



# When It Rains He Pours

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** I wasn't prepared for the starry-eyed stranger and his smile that made my thighs tremble. When a real estate powerhouse tries to force my hand into selling my building, I didn't have to think about my answer. I told them no. But after someone breaks into my gallery, destroying everything I own, and threatening me; I start to question how I'll ever come back from this. Until a stranger comes to my rescue, risking his own safety for mine. He saved me. Bold and charming, his muscles were hard as rock and his strength was fierce; he made everything right. Life began to fall back into place, and for a brief moment, I was able to forget about everything else. I wish that moment could have lasted a little bit longer. Because everything I thought I knew about my hero was a lie. He wasn't my savior, he was my enemy. I heard that bad things happen in threes. The break in, the lies... I didn't know what was next. I guess it's true, when it rains—he pours. And this man laid it on thick in all the right places. So how do I let him go?

**Total Pages (Source):** 83

# Page 1

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## Chapter One

### Glory

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What the hell?

Reaching my arm out, I touched the handle and watched the door sway. It was loose, not closed and locked up tight like I had left it the night before.

Why is this open?

Stepping back, I cupped my hips and looked around. The street was busy, flooded with cars and pedestrians. Spotting a woman on the curb right in front of my shop, I started towards her.

“Excuse me,” I said, softly holding out my hand. “Did you see anyone going in here?”

There was a chance that someone could have seen what happened, maybe a wandering eye had caught a fleeting glimpse of something—anything.

Her eyes lifted in annoyance, as if my question had somehow caused a great nuisance to what she was doing. “No.” Tossing her head back and forth, she darted over the crosswalk and was gone before I could get another word in.

Okay, sorry for asking.

Stepping back to the door, I pushed it open and listened to it swing inward. But it didn't open all the way, stopping halfway through, and gently bumping against something hard on the floor.

No, no, no, no. . . This isn't happening. It's not what it looks like.

The hair on the back of my neck shot up, as my skin buzzed, charged with electrified pops. My breathing became ragged, chest struggling to inhale shallow gulps of air.

Panic and confusion struck me down like a giant lightening bolt. I couldn't move, I couldn't think. It didn't make sense, nothing about this made sense. I wanted to rationalize it, pulling simple excuses out of thin air, and forcing them to fit.

The lock broke. . .

I didn't actually close it. . .

The wind, yeah the wind must have blown it open.

I tried everything I could to hold onto those thoughts and make them real. But I was wishing on falling stars, watching them drop from the sky, crashing and burning into the ground. I had to face the truth, no matter how much it hurt.

## Page 2

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Sealing my eyes shut instinctively, I stood still, inhaling deep breaths and trying to muster the strength to look. I couldn't, I didn't want to. I knew what I was about to see and I wasn't ready for it.

The slow creak of the door as the rusty hinges swiveled inward, rang in my ears. The eerie silence of anticipation swelled in my chest like a hot air balloon, growing and building, turning my nerves upside down.

Someone broke in.

You have to look, there's no way you can't.

Releasing the air from my lungs in one long whoosh, I opened my eyes and glanced around. Instantly, my heart sank into my stomach, chest collapsing around itself and suffocating me where I stood.

I can't breathe.

Oh my god, I can't breathe!

Holding my chest, I inhaled through my nose, exhaling out my mouth, repeating the cycle over and over again. Every part of my body instantly hurt, like I had been pushed off the back of a truck and dragged for miles across rocky pavement.

My work is gone. . . It's all gone.

Who would do this?

Why would they do this?

Stepping over one broken painting after another, shards of wood speckled the floor like sharp thorns, while sheets of canvas were ripped and strewn about like horribly disfigured snowflakes.

“Fuck.” Whispering under my breath, I spun in a circle and stared down on what used to be my gallery. Scraping distraught fingers over my scalp, I tugged at the roots of my hair, pulling it tight.

Holy shit. . . This can't be happening!

Why?

Why me?

Why like this?

The room became blurry and warped as tears bubbled over the surface of my eyes. Blinking, a rush of water streamed down my cheeks as my arms hung lifelessly by my sides.

Shock, that was the only word I could use to describe what I felt. Complete and total shock. Every inch of my skin was tingling, growing warmer and warmer as traumatized adrenaline purged my veins.

My gallery had been destroyed; completely fucking ruined, brought back down to bare bones and dust.

Standing in the midst of debris and destruction, my eyes continued to bleed with tears and my heart broke in half. I couldn't stop, no amount of wiping and sniffing could

stifle the raindrops pouring off my face.

It's all gone. . . All of it. What the hell am I going to do?

Years of hard work had been erased in an instant. Every single painting, every single image that I created with the stroke of a brush had been torn apart as if they meant nothing.

But they meant something to me. . . They meant everything to me.

I can't believe this is happening.

My brain scrambled with a million thoughts, all of them running and scattering out like tiny bugs from under a rock.

Dropping my bag to the floor, I crouched down, and braided my fingers together. I couldn't stand anymore as my legs shook, weakening beneath me, and causing the room to sway.

The walls appeared to bow out, the ground felt like a rolling wave, raising up high and crashing hard, dragging me into the depths with the undertow.

Clutching my stomach, vomit sat in the back of my throat, threatening to mix with the scattered canvases and broken frames. Digging the tips of my fingers into the floor, I tried to steady the spinning world around me.

All my paintings are gone.

## Page 3

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The thought caused my breath to hitch and my lungs to ache. The air became too thick and painful to swallow. Gripping my chest, small hiccups of oxygen wriggled down my throat.

What now? What the fuck do I do now?

Who would do something like this?

Where the hell was I supposed to begin? How the fuck was I supposed to process the fact that yesterday I was floating and today I was drowning?

This was my everything, it was my passion. And now—now it was nothing more than oil colored tinder.

Picking up a thin strip of wood, I stared at the splintered ends, softly thumbing the jagged edge. Blood pumped through my ears, forcing the world around me into silence. This was one of the worst pains I had ever felt. I was numb, fixated on the shard between my fingertips, blankly aware of the splinters pricking my skin.

A fleeting echo tapped behind me, and I chose to ignore it. Because nothing else was important. Everything that held significance in my life was sawdust at my feet. This place, this was what I had been striving to build—and now it was nothing.

How the hell am I going to rebuild all this?

In one quick swoop, a large hand clasped over my mouth. A faint gasp tumbled from my lips, as an icy shiver ran over my body from head to toe.

I shouldn't have ignored that sound. If I had been more alert, if I hadn't been so lost in my own head, then maybe I could have defended myself.

On instinct, my hands flew up, latching around the thick wrists capturing my body. I held onto them, unsure of what else I could do. I couldn't scream, I couldn't wriggle away. So I held on with a death grip as if my touch would signal the distress I felt and the man behind me would let me go.

He didn't let go.

“Don't try a fucking thing.” His voice whispered in my ear, thick and heavy. Firm fingers cradled my cheeks and nose, making it hard to inhale. “If I pull my hand away, you need to stay quiet. Understand?”

Nodding yes, I could smell the scent of his sweaty hands as his fingertips dug into the soft flesh of my cheek. It was sour, tainted in twisted anger.

“Good.” Sliding his hand down off my mouth, the sharp edge of his nails dug into my neck, keeping me frozen in place.

Oh my god. . . What does this guy want? Why is he doing this?

Sucking in a huge gulp of air, tears started to fall swift and painfully as my heart beat fast and hard.

The stiff nubs of his fingers teased the pulsing artery under my skin, playing with my life. “Do you like it? Do you like what I did for you? It should make this easier, with it all gone, you have nothing else to lose.”

What? What the hell is he talking about?



My brain fired off in every direction, looking for an escape, trying to find a way to stop him before he did anything else, before it went any further.

“I . . . I can give you money—”

“Shut your fucking mouth. I didn't come here for your money.”

Then what does he—

Tumbling nerves twisted my stomach, as a painful heat seared my insides, turning me raw. This man had other plans.

I didn't want to be right, I wanted to be wrong, it was easier to be wrong. Unsure of how to respond to such a horrid truth, I asked, “Then what do you want?” The words squeaked out, built on nothing but air.

Please, tell me I'm wrong.

The man let out a devious chuckle, dancing the tips of his fingers back and forth over the lump in my throat. “You really don't know?” Lowering his lips to the shell of my ear, his tone darkened. “You can't tell? Are you really that fucking stupid?”

No. No, no, no.

He can't! I won't let him!

My throat was horse and dry, making my voice crack. “You don't have to do this.”

## Page 4

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Twisting me on my heels, a dark shadow covered his face as he walked me backwards. My feet clung to the ground, trying desperately to stay in that place. I didn't want to be guided away, further and further into the depths of my gallery. Further and further away from the outside world and the safety I could hear passing by like thunder in a cloud.

There were so many people outside, but none of them were aware of what was happening in here, hidden behind the walls.

“Please, just let me go.” The hard wall slammed into my shoulder blades, forcing all the air out of my lungs.

“You're not going anywhere, not until I'm finished.” The white of his eyes glowed against the black silhouette. “Not until we're seeing eye to eye.”

“Don't do this, you don't have to do this.” Holding up my arms, palms facing out, I hoped whatever humanity he had left inside would make its voice heard.

I needed him to recognize that this wasn't right, that this would hurt us both. Because darkness wasn't a single layer, it was an endless hole. And if he kept going, it would only trap us both.

I'd be left burning inside myself with nightmares and scattered emotions I'd never tame. And this man, he'd have to live with the memory of what he had done.

Leave me alone!

I won't let you do this!

“That's not up to me.” Dropping his arms to his sides, they hung stiff. “I don't make the rules, I just follow them.”

Is this guy fucking crazy?

What rules?

The man took a step forward, his shoulders pressing back, head clicking shoulder to shoulder like he was stretching his neck. We were inches apart, almost touching chest to chest.

I didn't want him that close, I wanted him to get the hell out and leave me alone. Glancing at the floor to my side, I spotted my purse. It was arms length away, so close I could feel the phone inside.

“If you don't get the fuck out of here, I'm calling the cops!” Jerking my body to the side, I lunged for my purse on the floor.

The man snapped forward, forcing my muscles into overdrive. Slamming my knees on the ground, a gust of air swept past my face as he tried to grab me. He missed.

Crawling on my hands and knees, I scrambled to my bag. It seemed so much further away than I thought, as if my eyes had played a cruel trick, and it hadn't been close to begin with.

“Get back here!” he barked, stomping with heavy feet. His boots hit with force, each step a needless drive to regain control.

The light off the street caught my eye, slithering over the floor in bright beams of

safety. All I had to do was get there, all I needed to do was get up and run out that door.

Go Glory! Go!

Pushing my hands into the ground, I climbed to my feet and ran. My heels crunched over broken glass and splintered remnants of my life.

Everything I had was gone, and I wasn't about to let this creature take one more thing from me.

The man growled like a wild animal, his grunt filled with anger and rage. But I didn't look back to see where he was, I was too close, the door was right there, all I had to do was take a few more steps.

Tripping over the broken paintings, I lost my footing and fell onto my knees. Short bursts of air filled my lungs as the tips of his shoes crept into my line of sight. He was standing over me, his presence weighing down on my shoulders and holding me still.

And just like that, the safety was gone, ripped out from beneath my feet like a rug.

“Why are you doing this to me!?” I screamed, keeping my eyes on the floor. I didn't want to look up, I couldn't. Just feeling the fear of the unknown was enough to keep me stagnant. “What the hell do you want from me?”

“You should know,” he said, the words tearing off his tongue through clenched teeth. “You should know exactly what I want from you, I shouldn't have to explain myself.”

Breathing in slowly through my nose, I curled the tips of my fingers into the floor. My nails raked the small divots in the hard surface as desperation and need overwhelmed me.

You can't have it! I'm not yours to take!

Shaking my head, I swallowed the lump in my throat, trying so damn hard to keep my composure. There had to be something else I could offer him, something that wasn't forced use of my body.

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Because I wouldn't give him that. I would never stop fighting him if he pushed me, I would never just give in and let him do whatever the hell he wanted.

My body stilled, his breath hot like lava, burning my skin as he spoke. “Stop pretending like this is a game. Because if you haven't noticed, we're not playing along.”

We? Why is he saying we?

What the fuck is he talking about?

“I can't. . . I don't under—”

Cutting me off, his lips turned razor thin. “If all of this isn't enough to make you see, if it does nothing to let you know that we're serious, then you're really fucking stupid.”

My hair fell back into my face as my head tilted into my shoulder. This man was confusing the hell out of me.

“I won't tell you that you can do this. I can't.” Hanging my head lower, I lifted my hands into my lap and nervously fiddled with the nails.

All I wanted was for him to leave me alone. That was it. I wasn't sure how I could take any more.

Dropping to his haunches, he ran a heavy hand across my chin. “It didn't have to

come to this, but if you don't change your mind, it's only going to get worse.”

Change my mind?! Does he really think I'll just lay back and accept it with open arms?!

Flaring my nostrils, the pain in my chest turned sharp, piercing my heart like hot needles. “Fuck you.”

“Ha,” he laughed out loud, dipping his head into his chest as he stroked his jaw. “No sweetheart, that's where you're wrong. All of this, it's only going to fuck you. But you already know that, at least you should now.”

My blood began to boil, percolating under the skin like coffee. How dare he? How dare this man come into my place—into my world and try to shatter it?

He had no right.

Balling my fists, I cocked my head up. Veering my stare, I tried like hell to see his face. The shadow had shifted, allowing the faint light to break across his jaw. A dark stubble coated his chin, his lips were thin and cheeks sharp.

Show me your face, Asshole!

You're a coward—a weak, fucking coward, hiding behind that hood!

The scream sat on the back of my tongue, but no matter how much I tried, I couldn't get it out. It was stuck, digging claws into the muscle of my mouth to stay inside.

My insides were a torrent of anger and confusion, sadness and pain. Today had been shit. I wanted to wake up from this nightmare and start the day over.

But I wasn't sleeping. None of this was a dream, and no matter how much I wished it was, I couldn't un-live it.

Today was the catalyst of something bigger, it was a turning point that was forcing me into the rabbit hole. And I didn't know if I'd ever be able to climb back out.

Dragging a finger down my arm, the stranger drew small circles around my elbow. A devilish smile curled on his face, making me sick.

My chest began to constrict, muscles twining and contorting in ways I had never felt before. A purple haze clouded my view, as the world around me began to swirl and morph. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't think or move or speak. I was mute, sinking deeper and deeper as water filled my lungs.

Get away from me! Don't fucking touch me!

“Hey! Hey you!” A husky voice yelled from over the man's shoulder.

Instantly, the guy jumped back, allowing cool air from the open door to spill over my face.

Throwing a hand to my chest, I fell forward, taking in long pulls of oxygen. But no matter how much I tried to breathe, it felt like nothing was reaching my lungs. Pushing my lips into a tight circle, I breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth.

Closing my eyes, I focused on slowing down my lungs, doing my best to stop the panic attack before it took hold.

Heavy grunts filled my head, as shuffling feet rumbled the floor. But it was all over before I even had time to process what the hell had happened.



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“Damn.” A man's voice broke the silence, his breathing heavy and labored as he continued to speak. “He ran, took off before I could get a good hold on him.”

I couldn't look up. I heard him talking, but a high pitched ringing filled my ears. Falling back, I sat on my ass, letting my head settle into my hands as tears I couldn't hold in fell freely over my cheeks.

Who the fuck was that?

What the hell just happened?

Sitting in years of art, hours and hours of pained hands and sleepless nights, all I could do was cry. I felt violated even though I had only experienced a dark threat.

But something about the whole thing didn't feel right, it wasn't making sense. If he wanted to rape me, he could have. Instead he went on and on about me knowing what he wanted, asking me if I liked what he had done.

Why would he do this?

Why would he need to destroy everything if he was here for something else?

Plucking at my lips, my eyes gaped at the ground, staring into everything and nothing at all. A small bird chirped in my ear, reminding me of the recent conversations I had and how I blew them off without a second thought.

Was he with. . . No, they wouldn't do this.

Would they?

No, that's ridiculous.

“Are you okay?” the stranger asked, his voice soft as his feet crunched against the floor, grinding bits of glass under his shoes.

Wiping my eyes with the back of my hand, I lifted my face to the man's with a sniffle. My breath hitched as he lunged forward, dropping to one knee and gripping my shoulders tight.

Crooking his hard jaw, his brows arched with concern as thick lines drew up across his forehead. Bright cobalt blue eyes scanned my face and body, looking for injuries.

I couldn't speak. His eyes were sucking me in, making me forget why I was on the floor to begin with. They were so big, so blue, I wanted to dive inside and never climb out.

The chaos around me turned into heavy silence as our eyes connected. A ripple coursed through my body, riding my spine from head to toe. The electricity in my veins was numbing, causing the tiny hairs on the back of my neck to shoot up.

Who is this man? Where did he come from?

Firm fingers explored my shoulders, slipping down my arms and gripping my hands to lift them and look them over. “Did he hurt you?”

As quickly as the silence and warmth swept over me, it was gone, resonating as faded tingles deep in my muscles. With the snap of a finger, his voice pulled me out of my daze. I was back on that floor, living the nightmare I walked in on.

“No, he didn't get the chance. Is he really gone?”

“Yeah, he took off running. I tried to stop him, but he got through me. And it was either chase him down or make sure you were alright. So, here I am.”

“Thank you,” I said, doing my best to force a slight smile.

“You're sure you're okay?”

My eyes opened wide with a nod as I tucked my legs into my chest and hugged myself. I was shaking all over, unable to control the trembles that held me hostage.

“Come on,” he said, curling his hands around my shoulders. “Let's get you out of here.”

Pulling me to my feet, he nuzzled me under his strong arms, walking me out onto the sidewalk. The sun hit my face as it hung on the horizon, ready to disappear behind the treeline.

I stood quiet, trying to grasp everything that had just happened. But I couldn't.

It's all gone. . . How did this happen?

Why was that guy even here to begin with?

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Tears trickled down over my cheeks, dropping like rain onto the pavement. "It's destroyed, it's all destroyed."

"Don't worry about that right now, just relax." Rubbing a flat palm up and down my back, he kept me pinned to his ribs. "It can all be fixed. I'm just glad you weren't hurt."

Tipping my head up, I stared into his eyes. "You don't understand, I can't fix this."

Smiling through thin lips, his brows knitted. "Let's go grab a drink, I think you could use one. Let's take a little time to settle your nerves."

Tearing myself from his embrace, I bared my teeth. "I'm not going anywhere, you saw what he did!" Throwing my arms up through my hair, I pinned it to my head. "I can't fucking believe this." Dragging open palms down my cheeks, I leaned forward, cupping my hands between my knees. "What the hell am I going to do?"

Resting his hand on my shoulder, the stranger forced our eyes together. "Right now, you're not going to do anything." Pointing a finger towards the door, he spoke sternly. "That isn't going anywhere. And you can't do anything about it like this, you're too worked up."

Tugging his phone from his pocket, he stepped to the side and made a phone call, talking so quietly I couldn't hear him. I watched him, doing my best to try and calm myself down.

I was a mess. I couldn't think straight, my brain kept darting between thoughts and

concerns, fear and the future of my gallery.

Why did that man do this?

Who was he?

Everything I had was in there, all of it a small piece of who I was. It hurt too much to think about it all on the floor, torn and tattered into bits.

Fuck! Why me? Why the hell did this have to happen?!

Snapping my back straight, I rubbed my forehead and paced in a small circle. I wanted to cry, I wanted to scream and punch and kick anything I could. My insides were a giant ball of angry nerves, ready to explode at any second.

“Alright,” he said, holding his hand out to me and flapping his fingers. “Come on, there's a little place up the street I've seen before. We can go there, grab a drink, maybe something to eat if you're up to it. Then we can figure out what to do about this.”

Cocking my head, my hair fell into my face, tickling across my cheek. “I'm not going anywhere. There's too much to do, I have to call the police, I need to clean it all up. I can't just walk away and pretend like nothing happened.”

“I'm not asking you to pretend like this didn't happen. I'm asking you to join me for a drink so you can relax, and then come back to it with a fresh set of eyes. We'll figure this out, but sometimes, walking away can be a blessing.”

My jaw hung open as I glared at him through pained eyes. His words found their way in, settling over my swelling brain.

He's right. I'm too emotional right now to really do anything productive.

But that doesn't mean I can wash my hands of it.

Folding my arms over my chest, I kicked my hip out to the side. "I need to call the cops, I have to report what happened."

"That's all set, I took care of it."

"You took care of it?"

Nodding, a small smile teased the edge of his lips. "I have a good friend who works for the Vienna police, he's going to get on it for you."

"Really?" I asked, giving him a look of disbelief.

"Yes, really." Taking a step towards me, he snatched my hand, braiding our fingers together. "You can thank me later, right now, just let me get you away from here."

Hesitantly, I let my hand blend into his. His touch was warm and calming, putting me at ease. Blinking, I flicked my eyes between his. He looked honest, his expression stark and deep.

My heart pitter pattered, drumming like a hammer in my chest. This man did something to me, the feel of our hands together, the way he held me firmly in his grasp; I felt it everywhere; over my skin, in my muscles, my veins, my bones, he was covering me like a blanket.

I couldn't explain it, there were no words to express what it felt like. It was just a feeling, a surge of tingles and soft pinpricks that caused the hair on my arms to bristle.

And in all honesty, that was exactly what I needed right then.

“Alright.” Our eyes connected, his flickering in bright pops of color. I could see every shade of blue the world had to offer, sparkling and bursting under his relentless stare.

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A cool breeze blew between us, ruffling the hair on his head and sending his scent into my lungs. Inhaling his musk, my body went up in flames, igniting in forbidden feelings.

It felt wrong. All of this felt displaced, too real and too raw to be true.

Stop it Glory! You're just emotional from everything that happened.

Pushing the feelings away, I forced myself to see it as my brain doing its best to get rid of the bad and replace it with good.

I needed something good right then. And if this could be that, if this was what was sent my way to block out the pain for a blip in time. . . I would accept it with open arms.

The destruction would still be there. The hurt and the sadness were still hovering under the surface, ready to burst through at any moment.

Nothing would erase what happened.

Not even this man.

But maybe he could temper the pain for just a little while.



### Chapter Two

#### Glory

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Walking through Barry's, the man stretched his hand back, softly gripping the very tips of my fingers. His touch was sensitive, light and protective in the same breath.

I watched his back twist and curve with hard lines and firm muscles. Dips and deep trenches pushed and pulled against the fabric. The urge to reach out and stroke the mass of perfection tingled in my fingers.

I couldn't look away, I couldn't stop staring at the wall of muscle in front of me. His presence was fierce and empowering, commanding the room with each step.

My heart skipped in my chest as a warm, fuzzy feeling rumbled in my belly, and my head fell into a delirious haze. He had me mesmerized.

Stop, just stop. Now is not the time for this. There's bigger shit to think about.

Forcing my eyes to the floor, I tucked my free hand into my back pocket to ease the festering urge to touch him.

There was no doubt in my mind that my brain was trying to replace all the pain I felt with something else. And this man had saved me, he was an easy target to grasp. What better focus was there than your hero?

I need a clear head. I can't get lost in false lust.

Leading us to a booth against the back wall, he guided me into the seat. Slipping over the cushion, I grabbed the drink menu from behind the napkin holder and started flipping through.

I was afraid to look up, afraid to let my eyes settle on his and rekindle these ridiculous emotions of desire.

The booth wiggled as the man sat down in front of me, and he quietly cleared his throat. But I didn't acknowledge it, I wasn't going to give my body the chance to start that shit again.

“What are you going to have?” I asked, moving the menu higher up to cover my face.

Keeping my eyes on the bright pictures, I sensed him shifting his stare around my face, flicking those ocean blue orbs over every detail and thin line. His stare bore a hole into the top of my head, making me more than aware that he wanted me to look at him.

But I stayed strong, I didn't look.

“I'm not sure, I haven't looked at the drink menu yet. And I'm guessing you don't know what you want either.” His tone was highlighted with amusement, hinting that I had been staring at the same page this entire time.

Closing the menu, I slid it across the table, and stuffed the tips of my fingers into my temples. Pinching my lids tight, I groaned. “I don't have a damn clue.”

This is too much, all of this is too much.

My brain started running like a high speed train, doing circles around the million things I had to do.

I was going to need new materials; new paints, new brushes, new canvases. But first I had to drop this unholy bomb on all the customers who were waiting on their purchases.

Ugh. . . Those are calls I don't want to make.

I was hoping that they'd understand what had happened and be sympathetic. The last thing I needed was for all of them to request a refund. . . That would be a nightmare.

It's already a fucking nightmare.

The evil man's eyes flashed in my mind, forcing a shiver to ride my spine and turn my stomach. He spoke so intensely, as if I should have known what he was talking about.

But I didn't. The cryptic statement he left me with was puzzling and disturbing. 'You know what you need to do.'

What the hell did that even mean?

Does that really matter?

I shouldn't care about the perplexing words he spat in my face. He was going to hurt me, he was insane and crazed. Everything I needed to worry about was in his actions, it didn't need to go any deeper than that.

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What he said was irrelevant. Even he probably didn't know what the hell he was talking about.

I'm thinking too much about this.

I'm alright, he didn't get to do anything to me, that's all that matters.

I need to focus on how the hell I'm going to fix this mess.

Tears prickled my eyes, threatening to consume me. Water seeped over the surface, making my vision blurry. Sucking in a giant gulp of air, I sighed, wiping my wrists across the sockets to keep them dry.

“I haven't introduce myself, I'm Liam.” His head dipped low, trying to grab my attention. “And you're Glory I take it?”

Flicking my head up, I glared through tight lids. “How do you know my name?”

Smiling playfully, he shifted in his seat, laying clasped hands onto the table. “Well, the sign outside said Glory's Gallery. So, I'm assuming that's you.”

Ruffling my brows, I arched them high. “Yeah, that's right.” My cheeks flushed with embarrassment, making me feel ridiculous. Tipping my chin, I grabbed the straw on my place mat and tore small pieces off the ends. “I forgot about the sign.”

“Yeah, I don't blame you. You went through some shit today.” Pursing my lips, I gave him a stern glare. Shaking his head, he frowned. “I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said

it like that. I'm trying to help you relax, not get you more worked up.”

“It's alright, I'll be okay.” I lied. It wasn't going to be okay—Iwasn't going to be okay.

My world had been torn open, my life shredded and discarded as if it was worthless. Because it wasn't just about losing out on money, it went far deeper than that.

Art was all I had, it was the one thing that helped me through all the rough times growing up. All my feelings were molded into strokes on the canvas, that was where I shed my grief.

And that asshole had stolen it all.

But it wasn't this man's fault. He had saved me from that dick, and I was grateful for that. I wanted to thank him for what he had done, for putting himself in harms way to protect me.

