and clung to the armrests. Wind whipped my hair around, and my stomach lurched as the boat sped over choppy waters.

When he pulled alongside the dock on Rafe’s island, my entire body quaked, and I was certain I wouldn’t be able to find my voice. I stood on wobbly legs, thinking how that had been the longest two minutes of my life, and handed him the cash I owed him with shaking fingers.

“Th-thanks.”

He stood from the driver’s seat, grabbing my arm to steady me, and helped me find solid footing on the dock. “Call if you need me.” His tone suggested more than just a ride back. I looked into his eyes and found concern in them. God, these people really believed Rafe was a monster, and it was all my fault. I had to make this right.

“I’m okay. Rafe Mason isn’t the man you think he is.”

“If you say so, lady. I’m friends with the sheriff. Call if you need anything.”

I nodded but didn’t answer. The motor fired up, and I heard him pull away. My feet wouldn’t move at first. As I stood on the dock, memories assaulted me. The night I’d fallen in, the night Rafe put me into a boat and sent me off, thinking his actions would protect me.

But he’d never come after me. Why? I thought of his rejection in the hospital and how odd that whole visit was. Now that my head was clearing, things were starting to prick at my mind. Questions arose.

The whole time I’d been under my father’s thumb, recuperating from the kidnapping and my own attempt to end it, everything in my world had scrambled like a Rubik’s Cube. Nothing had lined up the way it should.

Coming back to this island felt like coming home.

I started on the trail and hiked up the slight incline past a massive willow. The top of his A-frame cabin came into view, and I took a moment to really see it for the first time. Painted a dark brown-red with a huge front porch, trees towered around it, as if standing sentinel. I thought back to the night we’d left through the front door, but I couldn’t recall leaving the cabin. I’d been too preoccupied with fear, too worried

about Rafe and what he'd do. Too paralyzed by the thought of going near the water.

As I climbed the steps, I withdrew the letters from my purse. Taking a deep breath, I halted at his door, and I gave myself a moment to hope.

Hope that he still wanted me.

Hope that he'd love me even.

Hope that he'd help me end this, once and for all.

Zach was still out there, and everyone around me was nuts. Rafe had done horrible things to me, but he was the crazy I knew, the crazy I loved, the crazy I trusted with my heart and my life.

Looking at him was like looking into a mirror. We'd done so much to hurt each other, but we were the only ones who could fix each other. I believed that with every bone in my body. It'd just taken me a while to see beyond my father's manipulations, his threats, and I refused to be a puppet any longer. Not unless it was the man on the other side of the door pulling the strings.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I lifted a fist and knocked.

"You can tell my brother to shove it. Shit, Jax, I don't even remember working at the winery. Seems pointless to go back now." I paced in the kitchen, cell to my ear, and not-so-patiently listened while he tried to convince me that Adam was right. Hiding out alone on the island wasn't going to fix anything. I needed to move on with my life, memory or not. Move on from Alex.

So why wasn't I? Even I didn't know why I was stuck in purgatory, neither remembering the past nor moving toward the future. I was frozen in this lonely existence where Alex's wails haunted my dreams each night. Other stuff haunted me too. Men and their brutal hands taking every last thread of power from me. I shook the images from my head, as I always did when those nightmares sparked. They

pierced me to my bones every time, but I took them as a sign that on some subconscious level, I craved the control I'd lost. Made sense, considering my life had become a huge clusterfuck.

"If you're not ready to talk to Adam," Jax said, "at least come meet up with me tonight. You've been cooped up on that island too long. We'll scope out a date for you."

I let out a bitter laugh. "Dating is the furthest thing from my mind, but I appreciate the thought." Tiring of pacing, I returned to the living room and lowered onto the couch with my laptop. Keeping tabs on the local fighting scene had become an obsession. I ached to step into the cage again, to experience the thrilling high that only came from choking out an opponent. But no legitimate organization would take on a guy convicted of raping a 15-year-old girl.

"Forget about women then," Jax said. "Just come meet me tonight. Say about nine?"

"I'll think about it." I scrolled through the latest fights and their outcomes. Some of the fighters I remembered, but a lot of the contenders were new names making a splash on the scene. "So how's Nikki?"

"Nikki is..." His sigh filtered over the line. "I'm trying to get her to postpone this fucking wedding."

"You're in over your head," I said, closing the laptop.

"You're one to talk."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Alex De Luca. She's the reason you're holed up in isolation on that damn piece of

land.”

I hated how he knew me so well. “I shouldn’t have left her the way I did, Jax. She was a mess—”

“Let it go,” he said, tone firm. “You don’t even remember her.”

“Oh, I remember her.”

“I’m not talking about the girl. I’m talking about the woman. You lose your fucking memory, but somehow, you’re still just as obsessed as ever.”

I had no ground to argue on, so I didn’t even try. A knock sounded, and I welcomed the distraction of an unexpected visitor. “Someone’s here.” I strode to the door, pulled it open, and found Alex standing on the other side, suddenly just there, as if my guilt had summoned her. “I’ll have to call you back,” I told Jax before hanging up on him. I pocketed my cell then stared at her with my mouth hanging open.

Fucking A. I was at a loss for words.

“I know you don’t want to see me,” she said, her gaze lowering to her sneakers. She expelled a breath that ruffled her hair before bringing her eyes to mine. Beautiful eyes full of pain and confusion and...something I couldn’t put a name to but whatever it was it pulled at me in a way I couldn’t resist. God, she was gorgeous. I’d noticed the differences in her at the hospital, despite her frail state, but seeing her on my doorstep, the sun shining on the crown of her curls, how her teenage body had morphed into that of a woman’s...I had to take a deep breath to keep from reaching out and touching her.

My gaze darted behind her to the trees where thick branches and the incline of the terrain hid the water. “You crossed the river?”

She bit her lip and nodded. “I have nowhere else to go, Rafe. No one else to trust.”

I was speechless. Birds chirped, a hawk squawked overhead, and the howl of a train roared in the distance. But me? I was fucking speechless.

“Say something, please.” She gripped her arm, fingers curling into the long sleeve of a green shirt. The weather was too warm to cover up so much skin, but I knew why she did it. And she looked fucking scared.

Of me? But that didn’t quite add up. What would cause her to set foot on this island, facing her worst fear and the man who’d kidnapped and raped her?

“After what I put you through,” I said, keeping my tone gentle so I wouldn’t run her off, “I don’t deserve your trust.”

She held out a stack of envelopes. “I wrote these while you were in prison. I want you to read them, but...” She backed away, her gaze roaming in every direction but mine. “I want you to read them alone. I’ll wait out here.”

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I stepped onto the porch and took the letters, and our fingers brushed together. A shiver went through me as I thought of the answers I might find inside the envelopes, but there was no way in hell I'd leave her out here alone when she seemed ready to jump out of her skin.

"I'm not leaving you out here by yourself. You can go inside and wait. I'll read them on the porch."

She still wouldn't meet my gaze. "Is Jax home?" she asked.

"No. It's just me." Did being alone with me make her feel more threatened? "I'm not going to hurt you, Alex."

She looked up, her expression so openly startled, I felt it to the bottoms of my feet. "I already know that." Without another word, she moved past, her shoulder grazing my arm, and entered the cabin. The screen door swung shut behind her. I didn't move at first, still too stunned and barely grasping the fact that Alex had really shown up at my door.