Flashing him a feigned smile, I said, “Thank you, I really mean it, thank you for what you did.”

“No.” His voice grew rough and heavy. “It was the right think to do. And none of this is alright. You just went through something horrible, you don't have to pretend. I don't expect you to sit there and act like nothing happened. If you need to cry, you cry. If you want to scream, do it. I won't stop you.”

Angling my head, I spun the straw on its tip, dragging it back and forth over the deep purple place-mat. “You won't stop me from screaming?”

“Nope.”

“Even in here, with all these people? You wouldn't be upset if I started screaming?”

“Hell no. And if anyone said anything about it, I'd knock them out.”

A tender smirk itched my lips. “What if it was a woman? Would you knock her out too?”

His eyes grew still, gawking at me like I should know better than to ask a question like that. “No, of course not. Do I look like an asshole? I'd ask her politely to mind her own business. And then I'd knock her boyfriend out.” A thin smile slithered up his face, creating a small dimple in his cheek.

Fuck, that dimple. . . My heart sped up again, crashing against my ribs like a caged prisoner.

“Seems reasonable. But don't worry, I won't scream.” Laughing lightly, I let my eyes settle on his. Relaxing into the seat, I started to feel a little more at ease.

What he was doing, it helped.

Smirking, he cracked his knuckles, stretching a single hand over the table to touch my wrist. We stared at each other for a long second, sitting silently as the room around us filled the empty space with inaudible chatter. Something sparked between us in that moment, something that I felt and saw, without knowing exactly what it was.

Clearing my throat, I darted my eyes away, jerking my hands into my lap. That feeling scared me, it was too strong, too real, too raw. I had never experienced an instant attraction to someone that was so deep I could feel it in my bones.

“Can I ask you something?” Liam tilted his head, causing his hair to sweep over his forehead, and land just above his eyes.

“Sure.” Fiddling with my fingers in my lap, I shrugged my shoulder.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:35 pm*

“When did you know you wanted to be an artist?”

Looking up at the ceiling, I let my gaze flip around all the dollar bills stapled to the sheet rock. They were everywhere, literally hundreds and hundreds of one dollar bills. All of them had black ink stains; some with names, some had images, some were a scribbled mess of nothing.

I felt a tickle on my skin, light as a feather. Glancing down, Liam was holding a dollar bill, running it up and down the side of my arm. “Go on, take it.” Flirting his eyes to the side, he nudged his head. “There's a marker right there.”

Pinching the bill between my fingers, I grabbed the marker and tugged off the cap. The image of an angel and devil, meshed together like a giant beast popped into my head.

So I went with it, sketching the wings and horns. My favorite part to draw was the eyes. I always saved that for last. Eyes were where the truth was, the eyes were where you could see what wasn't being said.

“Well? When did you know?” he asked, leaning over the table to watch the picture come to life.

I tried to think back to when I was a little girl and my father had bought me my first easel. That was the happiest moment of my life, until I opened my gallery.

But I wasn't sure when the realization set in that this was who I was. Art became more than just a colorful picture, it became my way to communicate when I didn't

have the words to speak.

“I guess I've always loved drawing since I was kid. And it just kinda grew from there.”

Shaking his head, he frowned. “No, I don't mean when did you start drawing. A lot of people can draw, but they don't turn it into what you did. Why did you become an artist.”

Need. . . Desire to be heard. . . Longing for a voice in it all.

“Why?” My lids popped open, lashes tickling the skin below my brow. “I guess it wasn't so much a choice as it was a force. I had to be this, it's who I am.”

“Hm,” the sound left his mouth with wonder. Scrubbing his jaw, his gaze pinned me in the seat. It was as if he was trying to read my mind, trying to see what brought that need out.

“Does that answer your question?”

“It tells me that there's more to you than I can see.”

“Well, we just met—” The weight of someone standing over me caused me to stop talking as their shadow pressed down on my shoulder blades.

Glancing up, a waitress stood beside us, popping her gum before asking, “What can I get you two?”

“I'll just have a glass of water for now,” I said, giving her a smile.

Cocking a brow, he frowned. “Water?”



“Yeah, water. I need a clear head, drinking won't help.”

“You need something to help you relax.” Looking up at the waitress, his hand moved and spun in the air as he talked. “What would you recommend for someone who's had a completely shitty day?”

Tossing a thoughtful look between us, she smiled. “I'd go for a Rum and Coke. Or maybe a Long Island Iced Tea, those have a little bit of everything in it.”

“Perfect, we'll take one of each.” Flashing her a big toothy grin, his gaze switched back to me. “That's what we need.” Snagging the dollar out from under my hand, he held it up. His mouth turned up high, eyes wide. “This is amazing, I can't believe you just threw it down that easily.” Running his fingers around the edges, he pointed up above our heads. “Can it go right there?”

“Absolutely,” she said, stuffing her notepad into the pouch of her apron. “I'll be right back with your drinks and the stapler.”

“Peer pressure much?” Knitting my brows, I tried not to smile, but it didn't work. The corner of my lip tipped up, the muscle twitching to keep it in place.

“Is it working?”

“It's not helping.”

“Are you sure?” Curling his lip, his lids hoods. “Because I'm pretty sure I saw a spark in your eye when she said Long Island Iced Tea.”

Shaking my head, I tried not to giggle. “I don't think you saw anything like that.”

Pushing big palms into the table, Liam sat back, straightening his arms. “I absolutely

did. Your brain says no, but your eyes say yes. Your eyes say a lot of things, Glory.”  
Winking, he pursed his lips into a tight grin, forcing the dimple to pop on his cheek.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:35 pm*

I sat quiet, unable to use my tongue. There were no words in my head, all of them lost to the sexual tension building inside me.

Is he trying to flirt with me?

“Just like your art speaks to the eye, your silence speaks to me.” His chest muscles flexed, stretching the fabric into a thin sheet. Firm pectorals were busting the seams, as thick muscles rolled up in his biceps like rocks.

My chest grew tight, belly tumbling and flipping as butterflies swarmed with frantic wings. Wriggling in the seat, I tucked my hands under my thighs as my nerves went rampant, exploding all through my body.

I was hot and cold, sizzling and turning to ice all in the same instant. Chills ran up my spine, curling fiery fingertips into my veins. My cheeks flushed, turning pink, only to cool into red frost burnt skin. The heat between my thighs pulsed, tickling the sensitive bundle of nerves.

I couldn't look at him, I wanted to, but I wanted to ground myself first. I didn't like the power he suddenly had over me, I didn't enjoy feeling like I was losing control.

Now was not the time to get all steamy eyed for this man who had kicked down my door and dragged me to safety.

But that's exactly what was happening.

Every look, every smirk and smile, it twisted my insides into knots. Liam was making

me forget the pain I was feeling and replacing it with misguided lust.

What the hell is going on with me?

It's just my emotions messing with me.

I had just been cowering on the floor, riddled in uncertainty and fear. My brain was screwed up, running on adrenaline I wasn't sure what to do with it.

Those feelings of lust weren't real, they were fake. A false state of desire to erase the blackness that wanted to shadow my heart.

“Here you go,” the waitress said, snapping me back into reality. “Who's getting what?”

“Glory, which one?”

“Long Island.” My fingers nabbed the glass before she even had time to set it down. Sucking in a big gulp of alcohol, I swallowed it with a cringe. “Oo, that's strong.”

“And that's exactly what you need, something strong.” Lifting his drink in the air, he jiggled it side to side.

“What are you doing?”

“Hold up your glass.” Giving him a funny look, I did what he asked. Clinking the glasses together, he said, “To new friends, new days, and to a new future.”

The waitress passed Liam a stapler. “Put it anywhere you'd like.”

Standing up, he reached his arms high above his head, securing the bill directly over

us. "Looks good," he said, handing the stapler back and dropping down. "See, a new dollar to start a new day. It all starts right here, right now."

Bringing the drink to my lips, the alcohol tickled my skin, making them go numb like I had just sucked on a hot pepper. "I'd love to agree, but I'm not sure where my future sits right now."

"Trust me, you will. Things will fall into place, they always do."

"How can you be so sure?" Veering my stare, I tipped my chin up. "You know nothing about me."

"I know more than you think." A wide grin spread across his face, reaching his ears. "Your art tells a story, I know your story."

"How could you possibly know? You didn't even get a chance to see my paintings." Laughing nervously, I fumbled with my drink.

"I've seen your work, it's amazing. I had a chance to peek in the window a few times before, but you weren't open."

"Really?"

Nodding, Liam's bottom lip pushed out, his eyes glazing over in thought. He went some where right then, leaving me alone at the table. His eyes shone like glass, my reflection a small blip on his pupils. There was a long pause before he spoke, his breathing slow and faint.

Looking down at his hands, he ran his fingers back and forth over the table. "My mom was an artist, so I might know a few a things."

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The way he said it, it hit me. There was sadness in his tone, his voice soft and flat. I understood what he was feeling, so I guided our conversation away from that place.

“Can you paint?”

“No, I can't paint for shit. But I can see the thoughts behind the detail, I can see the feelings in the image.”

Holding my drink, I swirled the liquor around and watched it form a tiny tornado. I needed to occupy myself with something else, something that wouldn't force my brain into a stand still. “So, are you from around here?”

“No, I'm here on business, and I'm hoping the opportunity works in my favor.”

“What kind of business opportunity?”

Sucking air in through thin lips, Liam leaned back against the seat and ran a hand through his hair. “It's a work in progress. I'm not even sure I want the green light anymore. But we'll see.”

Nodding my head, I took another swig of my drink, keeping my eyes inside the glass. “Well, I hope you get what you came here for. Business can be a bitch sometimes, I can tell you that.” Rolling my eyes, I rested the glass down, running my thumbs over the small droplets that had formed on the outside.

At least you have something, that's more than I have right now.

Studying me, Liam's brows furrowed, his expression penetrating my soul. Those eyes, those eyes could do so many things to me.

The way they drew me in, the way they were so deep, so strong, and yet, I couldn't read him. He was wearing a mask, his inner thoughts hidden from view, while he read me like a fucking book.

“You've had some other business trouble. What was it?” Rolling his shoulders forward, he flicked his gaze between mine, trying to see what was in my head.

Scrunching my lips, I felt the alcohol heating my core and warming my skin. “You know it took me years to get my gallery and build it into what it was. I put everything into it; blood, sweat, tears. . . Literally everything.” Laughing to myself, I curled the tips of my fingers over the rim of my glass. “And then one day, someone wants to rip it out from underneath you. I refused to let that happen, but now, with this shit—I'm not sure what to do.”

His lids lowered, trying to figure out how much of what I was saying revolved around the break in, and how much was another experience all together. But he didn't ask me to explain.

And I wasn't about to spew my guts all over the table. It wasn't his problem, none of this fell on him. These were my problems, my burdens to carry.

I didn't stop at one drink. There was another, then another. And I was feeling really good. Maybe a little too good.

I lost a little self control, allowing myself to flirt with Liam. And I was liking it, the moment of freedom before reality slapped my face in the morning; it was nice.

Everything that had happened melted away. I didn't feel the anger or despair from

walking into a shit storm, I didn't feel the sadness over losing everything I had created. Any fear of the man was gone, pushed further and further into the back of my mind as the drinks went down like water.

All I felt was Liam and the kindness of drunken inhibition.

His smile, his eyes, his voice. . . it all worked. I was happy for the moment, forgetting there was even a first half to this day.

“Did you grow up here?” he asked, palming his drink and taking a long sip. His eyes skirted around the glass, watching me intently.

“Yes and no. I lived in Rhode Island until I was fourteen, then my family moved here.” Tapping my thumbs against my drink, my lids hooded as I spoke. “I don't really miss it, but I do miss coffee milk and hot wieners. Shit, I'd kill to have either one of those right now.”

“Coffee milk? Sounds gross.” Scrunching up his face, he stuck out his tongue in disgust.

“It's not, it's delicious.” Smiling, I bit down on my bottom lip. “Maybe you'll get lucky and one day and I'll share some with you.”

“I'm not a man who believes in luck.”

Veering my stare, I tipped my chin up. “Really? You don't think someone can be lucky?”

“I think people make choices,” he said, running his thumb over the thin rim of his glass. His gaze settled on my face, his eyes following the outline of my lips. “Choices that can change everything.”



My heart started to race as I sat still, his glare holding me in place. Drawing in air through my nose, I lifted a hand to my mouth, plucking at my lips. “Change them how?”

“However it plays out. Luck isn't about good or bad, it's about where it takes you and what you do with it when you get there.” His eyes turned wicked, searing my skin with invisible flames. “So, what are you going to do with it?”

Sucking in a gulp of air, my lips sealed shut as I shook my head. “I—I don't know.” Opening my lids wider, my lashes tickled the bottom of my brows. “I never thought about it like that before.”

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My brain was trying to figure out this puzzled question. My father had always said that the world was a balancing act between good and bad, and that luck was the teeter it sat on. Sometimes that weight would shift in your favor, other times it wouldn't. But no matter what, no matter how much bad there was, luck would come back to you at some point.

“Tell me then, what makes you believe in luck?”

Shrugging my shoulder, I glanced up at the ceiling. “Because believing gives it a presence. Belief makes it real, it becomes tangible.” Dropping my eyes back onto his, I held his gaze. “Without luck people would think that they had total control, but you can't control everything. No matter how much you might want to.”

Liam gave me a toothy grin as he pushed back in the seat. “I guess it all comes down to what you believe then.”

“I guess so,” I said, stabbing the ice in my glass with my straw.

“Okay, my turn. Go on, ask me something.” Holding out his arms, he opened his chest. “Ask me anything.”

We spent hours in that bar, talking and laughing. He talked about growing up in Kentucky, and how his grandparents had a farm full of cows and chickens. But now he lived in Washington, a world away from there.

I learned he had an older brother, and that they ran their father's business, carrying on his legacy. He wouldn't tell me in what, and that peaked my interest, but he said that

was a conversation for another time.

“LAST CALL!” the bartender yelled from behind the counter.

“It's two in the morning already?” Grabbing my phone, I clicked it on so I could see the time. “Shit, I need to go.”

Liam took the last sip of his drink and waved to the waitress for our check. Grabbing his wallet, he took out some money, and set it on the table. “Come on, I'll walk you home.” Standing up, he flipped his fingers in my direction. Taking his hand, he helped me out of the booth, asking, “You sure you can walk?”

Swaying on my heels, I giggled. “I'm not too sure.”

Resting an open palm on the small of my back, he steadied me on my feet. “How far away do you live from here?”

“It's only few blocks. I'm sure I'll be fine.”

“I'm closer, why don't you come back with me and I'll call you a cab.”

Gripping his forearm, I found my balance. “No, no, I'm fine. I can get home.”

“Alright, then how about you come home with me anyway?”

Pursing my lips, a small voice whispered in my ear, doing its best to remind me that playtime should be over.

Just go home. It's been fun, but distractions are just that. . . Fun.

Distractions don't fix problems, they don't mend broken paintings and erase threats.

What I needed was a good night sleep so I could tackle tomorrow with a fresh set of eyes and a clear head.

Except, I didn't want this to end. I enjoyed being right where I was. I couldn't change what happened, but I could prolong it. I could forget about it for a little while longer.

Didn't I deserve that?

Didn't I earn a break from reality this one time?

Tilting my head, he flashed me his big blue eyes and wriggled his brows. A tingle radiated between my thighs, coalescing into a throb that beat against my sex. It might have been the alcohol that was holding my hand and helping along, but I didn't give a shit.

My head was still clear, I was still thinking for myself. And I wanted this man to give me one happy thing to look back on when I thought about this day.

Was it wrong of me to want him to have his way with me?

That raw need didn't feel like me, but that's all I could focus on.

“Are you trying to take advantage of me, Mr. Business Opportunity?”

Laying his hand over his chest, Liam gave me a stern look. “That is something I would never do.”

Maybe I want you to.

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I wanted to keep this feeling going, I wanted to stay lost in him and not let reality ever come back. Because this was far better than what tomorrow would bring. I felt greedy and starved, eager to wrap my legs around his hips and let him thrust the nightmares right out of my mind.

Lowering my lids, I batted my lashes. “Well maybe I want you to.”

“I never said the night had to be over.”

My cheeks blushed and the corner of my lip twitched. The flutter in my belly went wild as my entire body went up in a torrent of crackling sparks.

“Come on, let's get out of here.” His fingers twined around mine and Liam led us both out of the bar.

Screw it.

Tomorrow can wait.

### Chapter Three

#### Glory

We walked in silence, our feet clicking against the sidewalk in tandem. I could hear my heart beating inside my chest, thudding so loudly I glanced up at him, expecting he could hear it too.

“Did you know your eyes have a little green in them?”

“What?” I asked, nervously brushing the hair out of my face.

“Your eyes, when the light hits them just right, there's speckles of green.”

Shaking my head, I kept my gaze on my feet. “I didn't know that.”

Stopping short, Liam's arm reached out and snagged my wrist. Turning me on my feet, I stumbled slightly from the sudden change in direction. But he didn't let me fall. His strong arm swept in, curling around my waist and tugging me into his chest.

He didn't speak as his other hand came up and captured my jaw, tipping my head up so our eyes connected. He held me, never looking away, never loosening his hold on my waist.

Dragging his tongue over his bottom lip, Liam's thumb traced the curve of my jaw, following the line in one slow stroke.

Oh my god. . . What is he doing?

Is he going to kiss me?

Every nerve, every vein and strand of muscle in my body came alive. I could feel his heart beating through his thumb as he held it against my skin and cupped my chin. I could feel the air between us, growing thick and dense.

His chest puffed as he took in a long breath, exhaling warm air over my face. He was drawing strings from my arms, forcing them to gently brace his chest as I found solid ground to cling to.

Kiss me, please kiss me.

Parting his lips, he leaned in, gently placing his mouth on mine. And I accepted, tilting my head to give him room to kiss me deeper.

My mouth opened, tongue tempting the edge of my lips as he slipped his inside. Licking and tasting, my eyes closed, giving in to the drunken lust and forbidden freedom one single kiss was able to deliver.

I felt lighter than air caged in his arms, safe and protected against the world.

Liam pulled away, causing me to wobble on my feet, dizzy and woozy from the feelings he left me with.

With a tight smile, Liam stepped back and ran his hand through his hair. “Did you know that I've wanted to do that all fucking night?”

Lifting my fingers to my lips, I touched the warm skin, still able to feel his shadowed presence. Shaking my head, I tried to catch my breath. I couldn't think, I couldn't find

words or capture letters to make a sentence. My brain was blank, fumbling around the sensations he drummed up.

Braiding our fingers together, he started walking again. “Do you want me to walk you home—”

Cutting him off, I told him exactly what I wanted. “Back to your place, walk me back to your place.”

His fingers tightened around mine, tender yet greedy. “Let's go.”

I didn't want to go home. I wanted to finish what his kiss started. I wanted to feel more of him, I wanted him to touch me, to caress me, to deliver a sliver of goodness in this fucked up world.

The city was still, a few cars drove by here and there, and the occasional light was on in a window of the buildings we walked past. But most of the city was asleep, long before we left that bar. The distant chirp of sirens and the echo of a dog filled the silence around us.

I liked it, I liked feeling like we were the only ones there. In that moment, the city, the street, the sky and the moon—it was all ours.

“I'm up here, around the corner.”

“Wait, you're staying in the Hull?”

“Yeah, why?”



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“That's the most expensive place around.”

Shrugging his shoulder, his fingers tightened around mine, thumb rubbing the nub on my wrist. “It's home for now.”

“How long are you staying for?”

“Until I get what I came for.”

“You still haven't told me what that is.”

Liam's lips thinned as his eyes settled on my face. “I thought I knew before, but things have changed. Something special brought me half-way across the country, and it's not what I expected at all.”

“You're not going to tell me what it is, are you?”

“Nope.”

The hotel's front plaza emerged as we rounded the corner. Granite steps led up to a set of double glass doors. The center of the glass was frosted with the hotel name etched over the surface in looping swirls of calligraphy.

“I can't believe you're staying here.”

Glancing down on me, his head tipped into his shoulder, a single brow arching high. “And why's that?”

“I don't know, it's just that most of the time the only people I know that stay here are senators and the occasional famous actor or musician.” Staring down at the steps, I watched the black onyx swim in long streams through the white marble. “Most of the tourists stay over at the Gully or the Red Swan.”

“I'm not most tourists.” The doors slid open and I followed Liam to the elevator, hand in hand. Nodding at the receptionist, he hit the button and looked up at the glowing arrow.

I felt out of place and under dressed for that hotel. Looking down at my dirty jeans and paint stained sneakers, I uneasily twisted my toe into the fancy marble tiles.

“You alright?” he asked as the elevator dinged and the doors slid open.

“Yeah, I'm fine, I just don't feel like I belong here.” Plucking at my shirt, I looked myself over. “I mean look at me, I'm a mess.”

“You're not out of place here. If anything, this place doesn't fit you.” His smile warmed me, making my stomach do acrobatic tumbles.

“Thank you.” Stepping onto the elevator, Liam pushed number twenty-three, and before the doors even had time to close all the way, he was on me. His hands came up and tangled in my hair, his lips found my neck kissing and nipping.

Moaning softly, my head tilted back, giving him all the room needed. My sex was hot, throbbing and pulsing as his hands traced my ribs and teased the trim of my pants.

“Fuck, Glory, it's been hard as hell to keep my hands off of you.” Teeth nibbled the tender skin behind my ear, his tongue swirling over the surface and gently suckling my earlobe. “You have no idea how fucking hard it's been not to touch you. The walk

here was torture.”

“I’ve wanted you to touch me, I’ve been waiting for you to touch me.” The words spilled out as I exhaled, my fingers curling around his back to pull him closer.

Everything about us was raw, primal, driven by lust and desire. My brain had shut down, running on adrenaline and alcohol.

Did I know what I was doing? Absolutely.

But what was making the choices and decisions was debatable. I could say I was in charge, I could say that my mind was working at full speed and all of this was planned.

Except it wasn’t. The day had scarred me, it had made me want to hold onto something that made me feel good.

Because losing everything was too much for me to bear. It hurt, it stung, it created an open gash in my heart that needed immediate fixing.

And he became the glue I wanted to mend me.

Liam’s mouth found mine, his tongue dancing over the ridges. We were lost in each other, the passion and need all consuming.

The elevator came to a stop and the doors opened to release us into the hall. But we didn’t break apart from each other. Liam guided me backwards out of the elevator, his mouth still on mine, refusing to let go. Our steps were awkward and unbalanced as his arm wrapped my waist and my hands raked through his hair.

Reaching a door, he pushed me against it, trailing rough kisses down my throat as he

pulled the key card from his pocket and unlocked the door. Throwing it open, Liam's hands gripped under my ass and lifted me off my feet.

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Yes! Take me, give me something good to remember.

Kicking the door shut behind us, he carried me to the bed and threw me down. The mattress squeaked beneath me, replacing my voice. I didn't need to tell him what I wanted, my body said enough.

Looking up, his face was no longer that of a man, it was no longer human. . . He had turned wild. Fueled by sexual desire, Liam had lost all sense of himself and was being guided by animal instinct.

And I was ready for him to devour me whole.

Tearing his shirt over his head, he climbed on top of me, digging his fingers into my hair and tugging at the roots. “Fuck, I need you, Glory.” His words took shape over my skin as he whispered into my ear.

Arching my back, I exhaled a labored breath. “Take me, fuck me, just make me yours.” Rolling my hips, I opened my legs wider, pushing my mound against his lower belly.

“I'll make you mine, I'll make you mine over and over again.” Thick fingers tore my jeans open, ripping them down over my legs in one quick pull.

Throwing them to the floor, Liam raised up and started unbuttoning his pants. His cock was engorged, pushing angrily against the coarse fabric, begging to be set free.

My thighs shook, belly scrunching up tight as nerves ran rampant and fired off

electric snaps. I needed this so fucking bad, I needed to feel a release, I needed to feel him.

Kicking his jeans to the floor, his thick dick stood firmly behind his boxer briefs. The gray, form fitting fabric left little to my imagination.

I could see everything. His length pulsed, crown jumping out, trying to touch me.

Holy shit.

“You want that?” he asked, following my eyes to his hard muscle.

Biting my lower lip, I nodded, touching my neck and rolling my head to the side. Rubbing his hips with my thighs, I ran a single finger down my belly and stopped at the trim of my panties.

Liam let out a throaty growl, ripping my panties off in one pull. Pushing my shirt up, he fondled my breasts, pinching and plucking my nipples. “I'm going to make you scream, I'm going to make you remember me for the rest of your life.”

My pussy ached, wet and swollen. “Fuck me, stop talking and just fuck me.”

Slipping his boxers down, his cock bounced free. Gripping the base, Liam guided it towards my entrance. Rubbing the crown up and down over my clit, my body trembled.

The tender bundle of nerves on my sensitive button sent a wave of heat coursing through my body. There was no up and down, there was no day or night. I was fixated on the drug before me, ready to take my first hit.

My pussy grew wetter and wetter as the tip of his cock teased my entrance, forcing

me to whimper with a hard exhale.

His eyes never left mine, they stayed there, stopping the seconds from ticking away, and slowing down time. It was just us, nothing else. There was no hurt, there was no sadness or anger. Suspended in a permanent fragment of time, the world had shrunk down to two people.

Liam and myself.

Leaning over the edge of the bed, I heard him rustle around in his jeans. Foil paper cut through the air as he tore open a condom and slipped it swiftly over his hard dick.

With one push, he was buried deep inside my pussy, his cock stretching my walls to their max. Lowering down onto his forearms, he started off slow. Rocking his hips, he pulled away, then drove back in, each thrust deeper than the last.

My lids snapped shut, back jumping off the bed, as my heart steadied inside my chest. It was as if he was feeding my body, like I hadn't eaten in ages and he was keeping me alive. In that moment, I needed him more than the air around me.

Pistoning his hips, he slid in hard, hitting my lower belly. Everything went silent, I couldn't hear his lungs as he took in thick breaths, I couldn't hear my heart as it careened around inside my chest.

All I could do was see. I saw him, felt him, embraced him and what he stood for.

Liam was my hero, he was my savior, and right then. . . He had become my freedom from everything weighing me down.

His heavy breaths raked my throat, each grunt a soft burst against my skin. Thrusting with animalistic vigor, he forced my body to move little by little up the mattress.

Curling my nails into the blanket, I held on tight, wrapping my legs around his waist. Moaning, I met his pace, gyrating my hips and forcing my clit against his furry base. His lips captured mine; kissing me, tasting me, ravaging me with a deep seeded passion I could feel in my bones.

“Mm, fuck, Liam.” My voice was scratchy and harsh.



## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:35 pm*

I felt the tingle in my stomach, growing and morphing as his speed picked up and his cock thickened inside me. A thin sheen of sweat coated his chest, making him sparkle in the soft light of the hotel room.

He looked like a Greek god with his muscles flexing and his hair falling into his eyes. It felt surreal to be in his arms, to feel him inside me. A few hours ago I didn't know him, I had no clue he even existed.

And in a blink of an eye, he had become my everything.

The tension of the day melted away as his fingers dug into the small of my back, holding me still as he fucked me.

His thick cock teased my walls, forcing my thighs to spread like butterfly wings as my pussy milked his length.

Unlocking his lips from mine, Liam suckled my tit, nibbling on the pebbled bead. Dragging his tongue across my chest, he bit the other nipple and rolled it between his teeth.

“Harder, harder, don't stop.” Goosebumps jumped off my skin as the orgasm took shape, forcing my stomach to clench. I was ready, standing on the edge of insanity and eagerly waiting to jump.

And as the orgasm swept in, stealing me away, a small piece of my soul broke off and claimed this man. He was no longer just an ordinary guy, he was my safety.

Thrusting his hips, he gave one last hard push, and stilled on his arms above me. His cock throbbed, jerking violently and pulsing its life blood into the thin skin separating us.

Rolling off me and onto his side, he slid the condom off and dropped it into the trash beside the bed. Laying his arm over my stomach, he pulled me into his chest. I felt him nuzzle his face into my hair, as his fingers tickled up and down over my spine.

He didn't speak, I didn't speak, and we both drifted off to sleep.

I didn't think about what we had done. I hadn't allowed my brain to use its rational side or tell me that I wasn't thinking this through. My body had been in charge, calling all the shots.

And as sleep came in and took hold, I didn't think about my gallery or what had happened. I didn't think about the stress I had been dealing with or the assholes who were trying to take it away from me.

Liam's arms held me close, they made me feel like I was untouchable, and that reality could never reach me.

For that one night, I was happy.

\* \* \* \*

Ifelt the warm sunon my face as a soft glow lit the back of my lids. Blinking my eyes open, I felt a surge of pain slam into my skull.

Clutching the sides of my forehead, I rubbed vigorously, trying to ward off the hangover before it hit me like a tsunami with no remorse.

The light stung my eyes as I opened them wider, searing my pupils like hot needles. Rolling over fast, I groaned, stuffing my face into the pillow.

Memories of the day before flooded my brain, and I shot up in the bed, raking my nails through my hair. Glancing around the room, I tried to piece together all the images flashing behind my eyes.

Liam's hotel room. . . I'm actually here.

In my drunken state and alcohol hangover, my first thought when I woke up was that it was all a dream. That we had parted ways after the bar and the rest was just my crazy imagination.

That was not the case.

Looking around, the bathroom door was open, but the light was off inside, and Liam was no where to be found.

“Liam?” I asked, calling out. No response.

The wide, open room, blended with a full kitchen, and a small nook, with a long beige couch. But he wasn't anywhere I could see.

Where is he?

Lifting a hand to Liam's pillow, I touched it gently, and felt that it was cold.

He's gone. He's been gone.

The room was dead silent, and all I could hear was my heart pounding inside my chest.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:35 pm*

I was a one night stand.

The thought made me cringe, angry and frustrated at myself for allowing it to go that far. In the moment, in my alcohol induced state and angst over the destruction, I had allowed myself to be free.

But that freedom had gone too far.

Pressing my fingertips into my temples, I squeezed hard. I felt ridiculous for what I had done. Swooned by sex appeal, muscle, and pure lust, I tossed my morals out the window for one night of passion.

It was good while it lasted. You knew what you were doing. He never promised you anything.

It was just sex, plain and simple.

I wasn't sure why, but that stung. The thought of just being a quick roll in the sack with Liam hurt. It was a bad ending to an already horrible day.

Scooting to the edge of the bed, I pushed the tips of my toes into the plush carpet and looked around for my things.

My jeans were on the floor, my shirt was on the nightstand, my bra was sprawled out over the chair beside the window. But my panties. . . Picking them up off the end of the bed, I held the torn and ragged lace in my fingers, they were unusable.

Dropping them into the trash by the bed, I pulled on my clothes and grabbed my purse. Taking one last look around, a small piece of me was hoping to spot a note laying on the table or the dresser. There was nothing.

Another stab sliced my heart, forcing it to beat lazily. I wasn't sure what I expected really. I guess I just didn't think that he would take off while I was sleeping and leave me like that.

There weren't really any expectations. So why was I surprised and sad to see he was gone?

Slipping my feet into my sneakers, I ran my fingers through my hair and fixed it the best I could, eventually pulling it back into a low pony tail.

Standing in the elevator, I hit the button for the lobby. I didn't have time to wallow over this little bump in the road. I had shit to do.

Just forget him already. He did a nice thing, and he showed you a good time. That was it.

Rolling my eyes to myself, I leaned back against the wall, anxiously ready to be out of the hotel and as far away from any reminder of Liam I could get.

I'm not going to forget him, who am I kidding?

The memory would always be there, and there was no doubt it would bring a smile to my face.

He was too good to be true.

I should have known, I should have expected that to begin with.

I wished I had the ability to see what was coming, I wished I had the foresight of the road I was about to travel. It would have made everything a hell of a lot easier.

Unfortunately, crystal balls didn't exist in the real world.

Because this wouldn't be the last time I would see my knight in shining armor.

I just didn't know how dark his armor would turn out to be.

### Chapter Four

Liam

One week earlier

Sitting in the coffeeshop, I stirred a few packets of sugar into my coffee. Tapping the spoon on the rim of the cup, I rested it inside and took a sip. I couldn't think straight. For the first time in my life, I actually didn't have a damn clue what the hell I should do.

There's other ways we can do this.

Adjusting the cuffs on my sleeves, I stared out the window and watched for my partner. He was supposed to be there twenty minutes ago, but just like usual, he was late.

Staring off, I was startled by a set of heavy hands and a thick laugh. “Hey, asshole, waiting long?”

Rolling my eyes, I cleared my throat and leaned back in my chair. “Late much?”

“I know, but hey, at least you know I'm consistent.” Laughing, Jacob slid into the chair across from me with that stupid smile on his face he always had. “So, how did it go? Did you get it done?”

Shaking my head no, I fiddled with the handle of my cup. “She hasn't been there

when I've gone by. I mean, I can keep trying, but I think I might have found something better."

Waving his arm, he called out to a waitress standing by the counter. "Can I get some coffee over here?" His brows arched as she shot him a look. "Some time today would be nice."

Always entitled, like the world revolves around his dumb ass.

"Are you even listening?" I asked.

A stern look fell over his face as he relaxed into his seat. Throwing his arm out, he rolled his fingers in the air. "I was listening and I don't agree with you. There's nothing better here, we've already been through this place a million times." Throwing out a finger, he pointed at me, his lids folding like heavy blankets over his eyes. "And we're almost done, we're so fucking close. Why the hell would you go looking for something else?"

"Just hear me out, alright?" Cocking his head into his shoulder, his lips went thin as I kept talking. "There's a building a few blocks over from here, it has a great view of the harbor and a ton of space we could work with. I was thinking, maybe this time we use something that's already available. And instead of building a hotel, what if we turned it into luxury apartments?"

"Apartments? That's your bright fucking idea?" Letting out a sigh, a sarcastic smile teased his lips. "You want to put our name on an apartment building that's going to end up going to shit anyway? You're fucking with me right?" Jacob's voice had deepened, his eyes turning to pinpricks as he spoke. "That's not what we do, Liam. We don't play dress up with shit, paint it yellow and call it gold. We—"

Leaning forward, I held up my hand to stop him from trying to belittle me. "Don't



start, Jacob.” Letting our eyes connect, I matched his stare. “I know what we do, but I really think you should just think about it. It would work, I know it would. Why don't you come check it out with me, see it for your—”

“No, we're not doing that shit. We came here for one thing and one thing only, that's what we agreed on.” Stabbing his finger into the table top, his glare hardened. “What's gotten into you? Why would you even suggest something like that?”

“Fuck you man, none of this shit was set in stone. We had an idea, and now there's a new idea. What the hell is wrong with that?”

We both went silent as the waitress approached the table and placed Jacob's coffee down. He sat there, glaring at me as if he was the one who was in charge of this whole empire, and I should know better than to go against him.

But the truth was—he wasn't in charge, I was.

It was a seventy thirty split between us, plain and simple. The company was in both our names, not just his, not just mine, but I held the larger chunk. That's how our father wanted it.

And for good reason.

He had a rap sheet the length of my arm. Most of the shit was stupid; petty left, receiving stolen goods, just dumb shit he didn't have to do.

It always felt like he went out and did that shit just to piss off our father. Like he was giving him the finger and letting him know that he was going to do whatever the hell he wanted to, and no one could stop him.

He was a boy who was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, and he used that to his

advantage. Jacob expected the fucking world without having to lift a finger.

He hadn't earned a damn thing, he simply had it handed to him on silver platter. And even that wasn't done by choice.

Our father was gracious enough to leave him something, because that's what our mother had wanted. If my father could have had his way, he wouldn't have left Jacob with a damn pot to piss in.

Working with family wasn't a simple task. He was my older brother, and I knew the fact that our father left a larger piece of his legacy to me really pissed on his parade. In his eyes he deserved it, just because he was the first born.

I could shut the whole fucking thing down if I wanted to, but I tried to treat him like we were equal.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:35 pm*

It didn't matter, Jacob always walked around like he was king shit, and most of the time I let him. Because I never really cared before.

Before this, it was always easier to just let him do it his way. I'd nod my head in agreement, make him feel like we were seeing eye to eye. And as long he didn't fuck up anything, it worked fine for me.

This time was different. I didn't want the same thing as him, and I wasn't going to just sit back and let him steam roll the entire fucking project.

Not anymore.

“Liam, we both know what needs to happen, so get it done.” His lips thinned as he spoke, brows angling hard. “This isn't a fucking vacation, we're not here to sight see. We need those lots—all of them.”

“I'll think about it,” I said harshly, standing up and squaring my shoulders. “I'll try one more time, but I'm not making any promises.” Tossing some money on the table, I turned to leave.

Jacob threw his hands up, his tone full of frustration. “What the hell does that mean? We already decided. Where the fuck are you going? Don't just walk away from me.”

Flicking my head over my shoulder, I snapped. “No—youdecided, but I have the final say, don't forget that. It's my word that makes it happen, not yours.”

“Why are you being such a dick?!” he yelled as I stormed towards the door.

The room fell silent at his outburst, but I didn't look back. This wasn't up for debate, not anymore.

I was taking control of this before he ruined everything. We might be brothers, but that didn't mean I had take his side.

I had other plans.

It wasn't until a day later that I heard from my brother. And I was actually surprised it took him that long to call me. I never told him no before, not once.

“What do you want, Jacob?” Resting the phone on my ear, I walked to the closet and began sifting through.

“You shouldn't have walked out on me like that, we weren't done talking, Liam. This needs to happen, you know it does.”

“I told you I would think about it, I'm not done thinking yet.” Silence greeted me on the other end of the line. “Jacob, you still there?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he asked, his tone thick and heavy. “First, you storm off like a fucking baby, and now you're pulling this garbage. I didn't go through all of this fucking shit for you to suddenly get cold feet. We talked about this, we both agreed we'd do what we needed to in order to get what we wanted.”

Closing the closet, I stalked across the hotel room, laying out my clothes on the bed. “We have another option, I don't know why you're so resistant to it.”

“Liam, you can't back out now, you can't just put the brakes on like this. We're partners, I thought we made this decision months ago.”

“No, we're not partners, we're brothers.” Standing in front of the window, I looked out at the ocean. “And you came up with this, not me. I never said yes or no, I followed your lead like I always do. But things can change, I'm not your damn puppet.”

“We worked so hard already, we spent months negotiating with everyone else. There's no reason for us to change it now, we're so close, you just have to—”

Cutting him off, I shoved his words back down his throat. “Jacob, I'm done talking about this.”

Growling, he let out a heavy breath into the receiver. “And what about the rest of them, huh?”

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I kicked my shoes off. “We hand them back, nothing was signed and stamped. All we have right now is a bunch of people waiting on us. We can back out without any issues, no harm done. I'm sure half those people don't really want to sell anyway.”

“Do you know what I had to do to make this happen? Do you have any idea what I put into this project from the beginning?” I could hear his anger building as his voice lowered. “I won't let you destroy this, Liam, I'll do what I have to in order to get this done. I'll find a way, money talks, I'll talk to someone until I find what I need.”

“What the hell does that mean?” The line clicked, static filling my ear. “Jacob? Jacob, you there?”

The line went dead.

### Chapter Five

#### Glory

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Pushing the door shut in my apartment, I flopped down onto my couch. The plush mahogany cushions curved around my head and shoulders, cradling my body.

I was exhausted. Having had way too much to drink and my brain overloaded with every emotion known to man, I could barely function. Dropping my arm like dead weight off the side, I rested the other across my eyes.

What to do? What to do?

What the fuck am I going to do?

Words and images were blowing through my mind like a tornado. The destruction, the man, Liam. . .

My chest constricted as ghostly sensations of his hands on my body took over, and sharp hairs prickled their way down my skin.

No, not him, he's not what you need to think about.

I tried to force myself to think of what really mattered, creating a series of everything that needed to get done, and putting them in order.

Call my customers, clean the gallery, buy new supplies, paint my ass off.

Don't think of Liam!

His bright blue eyes flashed in my mind, causing my stomach to twinge with that familiar flutter of excitement. Clutching my belly, I rolled onto my side. I wasn't sure what it was about him that made me feel so tingly.

This is stupid. It was a one night stand, get over it.

My phone pinged in my purse, so I dug it out and checked the message. Ten messages were on my screen, all of them from my mother. She was last person I really wanted to talk to right then.

'Glory, rent is due in a few days, are you coming over?'

'Honey, did you get my message?'

'Hello? Call your mother!'

Her messages increased in worry and I wasn't surprised. I was all she had left. After losing my father, she seemed to clutch me harder. But I couldn't give her the same back. I was pulling away because things felt different, while she was doing everything to keep me close.

The distress over what had happened came back ten fold, making me even more pissed and upset. She relied on me for everything, so this gallery wasn't just about my existence, but hers too.

I loved my mother, don't get me wrong, but it was my job to care for her now. That was a heavy burden to carry, even as an adult.

It was a promise I had made to my father when I found out he was sick. And there was no way I'd ever break it, not a chance in hell. He died knowing that I would make sure she would always be alright. I wasn't going to let him down, not ever.

'Yes, I'm here. Sorry, long night, just waking up, I'll be by soon.' Turning my phone off, I dropped it onto the coffee table and stretched my arms up over my head.

Looking around the quiet space, I searched for my planner. I had to focus on what mattered. I needed to get my shit together.

Standing up, I walked to my desk, and rummaged around. Spotting the bright red planner, I pulled out the chair and sat down. My fingers shook as I pulled back the cover, knowing exactly how hard it was going to be to make those phone calls.

Hi, this is Glory from Glory's Gallery. I hate to call you like this, but. . .

I have some bad news. . .

I regret to inform you. . .

Damn it!



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:35 pm*

Driving the tips of my fingers into my temples, I drew rough circles into the skin. Closing my eyes, I let out a nervous breath, and reached out for the phone. Dialing the first set of numbers, I pressed the receiver to my ear.

“Hi, I'm looking for Mr. Vangaurd.” Running my finger up and down the spiral binding, I plucked the thin metal coil. “Mr. Vangaurd, this is Glory, from Glory's Gallery. I'm calling you because I have some bad news. . .”

Resting the phone on the base, I checked off the last name on my list. I ended up with a mixed bag. Some of my customers were very understanding, others were sorry to hear about what happened, but wanted a refund anyway. And the select few gave me an ear full, demanding their money back as soon as possible.

It could have been worse.

Pushing the planner to the side, I spun in my chair and cupped my hands between my thighs. Staring blankly into my apartment, I let my eyes settle over everything and nothing at all.

I felt like a zombie, unsure of how to move my feet forward, not knowing which direction to step or if I even wanted to.

My stomach grumbled for food and my throat was dry as I swallowed from alcohol dehydration. Making my way into the kitchen, I poured myself a bowl of cereal and a glass of orange juice.

I felt strange. Everything felt strange. I didn't feel like me, not in the sense I was used

to. I ate my food, but it had no flavor. I drank my juice, but I didn't taste the tartness of oranges.

Before yesterday, I felt everything. I could see colors in any object, I could smell and taste and feel inanimate objects as if they were alive.

But not today, not now.

It was as if the life had been sucked from not just me, but everything around me. The ceramic bowl pinged off the sink as I dropped it inside, and my brain instantly went to the image of Liam toasting the days ahead.

His smile, that dimple, the way his hair fell into his face and brushed his brows. The picture behind my eyes forced my heart to skip and made my body warm under the skin.

Damn it! I don't need this right now!

Holding the counter, my head dipped into my chest. I couldn't stay here, there was too much silence that allowed that man to steal my thoughts. Turning on my heels, I grabbed my tote and left.

There's no time to sit around. Shit needs to get done.

\* \* \* \*

Standing in the doorway of my gallery, I felt the same feelings that I had the day before. And I felt stupid. My night with Liam did nothing to erase what happened. It didn't fix one fucking thing.

I should have stayed here in the first place.

Stepping over the debris, I made my way to the desk in the back of the room and dropped my bag on top. It didn't matter where I looked, all I could see was my life getting torn into shreds.

Doing a walk through of the back room, I felt like my heart had been ripped out and smashed on the floor all over again. I literally had nothing left. The walls were painted with splashes of color, lewd words and profanity were written all over the place.

Walking back to the front, my feet dragged, weighed down like I was wearing lead anchors. I can't do this. There's no way I'm ever going to come back from this.

Pulling out my phone, I started taking pictures so I had something to show the insurance company. At least I'd get something back to help put the pieces back together.

Every click of the button captured a screen shot of what I lost, a frozen keepsake of my life in ruins. Pulling a folder from my tote, I rummaged through and found the papers with my insurance company info on it.

Plugging the numbers into my phone, the ringing echoed in my ear. After the third ring, a computerized voice picked up and let me know that they had a large volume of calls and someone would be with me shortly.

Listening to the music, I looked over my shoulder. My cheeks went from pink to red as I spotted the lovely makeover that had been done to my sign.

Glory Hole. . . Real fucking funny, Asshole.

“Hello, Graham and Tobin Insurance, can I help you?”

“Hi, yes, my name is Glory Daniels, and I'm calling because I had a recent break-in and wanted to make a claim.”

I could hear the woman tapping against a keyboard as she said, “Sure, let's pull up your information. Can I have the address of the unit.”

After giving her the address, my birthday, my social, and the policy number, I heard her let out a soft sigh.

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“Hm,” she said, the clicking of her fingertips loud and unnerving.

“What? What is it?”

“Ms. Daniels, there's no easy way for me to put this, but you're not covered under that policy anymore.”

“I'm not what?” My voice drew out confused and uneasy. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, it looks like we didn't receive a payment from you last month.”

“No, no that's not right. I know I sent it.” Digging around in my bag, I found my checkbook and yanked it out. “I can tell you the check number, let me get it.”

“Sure, take your time. It doesn't happen very often, but there are times where our system is behind and information processes late. If we can show proof of payment we can retro activate your policy.”

Flipping through the checks, my thumb rode the thin papers like a deck of cards. “I have it right here, I just need to find it.” A loose sheet flew out, floating to the floor. Bending over, I picked it up and turned it over.

No. . . No fucking way.

Shit!

“I . . . I never sent it.”

“Excuse me?” she asked.

“I have it here, I meant to send it, and I guess I didn't.” My heart sank deeper into my chest, the painful realization settling like a boulder in my gut.

“Alright, that's not an issue. We can reinstate it over the phone and you'll have coverage starting today.”

“But what about the damage to my building? Will it cover that?”

“No, I'm sorry, anything between yesterday and the end of last month won't be covered.”

“Are you serious? There's nothing you can do to fix this?”

“I'm sorry, Ms. Daniels, we can't prorate your policy.”

Dropping the phone from my ear after making a payment so I was covered again, I ended the call. The screen flashed to the last picture I had taken, and I was tempted to throw my phone across the room.

I just couldn't win. Nothing was going my way, there didn't seem to be a light at the end of the tunnel. Everything just kept getting worse.

Don't give up. You can't let this stop you. My father's voice chimed in my head, reminding me what I needed to do.

I worked too hard for this. I put everything into this place. It wasn't just my lifeblood, it was my mother's too. Without me, my mother would have nothing. I couldn't let her

get evicted from her apartment, leaving her hungry and broke.

Taking a deep breath, I grabbed the trash can and pulled it into the center of the room. I had to try, I couldn't give up even if it felt like this was the end.

Picking up wood shards and canvas, I started filling the bin. Piece by piece, I dropped my very existence into the garbage.

A soft knock on the door forced my ears to perk, but I didn't look. I didn't really care who was there, it didn't matter. "Sorry, I'm closed."

"But your sign says open."

Snapping my back straight, my head jerked over my shoulder. I was half expecting to be dreaming, anticipating an empty doorway as my brain played tricks on me.

"Hey," Liam said as he stepped inside. "I figured I'd find you here."

What the hell is he doing here?

Throwing my hands to my hips, I cocked a brow. "Where else would I be? I should have been here all along."

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I knew when I said it that it sounded a lot angrier than I meant it to. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little ticked off that he abandoned me the way he had.

No note, no thank you, but you can leave now; all I got was a cold empty bed.

“Well, I thought I'd find you where I left you, but you were gone.”

“And I thought I'd find you next me, but you were gone.” My voice was harsh, layered with annoyance and frustration. “You could have at least had the decency to tell me to go and not leave me to wake up alone.”

Holding out his hands, he walked closer. “Wait a minute, you think I left because all I wanted was sex?”

“That is how a one night stand works, isn't it?”

“Who said it was a one night stand?”

“You were gone when I woke up, what else would you call it?”

A smug grin filled his face as he shook his head. “I was going to call it breakfast, but when I got back you weren't there.”

Shit. . .

“What the hell are you talking about?”



“I left to go get us breakfast. I planned on waking you up with hot coffee for the headache you probably had and fresh bagels.” Holding up a small cup and a paper bag, he waved the bag side to side. “This isn't the same coffee, I got you new one, so it's hot.”

I felt like a complete asshole. I had jumped to a conclusion before I knew the truth, reading the situation totally wrong.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, seriously. I'm not one of those guys, Glory, I'm sorry if that's the impression you had of me.”

Dropping my arms to my hips, my shoulders rolled forward in embarrassment. “I'm sorry, I just thought you left because it was easier than telling me to get out.”

Laughing, he strolled forward and reached out to touch my cheek. “Next time I won't leave you like that, I'll make sure to leave a note or something first. I never meant for you to think I was done with you.”

My belly tumbled again, filling with the same warmth I had felt the day before. “Well, don't I feel like an asshole now.”

“No, don't do that to yourself. I should have let you know I was going out, I understand why you thought that.” His thumb swirled over my face, caressing me softly. “I shouldn't have done it that way, and I won't do that again.”

Smiling, I felt my cheeks light up. “So you really want there to be a next time?”

“If you'll let me.”

Nodding, I shied away, tilting my head towards the floor. "I think I'd like that."

Snatching my hand, he wrapped it around the coffee with a smile. "Good," he said, glancing around. Liam stalked the room, making his way to the desk and placing the bag of food on top. "So, what can I do to help?"

"Well, you already said you can't paint." Letting out a labored chuckle, I kicked a broken frame. "Without these paintings, I'm screwed."

It was depressing to think of all the shit I needed to start over. I wasn't sure if I would even be able to do it. Mount Everest had just relocated, growing out of the ground and blocking me from my gallery.

"No, but I can clean." Grabbing long wood shards, he piled them up in the crook of his arm as his eyes searched the area. "Got another bin? I think you're going to need more than just one."

"You don't have to do that." Scratching my head, I squeezed my temples. "I just can't believe this. Fuck, that asshole did a real number here. I had to cancel orders, and convince my buyers to give me some time to create them something else." Closing my eyes, I dragged my hands down over my face. "It sucked, I lost so much business because of this."

"Don't worry, we'll get this cleaned up."

"No, no, I can't let you do this. You've already done enough, this isn't your problem. I can't ask you to do anything else."

"You're not asking, I'm insisting." Liam kept bending and picking up garbage, his pile growing larger and larger. "I'm helping you, I can't just leave you here to do this on your own. And I'm definitely not going to let you be alone here until I know you're

safe, and that prick isn't going to try and come back. So,” he said, standing with his back straight and his arms full. “Another trash can?”

Who is this man?

And where the hell did he come from?

My heart pitter pattered, body igniting to his demand to help and keep me safe. The way he said it, it was as if he meant every word. He didn't waver as he spoke, he didn't sound insincere and full of shit.

Arching his brows, he jiggled his arms like the weight was becoming too much and he was about to topple over.

“Yeah, there's one in there,” I said, nodding my head towards a door on the wall to our right. Walking to the closet, I grabbed the second bin, and dragged it towards him so he could empty his arms. “I really appreciate this, thank you.”

“Don't thank me just yet, there's still a lot to do.” Liam's dirty blonde hair swept across his forehead as he leaned down, grabbing more of the carnage off the floor.

For over an hour the two of us cleaned up the trash and debris, dropping armful after armful of my life into the bin.

“There is so much I need to do to get back to where I was, I don't know how I'm going to fix it,” I said, cupping my waist and raking my fingers down my neck.

Liam had grabbed a broom from the closet and was sweeping the tiny bits into a pile in the center of the room. His arms bulged, rolling under the skin in waves. My body tingled with ghostly sensations of what it felt like when he touched me, when he held

me, when he had his way with me.

Sweat was starting to trickle down over his temples, his shirt damp and dark across his chest as he stood up straight and rested his arm on the tip of the broom stick.

My heart skipped inside, hiccuping with irregular beats as his muscles flexed and twitched beneath the fabric.

Tilting his head into his shoulder, he eyed me with a sideways grin. The lust was probably written all over my face with rosy red cheeks and my gawking eyes. As much as I wanted to enjoy him right then, I had to keep my head in check.

Flicking my eyes away, I cleared my throat. “I never expected I'd be starting from the ground up again.”

It felt like everything I had worked for had burned. There were no actual flames, there was no ash or charred remains, but that man might as well have drenched the entire place with gasoline and lit a match.

“Don't let this get to you. We can get you better locks, some more supplies, and you can trap yourself in here for two weeks to build up your inventory. Shit, we can even get you a mini-fridge and a toaster oven so you don't even have to leave to eat.”

“That sounds like over kill if you ask me, but if you're trying to make me smile, it's working.” A slight grin teased my lips, my cheeks lifting in appreciation for everything this man had done for me—for a stranger, a woman he knew nothing about.