Finally lowering to the first step, I eyed the bundle of envelopes. The one at the top of the pile had a date on it—just a few months after I'd gone to prison. Removing the rubber band that held them together, I noted how they were all dated. I opened the first one and pulled out a sheet of paper.

Rafe,

It's been three months, four days, thirteen hours, and some odd minutes since I felt

your eyes on me in the courtroom. I'm a horrible person for so many reasons. I took your freedom, and I'm not dumb. I know I wrecked your career too.

But I can't come forward about your innocence. I've tried. You don't know how many times I've fingered my cell, even looked up the number for the detective who handled my case. I went to my father's car once, keys in hand, and got behind the wheel. I'm not even old enough to drive by myself yet, but I wanted to go to the police and tell them...things.

You're still in that place, so obviously, I didn't. It's taken me this long just to put pen to paper and write you a letter I have no intention of sending. If I'm smart, I'll destroy this after I'm done.

But I won't.

I need someone to talk to, and you're the only person I want to talk to. Besides, the thought of ripping this up is too painful, as if these words were never real. As if my feelings for you don't exist. I'm selfish like that. Keeping my mouth shut is something I have to do, for your sake, for mine. But I need to lean on you right now. I still remember the day of my mother's funeral. It was the first and only time you put your arms around me. You're the only person who's ever told me the words I always needed to hear:

Everything will be okay.

I love you even more for that. And God, I miss you. Your laughter made the pain in my life a little more bearable. Your presence was the only thing that had the power to make me smile, and I've always loved the jittery feelings you stirred in my stomach. I have a few friends at school, no one that close. Definitely no one I can confide in, but sometimes they talk to me. They complain about those flutters, say they lose their tongue and can't talk to guys.

It's never been that way with you. That jittery feeling always made me feel alive and connected to you. And we talked all the time, about your dreams of making it to the UFC, about your family. About mine. I envy the closeness you have with your dad. And I know you don't get along with your brother, but at least he isn't—

Never mind. Family is a sore subject for me. I used to pretend that you were there for me and not my brother, that you needed to be around me as much as I needed to be near you. I know I'm lying to myself with that one. I'm just a kid. No one important. Someone who isn't worthy of you. I never was, and now, after what I've done, I never will be.

I don't have the courage to put into words why I did what I did. Maybe someday I will. Maybe someday I'll pour it all out into a letter and actually send it. Actually do the right thing. But I can't, because I'm just as trapped as you are.

I need you to know this, Rafe. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, and it's taken over my heart and each beat hurts, especially because I know you'll never forgive me.

But please try.

Yours always,

Alex

Intense relief settled in, and I wiped the sweat from my brow. I hadn't raped her all those years ago. Her own words proved it. I tore into the stack of her secrets like a starved man, needing more. Most of them were similar to the first, yet the tone shifted with each envelope as time moved forward. A prominent note of desperation and self-hate tainted the ink of her words. Then I came across a letter that branded my insides like a hot iron.

Rafe,

I don't know what to do! I'm so scared. He's out of control. He put my science partner in the hospital today, all because the guy asked me out on a date. I wish you were here. I know it's irrational to wish that. I'm the reason you are where you are. It's all my fault. My existence has caused so much pain for others.

You're the only one I can talk to you about any of this, yet I'm still not being honest. I'm still holding stuff back. I'm afraid if I write it out, something really bad will happen. I know I'm being paranoid. Spelling out the words won't bring the ceiling down, yet I can't make myself do it.

I wish I were stronger. My mom was strong. I see that now. She let go of this painful Earth because she felt she had no other choice. I hate that she left me, but I understand it now.

I wish I were as brave.

Yours always,

Alex

My hands shook as I pulled out another folded piece of paper. Her words became darker the more I read, and I was close to going inside the cabin and forcing her tell me what she hadn't said in the letters, but I couldn't tear myself away.

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Rafe,

I got drunk tonight. Graduation is supposed to be cause for celebration, so I partook in the craziness. I shouldn't have because I was off my game when I came home. He was waiting for me in the shadows, enraged because he thought I'd fucked someone else.

He just left my room, and now...now I'm disgusted with myself and stone cold sober. I don't fight him anymore. Truth is, I stopped fighting him after they took you away. I fucking hate myself, Rafe. Probably more than you hate me.

He made me come tonight. It's happened a few times before, but tonight was different. Tonight, he hit me, pinched my nipples so hard he had to smother my cries with a pillow. They weren't cries of pain, and that's why I'm so sick right now.

What is wrong with me?

Crazy thing is, as I write this and remember, I'm still turned on. But it's you I'm thinking of and not him. After I'm done writing this, I'm going to climb into bed and touch myself. I'll regret thinking of you in the morning because it's not fair to gain pleasure when you're where you are.

But I can't help myself right now. I need to wash away his touch and replace it with something else. When my fingers are sliding between my thighs, I'll pretend they're yours, pretend your tongue is down there too. He hasn't done that yet. I'm probably the only seventeen-year-old girl who hasn't had her pussy eaten out.

Tonight, in my heart, in my dreams, it'll be you.

Yours always,

Alex

Ah, holy hell. I dropped my head into my hand, her letter still clutched in the other. Reading between the lines filled me with rage. Someone had raped her for years, yet she hadn't named him. The logical conclusion, since she'd mention he'd been waiting for her when she came home, was that it was someone in her household, or someone who spent a lot time there. An associate of her father's? A random person hired on as help?

A boyfriend?

I wanted to hunt down whoever it was and castrate the fucker.

Her next letter called to me, and I couldn't resist the allure of her words. Words meant for me. Words writtentome. The stack had thinned considerably, yet there was so much left untold.

Rafe,

Oh. My. God. I'm so sorry. I'm so close to destroying my last letter, but I promised myself I wouldn't. But that was TMI.

Yours always,

Alex

I shook my head, mouth turning up slightly, and like an addict, I pulled out another,

and another. Her need to spill strengthened with each word, each tear that splotched the pages as she poured her heart out. I hurt for her. I hurt for me too, because the way she wrote it, she'd sent me to hell. A hell she hadn't fully grasped, though she'd sensed it. As I continued to read, a lump formed in my throat.

My nightmares came back to haunt me again, and I did what I hadn't been able to do before. I accepted them as memories. I'd been violated in prison. Something in that place made me snap, made me embrace the dark side of myself I'd fought for so long. I'd become the type of man who hadn't settled for fantasies. In Alex, I'd found the perfect excuse to justify an act that was and always would be unforgivable.

I carefully unfolded her last letter, hoping she'd finally tell me what I needed to know.

Rafe,

Today I graduated college. I should be over the moon, right? I'm not. I stopped to look back at my life these past seven years and that's when it truly hit me. I've left you to rot in that place all this time.

One more year, and you'll be out.

But what will I say to you? I want to see you so badly I ache with it. The need is a beast inside me, tearing my chest open and spilling my heart onto the floor. My crush has turned into a full-fledged obsession.

Dad wants me to take over the position of managing accountant for the business. I've got the degree for it, but the MMA world is the last place I want to be. That's where HE is. I'm shaking as I write this because I want so badly to write his name, but I just can't.

At the very least, you deserve to know why I sent you to prison, and I need to get it out of me once and for all because I need to move on. Dad set me up with a business partner. He's much older, but he's nice. Best of all, he's not...him.