Good guys still exist.

“Maybe that's exactly what I was trying to do.” Dropping his gaze to the floor, he

jerked his head. “You want to grab that dustpan and give me a hand? Or you can stand there and just look pretty, I don't mind that either.”

My lips spread higher, cheeks heating like I was holding hot coals in my mouth. “Sure, I can do that.”

Squatting down, I pushed the dustpan against the pile, trying to think of a way to show him how grateful I was for the help. The room was almost spotless, bare and clean just like the first day I walked in.

Aside from the walls, it looked brand new again. After a few coats of fresh paint, I'd be back to square one; a blank canvas.

Liam didn't have to do what he did, he could have looked in, decided to turn a blind eye, and keep going on his way. But he didn't, he stopped, he came to my rescue.

And I liked that. A lot.

My guardian angel. . .

Stretching his arms over his head, Liam rocked his shoulders side to side. “I don't know about you, but I'm getting hot as hell in here.” Slinking his fingers under the hem of his shirt, he rolled it up over his stomach as he tugged it off.

Holy fuck. . .

I was numb.

Trying not to stare, I flicked my eyes around. But his stomach looked like marble stepping stones, creating a solid path up to his chest. His arms were thick and hard, muscles rolling beneath the surface like boulders.

Somehow, it felt like I had missed all this greatness in the frenzy of lust the night before. There was no time to truly appreciate his body and strong physique while I was under his spell.

Wiping his forehead with his t-shirt, he draped it over his shoulder. “Let's finish this up, then there's something I want to show you.”

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“And what is that?” I asked, emptying the dustpan. “I can't imagine that there's anything in this town I haven't already seen.”

“I bet you'd be surprised.” His lip twitched in a devilish grin, that damn dimple stealing my thoughts and forcing my stomach into my throat.

The temperature in the room had risen, causing my hands to become clammy and my lungs to struggle to take in air. I was about to strip my shirt off too and wipe him down with it just to have an excuse to touch him all over.

I had to stop staring at his bare chest and raw back, it was making my heart beat fast and my sex throb. Watching his ribs expand as he took a deep breath, watching the sweat trickle down slowly over his broad shoulders and racing down the v-shape at his waist; it was too alluring, too much temptation at the wrong time.

The guy was sexy as hell. But I didn't have time to ogle my hero, there was work to be done.

“So tell me, of all the places you could go for your business opportunity, why the hell did you come to Vienna?” Leaning against the plastic barrel, I tucked the dustpan under my arm.

“I heard there was an amazing art scene.” Winking, he swiveled the broom, turning around to sweep the space behind him.

My eyes kept soaking in his body; the rigid muscles in his back, all the hard dips and strong curves, I was mesmerized.



Thick black lines painted an image on his shoulder blades, splashes of color filled in empty space, forcing the tattoo to jump off his body. The design morphed as he moved, arching and dancing over his skin like it was alive.

I hadn't noticed his tattoo the night before. It had gone completely undiscovered in the moon colored room as he pinned me on my back.

Squinting, I angled my head to see the picture as a whole. It was a fish, filled in with hundreds of small dots and lines.

I wanted to trace it with my fingertips and follow the maze it created. My hands were tingling, tempted to reach out and stroke his skin. Walking up behind him, I gently ran my fingertips across his shoulders. I couldn't stop myself, I had to touch him.

“I like your tattoo. Did it hurt?”

Looking down at me over his shoulder, he smiled. “Not really.” Grabbing a piece of canvas from the trash, he held up the ripped painting, rotating it in the air. “You know, you'd make an awesome tattoo artist. Have you ever thought about it?”

That one was one of my favorites. . .

My eyes stung with painful tears as I looked at the picture and remembered it for what it once was. It had been one I was proud of, one that I was going to hang high in the gallery and never sell.

It used to be the image of a woman, her body stretched over a wall as she brushed her thin fingers ever so softly across water. I had painted it from beneath, like the viewer was standing just below the surface and was gazing up.

That one meant a lot to me. It was how I used to feel. Trapped inside myself, always

the one looking out, never the one looking in. I could still feel the release after I finished it. It was as if I had locked that part of myself in the painting, sealing it inside forever.

That painting had set me free.

But staring at it now, torn and tattered, a mere fragment of what it once was, I felt like those captured emotions had escaped and were trying to find their way back inside my mind.

Blinking my eyes rapidly, I refused to let the tears break free, forcing them back into the cavern they came from.

You're not that person anymore.

“You alright?” Liam tilted his head, his face contorting, trying to figure out what I was thinking. “What's wrong?”

Am I that transparent?

“Yeah, I'm alright. It's just all of this, that's all.” Frowning, I shook my head. “I couldn't do that, I could never be a tattoo artist. I'd be too afraid to screw it up. You don't get to erase a mistake on skin. Once it's there, there's no going back.”

Pursing his lips, it looked like he wanted to poke me more about what was running through my brain. He didn't, and I was grateful for that.

“That's true, but once it's there, it becomes a part of your story.” Pressing my picture against his ribs, he bounced his eyebrows against his forehead. “I don't know, this would look really nice right here. Maybe you should consider it.”

“Yeah, I'll keep that on the back burner.” Laughing, I turned and attempted to walk towards the closet. Thick fingers quickly pinned me at the hips, pulling me back and spinning me around.

Liam's eyes burned, the bright blue now a caustic mix of indigo and sapphire. “Where you going? I was enjoying having you so close.” His teeth bit down on his bottom lip, hands moving slowly from my hips to the small of my back.

Letting my hands come to rest on his chest, we stood quietly for moment. My stomach flipped, knotting up like corded rope as Liam kept his gaze anchored on mine, his bright blues taunting me with the passion we had shared.

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The silence between us made my ears ring. It was strange how connected I became right at that moment to all the subtle noises growing around us.

His breathing picked up, my heart hammered inside my head, his lips smacked together, my breath hitched in response. His fingers delicately ran up and down the curve of my spine, my back arched in need of more.

“What would you think if I kissed you right now?” he asked, drawing small circles with his thumbs in the divots above my ass. “Would you kiss me back?”

Liam leaned in and I held my breath instinctively as I waited for him to kiss me. But he didn't, he bypassed my lips, allowing just the heat off his mouth to flutter against my skin.

With the weight of a feather, his lips brushed my cheek, tender and warm. “Would you let me fuck you, right here, right now?”

A thunderbolt rumbled through my muscles, jarring the bundle of nerves between my thighs. My sex grew hot and wet, tingling and aching with need.

“Is that what you want?” Under hooded lids, I nibbled on my lip, swirling my fingers around his pecs.

I was trying so hard to stay calm, to not let this nervous twitch make me push back and run away.

It's not like you didn't just sleep with him last night!

Stop being so nervous!

“I don't want it, I need it.” His fingers ran down over my ass, tugging me in closer. The thick muscle of his cock forged its way against my belly, taunting me with pleasure. “Does that scare you?”

Inhaling a sharp breath, I tipped my head up. There wasn't anything for me to say, no words were necessary, nothing was there that even mattered.

Shaking my head no, my body relaxed, falling effortlessly against his. “Should it?” I asked. “Should it scare me?”

Liam slid his hands up my body, slow and painfully delicate as he barely grazed the sides of my breasts and scooped my face into his hands. His eyes searched mine, but I didn't know what he was looking for.

Did he want to see my approval?

Was he looking for the fear he thought he saw?

“There are a lot of things that you should be scared of, but I'm not one of them.” His eyes flicked between mine, searching for understanding.

“And why should I believe you?” My nipples hardened as my breasts tickled against his bare chest, and my fingers kept slinking down, teasing the edge of his jeans. I was giving him my answer with touch, hoping he could see that I wanted him too.

With his hands around my face, he filled the small void between us, kissing my lips gently, then pulling away to look at me again.

His grip was firm on my cheeks as he palmed my face and the tips of his fingers dug

into the base of my skull, holding me in place. He was controlling my head, pulling it in for another quick kiss, then pushing away to look down on me and read my reaction.

“Why do you look so unsure?” Questioning him, I danced my fingertips around his chest. “If you couldn't tell last night, I enjoy being with you.”

“This is different,” he said, kissing the curve of my jaw.

Dipping my head towards my shoulder, I let him manipulate me with his touch. “How is this different?”

“Because last night was an impulse. I want to make sure this time, you really want it.”

Puckering my lips, I angled my head so I could look at him. “You don't know me well enough to know if last night was an impulse. Maybe when I want something, I just take it.”

Liam's eyes washed over my face, his lips twisting into a crooked smirk. “You're a naughty little thing, aren't you?”

“I guess you're just going to have to find out for yourself.”

Kiss after kiss slowly morphed from testing to devouring. My hands found his hair, raking over his scalp to keep him close. His fingers twined deep into my locks, knotting strands around each finger.

We were winding our bodies together, lips on lips, hands grabbing and groping, holding and squeezing. The air around us grew hot and thick as my chest constricted with need.

Swooping me off my feet, Liam carried me to the desk, and placed me down on top. Our tongues danced and swirled, tasting and licking. Strong hands gripped my hips, tugging me into his waist and guiding my legs around his back.

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We didn't say another word, neither one of us could. We were both so lost in greed, trapped in a savage lust to take each other, our voices weren't needed.

I felt his fingers as they found the button on my pants and jerked it free. Shimmying my hips side to side, he worked my jeans over my thighs, tearing them off my legs. Grunting, Liam ran his lips over my neck, nibbling my collarbone, and shoulder.

“Mm,” I moaned, letting my head fall back as he turned his attention from my mouth to my body.

The man felt so good. His hands, his mouth, his fingers, it didn't matter how he touched me, all I felt was raw trembles as they raced up my spine and through my muscles.

I had never felt like this before, not with any other man I had dated over the years. There was never this level of passion, not like this.

“Fuck, that's sweet.” His voice crushed my ears, turning my insides into mush. “I love when you moan, it's like fucking music.”

With labored breaths, I sat up straight, and started to work at his pants. I wanted them gone, I wanted him inside me. I wanted to feel the same ecstasy I had the night before. The man was like a drug, and all I wanted was more.

His cock pushed angrily against the scratchy material, eager to be let loose. Sliding his pants down his legs, Liam's cock popped free, thick and firm. He was engorged, pulsing and throbbing as I took his length in my hand and squeezed.



Snapping his eyes shut, his head fell back as he groaned. “Uh, damn, baby, that feels good.” Stroking his cock, I palmed the hard muscle from base to tip.

Gripping my knees, Liam pushed my thighs open, and flicked my panties to the side. Shifting his hips, I guided him towards my entrance, completely driven by the addiction running through my veins. My pussy was soaked, drenched in liquid arousal.

I couldn't think of anything right then but feeling him buried deep inside me. There were no rational thoughts inside my head, not one. I had been brought to nothing more than animal instinct. That itching, burning need that claws at your gut and takes control.

Liam's tip glided inside slow and precise, his eyes locking on mine as if nothing else existed in the world but us. His hands swept in, capturing my ass, as his cock continued to fill my sex and my walls stretched to fit him inside.

“You're so tight, so wet,” he said, whispering in my ear as he pulled our bodies together. “Fuck baby, you feel so good.” Dropping his forehead onto my shoulder, his arms wrapped my ribs, and his pace quickened.

Thrusting hard, our bodies meshed together. My legs curled and hooked around his waist, fingers raking his scalp and tearing into the back of his neck as his cock went deep and hit my lower belly.

I felt the tingle start in my core, radiating outward, and attacking every inch of exposed skin. I was quivering from head to toe, completely drunk in a trance that I couldn't shake off.

Liam growled, his hips giving one last thrust. “Ah, fuck, Glory.” His words drifted out, a perfect blend of breath and voice as he caught himself on the desk. “I can

barely stand.”

His cock was still buried inside me, pulsing and throbbing as goosebumps decorated his skin like small mountain peaks. Shaking his head, he threw his hands to his face and stepped back.

Tucking his length back into his pants, he bent down to the floor and picked up my jeans. “Here, you might want these.” Drawing in long slow breaths, he stepped back, turning to face the back wall, and ran his hands through his hair. “I . . . I’m sorry about that. I couldn’t stop it, I just wanted you so bad again. I don’t know what came over me.”

“What? Why are you apologizing? It’s not like I told you no.” Jumping off the desk, I slipped my pants back on and stared at the back of his head.

I felt so confused and couldn’t figure out why he suddenly felt bad about what we did. I wanted it too, it wasn’t like he forced me.

“I know, it’s just. . .” Ticking his head over his shoulder, I watched him rub his jaw. “Forget it, it doesn’t matter.”

“Liam—”

Throwing up his arm, he turned around to face me with a forced smile. “No, really, forget it.” Glancing around, he walked in a small circle. “Looks like we’re done here. It’s pretty close to perfection if you ask me.”

What was he going to say?

I was tempted to press him, to find out what he was about to tell me. But I decided to just leave it alone. If he had something he wanted to tell me, some piece of

information that he felt I deserved to know, I was going to let him do it when he felt it was time.

“I can't tell you how much I appreciate this.”

“It's not a problem, really.”

Biting my lower lip, I squinted my eyes. “Have you heard from you cop friend?”

“Not yet, but I'm not surprised either, this shit takes time.”

Chewing the inside of my cheek, I braided my fingers together and leaned back against the edge of the desk. “Does he need to talk to me?”

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“He might, and if he does he'll let me know.” Wiping his forehead with the back of his hand, he picked up the broom off the floor and put it back in the closet. “So, are you curious about what I want to show you?”

“A little.” Wiping my hands on my pants, I looked around, happy to not have to look at the mess of art bleeding on the floor. “What is it?”

“You're just going to have to wait until we get there.”

Eyeing him curiously, I smiled. “Okay then. Thank you again for all this.”

“You have to stop thanking me.”

“What am I supposed to do then?” Giggling, I watched him slink over the clean floor with a smile.

“Just enjoy what I can give you.”

Cocking my head, my brows scrunched into the bridge of my nose. “And what is it you plan on giving me?”

“A fresh start.” His fingertips slipped over my neck, and his eyes sparkled with a hidden agenda.

But it wasn't just his extremely sexy voice or sharp features that grabbed me. There was something about him; his presence could be felt, his kindness didn't seem like a mask.

When he talked, I felt it. When he looked at me, I felt it. When he touched me, it went deeper than the surface, heating me to the core.

“I don't understand.” Tilting my head against his hand, I stared back at him.

“You will.” Smiling, Liam bent down and kissed the top of my head. “I promise you that.”

My life was starting to feel like a fairy tale. I had suddenly morphed into Cinderella and Liam had become my Prince Charming.

I had never believed in shit like that before. That you could stumble into someone who could make you feel things you never knew existed. Like the world didn't matter as long as that person was standing right there beside you.

But the look in his eyes was making me reconsider everything I thought I knew.

Because maybe I had found my prince after all.

### Chapter Six

#### Glory

“Open your eyes,” Liam said, whispering the words against my ear.

Slowly, I blinked my eyes open, forcing the bright sun back into normal shadows. “Where are we?” I asked, looking around.

We were standing in an old stone-walled room with a dirty worn wood floor, and large windows that looked out over the harbor.

I could see the sailboats as they bounced against the waves, moving against the current. Florescent orange buoys bobbed and dipped, rocking back and forth like the hand of a metronome. Just beyond the buoy line a large cluster of seagulls flapped their wings, some dropping into the heard as others flew away.

Stepping to the window, I looked down at the street below. We had to be at least ten or eleven stories up, high enough to have a view, but still low enough to see fine details beneath us.

“This is one of the reasons why I came here.” Stepping up beside me, he stared out into the horizon with a smile on his face. “Beautiful isn't it?”

“We're in the old Vienna Mill, right?”

“Yeah, you're exactly right.” Wrapping his hands behind his back, his shoulders

squared with proud confidence.

“Why are you showing me this? Are you part of a construction team or something?”

“You could say that.” Smiling, Liam turned, tilting his head as his eyes fell over my face. “What do you think?”

Shrugging a shoulder, I flicked my eyes away. “I don't know. I guess it would be nice to not see this place just get abandoned. It's a beautiful building, but I still don't understand why I'm here.”

“This town has so much potential, it needs more than what it has to survive. I want to help with that. I used to come here when I was a kid with my parents. We had this little summer cottage we rented off of Fault's cove. Every summer we'd be here fishing, swimming in the ocean, sailing. . .” Pausing, I watched his gaze as it sparked with past memories. “I want to bring life back into this place, and that's what this building is going to do.”

“What's this place going to be, another hotel? Because we already have plenty of those.”

His muscles flinched, making him look uncomfortable all of sudden. I couldn't understand why, but I could feel his anxiety start build.

“No, nothing like that. I'm thinking luxury apartments—hopefully.” Shaking his head, he gave me an awkward smile.

Why did my question bother him?

“Hopefully? But you just said—”

“Right now it's just a thought. I still have to convince my partner that it's worth it. He has a different plan.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

Liam took a long step in and braided our fingers together. “Because this could help you too. If I can get him on board, then this could bring you more business. You'd have more people to sell to, more buyers to paint for. One business that can help another. That's how you build something great, it all works together. Who knows, maybe you could move your gallery closer, make it so everyone sees it when they walk by.”

His thumb stroked the nub on my wrist as his thick fingers massaged the inside of my palm. My body began to tingle as electricity shocked my veins the longer he touched me.

Pulling my hands away, I put some space between us. It wasn't that I didn't want him to touch me or be close. It was his idea of moving my gallery that made me uneasy.

“I can't move my shop, I won't do that.”

“Whoa,” he said, holding up his hands, palms facing out. “It was just an idea, that's all.” Taking a firm step in, he squinted his eyes and rubbed his jaw. “You do realize that your place is just a set of walls. It's not that building that makes you who you are.”

Taking in a deep breath, I let his words settle for a moment. He was wrong.

And I wasn't going to let my building go, I wasn't going to move out of it, I wasn't going to let anyone take it from me.



You might not have a choice.

“Can we not talk about me?”

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Frowning, his chin crooked to the side. “Look, all I'm trying to to say is that this would breath life back into this town and life back into your shop. You could have a line out the door with people who want to buy your stuff.”

If only it was that easy. If only I had all the time in the world to sit around in limbo waiting for his apartments to come to alive.

I had problems that were happening right now. What he was talking about could take months, years, maybe longer. That wasn't going to fix shit.

“So this is what you were talking about before? This is the business opportunity?”

Rocking his head on his shoulders, he sucked in a gulp of air. “No, not originally.”

Walking between the windows, I watched the street below. “Look, I think you have a great idea, I really do, but this isn't going to help me. All of this will take time, it wouldn't be up and running for months or longer. I can't wait that long.”

“What do you mean?”

I wanted to spill my guts and tell him the truth. I wanted to tell him that the loss of my art could mean the end of my business. That I didn't have to worry just about me, but that I had my mother to take care of too. That I had not only one, but two mortgages to pay. That I had made a promise I could never break.

But I didn't, because he couldn't fix my broken world with big dreams and wild ideas.

“Nothing, it's not your problem, don't worry about it.”

“What's going on, Glory? Tell me so I can help, I want to help.”

“Liam, I appreciate what you've done already, but you don't need to worry about me. I'll figure it out, I always do.”

I should just sell the fucking place. I'll never be able to get out of this shit if I don't.

No, that's not the answer.

“Why are you so afraid to get help?”

My eyes grew big and large as my ribs tightened and strangled my lungs. “I'm not afraid.”

How the fuck does he do that?

“Yes you are, I can see it all over your face.”

“I don't know what you think you see, but it's not fear.”

“Yes it is. You've been afraid of me since I walked in that door. I want to help, you should let me.”

“Liam, your idea of help is a fictional building that may or may not bring me business. There's nothing there that says it will help, not a fucking thing. I don't want to sound like an asshole, but there's nothing in what you're saying that is a fact. All I hear are wishes and thoughts, dreams and theories. Everything you're saying is built off an idea, not truth. I can't live off dreams, that's even worse than the nothing I have now.”

Liam's vision was just that; a vision. I needed my place right now, not his creation later. I needed my customers, not imaginary people that may exist if he builds that place up. And even if it did work, if he brought new people who wanted my art, time was against me.

Veering his stare, he tucked his hands into his pockets and turned on his heels. "I think you'd be surprised with what I can do. I can tell you to trust me—" Snapping his head to look at me over his shoulder, he arched a brow. "But you wouldn't listen to that, would you?"

"I don't even know you. How could you expect me to just believe what you say? Besides, it's more than just trusting you, I don't have the time to wait." Pinching the bridge of my nose, I closed my eyes. "You don't understand."

"You're right, I don't understand," he said, stalking further away. "And I can't understand if you don't tell me. Come on, I'll take you back. Like you said, you have work to do." His feet pounded away, anger and frustration filling every step.

I couldn't understand why he would be angry with me. I hadn't meant to upset him. I just needed him to realize that I didn't work on dreams, I didn't live my life on false hope and wishes. And I couldn't just sit back and wait.

I loved my gallery, I loved what I did. That place was more than just a building I painted in, it was another connection to my father who was no longer here. And the thought of losing it was horrible.

Maybe he isn't used to people doubting him? Maybe he's used to people pecking at his heels and giving him the answers he wants.

I didn't bother asking him about his reaction. I didn't really have the time to coddle his feelings, I had bigger shit to focus on.

I liked Liam, I really did. But my career was on the line, my mother needed me to succeed. That was what I needed to worry about, not about hurting his feelings.

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Standing on the sidewalk, Liam hailed a cab. The yellow taxi pulled over and he pulled the rear door open. "I'll catch up with you later."

"Okay," I said, slipping inside. "You're not coming too?"

"No, I'll grab a different ride, I have some shit to do." His voice was dry and scratchy, like he was ready to lash out at me for being so negative.

"Alright, so we'll talk later?" The question hung in the air for a moment, dangling uncomfortably between us.

"Maybe." Closing the door, he slapped the top of the car and walked in the opposite direction.

This feeling came over me and I wasn't sure what to do with it.

I felt. . . empty.

I couldn't make sense of it, I couldn't place it comfortably into some part of my brain.

Because I didn't want him to leave. . .

I wanted him to stay.

### Chapter Seven

Liam

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Standing outside, I leaned against the building and waited. Glory was inside her shop, painting the walls to cover up all the graffiti. She looked like she was almost done, putting the cover on a can and sticking it into the closet.

She had been the only thing on my mind.

I had never felt so completely powerless before. She had the biggest hazel eyes I had ever seen, littered in gold and bronze sparkles. Her hair was a striking shade of brown, almost the color of copper.

And her body. . . fuck that body of hers was enough to drive any man crazy. She had curves on top curves. Her ass jiggled in the cutest way when she was walking, her legs were lean and strong, wrapping my waist perfectly.

She hadn't noticed me in the window, so I decided to just let her finish up before I tried to talk to her. I felt bad for being so cold to her, I was an asshole and she didn't deserve that.

I just wanted her to see what I could. I wanted her to imagine the people that could fill up her shop if they had to walk by it every night to get home, the new eyes for her work, the new money that could flood through her door.

When she shot it down, making it sound like it was nothing more than a flashy idea, it pissed me off. If there was one thing I knew, it was people and how they worked, it was business and the growth new developments could bring.

And then I realized that as much as she needed the money, it didn't mean everything in her eyes. There was something in her voice, a softness that made me understand she had more on her plate than what I was seeing.

Stepping out onto the sidewalk, Glory was facing the door to lock it up. She still hadn't noticed me standing a few feet away with my hands tucked in my pockets.

“Hey, it looks good in there.”

Jumping, she threw her hand to her chest and sighed loudly. “Holy shit, you scared me. Don't do that, don't sneak up on me like that.”

“Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you.”

“Startle me? You know what happened, you didn't just startle me, you scared the shit out of me. You're lucky I didn't kick you in the balls right off the bat.” Shaking her head, she rechecked the door to make sure it was locked, then turned to face me, crossing her arms protectively. “What are you doing here?”

Her tone was so flat, slicing a small piece of my heart off. Cringing to myself, I knew what she was thinking, what she was feeling, what she thought about me.. .

I'm an asshole.

“I came to see if you needed help, but you were basically done, so. . .” Arching her brows, she waited for me to continue. “I waited out here.”



“Right, okay.” Adjusting the bags on her arms, she started to walk past me. “I haven't heard from you in three days.”

Dragging my hand through my hair, I held the back of my neck. “I know, I'm sorry. I just, I had to figure some shit out.”

Glory kept walking, her eyes set forward. She didn't respond, simply brushing by me with her bag, her feet hitting the pavement hard.

Standing still, I wasn't sure what I was waiting for. Was I waiting for an invitation to walk at her side? Was I waiting for her to give me a look that told me it was alright to follow her?

I didn't have a fucking clue what was going through her head. But the longer I stood there, the further away from me she was getting.

“Hey, wait!” I called out, jogging up beside her. “Let me make it up to you, let me take you out for dinner.”

“No, I don't think so.” Shimmying her bag higher up her shoulder, she shook her head, her lips pursed tight.

She still wouldn't look at me, refusing to let her eyes connect with mine.

Grabbing her forearm, I forced her to turn and face me. “Let's start over, how about that?” Trailing my fingertips up and down her arm, I tilted my head a hair. “I was a big fucking jerk, I know. I want to make it up to you.”

“You're right, you were a big fucking jerk.” Her eyes drifted around my face, circling my lips, gliding over my cheeks and dropping to my chest. “Why should I let you? Give me one good reason that I shouldn't walk away and forget you instead.”

“Because you won't ever be able to forget me. You and I both know that.” Curling my arm around her back, I tugged her into my chest.

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She didn't resist, she didn't try to pull away. Glory allowed herself to fall into my arms, her head dropping back, eyes settling on mine.

“And I know I'll never be able to forget you.” Swooping my hands around her cheeks, I kissed her.

I kissed her because that was all I really wanted to do. I kissed her because it was the only thing that felt right in my life. I kissed her because we felt so perfect together.

Her lips were tempered, parting slowly as she gave in, accepting the feelings between us.

It was strange to know something without ever speaking the words. To know that two things fit so perfectly together when they have nothing in the past to connect them.

We were strangers, but in my mind, in my heart and soul, she was the missing link to who I was.

Pulling away slowly, Glory lifted her fingers to her lips and touched them gently. “So, dinner you said?”

“Yeah, dinner.” Thumbing her jaw, I smiled. “If you'll say yes.”

Her lips turned up and I caught a glint in her eye. “Alright, dinner sounds good.”

“That's not a yes,” I said as my lids hooded. Pinching her chin between two fingers, I tipped her head higher. “Say it, say yes.”

“Yes.” Her whisper carried through the air like a tender song, one I had waited years to hear and never knew it existed until right then.