Maybe I'm clinging to the first opportunity to break free, though it feels like I'm trading one prison for another. I don't love this guy. I barely know him, but I can tell he's serious about me. He's already asked me to go with him to Paris for Christmas.

I'm stalling. I know I'm stalling. I've written you so many letters, but I've never explained. So here goes, from the beginning.

It started right after I met you. At first, I fought him. Over time, it was easier to give in. Then...I became a whore. I don't fight him anymore because he gets me off. It's sick and disgraceful. I know this. I've tried to get him to leave me alone, have even done some extreme things to break free for a while, but he always pulls me back.

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When I was fifteen, he got me pregnant. I got an abortion, and when Dad found out, he went through the roof. I don't know why he told Dad you raped me...no, that's not true. He did it because he was jealous of you. He's always been jealous of you.

You're probably wondering why I went along with the lie. I ask myself the same thing all the time. But I've seen his rage, seen firsthand what he's capable of, and he threatened to kill you if I didn't back him up. Hindsight's 20/20, they say. I know now that I should have stood up to him. You're a big boy and could've taken care of yourself. At the time, though, the threat choked me.

Now it's too late. You'll be out in a year...less, actually. I need to let you go. I need you to get past this and be happy. I want your forgiveness more than you could know, but that's an impossible dream. I wouldn't forgive me. I can't forgive myself.

Rafe, this is the last time I'll write, and you'll be safe because you'll never read these letters. You'll live your life hating me, and I'll have to find a way to live with that. If I could say one thing to you right now, it would be how sorry I am. He did it because I love you.

Yours always,

Alex

I dropped the page, watched it flutter to the ground, and stared at it for what seemed like forever. She waited inside, and I found it ironic that she was scared to face me. That she wanted my forgiveness. I'd kidnapped and done unforgivable acts—things I couldn't even recall—to a victim of rape. Maybe I'd feel differently if I remembered

the last eight years, but I didn't.

So that begged the question...what the fuck was I supposed to say to her?

Gathering her letters, I rose to my feet and pulled the screen door open. She'd left the front door cracked. Slowly, I stepped inside and the sound of running water brought me into the kitchen where I found her loading my fucking dishwasher like it was an everyday chore she did.

She must have sensed my presence because she shut off the faucet, though she didn't move or turn around. "You read them?"

"Every word." I wanted to ask her so many things. Why didn't she send the letters? Why was she giving them to me now? Most of all, I wanted to know the name of the scumbag who'd raped her. I had my suspicions, but I couldn't bring myself to believe it yet. I placed the envelopes on the table and fisted my hands. With all the pent-up rage rushing through my veins, I was surprised at how level my words came out. "Why are you doing my dishes?"

She shrugged. "To stay busy."

"Can you turn around and talk to me?"

"I'm scared, Rafe."

"I already told you"—willing the anger to leave my voice and body, I unfurled my fists and relaxed my stance—"I'm not gonna hurt you."

"That's not what I meant." She propped against the counter, fingers clutching the edge. "I'm scared of what you're thinking. We've been through so much together, but letting you read those letters was like giving you free access to my journal."

“Why’d you do it then?”

She dropped her head. “I let everyone around me dictate my life. I’ve basically been a doormat. What I did, sending you away like that when you hadn’t even touched me...if I could change one thing, it would be that.” She inhaled then let the breath out in a whoosh. “I want to make this right,” she said, voice fracturing, “but I don’t know if I can do it alone.”

“You’re not alone. I’m here, and I won’t let anyone hurt you like that again.” It felt like a dick thing to say, considering how the words came from a hypocrite’s mouth, but it was the truth. I wanted to tear into the person who’d done this to her. By the time I was through, no one would recognize his disgusting face. “Who raped you?”

She paused, back straightening before she whirled around to face me. “What?” Her large green eyes rounded in shock.

Shit. Fucking amnesia. The eight-year blank she knew nothing about.

“There’s something you need to know.” I gestured toward the half-filled dishwasher. “Those can wait.” I pulled out a chair and gave her a pointed look.

Rather than cross the few feet between us, she wiped her palms on her jeans. “Why are you acting like this?” Her voice rose, on the level of screeching, and the confusion on her face splintered through me. “Don’t treat me like I’m breakable. I want you back! Ineedyou back.” She blinked rapidly, sucked in several breaths, and to my horror, tears leaked down her cheeks. “Makeme sit in that chair.”

I gaped at her, at a complete loss. “Alex...come sit down. We need to talk.”

“I don’t want to talk! I want you to turn back time and come after me.” She doubled over, her shoulders quaking with sobs. “I want you to take back control! Stop acting

like nothing happened between us.” She wiped the hair from her eyes and slid to the floor, the fight bleeding from her body, then covered her face with her hands.

Carefully, I closed the distance and a sense of Deja vu came over me. I crouched in front of her, pulling her hands to the sides of her damp cheeks. “I don’t remember.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The last eight years, Alex.” Of their own volition, our fingers entwined. “I don’t remember any of it.”

He didn’t remember?

I searched his eyes, looking for a hint of recognition as I attempted to process what he’d told me.

Anything?

I tried to imagine what it would be like to wipe away that much pain and betrayal. Poof, gone. No more hurt, no more baggage, just a chance at a clean slate. Hadn't I tried to do the same, albeit a more permanent method born from desperation in a bathroom in the middle of nowhere?

His fingers tightened around mine, instantly grounding me. "Now you're the one who needs to say something."

"I..." What if he'd forgotten for a reason? What if deep down, he didn't want to know? "I don't know what to say."

He stood, pulling me with him, and led me to the chair. Though his hand pressed on my shoulder with a gentleness that surprised me, he made me lower into the seat. Some sick part of myself rejoiced in that. His odd behavior had unsettled me to my toes, his lack of imposing do-as-I-say presence. I wanted to wrap myself in it because it felt natural and familiar, and I needed that from him.

He tilted my chin up, and his mouth formed a hard line. "Whoraped you?" Regardless of whether his psyche wanted to remain in the dark, some part of him still sought the truth, or he wouldn't push for it.

"It was Zach." I wasn't about to repeat the same mistake. Whatever he wanted to know, I'd tell him.

His touch fell from my face, and I missed the contact instantly. "Did I know that?"

Before I lost my memory?”

“Yes.”

He let out a breath. “This is a lot for me to take in, Alex. I woke up in the hospital thinking I was twenty-one. The fight against Zach in Seattle is the last memory I have.” He clenched his jaw. “What happened the night I was shot?”

Suddenly, it dawned on me. He hadn’t come after me...not because he hadn’t cared but because he’d lost his memory. “Zach showed up. You guys fought, then you made me get into a boat.” I swallowed hard, but the memory of their last fight—the blast of the gun that still ricocheted in my head, even now—burned in my eyes and nose. “You tried to protect me, but he...he...”

“He shot me?”

I nodded, too choked up to speak.

He crouched in front of me, took my right arm in his hands, and ran his fingertips down the material hiding the ugly scars that had scabbed over. All I wanted was to throw myself at him and beg him to hold me, to never let go. I wanted to hide in his embrace forever. What an impossible, dangerous idea. Zach wouldn’t stop until he got what he wanted...me.

“Is he in jail?”

I shook my head.

“Why the hell not?”

“Dad’s covering for him again.” I tucked my lip between my teeth. “He said Zach

would leave me alone, but he cornered me in a restaurant today.”