Smirking, I placed a kiss on her cheek. “Let me walk you home.” Slipping my hand down over her neck, I stroked her arm and braided our fingers together. “It really does look good in there.”

“Thanks, I'm happy all that shit is gone. It's finally starting to feel like mine again.”

“So does this mean you're not changing the name to Glory Hole on the sign?”

Giggling, she smacked my chest. “Not a chance in hell.”

“Hey,” I barked, rubbing where she had hit me. “I need to tell you something.”

“Okay, what is it?”

“I talked to my friend in the police department, but I don't have good news for you.”

“Why? What did he say?”

“He did some poking around, made a few calls, but came up empty. He said that right now it's a dead end, there's not much he can do. Without a name or description of the guy and no other witnesses that we know of, all he can do is file a report for you.”

Scrunching up her lips, her face sunk in as she frowned. “Well, that sucks.”

“Look, I don't want you to worry about it. I have a guy coming down tomorrow to replace your door with a better one and some new locks. I'm also getting you a security system, this way I'll know you'll be safe.”

“Liam, no, I can't accept that.” Glory stopped short, her fingers trying to separate from mine, but I refused to let go. Squeezing tighter, she turned and grabbed my other hand. “I appreciate that, I really do, but I can't accept that from you.”

Shaking my head, I grumbled. “You really are stubborn, aren't you?” We stood in the center of the sidewalk, the world around us unimportant as far as I was concerned. People walked around us, splitting off on either side. “It's a gift, Glory, just take it. It's not out of pity, it's not some sort of buyout to make you like me. It's just a gift.”

“I just can't—”

Cutting her off, I released one of her hands and started walking again, pulling her along. “You can, and you will. He'll be there around ten tomorrow, it's already done.”

Glory frowned, her eyes turning into thin slits. “Who's calling who stubborn? I think that's the pot calling the kettle black.”

Grinning, I let out a laugh. “Yeah, well, I guess I win.”

Glory smiled the prettiest of smiles, as she nodded. “Fine, you win.”

We walked hand in hand, talking about old memories of the town from when we were kids. She told me how her parents had decided on Vienna after they came on a vacation and her father fell in love with the place.

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Glory said it wasn't long after he found out he had cancer that he decided that he wanted to spend the rest of his life in a place that was beautiful.

My heart hurt for her when she talked about her father, I could hear the love in her voice for him.

I know what you're feeling. I've been there too.

I didn't tell her how much we had in common and I probably should have. But it seemed wrong to steal her moment, to take her pain and flip it into my own.

Sometimes it was just better to let the other person talk, no matter how much you understood.

I found out that we were at the same festival more than once, and it was hard for me to believe I had never noticed her before. It was as if our paths had crossed in time, but we were both looking in the opposite direction.

Star crossed lovers. . . My mother would love this.

“Here we are, this is me.” Stopping in front of a three story building, she looked up. “I'm right there, second window in.”

Lifting her hand to my lips, I kissed the back of her palm. “I'll be back to get you around seven. Dress nice, we have reservations.”

“Reservations? For where?” Dipping her head into her shoulder, she smirked.

“It's a surprise.”

“And what if I had said no?”

“You did say no.” Chuckling, I gave her a sideways glance.

“You know what I mean, what if I didn't agree to dinner at all?”

“Then I'd be eating alone at a table for two.” Pulling her in, I wrapped her body in a big hug. “But we don't have to wonder about that, because you said yes.” Kissing the top of her head, I rubbed her back. “Be ready at seven.”

“Do you want to come up? It's only two, we have some time.” Lifting her face, her eyes twinkle under the sun.

Yes, yes I do.

“Seven, I'll see you then.” Holding her cheeks, I gave her one final kiss and walked away.

Yes, I wanted to go upstairs and take what was mine. But she deserved better than that, she deserved to be treated like the fine piece of art she was.

And temptation. . . temptation would make her wet, it would make her drip and eager to feel me inside her again.

We had the entire night to drink temptation and let it consume us.

She was worth the wait.

### Chapter Eight

Liam

I need Glory Daniels.

Putting on my suit, I adjusted the blazer and fixed my tie. My stomach flipped a little with nerves as I fixed my hair and splashed my cheeks with aftershave. This girl made me feel things I had never felt before. I never got nervous or had those signature butterflies that you heard people talk about when they thought they met someone special.

But Glory did that to me. I was excited and anxious, I could feel the sweat on my palms and the frog in the back of my throat. What was unsettling about it the most was that I felt all this and we had already slept together.

How is that possible?

Holding the sides of the sink, I stared at my reflection. This was new for me, to want to be with a woman, to keep her for myself and make her mine. I went through life so focused on learning the family business, that I didn't have time for any real relationship.

But that was all I could think about with her. I didn't just want to have sex and leave it at that. I needed more; I wanted to learn about her, I wanted to know all her secrets and details that made her who she was.



Because she was perfect in every way.

Sitting in the limo outside her apartment, I opened the door and walked up her steps. I wasn't sure what number was hers, so I pulled out my phone to text her.

“Well, don't you look handsome.” Her voice tugged on my heart, making it skip a beat.

My eyes ran over her body, licking every curve and dip. Glory was wearing a black dress that had a bright red flower pattern. Spiked black heels made her legs longer, forcing the muscles in her calves to pop.

She had pulled her hair back into a messy bun with loose strands framing her face, and rouge lipstick that matched the flowers. Her lids were highlighted by a smokey eye and her lashes fanned like canopies as she blinked.

Holy shit. . .

“Wow,” I said, my jaw hanging open as I gripped her finger and spun her around. “You look incredible.”

“Thank you.” Smiling, she inhaled a sharp breath as she looked out at the street. “Is that for us?” Her eyes grew wide as she scanned the length of the black stretch limo, her gaze twinkling in this childish excitement.

A playful itch forced my lips into a tight smirk. “It is.”

“Liam, you didn't have to do this. We could have just taken a cab, a limo is too much.”

“For you, nothing is too much.” Taking her hand, I guided her down the steps and

towards the vehicle. “And trust me, it's nothing, not a big deal at all.”

“Not a big deal?” Glory dipped her brows into the bridge of her nose as her mouth hung open. “It's a limo, this can't be cheap. I don't need big fancy things, Liam, a taxi works just fine.”

Laughing lightly, the driver opened the door to let us in. Placing my hand on the small of her back, I climbed in behind her. Slipping across the leather seat, I sat across from her with a smile on my face.

“What are you smiling at?” she asked, tucking her clutch against her side.

“Nothing.”

“No really, what?”

“It's just, you see the limo, the hotel, and you think fancy. I see the limo and the hotel and I think normal.”

Thinning her lips, she raised her brows in curiosity. “Normal?”

“Yeah, normal. This is how I grew up, but don't get me wrong, I can live without it.”

Giggling, Glory dragged her tongue lightly across her bottom lip, forcing my dick to twitch. “You say that like it would be easy. But if you've always had it, how could you possibly know you could live without it?”

Shifting in my seat, I grabbed a bottle of champagne and popped the top, pouring her a glass. “My parents made sure that I understood what we had. I don't take it for granted and I don't abuse it.”

“Really?” Gripping the thin stem of the glass, her fingers brushed over mine. My skin prickled with her delicate touch, fluttering up my arm and through my chest. “If you don't abuse it, then why are we in a limo right now?”

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Chuckling, I poured myself a glass and held it up. “I’m still paying his salary, I might as well use it once in awhile.” Winking, I took a sip of the champagne, just watching her.

I couldn't stop staring at her, there wasn't a way for me to move my eyes off of her.

She was so beautiful, a vixen to the eyes and a siren to the muscle in my chest. My cock thickened as I watched her cross her leg slowly over her knee. The diamond between her thighs was a hidden treasure I wanted to capture and claim as mine and mine alone.

There was this feral need building inside me, one I couldn't shut off, one I couldn't quite tame. It was as if all the rest of what made me human had dissolved the second this woman walked into my world.

Resting her hand on the edge of the window, she laid her cheek against it. “So tell me, what is it exactly that you do? I know you're in some sort of construction, or investment company, but what is it really?”

“Does it matter?”

“I’m curious, so yes, it matters.” Her lips pulled back into a bright smile as she veered her stare. “The fancy hotel, the mill, this limo. . .” Pausing, she sipped her drink, delicately licking the small droplets that had come to balance on her lip. “I can sit here guessing, but it would be easier if you just told me.”

Leaning over my knees, I threw my hand out and ran a single finger up and down her

calf. “Let's not have this conversation tonight, the last thing I want to do is talk business.” Her skin was soft and supple, so smooth it felt like velvet. “I'm sure there are other things we could talk about.”

I wasn't ready to have that conversation with her. What she wanted to know was tangled so intricately into her world, that telling her could mean the end of this—of. . . us.

It was a gamble I didn't want to take, not until I absolutely had to.

“Alright, like what?” Bringing the glass to her lips, she took a huge gulp. I watched her throat expand to make room for the liquid as a shiver ran up her body.

“Have you thought about me? Because I haven't been able to get you out of my head.”

“Are you trying to seduce me again? Is that what all this is?”

“Is it working?” Slipping my finger higher up her leg, I teased the edge of her dress, gently plucking at the seam.

Glory's cheeks turned the prettiest shade of crimson as she glanced away and looked out the window. Pursing her lips, her fingers played with the wispy loose strands of hair around her face.

“I'm going to take that as a yes.” Cocking my head, I held my breath for a long second. “But I'd prefer to hear you tell me the answer yourself.” The limo came to a stop and I heard the driver's door open. “Looks like you just got saved from answering my question.” The door opened, so I held out my hand. “Shall we?” I asked.

Flicking her eyes in my direction, Glory took my hand and let me lead her out of the car. Her heels clicked against the sidewalk as she stepped to my side, her eyes wide, glazed over in shock.

“Are you fucking serious?”

“What? Do you hate this place? We can go somewhere else.”

“No, it's not that. It's just, this place has a waiting list of six months for reservations, how the hell did you get us into The Crow's Nest?”

“I know people, Glory. . .” Pausing, I braided our fingers together and started for the entrance. “A lot of people.”

Huffing, her eyes shot up to mine, her stare full of curiosity and questions. “I can see that. And yet you refuse to tell me much of anything about who you are.”

“I'll tell you about myself, I just don't want to talk about what I do.”

Thinning her lids, she peered at me. “So are you being closed off or guarded? Because both seem to be true right now.”

Shrugging a shoulder, I let her question dangle between us, leaving it unanswered. “Ready?” I asked, bending my arm for her to take.

Glory stared at me for a moment, finally slipping her hand into the crook of my arm and walking with me inside.

We were brought right in, no waiting required, and sat at a small two person table in the back corner of the restaurant with a view of the harbor. It was my favorite table in the whole place, and I had a permanent reservation.

Years ago my father had invested in this place. The owner was an old family friend, he had fallen on rough times, so my father stepped in to help him. My father was a good man, he went out of his way to help people, it didn't matter to him what they needed.

That's the kind of man I wanted to be. Jacob however, was on the opposite side of the spectrum. All he cared about was himself, and this project was the perfect example of that.

The candle in the center flickered red and orange, the thin tendrils splashed her skin, giving her a sun-kissed glow.

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“You're so fucking beautiful, you know that.” Reaching out, I ran my thumb across the side of her cheek. Glory smiled, tipping her face slightly into my touch. “I really am sorry for the way I acted the other day, it wasn't right.”

Shaking her head, she laid her hands on the table and started to fiddle with a thin silver bracelet on her wrist. “It's fine, really, forget about it.” Her eyes held onto that bracelet as her lips folded down. “I shouldn't have told you your idea was a dream, that wasn't fair. My gallery was a dream once, who am I to tell you that what you imagine is wrong?”

Smirking, I cupped my hands over hers and coiled our fingers together. “And your gallery will be beautiful again.”

The sparkle I saw in her eye faded away as I lost her in that moment. She left the table, she left me, going inside herself as her mind began to spin. The expression on her face changed, it dulled into nothing more than flat lines and sad brows.

“What? What is it?”

Freeing her hands, she rested them in her lap, flicking her eyes up to mine. “The gallery might not reopen. I can't do it, not after what happened. I'm thinking I might have to sell it, that looks like my only way to save anything right now.”

Sitting up straight, I ran my hand over my jaw and stared at her. “What are you talking about?”

“I'm in too deep, there's no way for me to climb out. I can't afford to buy all new



stuff, pay my bills, and pay—” Stopping herself, she took in a deep breath. “You know what, forget it. This isn't the time to have this conversation. We're having a nice dinner, I feel really good being here with you right now, I don't want to ruin it with all this shit. Can we just not talk about it right now?”

Nodding, I stood up and moved my chair beside hers. “You're right, we don't have to talk about any of that right now. Let's just enjoy this. But I want you to know that nothing is over until it's over. You don't have to do this alone, and you can't ever give up, not on what you love.”

That was it, she just made up my mind right then and there. I knew what I had to do, I knew what was important and what wasn't. What I wanted didn't matter. What anyone else wanted didn't matter.

Only Glory mattered.

Dinner was perfect. She told me about what it was like to grow up in her home town of Coventry, and how her father had worked for years at a local soap factory. She told me how he would come home from work every evening and actually smelled good.

We came from two different worlds. She had grown up with nothing, only having the bare minimum it took to survive. While I never had to experience what it felt like to not have a phone or new clothes, fancy things and people at my beckoning call if I needed something.

And even though my father made sure I respected and appreciated what we had, all of that wasn't enough to truly make me understand the hardships others went through.

She had to overcome so much to get where she was. And yet, she was still able smile and laugh, to find the strength to keep going.

Right now she's not happy. Her world was crushed.

“You have to be the strongest person I have ever met.” Wrapping my arm around her shoulders, I teased the ends of her hair. “I’ve never met anyone like you before.”

Looking up at me, she smiled, her lips full and parted. “I can say the same about you.” Swooping her hand up around my face, the tips of her fingers tickled the light scruff on my cheek.

My cock jerked as she gently ran her fingers up and down, her delicate touch stirring the heat in my core.

Drawing a single finger down her neck, I slipped it over her ribs, tracing the outline of her hip. I felt a shiver scale her body as she inhaled a sharp breath when my finger reached the hem of her skirt.

“So what now?” Swirling my finger over the top of her thigh, I inched it closer and closer to her sacred spot.

I could already feel the heat off her pussy as my finger dangled just outside her clothing, threatening to go under her skirt, but never breaching the seam.

Glory exhaled slowly, her back snapping straight as she let her eyes connect with mine. “Dessert?”

Smirking, I pressed the tips of my fingers firmly against the inside of her thigh. “What are you hungry for?”

Biting down on her bottom lip, the corners of her mouth twitched. Her eyes flirted with mine, lids lowering as she batted her lashes. “Do I really need to say it out loud?”

“I'm not sure I know what you want, so yeah, let me hear it.” My hand moved higher, fingers dipping in and grazing her mound. She was wet already, her thin panties hot and soaked from arousal.

Her eyes fluttered in the sockets as she gripped my chin with her thumb and forefinger. “Maybe this will help you figure it out.” Pressing her lips to mine, Glory kissed me hard.

Our lips fit perfectly together, hers plump and soft, mine thin and rough. The tip of her tongue slid into my mouth, and she tasted sweet, like vanilla and honey. I couldn't stop myself, I couldn't hold back the feral animal she had woken inside me.

Digging my fingers into her hair, I gripped her roots and tugged her head back. I kissed her deeper, harder, and with more passion than I had ever felt before. I was burrowed into her hair, holding on for dear life, afraid to let go of this woman.

I wanted the world to know she was mine, I wanted to imprint my scent on her skin forever so no other man would even dare look at her. I had staked my claim and would never let anyone steal her away.

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Pulling back, my lungs ached for air, while my lips pained for more. “My place or yours?” I asked, massaging her scalp with the tips of my fingers.

“I don't care, lets just get the hell out of here.” Her breathing was ragged and labored, her body melting into the chair as she rubbed her thighs together.

Waving my hand in the air, I signaled the waiter. “Check please.”

The limo was parked out front, and I didn't even wait for my driver, Fredrick, to get out and open the door. Yanking the door open, I could see Fred through the small window behind his seat. Bouncing my brows, he gave me a nod and put up the privacy barrier.

Shutting the door behind me, Glory was staring at me with a seductive look in her eyes.

Fuck, this woman is going to ruin me.

The car started to roll and I didn't give a shit where he took us. I didn't tell Fred to take us to the hotel or to her apartment. I had other plans, he was just going to have to wait for instructions.

My head was in a fog, consumed by the vixen beside me. The faint lighting off the running boards created a shadowy glow on her skin. My heart began to hammer inside my chest as she took in a deep breath and her tits pressed against the fabric.

That was it, there were no words for me to say to her. I couldn't think or focus on

anything. My cock was engorged, ready to bust through the zipper and I had barely even touched her.

It was just a kiss. A simple kiss that threw my body into this state of arousal I had no control over. We stared at each other for a mere second, but that second felt like a lifetime.

Every detail I could find under the dim lights sent my heart into my throat and made my cock throb. Her hair and how the tendrils danced across her shoulders, her lips and how they formed the perfect heart shape, her cute little nose and how it lifted at the very tip ever so slightly; all of her, every last inch was perfection.

Pushing my hip against hers, I watched her chest rise and fall as she looked deep into my eyes. We didn't speak and we didn't need to; her body said everything I needed to hear.

Driving my lips onto hers, I pushed my tongue into her mouth, dancing it over the ridges. My hands found her hair, tugging it free from the elastic and letting all of it fall onto her shoulders.

Arching her back, Glory threw her hands around my face and curled her leg over my thigh. We were both struck with this animalistic passion as if a lightening bolt had blasted its way through the roof and hit us both.

Grabbing her hips, I guided her onto my lap. Her dress slinked its way up her thighs, giving me a clear view of the white lace panties underneath. Rocking her body, her pussy rubbed the bulge in my pants.

Pulling away, Glory nibbled my bottom lip as she moaned the sweetest coo I had ever heard. Plucking my lip with her teeth, her hips rolled hard and needy. Lowering her mouth to my ear, she whispered. "I need you."

Her voice, those three little words that left her lips on nothing but air. . . They sealed me to her. If there was even the slightest doubt in my mind before about what I wanted, it was all gone now.

Laying my head back, I pushed her dress up higher, and pinched the thin sides of her panties. Glory raised up on her knees, allowing me to pull them down her thighs and toss them to the floor.

Her scent filled the limo, turning me wicked. I wanted to taste her, I wanted to lap her up with my tongue and let her sweet juice coat my mouth.

I was craving dessert, a special treat that would satiate the hunger in my veins.

Butterflying her legs around my hips, I moved my hand under her ass and thumbed her clit. “Fuck, you’re so wet.” The pad of my thumb drew hard circles against her swollen bud, drawing out more moans and heavy breaths.

“You make me wet,” she said, barely able to form the letters as I teased her cunt, making her seep against my palm.

“This is mine.” My voice was husky and deep. Rubbing her clit harder, I slipped my finger inside her pussy. “All of this is mine.” The tone in my voice dropped as she rode my finger.

Grinding down, her pussy soaked my skin, dripping down my wrist. Glory started to move faster, her moans louder and less controlled. “Mm, oh, Liam. Mm, yeah, like that, just like that.”

Goosebumps jumped across her skin as I played her body like an instrument. Each cord created a new sound, each strum made her sing in ways that made my body ignite like a fuse.

“That's it, sing for me baby, let me know you like it.” Faster and faster I rubbed her clit, until her legs were shaking and her screams echoed around us.

Yanking my hand away, Glory glared at me like I had just eaten the last bite of cake. Lifting my fingers to my lips, I sucked her flavor off my skin with a playful smile on my face.

She tasted just like I imagined she would; like sweet icing, like perfectly cured scotch that's been waiting years for the right mouth to drink it down; like the woman I could fill my days and nights with and never get bored.

“Don't stop, please don't stop.” Begging me, her body was still moving, rolling against the rock hard muscle.

Her tender pleas plucked at my chest, making me want nothing more than to give her everything she could ever dream of.

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I wanted to take her pain and replace it with happiness, I wanted to take her hurt and untwist it so it fell off her body.

“Stop. . .” I said, my lips curving into an evil grin. “I'm just getting started.” Popping the button free on my pants, I pulled my cock out.

It was throbbing so hard it hurt, the pulse crashed through my muscles, making them tense and angry. My dick needed to be inside her, I had to feel her silky juice as her walls milked my length and her pleasure escaped her lips on feathered coos.

Digging my fingers into her hips, I guided her waist up, positioning her pussy above my crown. Glory gripped my cock at the base, keeping it straight as she pressed her knees into the seat.

“Fuck, I can feel the heat off your cunt.” Laying my head back, the head of my cock teased her entrance. “You want that? Are you a dirty girl who's going to take what she wants?” I asked, holding her in place so she couldn't lower herself down.

Furrowing her brows, the tips of her nails dug into my shoulders. “Stop screwing around and fuck me before I lose my mind.” Her muscles tensed up as her legs began to tremble and small beads of sweat glazed her forehead.

With one hard thrust, I drove my cock in, pushing the top of her thighs down. Glory's body fell forward as a loud gush of air exploded out of her lungs.

“Ah,” she moaned, scraping the sharp edges of her nails down my chest. “My god, you're so damn hard.” Brushing her lips against my cheek, she kissed me softly.



I didn't move right away, allowing myself to just take in this moment. She was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. Her hair was splashing around her face like silk strands, her eyes were glittering as her lids hooded and a quiver ran up her body.

“You do this to me. . .” Pausing, I pushed the hair out of her face. “You do a lot of things to me.”

Glory smiled, and even in the darkness, I could still see her cheeks as they blushed and her eyes as they lit with wicked destruction. She was going to be the downfall to my sanity and she didn't even know it.

Cupping her jaw, I pulled her face to mine, kissing her with all the feelings I couldn't find the words for. I felt lighter around her, I felt like the rest of the world didn't exist, I felt like this was the whole point of living; to meet that one person who forced you to sense your heart in your chest and your veins under the skin.

Slow and steady, I guided her up, only to slam back inside her. With every thrust she would hiccup a gasp of air, with every piston of my hips, her body would still in anticipation.

I touched her every place I could as we fucked in the back of my limo. I couldn't stop my hands from feeling her skin, her hair, her face, her legs. I wanted to do this every single day, I wanted to keep her with me so I could get my fix.

Since the moment I saw her, I wanted nothing but to keep her safe, to keep her close, to keep her for myself. She wasn't on this earth for anyone else but me.

“I'm never letting you go, Glory, I hope you know that.” Curling my fingers around her neck, I slipped an open palm under her chin and kissed the throbbing vein in her throat. “I can't—I won't.”

Parting her lips, she drove her hands into my hair and dropped her face onto my shoulder. Her voice was low, but I could never miss the words. “I never said I was leaving.”

Driving in with vigor, I fucked my artist goddess, filling her with every inch I could. Her walls clutched my shaft, making sure it stayed inside. The rumble in my lower stomach forced my balls to draw up tight as a tingly sensation crept up my back.

“Oh god, oh god, I'm so close, don't stop.” Snapping her shoulders square, Glory sat up straight, holding onto my shoulders as our bodies moved fluidly. “Uh, uh, mm, yeah, fuck me, fuck me, Liam.”

The sound of our skin slapping filled the air between us, sweat dripped down from my hairline, slipping between my shoulder blades. A fierce tremor made Glory stiffen for a moment, only to disappear and cause her to fall limp against my chest.

With one final pump of my hips, my cock pulsed, turning to stone as it poured its life blood into her body. Pulse after pulse, the hot come seeped from my swollen head, making my chest tighten and my lungs freeze.

I couldn't breathe as I sat there like a statue, unsure of what the hell to do with myself. My brain had turned to mush, my muscles now weak and tired.

“Wow,” she said, dropping to my side and resting her arm up over her head. “I don't even know what to say, except wow.”

Looking over at her, she had a firm smile on her face, her chest was raising and lowering rapidly. Her lips formed a perfect circle as she blew out a hard breath of air and shook her head in disbelief.

Buttoning my pants, I smirked. “Are you saying that the other night wasn't as good?”

Glory's eyes widened, her jaw crooking slightly. "No, that's not what I meant at all. I just meant—"

Chuckling, I cut her off. "I'm just kidding, it really was fucking incredible."

Smacking my arm, she pursed her lips. "You never told me you were a damn comedian."

"There are a lot of things you haven't learned about me; but you will." Realizing that the limo wasn't rolling anymore, I looked out the window. "Looks like you're home."

Leaning over, Glory nodded. "I guess I am." Flicking her eyes to mine, she asked, "Do you want to come up?"

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Thinning my lips, I shook my head. “No, I have a meeting early in the morning, I'm just going to go back to the hotel.”

Her expression held disappointment as the muscles loosened, and her shoulders rolled forward. “Are you sure?”

Pinching her chin with my fingers, I leaned forward and kissed her. “Don't worry, I'll see you tomorrow, I promise. No more going days without you.”

Holding out her pinkie, I gave her a blank stare. “Pinkie promise me.”

“Are you serious?” Laughing lightly, I arched a brow.

“My pinkie is out, isn't it? Pinkie promise me.” Gripping her pinkie with mine, she kissed the back of my knuckle. “I'm holding you to it, you can't break a promise. My dad used to say that a pinkie promise was just as good as writing it on paper.”

“I would never promise you something and not follow through.”

Glory opened the door, climbing outside and turning to face me. “I hope not, Liam.”

She walked up the steps, spinning around to look back at the car over her shoulder. There was no way she could see me behind the black tinted glass, but she smiled and blew me a kiss anyway.

Capturing her kiss, I held it to my cheek just like my mother used to do when I was really little.

Just like that pinkie promise meant everything to Glory, her kiss meant everything to me.

And I would never let one pass me by.

### Chapter Nine

#### Glory

Waking up in the morning, I actually felt good. The sun was up, my mind wasn't hurting and throbbing, and for the first time in weeks, I could envision fixing the mess at my feet.

Climbing out of bed, I checked the time and decided to take a quick shower before heading to the gallery. I wasn't going to just give up on this, I didn't have to. I had to keep trying, I couldn't just throw up my hands and walk away.

Liam was right, I loved what I did, and walking away wasn't an option. It shouldn't matter what came my way, I should always keep going.

Throwing on my clothes, I pulled my hair back and grabbed my tote, determined to figure this shit out.

I had a list inside my head; grab breakfast, hit the store for more supplies, and paint my ass off.

I've got this, I have to.

My phone pinged, so I grabbed it and checked the message. My mother was still wondering when I was coming over and if I had the rent money. I knew she meant well, I understood that she depended on me, but it was hard to go home.

It hadn't felt the same there since my father died. The place felt empty, quiet, as if something was missing; and it was—he was gone.