Rafe pushed up my sleeve and caressed the wound I’d inflicted on myself. “Why did you come here? Why didn’t you go to the cops?”

“You make me feel safe.” I trembled under the warmth of his touch. “I don’t trust anyone else. Don’t make me leave.”

“I fucking kidnapped you, Alex. I might not remember the details, but I know that much. Jax filled me in, and I saw the prison in the cellar. How can you feel safe around me?”

“Because I’m as twisted as you are.”

“I think that’s the first sensible thing you’ve said.” His thumb rubbed over my scar. “Tell me what happened here.”

I shook my head, my brain refusing to go back to that cabin, even though I’d promised myself I’d tell him anything. “I can’t talk about it. Please don’t make me.”

“Makeyou?” He looked at me in confusion. “You keep using that word.”

“You’ve obviously forgotten the power you have over me.”

“Then tell me. I need to know what happened. All of it.”

“I can’t.”

“You can.” He tangled his fingers with mine. “Because we’re going to the police and they’ll need to hear it.”

I shook my head. “My father will have me committed. He’s got everyone thinking I’m crazy, that I tried to kill myself.”

“Did you?” His attention landed on my arms.

I studied our joined hands. “It’s not what you think. I tried to get away from Zach, but he kept me high on ecstasy half the time.” I blinked rapidly. “I convinced myself he was you, and...”

He squeezed my hand. “I’m listening.”

Turning my head, I gazed out the window at the cloudless sky, too ashamed to face him. “He snapped after I cried out your name.” I untangled our hands and slowly lifted my shirt.

Rafe stood, bringing my attention back to him. His jaw twitched and his green eyes went so dark, I was glad his anger wasn’t directed at me. “He did that to you?” Fury drenched his words, flooded the space between us with an oath of retribution.

Closing my eyes, I nodded. “Afterward, I...I lost my mind and locked myself in the bathroom, broke the mirror and...I just wanted him to stop.”

Without warning, he pulled me from the chair and into the shelter of his arms. One hand tangled in my hair as the other held me to his shaking body. “He’ll never hurt you again.”

Standing on tiptoes, I clutched his shirt and burrowed into the crook of his shoulder. “I wasn’t the only one he hurt. He wrecked your life, Rafe. We both did, and I am so, so sorry. I know I need to turn him in but—”

“Stop.” He pulled back and framed my face in his hands. “If it’s forgiveness you’re asking for, you’ve got it. Fuck, Alex, I’ll never forget the sight of you in that hospital bed. If I’d known, there’s no way in hell I would have left you there.” He drew in a deep breath. “But none of it matters as much as you being able to heal from all of this. You were only fifteen, way too fucking young to be held accountable for a decision your rapist coerced you into making.”

Hot tears slipped from my eyes, dripping down my face in relief. In the deepest and darkest crevices of my being, I’d never believed he’d be able to forgive me. A lump of anxiety formed in my throat, and I swallowed, but it only crashed into the pit of my stomach. His forgiveness wouldn’t keep me safe from Zach’s madness...wouldn’t keep him safe.

“He’ll come after us both. He’s insane and jealous—”

“You need to turn him in, Alex.” His hands fell from my face. “Zach belongs in jail. Fuck, I belong in jail. We’re gonna do something about it, regardless of what your piece-of-shit father has to say.”

My gaze darted through the window where trees obscured the bane of my existence. Those plans were terrifying—they involved getting into a boat again. They involved coming forward. I wasn’t sure which I dreaded more. “I won’t tell them what you did. If you want me to talk to the police, then you staying out of jail is my stipulation.”

“I won’t argue with that. I’d rather be here protecting you than sitting in a jail cell, so I guess we’d better get our stories straight.”

I glanced at her in the passenger seat. The pallor of her skin worried me. So did the way she wrung her hands in her lap. She’d barely said two words since we’d left the island, except to insist on going to the sheriff’s department here in Dante’s Pass instead of filing the report in Portland. The boat ride had thoroughly rattled her, and I

dreaded the trip back to the cabin. By the end of the day, I feared she'd hate my guts for making her go.

"The sheriff isn't my biggest fan, Alex. He's got everyone around here believing I'm a threat. I doubt he'll hear you out."

"Then I want to talk to him. This isn't just about turning Zach in. I want to clear your name too."

Overtaking a prison sentence wasn't going to happen by filing a police report, but I didn't want to disappoint her. "I'm not even sure which law enforcement agency holds jurisdiction. Zach kidnapped you from the island, crossed county lines, and you ended up in a hospital near Mt. Hood."

"The police don't know he took me from your island, Rafe. I told them I pushed my car into the river before going to that cabin on my own."

"He held you in a cabin?"

"An isolated place in the middle of nowhere. I wouldn't even know how to get there. He said it belonged to a friend."

I cursed under my breath. "So what are we going to say then?"

Her brows furrowed in thought. "The truth with a few alterations. I'll tell them Zach kidnapped me. You drugged me, so I have no memory of you and Jax pushing my car into the river. I'll blame that on him too."

"I drugged you?"

"When you took me," she said quietly.

“And here you are sitting next to me in a fucking car.” I shook my head, unable to grasp how she could use the word “safe” and my name in the same sentence. “What will you tell them when they ask why you’re spending time with your convicted rapist?”

“The truth. You’re innocent. I lied eight years ago, under the threat of Zach, and I came to you because I’m scared and want to make this right.” She bit her lip and gazed out the window at the small-town businesses lining the main drag. I didn’t agree with her about the innocence part, not in relation to the past few weeks, but I let it go for now. No good would come from arguing the point to death. Neither of us said a word until I pulled into the parking lot of the sheriff’s department.

“You ready?” I asked.

With a nod, she pulled on the passenger door handle. I got out, rounded the car, and without thinking I placed my hand on the small of her back. We entered the brick building and found it deserted, save for the deputy manning the front window. I didn’t recognize him, so I assumed he’d come to Dante’s Pass after I left. I’d blown out of town before my graduation cap had time to hit the ground.

“I need to report a crime,” she told the guy on the other side of the glass. I hung back, marveling at her strength as she told the deputy about the nature of the crime she wanted to report. He took her information before rising to get the sheriff.

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Minutes later, a side door opened and Lyle appeared, the deputy on his heels. His gaze blasted me, and the scowl twisting his features made me want to yank Alex out of there immediately. But his expression softened when he asked if she was comfortable giving her statement to him.

She told him she was okay with that, then turned to give me a tiny reassuring smile. “I’ll be back.”

I wanted to go with her. I wanted to grab her and never let go, but I understood her need to do this on her own. They disappeared behind the door, and the deputy resumed his spot behind the window, his attention captured by a crossword puzzle.

I knocked on the glass. “I need to make a call. If she comes back before I do, let her know I’m right outside, okay?”

He waved me off without raising his head. What a prick. I withdrew my cell as I exited, and a strong breeze carrying the familiar scent of fresh water and a hint of fish rustled my hair. Scrolling to Jax’s name in my contact list, I pushed the call button and waited for him to answer, all the while searching the area. This wasn’t a conversation I wanted overheard, but I needed something fast and my instincts told me he could get it for me.

“What’s up?” he answered.

I darted my gaze around the parking lot once more, satisfied that I was completely alone. “Can you do me a favor?”

“Depends.”