He had been almost seven years since he left us and I felt like I still wasn't over it yet. People say that the pain eases with time, but it didn't feel like that to me. I lost my father when I was a teenager, at the tender age of sixteen. He made it two years after his diagnosis and I still hadn't come to terms with it.

It felt like time made me more aware of the fact he wasn't there, that every day that passed since we put him in the ground was another day I missed him even more. It was a pain that was deep, one that followed you around, reminding you it was there whenever it had the chance.

Typing quickly, I told her I'd be over in a little bit to drop off the money. My stomach pitted at the idea. I could still smell the scent of my father's cologne in the air, it still felt like he would emerge from one of the rooms or come walking down the hallway.

I avoided the home I grew up in as much as I could, just to distance myself from the memories I couldn't bear.

Walking out of the building, I started towards the bank. My list of errands had grown a little, but the day was still young. It was almost ten in the morning, I had plenty of time left to get everything else done.

Taking my phone back out, I scrolled through the numbers and pulled up Liam. Opening a new message, I decided to send him a simple good morning.

'Good morning, hope you have a good meeting.'

Ping. 'Morning beautiful, I'll be over once I'm done. Will you be at the gallery?'

'Probably, but I have to stop at my mom's first and run a few errands. Where is your meeting?'

'Coffee Cake's. But I'm not sure how long I'll be. Why? Miss me already?'

Giggling, I smiled to myself. 'Maybe.'

'You miss me. I'll text you before I come. I gotta get ready.'

Dropping my phone into my tote, I pulled out my wallet as I reached the ATM. Plugging in my numbers, I took out the rent money. Checking the balance, I grumbled to myself, knowing that right then that was all I had to my name.

Four grand. . .

Folding up the cash, I tucked it into my back pocket and started for my mom's house. The streets were busy as usual for this time of year. The tourists were starting to filter in like packs of wild animals, their cars clogging up the road.

Trucks were pulling boats down to the harbor, mini-vans were packed with families that were heading to the motels or cottages by the ocean. The summer was great for business, but bad if you wanted that quaint quiet a small town could offer.

Rounding the corner, I turned up Gorton ave. My mother's home was three blocks away, a stone throw from my gallery, but I barely ever walked this way if I didn't have to. My art had become my world, but not for just me, for her too.

I spent my days and nights working, never taking the time anymore to go for Sunday dinner or pop in just to say hello. She used to give me shit for it, but I think she understood my reasons.



She stopped bothering me about it, allowing me to do things at my own pace. That's what I needed most, time.

Sometimes I wondered if she realized how hard it was on me to be responsible for her. But we never talked about it, it was one of those elephant in the room conversations I didn't want to have.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:36 pm*

A firm hand grabbed my shoulder from behind, causing me to yelp in surprise. Spinning on my heels, a man in a suit was glaring down on me, his lips thinned. I knew him, we had met once before, and I told him to go fuck himself.

“What the hell do you want? I gave you your answer already.”

“No, you gave me a message. I'm curious if you got mine?” he asked, stalking forward and pinning me against the building. “I'm pretty sure I made myself clear.”

“What the hell are you talking about? I haven't had any messages from you, and I already told you no, I'm not selling you my building”

Slapping an open palm against the brick beside my head, he snarled. “Do you think you can just tell me no? If destroying everything you owned in that place wasn't a message, you're a stupid fucking girl.”

My heart stopped inside my chest as his words hit a nerve.

He did this! He's the one who's responsible!

The thought had crossed my mind, but I pushed it away. I couldn't imagine a man in a suit, a man who seemed to have more than my lonely little building could ever offer, would do such a thing.

“That was you?” My voice was sharp and short.

“Do you think I'm stupid? It wasn't me exactly, but money talks. All I had to do was

offer the right price to the right man, and my message was sent loud and clear.” Laughing, the man tipped his head back, opening his mouth wide. “It was easy as fuck to higher someone to do the dirty work for me.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you? Why would you do that?!” Yelling, I veered my stare, wishing that my eyes could shoot bullets. “I’m going to call the police and tell them what you did!”

“The police won’t do shit. Do you have any idea who I am? Do you understand what I can do to you? Let me make myself really clear; if you don’t sign the papers, I’ll have to finish what I started.”

My heart stuck in my throat, his threat evident on his face. “Why? Why can’t you just leave me alone?”

“Because when I want something, I take it.” Lowering his face, he pressed his lips to my ear. “And I want your building, so stop making this difficult on yourself.”

“If you have all this power, then why not buy something else? Why take it from someone who doesn’t want to give it? This is my life you’re trying to buy and it doesn’t have a price.”

“Everything had a price.” His eyes connected with mine as he took a step back and adjusted the cuffs on his sleeves. Chuckling, his smile deepened. “You have the papers, sign them. Don’t make the same mistake again and tell me no.”

“You can’t so this,” I said, furrowing my brows. “You can’t threaten me into doing what you want.”

“Let me make myself really fucking clear. My next move won’t be a threat, I’ll literally turn your building into ashes. If you don’t want to watch it go up in flames,

don't fucking test me.” Smirking, his eyes turned black and his grin turned sinister. “Have a nice day, Glory.” Winking, the man walked off with the most evil smile on his face I had ever seen.

Snatching the phone from inside my purse, I called the police. It didn't matter to me who the fuck he was, he had no right to threaten me like that.

“Hello, can I help you?” A woman answered.

The words tumbled out, broken up with relentless tears and heavy breathing. Adrenaline was purging my veins, making my body feel cold. I was shaking from head to toe, so hopped up on emotional chaos that I didn't even pause to let her ask questions.

After spewing what had happened from the very beginning, she put me on hold so she could check into the original report.

“Miss Daniels, Detective Glenn has your case, would you like me to transfer you?”

“Yes, please.”

The phone went silent, leaving me to hear the blood pumping through my ears. It felt like forever before I heard a click and the soft sound of someone clearing their throat.

“Miss Daniels, this is Detective Glenn. Valerie tells me that you have new information about the break in at your business. What do you have for me?” His question hung in the air as I tried to gather my thoughts.

“Yes, I do, did she tell you what I said before?”

“She filled me in, but I'd like to hear it from you? Can you come down to the station

so we can speak in person?”

Thumbing my lip, my eyes scanned around me, wondering if that asshole was watching from a distance. I didn't see him, but that didn't mean he wasn't tucked away someplace.

“I can come in a little bit.”

“Can you do one o'clock?”

“Yeah, yeah that works.”

“Great, and bring anything you have that will help.”

“I don't really have anything. He just threatened me, he told me he was the one who had ruined my shop.”

“Did he put his hands on you? Do you have any bruising or marks?”

“What?” My voice filled with confusion. “No, he didn't hurt me, he threatened me. He said he did it.”

“Well, I can take a formal statement, but without proof, it's a he said-she said deal.”

I could feel the frustration start to build inside me as his tone dropped, turning from inquisitive into hopelessness. “You need to do something, can't you bring him in? Arrest him? Charge him with harassment or something?”

“Miss Daniels, we can't just go around arresting people without proof.” Letting out an audible breath, he continued. “Just come in this afternoon, give a statement, and I'll follow up.”

Dropping my voice, I spoke low and deflated. “Yeah, sure, whatever.”

I didn't even wait for a response, I hung up before he could say anything else. There

was no belief in his tone, not one ounce that he thought B and B Realty was behind the break in.

But how could I blame him, I didn't think it was possible either. Slipping my phone back into my bag, I walked to my mom's. My hands were still shaking as I reached the house, my chest still painfully swollen and aching.

Climbing the steps, she opened the door with a blank gaze. "What the hell is wrong with you? Are you alright?" Holding out her arm, she guided me inside.

"Yeah, yeah I'm fine. I'm sorry, things have been crazy lately. My gallery got broken into and a lot of stuff got destroyed."

"Oh my god, Glory." Her voice was delicate and gentle as she walked me to the kitchen and sat me down. "When? Who? What happened?"

"Last week, it's all gone, Mom, all of it." Resting my head in my hands, I closed my eyes. "But don't worry, everything will be fine."

"God, you sound just like your father." Cupping her hips, she stared at me. "How about some coffee? You want some coffee?"

Shaking my head, I tried to smile, but I knew it looked as fake as it felt. Wiping my fingers down my cheeks, I sighed. "No, that's okay. I can't stay long, I have to get back to work."

"Glory, you can't go like this. Why don't you stay and I'll make you something to eat."

"No, really, I need to go." Taking the money out, I laid it on the table. "Things might be tight for a bit, but it'll be fine, I promise." Standing up quickly, I tugged my bag up

my arm, holding the thick strap.

My mom stared at me, folding her arms over her chest, her eyes full of worry. “I don't like this, I don't like seeing you like this.”

Leaning in, I kissed her cheek. “I'm alright, Mom, I'll call you later.”

Looking over my shoulder as I stepped outside, my mother walked up and held the door. Leaning her head against the door frame, she gave me a half smile.

Smiling back, I flicked my eyes away from her. I couldn't watch the sadness in her lips as she made that smile, knowing that she was just as concerned as I was.

But our concerns were for different reasons. She feared for me, my peace of mind, my safety; and I feared the idea of her having nothing, of losing the home my father fell in love with, the one he took his last breath in.

She had been a stay at home wife, caregiver, and mother for as long as I could remember. I loved my mom, but she had absolutely no skills. It sounds harsh when I put it that way, but it's the truth.

My father had taken care of her, he had been the sole provider. And when he passed, that was it. Her money dried up instantly. It was horrible.

She was too young to collect social security from my father, they denied her without pause. The golden age for that was sixty.

She had no computer skills, no college degree, no work history outside whatever she did in her youth. The cooking, the cleaning, the food shopping; you name it, if it was a household duty, her shoes filled it.



That's where I come in, we had been staying just above water, my art had been enough to make sure neither of us went without. I kept pushing, I kept painting, I kept going; and with all that hard work I was finally able to open my gallery and create a life for both of us.

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There should be some sort of widow's benefit, especially for someone who had been out of the work force so long. You know what they gave her? A check for three hundred and fifty dollars, that was it. What a slap in the face.

When it rains, it fucking pours.

Keeping my head down, I walked in the direction of the art supply store. I was determined to get some shit on a canvas today. I still had a few customers who were willing to wait, and I wasn't ready to give up.

That asshole could go fuck himself. He wasn't going to drive me away, not a chance in hell. If anything, he made me want it more. I worked too hard to let some rich, self absorbed jerk force my hand.

Screw him. I'm not going out that easily.

Glancing up, Coffee Cakes was across the street and I could see Liam in the big picture window. He was sitting with another man who had his back to the glass. Liam's hands were moving strong and pronounced as he spoke.

Stopping in my tracks, I watched him for a second, debating if I should just pop in. I wouldn't interrupt his meeting, but I could probably get a smile out of him.

I could use a coffee. . .

Looking both ways, I waited for a few cars to pass, before jogging across the road. Gripping the door, I leaned back and looked at Liam before going inside.

The tiny bell chimed as I walked in, but he didn't look my way. Walking to the counter, I kept him in my peripheral vision, just waiting for him to realize I was there.

“What can I get you?” The Barista asked.

“I'll take a chai latte with one shot of espresso.”

Turning on my heels, I leaned against the counter and glanced at Liam's table. Liam was still talking, his movements more erratic and emotional.

What the hell is he talking about?

The man he was with had leaned over the table and was grabbing something off the floor. But Liam kept on talking, his hands never stopping.

“Here you go,” the girl said, sliding the coffee in my direction.

Looking away, I paid her and grabbed my drink. Turning back, my heart stopped in my throat as the man in front of Liam was looking directly at me. His mouth held this crooked grin that made my skin crawl and my nerves rattle.

No, not him. It can't be.

Liam cocked his head over his shoulder, following the other guy's glare, his eyes growing wide. Standing up quickly, his chair scraped over the tiles like nails on a chalk board.

“Glory, what are you doing here?” he asked, stalking forward with a worried look on his face.

“I was walking by and thought I'd—” Cutting myself off, I took in a deep breath.

“How do you know that man? Why are you here with him?”

Glancing back over his shoulder, he reached his hand out and cupped my elbow.

“That's my partner. . .” Pausing, his voice went soft. “And brother.”

“Brother? He's your brother?” My hands began to shake as the realization set in.

“You're in on this too?” Tears sprang up in my eyes, bubbling over the surface and making it hard to see.

“Yes—I mean no, I mean that's why—”

Dropping my coffee to the ground, I felt the hot liquid as it splashed off the floor and burned my ankles. But I didn't care, I didn't want to be there anymore. Pushing past Liam, I headed for the door.

I couldn't hear anymore, I couldn't look him in the eyes or listen to his voice. His voice had gone from pleasure to pain. In a flash he wasn't the man I thought he was. He had become a dark presence that stabbed me in the heart and cut me open.

“Glory, wait!” he called out, but I didn't look back.

Liam had been in on it the entire time, he had know from the very first moment we met what was going on. Jacob was his brother, they ran the company that wanted my building.

Oh my god, I slept with him! I gave myself to the enemy!

The realization drizzled over my brain that us meeting wasn't by chance, he wasn't a hero at all. He was a part of the same company that wanted to take my shop from me in the first place.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:36 pm*

It was all a set up. My heart cracked as I ran away from the coffee shop. He doesn't really care about me! All he really wants is my signature. The muscles pounded, forcing layers to flake away with each beat.

The tears rolled down my face effortlessly as the world I had been living in crumbled even more. None of this was real, not one ounce of it had been true.

He lied to me. . .

Liam was a scam. He had no interest in me to begin with, all he had his eyes on was my building.

It all started to fit into place. The break in, the destruction, the man who came to my rescue. His attempt at getting me to move, his sweet words and kindness, it was all a bold faced lie, a strategy to steal everything away from me.

My legs throbbed as my feet crushed the pavement and the air around me barely made it into my lungs. But I didn't stop running.

How could he do this to me?

I believed there was something between us. I believed that he wanted to help. I believed every lie that came out of his mouth.

I thought he cared for me, but I was wrong.

It felt like a rope had wrapped my body, crushing my soul.

I hated myself, because I had fallen in love with the enemy.

### Chapter Ten

Liam

Dragging a hand through my hair, I turned back to Jacob.

He had this smile on his face that made me sick. As if he was enjoying not only the pain she suddenly experienced, but the hurt and surprise that was running through me too.

“Well little brother, it looks like we got work to do.” Leaning back in his chair, he held his hand up by his face and rubbed his fingertips together. “It's time to close this thing.”

Flaring my nostrils, I stepped over the puddle of steaming coffee, and stalked to the table. “Why did she look at you like that?” I asked, balling my fists and resting them on the table.

Shrugging his shoulder, his brows arched high. “We've met before, remember? I was the one who came and talked to everyone a few months back. She knows why I'm here, and now she knows why you're here.”

I saw something else in her eyes. I saw fear.

“No, that's not what it was. . .” Pausing, I angled my head and glared down at him. “Why did she look at you like that, Jacob?”

“How the fuck should I know?” Stiffening his back, his eyes met mine. “All I know is that we need her lot. And you failed, you couldn't get her to sign. So, I'm taking matters into my own hands now. We can't always play nice, Liam. Haven't you learned that yet?”

Shaking my head, my jaw jetted out. “Play nice?” Huffing under my breath, our eyes never broke. “I gave you another option. She's never going to sign it over to us. That door is shut now, there's no doubt in my mind.”

“I have my ways, Liam.” His smile thinned into an evil smirk. “I have my ways.” Standing up, Jacob adjusted the trim of his blazer. “I'll call you later, some of us have work to do.”

“Whatever you're thinking, Jacob, I'm warning you not to do it.”

Chuckling, he pressed his palms against his chest as his lips feathered with a smile. “Or what? What the hell are you going to do, little brother?”

Veering my stare, I spoke through clenched teeth. “Don't test me, this time it's my decision.”

Latching onto my shoulder, Jacob gave me a hard squeeze. “You don't get a decision in this, not anymore.” Slapping my back, he quickly stormed out of the cafe and climbed into a car park outside.

My muscles were tense, trembling so fiercely I felt my nails under the skin. Opening my hands, there were deep dents in my palms, almost deep enough to draw blood.

What the fuck is he going to do?

The look in his eyes told me he was planning something, and the voice in my head



was screaming not to trust him. But he was my brother, as much as he might not float on the same line as everyone else, he wasn't evil.

Was he? Was he capable of doing something else?

The twinkle in his pupils gave me a bad feeling, it wasn't built off excitement and good intentions. His voice was full of malice, layered in quiet threats.

I need to talk to Glory. I have to find her.

She could hate me all she wanted, but I had to explain myself. She needed to know the truth, I wanted her to hear it from me directly. This my only chance to make it right.

I had to make it right.

I spent hours driving around looking for her. She wasn't at her gallery, she wasn't at her apartment, or any of the local coffee shops or restaurants. She had vanished.

“Where are you? We need to talk, just hear me out on this.”

The message went unanswered—every message I sent her went unanswered.

Pulling up to the hotel, I paid the taxi driver and headed inside. There was a feeling of loss filling every crevice. This wasn't what I wanted, I never wanted her to find this way.

I should have told her who I was from the beginning.

Hanging my head, the elevator doors opened, depositing me onto my floor. Checking my phone, she still hadn't tried to call or text me back. Releasing a weighted breath, I

went into my room and fell onto the bed.

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Two days I spent trying to track her down. I waited outside her gallery, but she never showed. I sat in the coffee shop, hoping to see her walk by. Nothing. She was a ghost, disappearing as easily as she had taken my life by storm.

It's over, there's nothing left for me here.

Sitting in my hotel room, I made a quick phone call and started packing my bags. I didn't want to give up on her—on us, but if she wasn't willing to hear what I had to say, if she refused to let me explain, there was nothing else I could do.

I couldn't force her to listen to me. I had betrayed by not telling her exactly who I was. She gave me the chance multiple times, asking my work, and I chose to shut her down.

It's all my fault anyway.

Stuffing the last of my clothes into the suitcase, I zipped it up and rested it on the floor. A heavy knock ricocheted off the door, causing my back to stiffen.

Jacob. . . What the hell does he want?

Walking to the door, I tugged it open. “What the hell—” I lost my voice instantly, unable to use my tongue.

Glory was standing in the doorway, her eyes red and swollen from all the tears I caused. Her cheeks were wet and she was sniffing as she lifted her head to look up at me.

I wanted to grab her and hug her, I wanted to hold her and tell her I was sorry. But I didn't. My arms hung at my side as my heart raced and my muscles shook to touch her.

We both stood silent, Glory glaring up at me with hatred in her eyes. I was afraid to say one word, afraid that my voice would force her away.

Sucking in a big gulp of air, she let it out slowly. Her lips parted, exposing clenched teeth. "You win." Throwing a stack of papers in my face, she started to turn and walk away.

"Don't go," I said, quickly lurching forward and grabbing her arm as the papers fluttered to the ground around me. "Let me explain, I'll explain everything."

Stopping in her tracks, her head ticked over her shoulder as her eyes connected with mine. Baring her teeth, Glory pivoted on her heels.

Crack!

With her small fist, she punched me in the jaw. Releasing her arm, I rubbed my chin. "I deserve that."

"You deserve more than just that." Peeking around my back, she looked inside the room, her eyes zeroing in on my luggage. "Running away?" Cocking her jaw to the side, she snapped. "I don't blame you, I'd run to if I was as big of an asshole as you."

"That's not what this is. I'm not running away, I don't want to run away. But I don't know what else to do, you want nothing to do with me—"

"You have no idea what I want." Clenching her jaw, her pupils turned to pinpricks.

“Please, just hear me out. I was going to tell you, I just didn't know how.”

Her lids turned to slits as she growled. “How about just growing some damn balls and telling me the truth like a real man?”

“I know, I get it. I was wrong, I should have told you that I was Liam Barnes from B and B, but I couldn't.”

“And what about the rest, huh? What about the gallery and the damage and the fact that you and your brother did this to force me out?” Taking a step in, Glory balled her fists by her sides. “What about all of that? Or were you just going to pretend that it never happened? Like you really didn't have a roll in it? You fucking played me, you used me.”

Wait. . . What?

Arching a brow, my eyes darted between hers. “What are you talking about? We didn't do that to your shop.”

“Stop, just stop lying. I know everything, Liam. I know about your little scheme, I know about the set up for you to come in and save me. I know all of it.”

“I don't know what the hell you're talking about. I didn't—”

Throwing up her hand, she rolled her eyes. “Cut the fucking shit, Liam. You won, you both won. I signed the papers, the place is yours. There's no need to pretend anymore. Jacob told me everything.”

“Glory, I really don't have a damn clue what you're talking about.” Stroking my jaw, I shook my head. “What did Jacob say to you?”

“Stop, just stop.” Scrunching her eyes, her brows dipped into the bridge of her nose as she studied my expression. “You really don't know?”

“No, I have no fucking clue.”

Glory stared at me, her face filled with uncertainty and anger. “Stop screwing with me. I've already been through enough, I don't need you messing with my head.”

Taking a step forward, I gently gripped her arm. “I'm serious, I had nothing to do with any of that. When I came in and saw that guy, I had no idea what was going on. That was all real, Glory, that was the real me, it wasn't an act.”

Her eyes scanned my face, searching for something to show her I was being honest. “Your brother told me he did it, he said it was a message. I just thought that you were in on it too, that it was a set up or something.” Her voice was delicate and uneasy as she nervously picked at the beds of her nails.

Jacob did that? Is it possible? Or is he just taking credit to drive her out?

I couldn't focus on my brother right then. All my attention was on Glory, on fixing the mess I created.

“I had nothing to do with that, I wouldneverdo something like that.” Running the tips of my fingers up her arm, I softly swept my hand down her hair. “Glory, the person you met, the man you thought I was, that was all me. None of this was planned, nothing between us was pretend.” Taking another step in, I gently rubbed her back. “I did come here originally to try and get you to sign your place over to us, but that was before I actually met you. Whatever Jacob said, I wouldn't even listen. If I thought for a second that he was capable—” Cutting myself off, I breathed in slowly though my nose, trying to stay calm. “I would have stopped him.”

Inside I was a raging mess. I was ready to find my brother and beat him into the ground, I was ready to grab him by the throat and make him apologize to Glory for all the trouble he caused.

There was no amount of words I could use to describe how disappointed and angry I was with my brother—and that word, I didn't even want to use it. He wasn't my brother, not anymore.

If he was behind what happened at her gallery, he was dead to me. But a small piece of me was hoping that he was just saying it. My brother was a liar, so you had to take what he said at times with a grain of salt.

Maybe he's just fucking with her. Maybe he just wants to use that against her.

“You're serious?” she asked.

“Yes, I'm serious, I would never do something like that. I don't want to take your shop anymore, I want you to have it, I want you to have everything you deserve.” Cupping her jaw, I forced her head higher. “I want you, I want this—I want us.” Lowering my face, I let my lips hover over hers.

“You really mean that?”

“Every word.” Pushing my lips against hers, I kissed her. I kissed her like she was the air I needed to survive. I kissed her like I would die if she pulled away.

Glory was all that mattered.

Pulling her into my chest, I curled my arms around her body and held her tight. I wasn't going to let her go, not now, not ever.



Our kiss deepened as her body folded into mine. Driving her hands into my hair, her nails raked my scalp feverishly. Swooping her off her feet, I carried her into my room, kicking the door shut behind me.

We didn't break the kiss, still devouring each other like the world was ending and this was our last moment on earth.

Shoving the suitcase off the bed, I laid her down and climbed between legs. My mouth placed feathery kisses down her throat, nibbling her skin. Moaning, Glory wrapped her legs around my waist as her hands clutched my back.

"I'm sorry," I said, whispering the words into the crook of her neck. "I'm so sorry for all of this."

"Don't." Pressing her palms to the side of my face, she lifted my head so she could look me in the eyes. "You don't need to." Scanning my eyes, her lips twisted as her breathing was heavy and labored. "It doesn't matter, what's done is done."

Smiling, I kissed the tip of her nose. "You're so fucking beautiful." Brushing loose strands of hair away from her face, I moved my lips down her cheek. "I don't know what the hell I was thinking, I could never run away from you. Come with me, we can go together, we can start a new life someplace else."

"Liam, I can't run from this place, it's my home. My mother is here, and she needs me. I'm everything to her, I could never just leave her." The tips of her fingers traced the hairline on my forehead, sweeping behind my ear. "Stay with me, stay here."

Biting her lower lip, her eyes pleaded for me to answer. To say the one word she wanted to hear, to know that she would never have to wonder when I'd be home, because this would be my home too.

But I didn't give her what she wanted. I couldn't tell her that I'd gladly carve out a small spot here as my own.

I had to show her.

Kissing her with all the feelings I felt for her inside, I gave her the answer she was looking for.

My life was missing this, it was missing her. I could never turn my back and leave, it wouldn't work. I'd never stop thinking about her, I'd never stop dreaming about her, I'd never be able to keep her as just a memory.

Licking and tasting her, I peeled her shirt up over her head and threw it onto the floor. We were all air and movements. There was no more need for us to speak, to utter one more word. Our bodies glided back and forth as hands touched and stroked, and mouths tangled together in filthy kisses.

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Grunting, a wolfish smirk exposed my teeth as her hand tore at the button on my pants, breaking it free. She had become wild, driven by emotional urges and adrenaline. I watched her chest rise and fall rapidly as my cock broke free and an audible gasp escaped her lips.

“That's all yours,” I said, gripping my dick at the base and holding it tight.

“Mm,” she moaned, digging her heels into the mattress to lift her ass off the bed and tug her pants down her thighs. “And I'm all yours.”

Her voice hit my chest, making my heart drum harder. Spreading her legs wide, her pussy glistened, painted in arousal. Digging my fingers around her knees, I pushed back and dropped my face into her soaking cunt.

Glory let out a loud groan, clutching my hair in her fingers and yanking hard. Lapping her flavor, I flicked the tip of my tongue over her swollen bud. Her body wriggled in my hands, thighs threatening to squeeze my temples.

Pinning her knees to the bed, I swirled my tongue over her folds, dipping it into her entrance and watching her bite down on her bottom lip as her thighs shook.

It was beautiful, the most enticing site I had ever seen. Stroking my cock in one hand, I ate her out like I was starving. Her juice coated my chin and mouth, sweet as icing.

Goosebumps jumped across her skin as her legs trembled and her belly tightened. She was right there, hanging on the edge as the orgasm built in the tender bundle of nerves.

Arching her back hard, she pushed her cunt into my mouth, her needy button pulsed and throbbed as the tip of my tongue drew long slow circles around it.

“You taste so good,” I said, pushing up onto my knees and crawling up to her.

Her eyes were wild and glazed over she tried to capture her composure and settle back into the bed cradling her body.

“Oh my god, Liam, that was. . .” Her voice trickled into nothing as she touched the side of her face and let out a breath of air. “That was—”

“Just the beginning,” I said, cutting her off. Driving my cock in with one hard thrust, Glory let out a coo, latching her legs around my hips.