“I need a gun.”

“Come again?”

“You heard me. Can you get one?”

“Well, yeah, but why? What’s going on?”

“It’s Alex. She showed up on the island today. I don’t wanna go into details, but she’s scared. I need a weapon.”

“Whoa...you need to back up there. What the fuck is going on?”

I sighed in exasperation. “Her brother is psychotic. He’s the one who shot me, Jax. Can you get me a gun or not?”

“Are you gonna use it to protect yourself or her?”

I narrowed my eyes. “What does it matter?”

“You’re doing it for her then.”

Not a question. “So what if I am?” I shot back, tiring of his inquisition. “If you don’t wanna do it, just say so. I’ll find someone else.” Though Jax was the only one I trusted even marginally with this. I was a felon. If I went down for getting my hands on a gun, well that would be tragically ironic.

And dangerous because Alex would be left on her own.

“You sure she’s worth it?”

“Why do you hate her?” I asked, the disdain in his voice bothering me.

“I don’t hate her.” He lowered his confrontational tone by a few degrees. “You did, for the three years we shared a cell.”

“There’s a reason she did what she did.” I kicked a rock and watched it ricochet off a bright blue curb. “She’s trying to make it right, and she’s fucking terrified, Jax. I won’t stand by and do nothing.”

He sighed. “You wouldn’t be you if you did. Saving people is your MO.”

I glance around again, tapping my foot. “So you’ll get it for me?”

He didn’t say anything at first, and I thought I heard him let loose a curse. “Yeah, I’ll get you what you need. Tell me what you’re looking for, and I’ll get it to you tonight.”

The boat ride back to the island broke the final straw of my sanity. I collapsed onto the couch, tightened into a ball in the corner, and clung to the false shield of numbness protecting me. What a ridiculous illusion, the idea of safety.

Maybe my father was right in threatening to have me committed, because I sank into the term “crazy” with a vengeance, especially after Jax showed up and gave Rafe a gun.

Three days had passed since that night, and I still didn’t remember breaking down with much clarity. I had vague recollections of wailing and clawing at Rafe and Jax when they tried to calm me, but I couldn’t remember what had gone through my head, though something had triggered the episode. At first, I thought it was Jax’s

presence, but later that evening, when Rafe tucked the gun underneath his pillow on the couch, it hit me.

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The image of Zach shooting Rafe wouldn't leave me alone. I saw it when I stared into nothingness, when I showered, when I slept.

Reporting Zach's crimes hadn't helped. The sheriff had patiently listened while I told him the changed version of my story, but I wasn't sure he believed me. And whatever he'd said to Rafe afterward had sparked his fury. He'd pulled me from the station, a shaky mass of anger, and had threatened to go to the media if they didn't do something about Zach.

We probably should have gone to Portland, but Portland was where my brother was...unless he was here in Dante's Pass, stalking me. I pictured him camped out somewhere near the island where he could watch the cabin with his relentless hazel gaze, noting when the lights shut off every night.

I cranked my head and peeked through the windows in the living room with single-minded focus, wondering if he was ogling me now through a pair of binoculars.

Fucking paranoid, Alex.

Zach would have to be high up in the hills on the other side of the river to even spot the cabin, much less see inside it.

"What's on your mind?" Rafe spooned me, one hand smoothing over my stomach underneath the T-shirt I wore, as if he could wipe away Zach's carving with his touch. The TV cast a dim glow in the room, though the volume had been turned so low, I strained to catch the real life horrors broadcasting through the screen. We'd been cuddling like this on the couch for the past hour after dinner.

Rafe wouldn't kiss me, and he never touched me like he used to—with demanding hands that didn't seek permission, with fiery passion that scorched me. I craved that side of him like a starved junkie, but I didn't know how to tell him, and he didn't remember the days we'd spent together, so I settled for what I could get. Stolen hours with him on the sofa each night before we went our separate ways to sleep. He cooked for me, worried about me, but always kept a distance that seemed insurmountable.

“You keep looking out the windows,” he said at my continued silence. “Wanna talk about it?”

“I'm worried he's watching.”

“He can't see in here, Alex.”

“Logically, I know that.” I untangled from his arms and walked right up to the glass. Peering into the blackness, I willed my heartbeat to slow. Hewasn'tout there. If I kept telling myself that, maybe I'd believe it. “You think the police are looking for him?” I asked.

“Yeah. I called the detective in Portland today.” His footsteps vibrated the hardwood beneath my bare feet, and his body warmed my back. “They're on it, Alex. Lyle might be an ass wipe, but he did his job.”

“Do you think Zach got spooked? Maybe that's why he hasn't shown up.” I was scared to hope for it.

“Or maybe he knows better. I won't let him hurt you again.”

I turned around. “Have you remembered anything yet?”

“No.” He settled his hands on my shoulders, dipped his head, and his lips lingered near mine. “Nothing’s coming back.”

“You’re so different this way,” I whispered. He was more like...the guy I remembered from eight years ago.

“Am I really?” He pulled away. “Because when I think of you down in that cellar, I’m ashamed of myself.”

The memory of that place called, like a siren’s seductive song. Did he feel it too? The allure of the cellar had been silently summoning me since I’d first arrived on the island. So far, I’d been too much of a wuss to go down there, to soak up the place where Rafe first showed me his darkness...the place where he helped me embrace mine. Our twisted romance began down there.

A shiver went through me. On one hand, I’d been through hell in that dank, cold space, but on the other, experiencing his touch for the first time as a woman had been intoxicating.

“You’ve thought of me down there?”

“I’ve tried to remember,” he said, though he avoided my eyes.

The uncertainty in his mannerisms unnerved me. He seemed so lost, as if a huge part of him had gone missing, and in a way it had. “Do you want to remember?”

“Of course I want to remember.” He rubbed a hand down his face, but he didn’t wipe the fear from his expression. His mask had cracked, leaving behind a fissure where the broken man peeked through.

I tugged on his hand, impulse driving me. “Come down there with me.”

His feet didn't budge. "Absolutely not."

God, he looked terrified. We both had demons to face in that cellar. Slowly, I slid my fingers from his. "Fine. I'll go down by myself, and I'll wait for you as long as it takes."

"Alex—"

The loud thud of my steps on hardwood drowned out the rest of his words. I yanked the door open, entered the dark space, and jumped when it slammed shut behind me. I felt along the concrete, heart pounding, and searched for the light switch in the blackness. My palm brushed it, and a moment later dim light flooded the room. With a sigh of relief, I descended the stairs. The cold penetrated first, then the scent of dirt, musty dampness, and concrete—a combination my mind equated with captivity. Instinct alone made me wander to the cage.

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Everything crashed back with the strength of a tsunami. Naked, cowering in the corner, trembling from the cold, terrified because I hadn't known what Rafe was capable of. I folded my arms around myself, as if to ward off the memories and the chill in the air.

But I was safe. On the most fundamental level, my body knew that. It also responded in a way that used to make me loathe myself.

Not anymore. Not when it came to Rafe.

My gaze zeroed in on the cuffs dangling from the ceiling and warmth flooded between my thighs. He'd left the door to the prison open. I entered, this time of my own free will, and stripped the clothes from my body. Goose bumps broke out on my flesh, and my nipples tightened into aching buds. I lifted my head and eyed the cuffs again, noting how he'd left them unlocked. They spoke to me, whispering to slip my wrists inside and close the metal on my free will.

He'd probably think I was insane, and maybe I was, but something told me this would bring him back to me. I stood on tiptoes and worked one wrist into the circular restraint. The lock clicked in place, making my pulse speed up. After some maneuvering, I managed to secure my other wrist too.

There was no going back. I'd effectively trapped myself, leaving the decision of freeing me up to him. Suddenly, my stomach dropped. What if he didn't remember where he kept the key? I didn't have time to agonize over that too-late realization. The door creaked open and his footfalls announced his arrival. The instant he saw me, he froze.

I hung before him, naked, exposed, wrists bound as effectively as my heart was to him.

“Please tell me you know where the key is?”

“If I had to guess,” he said, taking a step closer, “it’s on my keyring.” He gestured toward me. “Why are you doing this?”

“You know all my secrets, all my shame.” I glanced at the cement floor, remembering how I’d awakened, naked and cold, with my hands restrained to the bars. “This is where you first brought me. You wanted to make me suffer the way you did. But we shared something, Rafe, and I want that back so badly.” I shut my eyes, disturbed by the utter shock in his.

“I don’t remember.” I heard him come closer.

“I have faith you will.” A tear slipped from beneath my closed lids, and the brush of his thumb caught it. I sucked in a breath. “I crave your touch so much. Please...make his disappear.”

He grazed his fingers across my breasts. “He hurt you.” His words came out strangled. He inched lower, hands drifting over the evidence of my brother’s brutality, and smoothed a palm along my stomach, where Zach had branded me with his name. “And though I don’t remember it, I hurt you too.”

“Rafe—”

“Look at me,” he interrupted.

I opened my eyes, and my insides melted from the heat in his. His palms cradled my cheeks with a tenderness that masked his need to conquer. He might not recognize the

hunger in himself, but I did. That need colored the command in his tone, was evident in the wide stance of his feet and the bulge behind his zipper.

My heartbeat rocketed. What if he remembered and went back to hating me? “Please don’t hate—”

He silenced me with his mouth, his unyielding hands holding my head in place as his lips forced mine open, tongue thrusting in gentle possession that claimed, commanded, owned. My lids shuttered, and I lost myself to his taste. His kiss infused me with a raging, burning need. An explosion went off at my core, spreading from my belly down to my thighs, all the way to the soles of my feet. I spread them and gained better traction on the ground. Cool air drifted between my legs, where I ached for him—for his touch, for his hot mouth kissing so intimately, for the girth of his cock.

He inched away, breaths puffing across my swollen lips. “Open your eyes, sweetheart.”

My heart jumped at the endearment, and my lashes fluttered open. “You remember,” I whispered, both fear and hope warring in my soul.

“No.” His thumbs caressed my damp cheeks. “I don’t need to remember to know that I want you.” His brows narrowed, and he frowned. “It’s the way I want you that worries me.”

“Tell me.”

He hesitated. “I’ve had fantasies for a long time.” His gaze lifted to my restrained hands. “Dark fantasies I never thought I’d act on. I don’t know what I did to you, or what that place did to me, but it scares the fuck out of me.”

“You don’t have to be afraid.”

He stepped back and took in my nakedness with a single glance. “We’ve always orbited each other,” he said, pausing with a shake of his head, “but I never imagined it would lead to...this.”

“Never imagined we’d be so right for each other? Rafe, you already know how I feel about you.”

“You had a crush on me.”

“Is that how you saw me back then? Just an annoying kid?”

“At first, maybe.” His green eyes flickered to my face again. “I felt it too. I won’t deny it, but I’ve got eight years of memory missing, and you’ve been...so fucking scarred by Zach and me, I don’t understand how you’re standing on two feet right now.”

“Technically, I’m on my toes.”

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The corner of his mouth turned up. “You surprise me. Your strength inspires me, Alex.”

“Don’t mistake me for being strong.” Nighttime always hit hard, when the dark wee hours of morning choked me with loneliness. The scars on my body didn’t compare to the ones no one could see, though I felt them each night, pressing on my chest until I couldn’t breathe. “I’m here in shackles because I’m not strong.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I need you. I’m sick with needing you.” I cursed my trembling lips. “No matter what you do, no matter what you remember or don’t, I’m yours.”

He groaned. “Even if I keep you strung up like that?”

“You’ve done it before, for hours in the dark. Naked, just like I am now.”

“Why did I do that?” he asked, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Punishment.”

“What the hell did you do to deserve that?”

Hurt pinged through me at the thought of him making me eat off the floor. But that happened before he’d known the truth. I regretted not telling him sooner. “I threw a tantrum.” More like a plate of food.

“A tantrum?”

“Yes.” I shifted my weight to the other foot and pulled at the restraints, though I knew I’d find no escape from the burn in my shoulders or the ache in my feet.

My restless movements caught his attention, and he adjusted his jeans. “Shit, seeing you like this...you have no idea what it’s doing to me. I might not remember, but my body does. I want to hoist those legs up and fuck you raw. My cock is insisting you’re mine.”

“Your cock is right. You should listen to it.”

He cursed under his breath. “Not tonight.” Pulling a bundle of keys from his pocket, he tried two before the lock on my left wrist unlatched.

“You don’t want me?”

“Of course I fucking want you.” He freed my other hand, and my arms dropped to my sides. He bent to gather my clothing before thrusting it all into my arms. “But not like this. Get dressed,” he said, turning his back to me.

My hands shook as I pulled the shirt over my head. Hurt welled in my throat, making my voice wobble when I spoke. “Then why are you pushing me away?”

“Are you dressed yet?”

Tugging on my pants, I shot daggers at his back. “You’ve seen it all, so why the illusion of decency now?”

He whirled around. “Because I’m not the same person from a month ago.” He grabbed the back of my head and pulled me close. “I don’t even remember that

person.”

I licked my lips. A couple more inches and they’d connect with his. “He’s still inside you.”

“You want the guy who paddled your ass, is that it?”

My heartbeat skipped. “You know about that?”

“Jax told me.”

A shudder of hot desire tore through me. “Did he tell you how it turns me on?”

“Holy fuck, Alex.” He let go of me abruptly. “He failed to mention that part.”

“I’m guessing he failed to mention a lot of things.” I maneuvered around him and headed for the staircase.

“What are you doing?”

I lifted a foot onto the bottom step and glanced over my shoulder. “I’m going to bed. Don’t worry about me, I know how to use my fingers.” A thrilling sense of power stormed through me. I wasn’t used to being so bold. Part of me wanted him to reclaim his dominance, to pull me over his knee and spank the attitude from me. But I kind of liked this side of him too—a mixture of the man he used to be with the dark guy hiding just beneath the surface. “If you need help with your hard-on, you know where to find me.”

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I knew I was dreaming again, but like every other time, it seemed vividly real. The gritty floor under my cheek. The rage firing through my veins at not being able to defend myself. Their hands banding around my wrists and ankles, keeping me immobile while their leader shoved his cock up my ass.

Nothing had ever hurt so much.

Nothing had ever made me feel so helpless, dirty, or ashamed.

As usual, I never saw their faces. I squeezed my eyes shut, and it took everything I had not to cry out, to contain the sting behind my lids so my shame didn't liquefy. All I could do was ball my hands and wait until he finished. But that wasn't the end. Not even close. They took turns, and at one point, they forced me to my knees and assaulted my mouth too. I bit the first one who shoved his filthy dick in and received a blow to the head for it.