Pressing her face into my chest, she dragged the sharp edges of her teeth across my collarbone, taking small bites.

And as we made love, as the rest of the world went about their day and we got lost in each other, my body made a promise to her.

I promised her I'd always be there.

I promised her I'd always love her.

I promised her I'd fix everything.

### Chapter Eleven

#### Glory

Laying in the bed, I turned on my side and watched Liam gather the papers from the hall. He was wearing only his boxers, and I couldn't stop myself from just staring as his muscles flexed with each movement he made.

He dipped down and my eyes traveled across the lean contours, he swayed to his left, and my eyes followed the sharp bulges at his neck. He was a god, forged from stone and meticulously built to please.

Twisting around, he closed the door, tapping the papers against his firm abs to make them even. "You never signed these," he said, thumbing the thin edges as his strong legs brought him back to the bed.

"It's a little late for that, isn't it?" Lifting my head, I rested it in my hands as he sat down beside me. "They're signed, there's nothing I can do about it now. It's probably for the best anyway."

Flicking his head over his shoulder, his eyes thinned. "Don't say that. You love that place, it's yours, not my company's." Holding the papers up, he tore them in half and dropped them into the trash. "You never signed these papers." Drawing out his words, he wriggled his brows and smiled.

"But what about everything else? Your brother—"

“My brother is an asshole.” Pushing his palms into his knees, his back stiffened. “Don't worry about him, I'm going to fix this, I promise.”

“Liam,” I said, popping up and wrapping my arms around his shoulders. “He said—”

Not letting me finish, Liam twisted his torso and curled his arms around my body, pulling me onto his lap. “I don't want you to worry about him, I don't even want you to think about him. I told you I'm going to fix this and I will.”

Liam kissed my forehead, pressing my cheek against his chest as he stroked the side of my face. I let him hold me, I let him cradle me and tell me everything would be alright.

I wanted to believe him so badly, forcing myself into this fake feeling of trust.

But deep inside, it didn't feel like I would ever get out from under this.

Tipping my head up, I asked, “So what now? What do I need to do?”

Pinching a piece of my hair between his fingertips, he twisted it softly. “I don't want you doing anything, this is on me. He's my brother, and he might be a dick, but I know him better than he knows himself.” Letting the ringlet go, it slid over my face, coming to rest on the delicate tips of my lashes. “He's not a horrible person, he's just misguided.”

Peering up, Liam's face changed as his mind turned with whatever plan he had brewing inside. I could see the disappointment and anger in his eyes. Liam had to make a choice, and he had chosen me over his own brother.

That had to hurt on some level, regardless of what was happening. I was certain that he felt a broken loyalty. Blood was suppose to be thicker than water, until that blood

ran so thin it dried up.

Tracing his fingers up and down my arm, Liam smiled. "Come on, let's go shopping."

"Shopping?" Drawing circles over the center of his chest, I played with the small hairs. "What are we going shopping for?"

"You'll see." Sitting me up, he stood up off the bed and grabbed his pants off the floor.

"So, I take it you're not leaving then?" Glancing at his luggage, I let my eyes shift back to his.

Smirking, he chuckled. "No, I'm not leaving. I don't even think I would have actually gotten on the plane to begin with." Unzipping his bag, he pulled out a clean shirt and slipped it over his head. "Well," he said, rolling his hand. "Get dressed."

Eyeing him curiously, I picked up my clothes. "Where are we going?"

"I told you, we're going shopping. Do you not like shopping?"

"No, I like shopping, I just don't like surprises." Shimmying my jeans over my hips, I buttoned them. "At least tell me what we're shopping for."

"Nope." Grabbing his phone and wallet, he stuffed them into his back pockets.

"This isn't fair."

"Fair is a debatable word." Standing at the door, he waited for me to finish getting my clothes on and brush my hair with my fingers. "You ready?"

“As ready as I can be.”



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A car was waiting for us outside, and I had no idea how he did that so quickly. I didn't even see him use his phone. Liam leaned into the driver's side window and whispered something into the man's ear.

His massive sized body dropped down next to me and his hand immediately came to rest on my thigh. "This is going to be fun."

"I wouldn't know, I have no idea where we're going."

Smirking, he leaned over and gave me a quick kiss. "You're just going to have to trust me."

The car moved forward, turning onto Main Street. Liam braided our fingers together, keeping his face looking out the window.

This man is something else.

Squeezing his hand tighter, I watched the buildings pass by as we drove. A giddy childlike excitement crept through my chest, making my lungs ache and my stomach clench.

"We're getting close, shut your eyes."

"Seriously?" I asked, snapping my head over my shoulder to look at him.

"Yes, seriously," he said, running his hand down over my eyes, forcing my lids down. "And keep them shut."

“Fine.” Everything went dark and I could feel the car still moving. “How close are we?”

“Not far. Are they shut?”

“Yes, they're shut.”

Liam's shadow swept across the back of my lids and the weight of his body shifted around my face. “You're not trying to peek are you?”

Giggling, I tilted my head as I spoke. “No, I'm not peeking.” The car slowed down, coming to a stop. “Are we there?”

“We are, keep them closed.” Taking my hand, he guided me out of the car. “Don't open them until I tell you to.”

“This is really dramatic, you realize that right?”

“It's suspenseful, not dramatic.” His hands gripped the outside of my shoulders as he positioned me where he wanted me. Curling his fingers over my eyes, he whispered into my ear. “Are you ready?”

“Yes, I'm ready, let me see.”

“Are you sure you're ready?”

“Liam!” I yelled playfully, giving him an elbow to the ribs. “Yes, I'm ready.”

“Alright, alright.” His hands peeled away, but my eyes were still shut. “You can open them now.”

Blinking quickly, it took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the light. Looking up at the building, I squinted to read the sign. Always Paint.

“What are we here for?”

“Was I talking to myself the whole the time?” Nudging me with his shoulder, Liam looked down on me, his teeth bright behind his lips. “We're going shopping.”

“For what?”

“For you.”

“Liam, I—”

“Glory,” he said instantly, stopping me from finishing my sentence. “I'm taking you shopping, and you can't tell me no. I'd buy everything myself for you if I could, but I don't have a clue where to begin.” Taking my hand, he pulled me towards the double doors. “You need new stuff, let's go get it.”

“This is too much, you already got me a security system, that's more than enough.” Dragging my heels, I leaned back hesitantly.

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“Will you stop with all that. I want to do this, so let me. It's my fault for all of this anyway.” His voice trailed off as his tone went soft.

Arching a stern brow, my lips turned down. “What are you talking about? None of this is your fault, you didn't do anything wrong.” Raking my fingers through my hair, I swallowed hard. “I mean, yes, you should have told me who you really are, but you had nothing to do with anything else.”

Liam stopped short, dropping his head into chest. “Glory, I was the one who suggested this town to begin with, I was the one who told Jacob that your building and the ones around it were the perfect spot. If I hadn't done that, none of this would have happened.” His eyes darted up to mine, and I could see the pain and regret he felt inside.

“You can't blame yourself, you didn't make the same choices your brother made. It doesn't matter what you suggested, he made his own decisions.”

Shaking his head, his lips folded into a thick frown. “I know, but I still feel guilty.”

“Is that what this is?”

“What?” he asked, furrowing his brows.

“All this.” Looking up at the store, I nodded my head. “Shopping, the alarm system, are you doing this because you feel guilty?”

Opening his eyes wide, he held up his hands. “No.” His voice was sharp and

powerful. "I'm not doing this because I feel guilty. I'm doing this because I want to, because you deserve it." Liam reached for my hand and pulled me into his arms. "I want to give you the world, Glory, and it's not because I feel guilty. I feel guilty that all of this happened, and as much as I wish I could take it all back, something good did come out of this mess." Running his finger across my lips, he smiled. "I met you and that's one thing I wouldn't change. Giving you these things makes me happy. I like you seeing you smile, I like seeing your eyes light up. And I'd do anything to make you do that every day for the rest of your life."

My cheeks heated as my heart went crazy inside my chest. "You mean that?"

"Every word." Liam lowered his face, giving me a deep passionate kiss. Pulling away, he peered into my eyes. "Always."

Gripping my hand, Liam led me into the store. He made me grab a carriage and he took one of his own. We filled both of them, and then we filled a third and a fourth.

Canvases, paints, brushes, charcoal, sketch pads, frames, a new easel. . . He wouldn't leave until I had everything I needed to start over.

I was more than grateful for everything he was doing. I felt like I was living in a fairy tale, like any second my eyes would open and I'd find myself laying at home in my bed.

But it was real, all of it was real. From the good to the bad, they both went hand in hand. You can't appreciate the great things if you don't experience the horrible things.

"Is this everything?" he asked, scanning his eyes over the items and looking back at the isles. "Are you sure you don't need anything else? Modeling clay, finger paints, sponges?"

“No, this is plenty.” Laughing, I placed my hands on my hips. “And you're sure about all this? This is going to be expensive, you know that right?”

“Glory, the money doesn't matter. You being happy is all I care about. I want this for you, I want to watch you paint. . .” Pausing, he closed the small gap between us and gripped my hips. “Maybe you paint naked, I don't know. We can get a few more drop cloths if you want in case you decide to go wild.”

Giggling, I placed my hands around his neck. “I don't usually paint in the nude, but I might make an exception here and there for your viewing pleasure.”

Liam let out a sexy growl as he pressed his forehead to mine. “Sounds like we have a date.” Kissing me softly, he wriggled his brows. “You ready? Are we all done here?”

“Yeah, I think we're done.”

Driving back to town, squished in the back of the car with everything we couldn't fit in the trunk, Liam never let go of my hand and I never stopped smiling.

He had become more than just a hero to me.

He had become a piece of my soul.

And I could never thank him enough for making me feel whole.

### Chapter Twelve

Liam

Glory was separating everything from the car, making small piles and stacks. Stepping back, she clutched her hips and peered down on all of it. She had this look on her face, almost like she was confused.

“What's wrong? Did we forget something?” I asked, walking up behind her and scooping my arms around her stomach. Digging the curve of my chin into the crook of her neck, my eyes glanced over all the items. “I'll go get you whatever it is you need if something is missing.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head, causing her hair to tickle against my cheek. “Everything is here, it's just that I feel like this is the first time I honestly don't know where to begin.”

“You begin with sketching, at least, that's what my mother always did first.” Glory tilted her head so she could look at me, her eyes full and inquisitive. “I used to watch her when I was little, she had this old ratty drawing book she carried everywhere.”

Thinning her lips into a tight smile, Glory walked to her tote bag and dug around inside. “Was it something like this?” she asked, pulling out a warped and worn spiral bound book.

“It was exactly like that.” Holding out my hand, I flapped my fingers. “Can I see that?”

Tipping up her chin, she gave me a stern look. “This is private, you need clearance to see inside.”

“Is that right?” Arching a high brow, my lips curled up. “I’m pretty sure I have the right clearance.”

“I don’t know, do you have the secret code word.”

“Please?” Putting on my best puppy dog face, I pouted.

“Wrong, denied.” Holding the book in her hands, she flipped the pages quickly, creating a soft breeze that blew the loose strands of hair around her face.

“Denied, huh.” Taking a firm step in, Glory stepped back, her giggle infectious as she tucked the book behind her back. “Maybe I’ll just take it from you.” Each step forced her closer and closer to the wall behind her.

“You won’t get this from me. You’re going to have to pry it free from my cold dead hands.” Bouncing her eyebrows up and down, she kept creeping backwards.

In one quick movement, I lurched in her direction, making her sway on her heels as she realized she had no where else to go. Looking over her shoulder, she bit her lip and smirked.

“Ah, you didn’t see that wall did you?” Resting my hands on either side of her head, I boxed her in. “Where you going to go now?”

“You can’t see it.”

“I don’t think you can stop me.” The cat and mouse game we were playing was making me hard. She couldn’t escape, there was no where for her to go. Licking my



lips, I brought my face to hers, brushing the tips of our noses together. “You're trapped.”

“Am I?” she asked, her tone mocking me. “Is that what you think?”

“Where can you go?” Flicking my eyes side to side, I pushed my toes against hers. “I got you right where I want you.” Leaning in, I was about to kiss her, but suddenly she was gone.

With one fast dip, Glory had ducked under my arm and darted out into the center of the room. “Trapped, huh?” Laughing, she flashed me a big smile.

Hanging my head, I didn't say anything else. Running forward, Glory let out a loud squeal as she took off, doing her best to avoid my hands.

We were like two kids, the boy chasing the girl, wanting nothing more than to feel her in his arms. My dick throbbed, eager to grab hold of my girl and swoop her in my arms.

She was laughing, the purest laugh I had ever heard. Her smile was bright and full of life, her eyes twinkling like there wasn't a care in the world.

Glory looked so beautiful right then, her skin was glowing, her cheeks rosy and pink as she huffed with her breaths to stay clear of me.

Taking a sharp turn to her right, she lost her footing, causing her to slip and fall off balance. I was at her side in one step, snagging her in my arms and yanking her into my chest.

“Gotcha,” I said, hugging her as tightly as I could without hurting her.

Our eyes connected, her smile fading into the sexiest little grin. Pushing my erection into her hip, her arms dropped by her sides as her tongue ran over her bottom lip.

I heard the notebook fall to the ground, the metal binding clanked off the floor as the pages splashed open like water.

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She didn't even look down at it, her eyes were frozen on mine, her body molding into my hands as her breathing became thick.

Neither one of us uttered another word. We were lost in each other, in a trance that I doubted anyone could break if they walked in right then.

Her slender fingers came up and ran over the scruff of my jaw. Parting her lips, her tongue tempted the opening, making my cock jerk and my heart hammer inside my chest. Pushing up onto the tips of her toes, she didn't wait for me to make a move. Glory took charge, she drove her lips onto mine as her nails raked through my hair, digging at the roots.

Gripping her under her ass, I lifted her off the floor and guided her legs around my waist. Stalking backwards, I didn't stop until her back hit the wall, sealing her in place.

Growling, I forced my dick against her hot center, grinding against her. Her hips pivoted forward, meeting the motion with a sway of her own.

We were fucking with our clothes on, our lips locked tight, bodies glued to each other. Each kiss was devouring, every breath was ragged and unhinged, our hands were greedy, our tongues were angry.

With a rough hand, I pinched her nipple, making the perked bead turn to stone. Glory groaned, her soft moan air-filled as it entered my mouth between breaths. I couldn't get enough of her, no amount of time would be too much.

Glory wiggled her hips, forcing her feet to the floor. Tearing at her pants, she yanked them down over her thighs, kicking them off her feet into a puddle of blue at her side. Her hands found the trim of my pants, and with the same fierceness she tore them open.

Digging my fingers into the soft flesh of her ass, I picked her back up, pinning her to the wall again. With one strong hand, I kept her in place as I gripped my cock with the other hand and positioned it against her entrance.

A shiver ran through her body, forcing goosebumps to erupt over her skin. The heat off her pussy warmed my dick, her sweet arousal soaked the tip, making it easy for me to slid inside.

Driving into her with one hard push, Glory's head fell back against the wall as her eyes snapped shut and her lips puckered into the perfect O. The muscles in her pussy squeezed around my shaft, drawing a throaty moan out of mouth.

“Fuck, you're so wet.” The words were soft as I pulled my hips away and slammed back inside.

Her eyes opened, glinting like liquid fire as she peered at me. “You do that to me, you make me drip, Liam.” Clutching my hips with her thighs, she rocked her clit against my lower belly, moving in rhythm with my cock.

Her pussy milked my shaft, making my balls draw up tight and my lower stomach clench. Glory's thighs were shaking, but she never let go of me. Throwing her body forward, she tucked her face into my shoulder, biting into the skin as she moaned.

My hands vibrated as her body trembled when the orgasm swept through her muscles and veins. Air filled coos filled my ear as she nuzzled her face in deeper and held onto me tighter.

With one final pump, my dick exploded, forcing wave after wave of hot come into her pussy. I could feel the sweat as it dripped down between my shoulder blades, and my muscles as they tensed with electric pops.

Lowering Glory to the floor, she touched down on the tips of her toes first, dropping onto flat feet. Biting her lower lip, she glanced up at me with this look in her eyes.

“What?”

“I think I know where to begin now.”

“See, I'm good for something here—inspiration.” Taking both her hands, I tangled our fingers together.

Glory stared at me, her gaze filled with hope and new life.

That look, that look was the only look I ever wanted.

If everything else in my life suddenly vanished, if I lost it all, I wouldn't give two shits as long as I had those eyes looking back at me every single day.

She was quickly becoming my world.

### Chapter Thirteen

#### Glory

Holding the brush tightly between my fingertips, I dabbed it into the deep royal purple paint and started to spread it across the canvas. It was thrilling, adrenaline in the form of colorful splashes and thick strokes.

I could see the image as clearly as if it was already on the canvas. The purple sky was going to be filled with bright red and orange blotches. A young girl would be standing at the edge of a small puddle, peering into her reflection. The image reflecting back would be a princess, her confidence bold and visible.

Liam's eyes followed me around the painting as he watched from a distance. He was sitting on the floor in his boxers, his gaze cemented on my back and arms as they moved with ease.

“It really is incredible to watch you.” His mouth was half full, chewing a handful of chips. “I don't how you do that. It's already beautiful.”

Looking back at him over my shoulder, I smiled. “Thank you.”

Pushing himself up off the floor, he came to my side, and curled his hands around my forearms. Kissing the top of my head, he placed soft kisses down the side of my face and over my neck. “If you didn't seem so into this painting, I'd probably take you again just like this.”

Giggling, I draped my hand around his neck as he kept kissing my skin. "I'll never get anything done at this rate if you keep touching me the way you do."

Liam chuckled, pulling away. "You're right." Grabbing his pants off the floor, he pulled them on. "I'm going to go in the back and make a few business calls. Get as much done as you can, because when I get back, I can't promise I'll keep my hands off you." Yanking his shirt over his head, he gave me a wink.

Nodding, I watched him walk away, disappearing into the backroom. Moving my eyes back to the painting, I continued working.

It felt great to actually be painting again. I felt like it had been ages since it flowed this easily. I honestly wasn't sure if I'd ever paint again. A week ago I had written off this life all together, ready to just give up.

I'd never give this up, I can't. It's embedded too deep to ever let it go.

My hand traveled up and down, across and back again. Each layer adding a new dimension to the picture. Life was bleeding into the material from my fingers, and I could actually feel it, as if it was taking its first breath.

**CRASH!**

My hand skipped across the canvas as the sound of glass breaking echoed through the room. Jerking my body straight, I jumped to my feet and looked over the easel, searching for the source.

What the fuck was that?!

The front window had been blasted open by a flaming bottle. spurts of flames traveled across the floor, scaling the walls and new paint. I stood in shock, gawking at

the fire as it spread so easily, engulfing the room as quickly as it appeared.

“Glory!” Liam yelled.

Snapping my head over my shoulder, our eyes connected as he stood in the doorway. His lids had shot open as the same shock I felt filled his blank and fearful stare. The room flickered in orange and red as the flames moved like water.

“Go! Get out of here!” Holding his hand to his face, he tried to block the heat off the flames as he took a few steps in.

But we were separated by a river, a burning, smoking river that neither one of us could cross. Taking a few steps backwards, he yelled again. “Get out!”

The thought of abandoning this place cut through my heart. I couldn't—no I wouldn't leave without trying to tame the out of control beast before it destroyed everything.

I can't lose this all again!

“No, Liam! We have to put it out!” Glancing around, I looked for anything to battle the fire as it crawled up the walls and over the ceiling.

It was moving so quickly, the sharp tendrils dancing and swaying back and forth as if they were mocking me. The new paint on my picture began to melt as the heat intensified. I watched as the colors bled together, each streak a crushing blow to my insides making me hurt.

“Get out, Glory!” Liam stood in the doorway, but I refused to listen. “Just go!”

“No!” I screamed back, snatching my shirt off the floor and slapping the flames with



it. "I won't leave!" My eyes began to fill with tears as the smoke turned from gray to black, causing me to choke as I swallowed air.

Frantically, I flailed the shirt, doing my best to beat the fire out. It did nothing. The fire kept spreading, devouring every inch of wall and ceiling it touched. Coughing, I covered my mouth with the charred piece of cloth and dropped to my knees.

My eyes tried to find Liam in the consuming darkness, but I couldn't see him. Taking in short, slow breaths, I crawled under the smoke, working my way to the front door. It was getting harder and harder to breathe as the oxygen was sucked from the air by the fire.

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I couldn't fight the fire, I couldn't stop the fire, I couldn't steal it's oxygen and make it grow weaker.

It's time to go! Before it's too late!

A voice inside my head took charge, forcing me to do the only thing I didn't want to. I didn't want to give up.

Struggling to crawl across the floor, the room began to get fuzzy and my head felt light and dizzy. I could see the very bottom of the door, but it was getting harder and harder to keep my eyes open.

My chest burned on the inside, my throat was dry and brittle as I gulped for clean air. Nothing was coming, I was suffocating and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

Falling onto my face, my knees gave out, releasing my body onto the floor. I had no strength left to carry me along. It didn't matter how much I wanted to fight, I was done.

Tears fell down my cheeks as every inhale felt like I was swallowing sizzling needles. Each breath became more shallow than the last. Closing my eyes, I curled up into a small ball, hoping that I would pass out before the fire engulfed me.

Blackness swooped in, stealing me away, saving me from any pain I might feel.

I was grateful for that. At least death could be painless.

Because this life had stolen everything from me.

Liam didn't believe in luck and I had just lost all hope in happily ever afters.

### Chapter Fourteen

Liam

No!

No!

I couldn't see her anymore, the smoke was too thick from where I was standing to see anymore than a few feet in front of me. Running through the back room, I threw open the emergency exit door and darted out into the small alley behind the building.

The second I opened the door, I heard a loud whoosh and felt the heat grow by a million degrees. I didn't stop to see if I had just made the fire worse by feeding it more air, I had to get to Glory.

She was the only thing on my mind. The building could be fixed, but if I lost her, I wasn't sure what I would do. Her life was worth more than any one thing someone could own.

I had no intentions of owning her, I didn't want my brother to own her, and I'd be damned if I let her lose her life because she was allowing this place to own her.

This wasn't all she had anymore, she had me now. There was nothing I couldn't give her, and nothing I wouldn't give her if she asked.

With heavy feet, I ran around to the front and tried to open the door. Grabbing the

handle, it was hot as fresh red coals, burning the center of my palm.

“Fuck!” I yelled, shaking my hand to ease the pain. “Glory!” Screaming, I pounded on the door, slamming it with my shoulder to try and break it down.

It hardly budged.

Taking a few steps back, I ran forward and kicked the door at the seam. I heard it crack, but it was still closed tight. Kicking it again and again, I used every last ounce of strength I had to force the door open.

Lifting my foot one last time, I kicked with my heel. Splinters of wood shot inward as the door exploded open. Black smoke billowed out from inside and I could see red and orange bursts between the massive cloud as the flames continued to grow.

Covering my nose and mouth with my arm, I stalked inside, not thinking about my own safety at all. I didn't give a shit about myself. I couldn't feel the burn on my hand, I couldn't feel the smoke as it filled my chest, I couldn't feel the heat as it singed the hair off the back of my neck; all I cared about was finding Glory and getting her out.

My eyes teared as the smoke battered the surface, making it even harder to see in the darkness. There were shadows everywhere. The outline of something large on the ground caught my attention.

Bending over, I grabbed it. It was hard, squared at the edges and soft in the center.

Canvas. . .

Dropping it to the ground, I pushed blindly in further. Taking another step, I hit something soft. Leaning forward, I felt around, tracing a thin curve and running my

fingers through silky fibers.

Glory.

Pulling my arm off my face, I stuffed my hands under her body, and lifted her off the floor. Cradling her in my arms, her body was limp and motionless.

“I've got you, I'm getting you out of here.” Turning back towards the door, I walked carefully with powerful steps. “I'm not letting you die, not today, not ever.”

The cool night air spilled over my face and filled my lungs. Coughing, I placed her down gently on the sidewalk. Coddling her head, I listened closely to see if she was breathing.

I couldn't feel her breath on my skin or see her chest as it lifted in shallow breaths. She was so still, so stoic, like a sleeping doll. My brain was trying to process what to do and how to handle this.

Air! She needs air!

“No, Glory, no no no.” Tipping her head back, I placed my mouth around hers and sent a breath of fresh oxygen into her lungs. “Come on, come back to me.” Releasing a second breath, I watched her chest rise and fall.

Sirens were blaring in the distance, growing louder and louder as I did my best to bring her back to life. Her face was smeared with charcoal dust, her lips a pale shade of blue.

No! Come on!

“Breathe, Baby, come on and breathe.” Rubbing her cheek, I pinched her chin and

placed my hand on her forehead, giving her another rush of oxygen to feed her veins. “Breathe, Glory, breathe.” The words came out against her lips as I kissed her softly, dropping my head onto her chest.

“Huuh.” Her chest lifted as she inhaled an audible gasp. It was weak, but I heard it, and it was the best sound I had ever heard in my life.

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“There you go, there you go, Baby, breathe.” Pushing my ear against her chest, I listened as the air trickled into her swollen lungs.

Each small breath she took made my heart pump harder and my nerves ignite. She was still with me, she was still alive. Adrenaline purged through my body as I focused on the woman who had stolen my heart.

The lights from the firetrucks flickered off the building as the brakes squealed to a stop. I heard the sound of men as they jumped out of the truck and felt their feet as they slammed against the ground.

“Is she alright? What happened here?” A voice chirped over my shoulder and the presence of someone dropping down to her side pulled my attention off of her and onto them.

“She's breathing, but barely.” Pushing back, I made room for the paramedics so they could look her over.

More people arrived, surrounding Glory and myself. I felt the cold metal of a bell against my chest and heard someone ask me to take in a deep breath.

Everything was happening in slow motion. Their voices were muffled and sounded far away, the men and women moving around me to put out the flames all looked like they were in a freeze frame.

A stretcher was rolled to Glory's side. The sound of the metal rungs as they dropped to her level echoed inside my brain. Police had arrived, along with more paramedics



and I felt like Glory was getting pulled further and further away from me.

I watched as she was hoisted onto the stretcher with an airbag on her face. The hand holding it was squeezing it evenly as the voices all blurred into one giant mass of sound.

“I’m going with her,” I said, attempting to rise to my feet.

“Sir, you need to stay seated, we’ve got another ambulance for you.”

“No!” I snapped, keeping my eyes on her. “I’m going with her.” Her arm had been placed over her chest, so I grabbed her hand. “I’m fine, I’m not leaving her side.” Braiding my fingers into hers, I refused to let her go.