The nightmare suddenly shifted and my hands fell free. Now I was the one on top, holding someone else down.

“Rafe, wake up.”

Dream...it was a dream, so why couldn't I wake up?

“Rafe!”

Her voice finally penetrated, and I opened my eyes to find Alex's shadowed face inches from mine. She was sprawled beneath me on the couch where I'd gone to

sleep alone, though now our bodies were pressed together, chest to chest, thigh to thigh. I restrained her hands above her head with one hand and propped myself up with the other so I wouldn't crush her.

"I'm awake," I said, struggling to catch my breath. "Did I hurt you?"

"Um...no."

Her uncertain tone made me grind my teeth. "Don't lie to me. If I hurt you, tell me."

"You didn't hurt me."

"Then what is it?" Sweat broke out on my temples and slid down my spine.

"You feel good, okay?" She inhaled then let the breath out in a whoosh. "You were having a bad dream, but when I tried waking you, you grabbed me and...I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing?"

"For wanting to jump your bones when you're still trembling from a nightmare. It's not okay. I'm not okay."

I shifted my weight to the side, pressed her into the back of the couch, and wound an arm underneath her body. "You feel pretty fucking okay right now." I grabbed her thigh and pulled her leg over mine, and my erection nestled between us. "Does that feel like I mind this?"

She groaned.

Or maybe I did. Suddenly, all the logic in the world didn't matter. I wanted her, she wanted me. The rest of the world could go to hell. Tomorrow, I'd flagellate myself

over poor choices and my stubborn memories. I filled my hand with her ass, pulled her even closer, and thrust my cock against the hot center obscured by her panties. Fucking hell. Two thin layers of material was all that separated us. And her damn tank top. Her ridiculously tiny tank top.

“Rafe.”

She breathed my name against my neck, and I shuddered. A good kind of shuddering, the kind that made me want to melt into her until we became one. I buried my nose in her hair and inhaled, feeling as if I would never get enough.

“This is insane,” I said.

“What is?”

“Wanting you so fucking much.” It was like she wore a pheromone with my name on it. “We can’t do this, Alex. There are a million and one reasons why this is a bad idea.”

Her breaths puffed against my skin in rapid succession. “Name one.”

“The shit you’ve been through.”

“You’re doing a good job of distracting me.” She nuzzled my jaw, and her fingers fisted in my hair.

“Fuck,” I said with another tantalizing shudder. “This isn’t the way to deal with it.” But my hand shared Alex’s agenda. It wedged between our bodies and freed my cock from my boxers. “Tell me to stop.”

“Never.” Her teeth lightly scraped along my scruffy face until she reached just

underneath my ear, where her moan vibrated through me.

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“You’re killing me.” I tugged her panties to the side and dipped a finger inside her wetness. “I don’t have any condoms.” Or if I did have some, I didn’t remember where they were. She moved against my hand, moaning, and I added another finger.

“You fucked me before without them,” she said with a gasp.

I halted. “This is more than fucking.”

She arched her spine, a silent plea for me to keep going. “God, Rafe, it’s neverjustbeen fucking between us. Not for me.”

I clutched the back of her head, and we stared at each other, mouths parted, the air warming between us. I hooked my fingers inside her, eyes trained on her face to watch her reaction.

“Rafe!” Her nails dug into my damp shoulders, and she trembled all over. “I need you inside me.”

Her desperation slammed me back to Earth. “No, sweetheart, you need to face what’s happened.” Reluctantly, I withdrew my hand from her tempting pussy. “Whatever this is between us, we have time to figure it out.” Letting her go, I rolled off the couch and took a spot on the floor, where I folded my arms around my knees. She propped up on one elbow, curls falling into her eyes, and glared at me. I understood her frustration, but fucking her wasn’t going to fix anything right now. My cock throbbed, pissed with my decision. I was sure Alex and my wayward dick had forged an alliance against me.

She flopped onto her back with a groan.

“You know I’m right,” I said. “I can’t remember shit, and your psycho brother is still out there somewhere.”

“I know,” she said with quiet acceptance. “But I still remember, Rafe. I’ll never forget what it was like with you. You made me feel things I didn’t think were possible.”

“Was that before or after I tortured you?” I still didn’t know the details, but I must have done something horrendous for her to threaten me with a broken bottle. The flash of her terrified face would forever haunt me.

“What do you remember?” she asked, rolling to the edge of the couch.

“I told you. I don’t remember anything.”

“I don’t believe you.”

I dragged a hand through my hair. “Okay. They’re just flashes, but I’m pretty sure I choked you. What else did I do?”

“It doesn’t matter what you did. I forgave you for it.”

“How can you let it go like that?”

She scowled at me. “Have you not figured it out yet?”

“Why don’t you fill me in?”

“I’m in love with you.” She bit her lip. “I’ve been in love with you for years. I

thought you understood that from my letters.”

“You don’t love me, Alex. For God’s sake, you were only fifteen.”

“Don’t tell me how I feel!”

“It’s fucking common sense. You might want to fuck me, but love? You don’t even know me. Fuck, I don’t even know me anymore.”

“I know how I feel. I know we had a connection.”

I shook my head. “We had sex—sex I don’t even remember.” Tears pooled in her eyes, and I wanted to kick myself for being such an insensitive ass. “Alex, I’m sorry.”

“That that you don’t remember us.” She swiped at her eyes with jerky, angry movements. “But what we shared went beyond the physical. You were the only person who gave a shit about me.”

Unable to stop myself, I slid a palm along her cheek, and my thumb caught a tear. My attention lingered on that salty drop, as if it called to me in some way. My gaze swerved to hers, and I licked my lips, imagining the unmistakable taste of sorrow.

“I still give a shit about you.” I furrowed my brows, running that statement in my head a few more times. I did care about her, more than I should. More than I had a right to, which was why I’d do everything in my power to protect her, even from myself. I pushed to my feet and thrust a hand out for her to grab. “Go back to bed.”

She let me pull her up from the couch. “Come with me.”

“Alex,” I warned.

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“I don’t mean to do anything. I just want you to hold me, like you do on the couch.”

“I won’t be able to stop at that. Not this time.”

“Why hold back then?”

“Because I refuse to hurt you more than I already have.” The dark urges pricked at me, growing with intensity the more I thought of thrusting into her. I didn’t know if I could keep from flirting with disaster when it came to her gorgeous neck that tempted the strength in my hands.

“You won’t hurt me,” she said, tugging on my hand. “Come to bed.”

“No.” I disentangled from her grip.

With a growl of frustration, she stomped off in the direction of the loft, where hopefully she’d stay. I knew I wouldn’t be able to say no again if she pressed her tight, seductive body against mine. Letting out a shuddering sigh, I reclaimed my place on the sofa and checked under the pillow to make sure the gun was still there, but falling back to sleep didn’t come easily. My cock throbbed with the need for release. I’d already jacked off once tonight in the shower, before I’d called it an early night after Alex had stripped and shackled herself in my damn cellar.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. Just past midnight.

Fuck.

This was going to be a long night because jacking off wasn't going to cut it. I flopped to my side, facing the back of the sofa, and willed my dick to settle the fuck down. Eventually, sleep pulled at me, welcoming me into the embrace of oblivious relief. If not for the unexpected noise, I would have been out for good.

Footsteps.

Damn. Alex was going to be my downfall. I'd known it eight years ago but had ignored it. "Go back to bed," I mumbled.

Something sharp pricked the back of my neck. I shot up, twisted around, and barely made out a large shadow as I slumped against the couch, hand reaching for the pillow.

Then everything went black.

Voices drew me from the black pit I'd fallen into, except I wasn't on the soft cushions of my couch. My cheek pressed against the hard floor where every footfall vibrated through my jaw with the force of a jackhammer.

"Hurry up," someone muttered. Liquid sloshed and chugged, and the formidable odor of gasoline burned my nostrils. "Watch it! Don't spill any on him."

More footsteps thumped, more words drifted in the harsh air. I guessed there were two, possibly three of them surrounding me. I thought of Alex alone upstairs, and panic tore through my veins. I tried to push off the floor, intending to lung for my gun, but my limbs were heavy and useless.

"I doused every part of the island." Thud-thud-thud. Each step poked at the throb in my temples. "Is it done?"

“Yep. She’s across the river. I gave her enough to knock her out cold for a long time.”

“Good,” a deep voice said. “Finish with the inside. We need to get outta here.”

“What about him? Thought you wanted him to watch.” A shoe nudged my body. “He ain’t waking up.”

A sinister laugh chilled my blood. “Sure he is. See his hands? He’s itching to rearrange your face, dude. Hurry the fuck up.”

Feet shuffled across the floor. “Get over here and help me with him.”

Two pairs of arms dragged me to my knees. I tried to speak but only managed a groan. Forcing my gritty eyes open, I lifted my head, which felt as heavy as a bowling ball. Shadows surrounded me, and I couldn’t make out their faces, couldn’t tell for sure how many were in my house. Nausea rose, and my head pounded so hard, every word they spoke lanced through my brain like a spear. I dropped my head, chin to chest.

One of them yanked my neck back and a blow glanced across my cheek. “Time to wake up, buddy. You ain’t gonna want to miss the show.”

“Alex?” Her name was the only word I could force past my sandpaper tongue.

“She’s safe, and she’ll stay that way as long as you do what you’re told. Understand?”

No. I didn’t understand anything, except that I’d been drugged. Another fist connected with my face, and I didn’t have the energy to fight them.

“I asked you a question. Her life depends on your cooperation. Do you understand?”

I nodded, though my head drooped more than bobbed. “Yeah.” Little by little, consciousness settled into my bones, though I still felt weighed down, as if ten wet blankets covered me. “What’d you give me?”

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“You don’t ask questions. You shut your mouth and follow orders, got it?”

When I didn’t answer, two hands banded around my neck, fingers pressing hard on my carotid arteries. Spots danced in my vision, and I lifted my sluggish arms to ward off the assault, but the drugs had rendered my body useless.

He pulled away before I lost consciousness. “Take him outside.”

Two men hefted me into a slumped-standing position, and we slowly stumbled to the front door. “Don’t do this.” Another blow to the face shut me up. My chest squeezed as they pushed me down the stairs of the porch. I plummeted to the ground, rolled, and tried to brand my mind with every detail of the place where I’d spent so many summers growing up.

The fuckers were going to burn it down. My father’s cabin. The island. All I had left of him.

“Why are you doing this?”

A boot shot out and struck me in the kidney. I grunted, back arching, and held my breath.

“Shut the fuck up!” one of them shouted, adding another kick to my side. “Stubborn asshole.”

I peered up, trying to make out a face, but a baseball cap and sunglasses obscured his features. The other guy stood off to the left, remaining out of sight. Neither of their

voices seemed familiar, though that didn't mean shit. Everything around me hit my ears in an odd way. Crickets sounded, normally a melodic chirp, but their call blared in my ears like a screeching alarm.

Footsteps thundered down the stairs. "Let's go. Get him to the dock." His buddies hauled me to my feet and forced me toward the path, and the guy at my back laughed. "Little early for the Fourth of July, but what a show, huh?"

I clenched my hands, tested my strength. Whatever they'd given me was beginning to wear off, though not enough that I could overpower three men. Maybe more.

And Alex...

I swallowed hard. They had her somewhere. If I fought them, they'd hurt her...or worse.

What if they've already hurt her?

The idea sickened me, made me want to lash out and pound into them. My mind was fully alert now, demanding Idosomething, but my sluggish body wouldn't...couldn't fight. I'd never felt so weak as when I climbed the small hill that led to the dock. Sweat slicked down my bare back, though I trembled from the chill of the late night breeze. I fell to the ground twice on the way down, and their laughter hollowed through me each time, like a demon that taunted.

Evil. Whoever these men were, they were pure evil.

When we reached the dock, they pushed me to my knees, facing the island. I couldn't see the cabin from this vantage point, but the trees surrounding it towered, nothing more than shadows against the backdrop of mountains.

One of the men lit a torch and passed it off. "You get the honors. Make it quick. We

need to get out of here.”

I blinked, horrified by the sting in my eyes. I’d survived a lot and had never cried, but the thought of watching my father’s island go up in smoke gutted me. “Don’t do this. I can get you money.” I risked looking up and met the dark gaze of someone who struck a cord of recognition in me, though I couldn’t place where I’d seen him before. “What do you want?” I asked.

“I want you to suffer.”

I opened my mouth, about to ask him what he wanted with me, when his fist slammed into my nose. I cupped my face and doubled over, crashing into the planks of the dock. Two hands wrenched me up. “Watch it fucking burn.”

A billow of smoke surged upward, tinted an eerie orange-red from the glow of flames. A guy sprinted toward the dock. “Get him in the boat! Let’s go!”

I shot out a fist at the first fucker who tried dragging me to my feet. He snickered. I didn’t pose a threat to them—I was so weak a kitten could probably beat the shit out of me. They lifted me and dumped my boneless body into a dinghy.

“He’s heavier than he looks. Think our weight will sink this thing?”

“Shut the fuck up and get in.” They piled inside, and someone started the motor.

The island grew smaller as we sped off. I gazed at my home, now nothing more than a raging inferno, some of the last memories I had left up in flames. Who were these men, but more importantly, why?

Why Dad’s island?

Why had they taken Alex?

What did they want with me?

The ride ended a few short minutes later, and they hauled me from the boat and up the ramp. I didn't walk as much as shuffle toward the sedan parked a few yards away. A guy exited through the passenger side door and popped the trunk, revealing Alex's bound and gagged form inside. She wasn't squirming, wasn't even moving.

My heart raced as I weighed my options. I could try to fight them off, but I didn't know for certain how many men surrounded me. Three, four, five? I glanced over my shoulder and met the barrel of the gun Jax had given me. "Don't over think it, Mason. Get in the trunk."

A startling blast sounded. I jumped, adrenaline flooding my system, and stared at the fire engulfing the island. Not a gun shot. The propane tank outside the cabin must have ignited.

"We don't have time for this bullshit." Sirens blared, distant, but it wouldn't take long for the area to flood with emergency vehicles. Maybe I could fight them, stall long enough for help to arrive. "Get in the fucking trunk," he said, cocking the gun and swerving it toward Alex, "or I'll shoot your girl."

I could fight them. I might even hold them off for a few minutes, but what if they shot her? What if they killed me and took off with her?

I did the only thing I could. I crawled into the trunk.