“Sir—”

Jerking my head over my shoulder, I glared at the man who was trying to talk to me. “I said I’m going with her.”

Pursing his lips, he looked from me to her and gave me a nod. I didn’t give two fucks what they wanted me to do. I wasn’t leaving her, period.

Sitting in the back of the ambulance, I never let her hand go. The paramedic worked around me, hooking her up to an IV and oxygen, checking her vitals and listening to her chest.

As we drove to the hospital, I knew that what I was feeling for this girl was love. It was real, tangible love. I could feel it in my bones, in my muscles, in my heart.

I would have gladly let the building gobble me up as long as she got out. I knew it as I ran into the flames, I knew it as my skin turned red hot and I could feel my flesh as

it started to burn.

I loved Glory Daniels.

And I'd run into any burning building to save her.

### Chapter Fifteen

#### Glory

My eyes cracked open. A bright light hovered over my face.

Am I dead?

Blinking rapidly, I tried to look around. A small piece of me expected to see my father's face, with his big toothy grin and rosy red cheeks. But as the fog in my head cleared, I could see the tiles of the ceiling and the bulbs glowing bright.

I'm in the hospital. I didn't die.

Lifting my fists to my eyes, I rubbed them hard, trying to focus. I could feel my chest and it hurt. Each inhale was excruciating, each exhale was just as harsh.

Twisting my head to the right, I could see the machine that measured my heart rate and pulse. Lifting a hand to my face, I felt the tubes that were placed in my nose, feeding me pure oxygen.

Turning to my left, I smiled to myself. Liam was asleep in the chair beside my bed, his chin resting in his palm, eyes closed tight. He had white gauze wrapped around both his hands and more taped across the side of his neck. He was wearing a hospital gown, with his feet stuffed into those dark gray stockings they give you with the grips on the bottom.

I tried to giggle, but the pain was too much. My laugh came out like an injured donkey, going high pitched and falling into a low groan. Clutching my chest, I coughed hard and cleared my throat.

Liam's eyes slowly opened, growing from sleepy to wide in a instant. Shooting to my side, he grabbed my hand and brushed the other across my forehead. "Good morning, beautiful. I've been waiting for you to wake up."

"What the hell happened?"

"There was a fire at the gallery. . ." His voice trailed off as he watched for a reaction. "Do you remember anything that happened?"

My brain flashed with images. The glass as it broke open, the flames as they washed across the floor and seeped up the walls like demonic water.

Nodding, I could feel the tears as they began to well up in my eyes. "I remember." Holding his gaze, I tried not to cry. "Is it all gone?" I asked, my words soft and quiet.

Liam looked down at my hand, tracing my knuckles with his thumb. "I'm so sorry, Glory."

Closing my eyes, I let my head sink into the pillow. "All of it?"

"They tried to put it out, they did." His fingers tightened around mine as he spoke. "I'm just so happy you're okay. I thought I lost you." His voice waned, teetering on tears of his own.

Opening my eyes, I lifted my free hand to his face and cupped his cheek. "I'm still here."

“I don't know what I would have done if I lost you.”

“You didn't lose me, I'm still here.” Liam laid his head on my chest and I ran my fingers through his hair. “Are you okay? Are you hurt bad?”

Tipping his face, he peered up at me. “I'll be fine.” Kissing me gently, he nuzzled his head into the crook of my neck. “We're both going to be fine.”

“How long have I been out?”

Wrapping his arm around my chest, he held me tightly. “Too long.”

“How long?”

“A day. But that was one day too many.”

“Do they know what happened?”

“No, but they're investigating. We probably won't know what happened for a little while.”

“Someone did this, Liam.”

“You don't know that—”

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Cutting him off, I coughed slightly as I spoke. “I saw the bottle on fire as it hit the ground. I watched it spill flames across the room and engulf everything in that place.” Closing my eyes, I knew I had to tell him the one thing he probably would never want to hear. “I know who did this, I know who's responsible.”

Liam's face fell flat as he stared at me confused. “Who do you think did this?” he asked, his tone husky and coarse.

Taking in a slow breath, I looked away as I spoke. “It was Jacob—your brother—he did this.”

Pushing up quickly, Liam's eyes held disbelief. “I know my brother is an asshole, but to set the building on fire with us inside? He wouldn't do this.”

“It was him. I tried to tell you before, he told me he was going to do this. Jacob came right out and said he would burn it to the ground.”

Liam's eyes bounced between mine as he tried to process the thought. I couldn't blame him if he didn't want to believe it, I didn't know how I'd feel if someone was telling me that someone I had known all my life had done something so horrible. But I knew Jacob was responsible. There was no one else in this world that wanted me out as badly as that man.

“Maybe you heard him wrong, maybe he didn't mean literally.” Snapping his back straight, Liam started to pace the room. “He wouldn't do this, there's no way.” Raking his hand through his hair, he clutched his jaw. “I know my brother; he's a douchbag, he talks shit, but this—” Throwing out his arms, he held up his bandaged hands.

“He wouldn't do this.”

Pushing myself up in the bed, my brows arched high. “Are you so sure of that? He sent someone to destroy the place and threaten me. Did you think he would ever do that?”

“I know Jacob doesn't have a huge moral compass, but—”

“He said it, Liam.” My voice crackled out, but I was stern. “You didn't hear him, you didn't see him, the look in his eyes when he said it. . .” Pausing, I lifted my hand to my mouth and plucked my bottom lip. “He meant it, and he did exactly what he said he would. I know he's your brother and you don't want to believe it, but he's behind this.”

Stopping in the center of the room, Liam's eyes were big as saucers. “I. . . I need to go.” Turning towards the door, he opened it with a hard tug.

“Wait, where are you going?”

“If what you're saying is true. . .” Glancing at me over his shoulder, he gave me a weak smile. “Then there's something I need to go do.”

My eyes were frozen on him as he walked out of view. A buzzing noise filled my ears as the door stayed open, allowing the flurry of sounds from the hall to seep inside.

I didn't know where he was going. But I knew whatever he was planning, it wasn't going to end good.

Liam was finally going to see what side his brother was on, and it wasn't the side he would want it to be.

Reality was about to slap him in the face. His brother was far worse than he thought he was.

And there was nothing I could do, he had to see it for himself.



### Chapter Sixteen

Liam

Tearing off the hospitalgown, I grabbed my clothes from the bag under the bed. Pulling them out, the scent of burnt wood and smoke hit my face. Coughing lightly, I ignored the smell and put them on anyway.

I wasn't about to stay one second longer if Jacob was involved in this. I had questions and I needed answers.

“Mr. Barnes, what are you doing? We haven't discharged you yet, the doctor wants you to stay for observations, and we still need to address the seriousness of the burns on your hands.”

“I need to go.” My voice came out short and gruff as I threw my shirt over my head.

“But Dr. Conner wants to keep an eye on your lung function. You have interior burns to your esophagus and you might need surgery on your hands. Those are third degree burns, this is really serious, you can't leave just yet.”

“You can't keep me here, I'm leaving.”

“Mr. Barnes—”

“I can't stay, have Dr. Conner call me, I'll set up a time to come see him.” Jamming my feet into my shoes, I stuffed my wallet and phone into my back pocket.

The nurse stood in the doorway, not sure exactly what to do about me. I could see it in her eyes that she felt annoyed I wasn't complying with what the doctor wanted. I just didn't give a shit.

I was fine. I was alive. The rest of my body would heal with time, I wasn't on the verge of death. But what Glory said and with the seriousness on her face, it was enough for me to question what my brother was truly capable of.

Damn it! I hope he didn't do this.

It was a feigned plea in my mind. I wanted to believe that he didn't have this type of evil inside him.

But if she was right, if my brother was the person who burned down her building, then I wanted to know why. He was going to have to answer to me before anyone else knew what he had done and I lost my chance to hear it from him myself.

Walking towards the exit, she stayed in the center of the doorway as if she was going to block me from leaving. Stopping, I cocked my head and softened my expression. Holding out my arms, I took another step forward.

“I'm not trying to be difficult, but if you don't let me by, I'll just move you myself.”

Folding her arms over her chest, she stepped to the side and let me through. I wasn't even at the elevator yet before I heard the speakers overhead crackle on.

“Dr. Conner, please dial three four four, Dr. Conner three four four.”

I need to get the hell out of here.

Getting off the elevator, I walked through the front entrance and texted my driver. I

told him I'd be walking down Dalton Drive and to come grab me.

Hanging around at the hospital wasn't an option. The nurse wasn't waiting for me to leave before calling doctor, so I wasn't waiting around for him to find me.

It wasn't long before the black car pulled to my side and stopped. Hopping in the passenger seat, I said, "Thanks, Fred."

"No problem, but why are you walking? I would have picked you up out front of the hospital."

"I haven't exactly been sent home, but I can't stay there, I need to find Jacob."

The car started forward, merging into traffic. "I talked to him this morning, he's down at the site checking the damage."

"The site?"

"Yeah, the one you two bought, he said he was going to see how much money the fire saved him."

Taking in a deep breath, my nostrils flared. "Looks like you know where to bring me then."

I didn't say another word the entire ride. My head was a fucking mess, the rage was slowly killing me, and every muscle in my body was about to explode.

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Glory was certain that he had done this and I held onto my doubts. But the more I thought about it, the more things seemed to make sense.

The conversation we had a few weeks back replayed in my mind. He was taking matters into his own hands, he had other ways to get it done. But this. . . Was the break in, the intruder, the fire; was all of that his plan?

I knew he had a soul that didn't quit fit in with the rest of the world, but to think he'd be so callous and cruel, to go this far for his own personal gain, it was hard to imagine. We had everything in the palm of our hands, one little lot wasn't worth this kind of anger.

And we were brothers, I didn't want to think that my own brother would set a building on fire with me inside.

Balling my fists in my lap, I stared out the window at the sky, zoning out to the voice inside my head.

What if it's true? What if he did do this?

I'd never be able to look at him again without seeing Glory's pale unconscious face. I wouldn't be able to stomach being near him.

Looking in Jacob's eyes would remind me of her laying lifeless on the floor. I was already going to have scars I'd have to see every day, I didn't want to see my brother's face alongside them.

Rolling up to Glory's building, I could still see smoke trickling out from beneath the charred rubble. Some of the beams were still standing that made up the walls, but the roof was caved in and I could see straight through to the back.

Fuck, there's nothing left at all.

Climbing out of the car, I told Fred he could go and if I needed him I'd call. Glancing around, I didn't see Jacob. Walking around the building, my jaw hung open as I really took in how lucky we both were to be alive.

The wood was cracked and black as ink, all of the walls had folded over and smashed into chunks of soot.

“Hey there, little brother, what do you think?” Jacob came up behind me, his voice slick and playful. “This makes it a little easier, huh? The demolition is basically done, we lucked out for sure.”

Clenching my jaw, I turned around to face him. The smile on his face made me want to hit him instantly, but I held back. There was still a glimmer of doubt I held onto, a small morsel of hope that Glory was wrong and he had nothing to do with any of this.

That maybe this was some weird twist of coincidence that all of this went down and we just happened to get mixed in the chaos.

Deep down in my gut, as much as I didn't want to acknowledge it, I knew she was right. It was hard to accept, hard to allow that idea to settle on my brain and become real.

But I could feel it. I could sense it on my skin as the hairs bristled when he talked. I could feel it against my ear drums when his voice left his lips as he spoke. Jacob had done something horrible and now I had to know his reasons.

“Why, Jacob?”

Titling his head, his lids thinned. “Why? What kind of question is that?” His eyes bounced between me and the building. “Because we don't have to pay now to have it torn down, we can just have it cleaned up. That's why this is easier.”

“No, I'm not talking about that.” My back went stiff as I perked my chest and squared my shoulders. “Why did you do it?”

Chuckling, Jacob hung his head. “Do what, Liam?” Running his thumb across his jaw, he lifted his eyes to mine. “What is it you're asking me?”

“Why like this? Why so ruthless and careless?” My arms went pin straight at my sides as I curled my fingertips into my palms. “Why couldn't you just let her be?”

The tips of my fingers bore into the gauze, but I didn't feel any pain. Right at that moment there were no burns on my hands, there was only anger for Jacob.

Sucking in a slither of air, Jacob smirked. “Because we take what we want, we're Barnes's, that's what we do.”

Frowning, my hands dug in tighter. “That's not what we do, that's not who we are.” Throwing out a finger, I pointed in his face. “That's who you are, you've always thought of yourself as superior, but you're not.”

“Liam, you and I both know that dad would've done the same thing. He wouldn't have left this place without getting what he came for. We came for these lots, we came for all these lots, and that's what we have now.”

“She still owns the lot, nothing changed because of the fire.”

“Does she?” His smile thickened as he reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a stack of folded papers. “Because these say it's ours now.”

“Where did you get that?”

“I stopped by your room yesterday and you weren't there. But these,” he said, waving the bundle in the air. “These were. You know if you want to really destroy something you need to burn it.” Baring his teeth, he bit his bottom lip and glanced at the fried building. “A little tape, a few photo copies and they're like new.”

“You motherfucker.”

“No, brother, you're the motherfucker who ruined this whole thing.” Smacking the papers against his palm, he took a step into me. “You did this, it's all your fault. If you had just done what you needed to in the beginning, none of this shit would have happened.” Taking another step closer, his mouth folded into a scowl. “But you had to go and fall dick first into that girl. You lost your focus, you let her get into your fucking head.” Poking the sharp edge of the papers into his temple, his eyes sparked in a devilish glow.

Grounding down my teeth, I choked out my words, gritty and firm. “Step back.”

“Or what? Are you going to try and fuck me too?” Tipping his head toward the sky, he furrowed his brows. “Oh wait, you did that already the second you traded family for pussy.”

Thud!

My fist flew up, connecting with his nose. Followed by a second and a third. I couldn't stop myself, brother or not, he had done the unthinkable.

Jacob had ruined Glory's life, he had burned her world to the ground and he didn't give two shits about it. All he cared about was himself. He didn't care how hurt she was, he didn't care that everything she worked so hard for was now a pile of ashes.

He had one goal and he really was willing to do whatever it took to make it happen.



She was right.

Covering his face, Jacob took a few quick steps back. Jerking his head, he wiped the blood off his nose and smiled. “Now there's the Barnes spark. If only you used that instead of your dick, maybe you'd get somewhere in life.”

Charging forward, I tackled him to the ground. Our bodies tangled as arms and hands flew. Jacob was striking me with the same ferocity that I was hitting him. But our anger was different.

He was fighting me because I wasn't on his side.

And I was fighting him for the woman I loved.

Alternating powers battled for control, good versus evil, a war of two beliefs. Jacob felt only for himself, for what he thought was his. That was a special power all on its own. It was driving him mad, making him take risks that weren't necessary.

I felt for her, I felt her pain, I felt her anger and hatred, I felt her loss. And that wasn't something I would tolerate. I had lost any control I had over myself. Jacob needed to get shoved off his spot on the mountain top, and taught that he wasn't all mighty.

Rolling on the ground, I cracked my elbow against the side of his head. I felt the quick jab of his fist against my ribs, followed by a knee to my thigh. But that was all I felt, just the weight of him around me.

Red was the only color I could see and feel.

Curling my fingertips into his jacket, I threw him to the side and jumped on top of him. Pinning him down with my knees, I punched him in the face. Punch after punch rained down on my brother, each one a new level of anger that seeped into my

muscles.

“This is your fault!” I yelled, putting all my weight into each punch. “You did this!” My knuckles connected with his cheek, cracking the brittle bones beneath his skin.

Holding up his hands to block his face, he turned his head away from my relentless fists. There was nothing he could do. I unleashed years of pent up frustration and anger on him.

He was never a good person, despite how many chances he was given to change. Even when we were children he had this darkness inside him.

“Break it up! Break it up!” A man's voice shot into my ear as firm hands grabbed me around the shoulders and tore me away.

The man wasn't enough to break the trance I was in. Lunging forward, I jumped back on my brother and hit him again.

“Enough!” The man clutched me around the neck, dragging me backwards. “Calm down, take a breath.” Holding me in place, he restrained me by the throat, squeezing tighter as I wriggled to get free.

“Let me go!” Snarling, I jerked my shoulders and flailed my arms. “Fuck you, Jacob! You're dead to me! Fuck you!”

My brother pushed back across the ground, sitting himself up. Rocking his jaw back and forth, his eyes turned to razors. “You're going to pay for this, I'm going to make you wish you never laid a finger on me.”

“Go ahead! Take your best shot!” Biting the inside of my cheek, my brows snapped down. “You can't fucking touch me, you're nothing without me.”

Jacob could threaten me all he wanted to. But I knew the truth, I knew what he was. There wasn't a thing he could do, he wasn't getting away with his. His free ride was over, it was time for him to own up for his mistakes and the things he had done.

Attempting to throw myself forward, the man pulled me back. "Enough!" Cold metal wrapped one of my wrists as the man tugged it behind my back. Cuffing the other arm, he turned me on my heels and started forcefully pushing me forward.

Slowly the realization set in that it wasn't just a man who had broken up our fight, it was a cop.

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“Wait, what are you doing? I didn't do anything wrong! You're arresting the wrong person! Arrest him, arrest Jacob!”

“I suggest you shut your mouth for now.” Resting his hand on my head, he pushed me down into the cruiser and closed the door.

“No! Let me out!” Wiggling and bending my arms, I tried to work them free. It was useless.

The cop looked down on me through the glass, his lids half shut. “Just hang out here for a minute, I'm going to go talk to him and find out what's going on exactly.” Turning away from me, the man started walking.

“No, talk to me, I'll tell you the truth!” He ignored me, walking with ease back to my brother. “He's a liar! Don't believe anything he says! He did this, he did all of this! He burned the building down, it was him!”

Nothing. It didn't matter what I said, the cop refused to listen.

I watched as my brother made pained faces, his body language slow and sour as the cop asked him questions and he gave bullshit answers. Jacob looked beyond the officer, his eyes twinkling with delight as the cop ate up his story.

Motherfucker! You motherfucker!

Shaking my head, all I could do was sit stagnant in the back of the car, unable to defend myself on how this fight came to be. I wanted to break through the glass and

strangle him as his eyes teared with fake emotion and his lips folded up like he was the one who had been the victim there.

The real victim was laying in the hospital, her life almost lost to his actions, to his selfishness. Glory was the one who had been wronged and hurt, not my brother.

The officer nodded, rolling his shoulders forward and helping Jacob up off the ground. Jacob shook his head no as the cop spoke. I had no clue what he was saying, but whatever it was the man was eating out of the palm of his hand.

The policeman stalked back to the car, opening his door and climbing in the front. “Well, get comfortable, it looks like you're about to have a long night.”

“Whatever he told you, he's lying. Not one word out of his mouth is true.”

“Mr. Barnes, I suggest you save it for the interview room.”

“Are you arresting me?” I asked, my voice demanding and confused.

How can you do this to me? I didn't do anything wrong!

The cop glanced back at me through his rear view mirror. “Right now we're just going to the station to talk a little more.”

“If you're not arresting me, then let me out.”

“I can't do that, we need to clear up some things first. And the best place to do that isn't here, it's at the station.”

“Do I need my lawyer?”

“Well, that's up to you. But assault is a serious charge, and like I said, you're not under arrest—yet.”

Shutting my mouth, I didn't utter another word. The anger I felt before only grew, this entire thing had been flipped around and it appeared that I somehow had found my place at the bottom of the pile.

I didn't give a shit what the cops might think, I didn't care what Jacob had told him.

The truth would come out and when it did, I wouldn't be the one peering out from behind the looking glass.

### Chapter Seventeen

#### Glory

“Take a deep breathin for me.” I shivered as the icy cold stethoscope moved across my back. “And let it out.” Listening intently, he dragged the metal bell over to the other side. “Again, big deep breath.” Dr. Conner's eyes peered off beyond my head as he focused on using just his ears. “Good, that's good. How do you feel?”

“Better, it still hurts a little when I'm breathing, but much better.”

“That's to be expected. But you're improving and that's what we want.” Wrapping the tool around his neck, he tapped some notes into his computer. “We're sending you for another x-ray today, see how your lungs are healing. I'm hoping we'll be able to send you home in a day or so.”

“Good morning,” my mother said, popping her head into the room. “How is she today?”

“She's healing well, just like we want her to.” Smiling, the doctor scanned his badge for the computer and logged out. “I was just telling Glory that she should be able to go home in a couple days or so.”

“That's great!” My mother's eyes lit bright as she smiled. “Isn't that great, honey?”

Nodding, I laid my hands on my lap and forced a smile. “It's really great.”

“Well, an x-ray tech will be up in a bit to bring you down and I'll come tell you what we see after I get the results.” Walking to the door, he patted my mother on the back and gave her a comforting smile.

“Doctor,” I said, forcing him to stop from going out the door. Twisting to look at me, he waited for me to speak. “Have you heard from Liam?”

“I'm sorry, Glory, I can't disclose patient information.”

“No, I know, and I understand that. It's just, I haven't seen him since Tuesday, it's been three days. I was just wondering if you'd seen him or heard from him. I'm getting worried that he hasn't come back to see me since he left.”

Pursing his lips, he crossed his arms over his chest. “I haven't seen him, but if I do, I'll tell him to come pay you a visit.” Holding out his hand, his lids opened wider. “But I'm not getting my hopes up that I'll hear from him sooner rather than later. You might have a better chance of getting in touch with him before I do.”

Smiling with closed lips, I nodded.

I didn't like his answer, I didn't like that Liam wasn't answering his phone, I didn't like that I hadn't heard from him in days. There was a pit in my stomach, churning and tumbling around.

Something is wrong.

“Are you alright?” my mom asked, walking to the edge of the bed and reaching for my hand. “I brought you lunch, are you hungry?”

“No, thank you though.” Hanging my head, I stared down at my fingers.



“What is it? Is it that guy that's bothering you?”

“I'm just worried about him. He went through the same thing I did, he should be here, not out there. I don't like it, it's not sitting right.”

Rubbing the top of my hand, my mother angled her head. “Honey, I'm sure he's fine.”

“I'm worried, Mom,” I said, tugging the blanket up higher.

My mother looked at me, her eyes reading my body language. “You like him.”

“He saved me.”

“He must be a pretty special guy to save some girl he doesn't know.”

Flicking my eyes up to hers, I said as sly as I could. “We're not exactly strangers, but yeah, he is pretty special. Which is why I'm getting worried that I haven't heard from him.”

Smirking, my mother leaned over and pushed the flowers on my nightstand to the side. Setting down a few magazines and a container of her famous homemade mac and cheese, she let out a sigh.

“What?” I asked, locking my eyes on her face. “What was that?”

“What was what?”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:36 pm*

“That sound, what was it for?”

Frowning, she shrugged her shoulder. “I don't know what you're talking about, I didn't make a sound.”

“Yes you did, you made that sound you always make when you have something else you want to say.”

“Glory, that's not true.” Claspings her hands together, she folded them in her lap and put on her innocent face. “I just think you should focus on getting better so you can come home and not focus on some guy who obviously isn't worried enough about you to be here.”

And there it is.

“Mom—”

Cutting me off, she held up her hand. “I'm just saying, that's all. You can do whatever you want, you're a grown woman.”

“I knew it.”

“Knew what?” she asked, defensively furrowing her brows as if she didn't know what the hell I meant.

She knew, but she liked to play stupid sometimes when you caught her in the middle of one of her tricks. My mother was trying to manipulate me. Maybe she was just

being protective, that motherly love shining down because no one would ever be good enough for her daughter. Or maybe she was trying to save me from getting hurt, the fear of watching her daughter get her heart broken.

My mother's heart had been torn to pieces since my father died, I couldn't blame her for wanting to protect me from that pain.

“I knew you had more to say.”

“Glory, you have to look at it from my point of view. I haven't had my daughter for a long time, I tried to give you space, I let you do what you needed to so you could find some sort of peace. But I won't do that again, I can't. I lost your father and the thought of losing you too is too much to bear. If this guy cared, he'd be here, just like I'm here.”

Shutting my eyes, I laid my head back. “He does care about me, he ran into a burning building to save me.” Picking up my head, I stared at my mother. “Something isn't right, I can feel it.”

Fixing the edge of the blanket, my mother tucked it under my thighs. “Right now you need to work on getting better, you can't worry about him. You'll be out of here soon, then you can figure out what's going on with that guy.” Leaning in, she kissed the top of my head. “Just promise me that you won't let it stress you out, can you do that for me? Please?”

“Alright, I won't.”

Smiling, she gripped my hand and squeezed it hard. “Thank you. Now get some rest, I'll come back this afternoon. If you need anything just give me a call.”

“Okay, I will. Thanks, Mom.”

My mother's lips folded into a thin smile as she stood up and pulled her purse up her arm. "You have no idea how happy I am that you're alright, Glory. It's something you'll never understand until you have a child of your own." Closing the door behind her, I was left in this uncomfortable silence.

I wanted to stop thinking about Liam, but I couldn't. I wanted to think that he had just gotten busy with work stuff and I'd hear from him at any moment.

But deep down I knew it was something else.

After everything we had been through, there was no way in hell he would just leave me like this.

Where are you?

I need you. . .

Snuggling into the blankets, I peered out the big window beside the bed. My head was spinning with thoughts, horrible thoughts about what had happened to him.

When he left he had a gleam in his eye that screamed destruction.

He was going to find Jacob. . .

I just hoped Jacob hadn't found him first.

### Chapter Eighteen

#### Glory

Opening the door, I dropped my bag on the floor and walked around the room. It was surreal, like I had stepped through a portal that brought me back almost a decade.

Running my fingers across the porcelain dolls on the shelf by my dresser, I couldn't believe that my mother hadn't changed a thing.

The same floral bed spread was on the mattress, a small cluster of stuffed animals were positioned on the pillow. All the ribbons and trophies I had won during softball and gymnastics were sitting in the same spots I had put them back when I was kid.

It's like a damn time capsule. She didn't get rid of anything.

After getting discharged from the hospital, my mother convinced me to come stay with her for a little bit until I was completely healed and everything got situated. I wasn't sure exactly where my life was going at that point, so I hesitantly agreed.

There was a time where I thought I had it all figured out, and until recently, I had somehow pulled the wool over my own eyes and actually thought I did. But the world had other plans for me, awful plans that left me questioning where the hell this road was taking me.

I was left hanging in limbo, waiting on everyone else to tell me what to do next. There were no answers, there was no giant arrow showing me where to go. I had

never felt so lost before.

What are you supposed to do when the world you knew was suddenly tossed upside down?

What the hell am I doing?

Picking up a stuffed penguin off the pillow, I held it in my hands and stared into its lifeless glass eyes. I could see my reflection in its gaze, and I couldn't help but notice that my eyes looked just like the penguin's.

There was nothing there, no emotions, no feeling, no life. . .

Who am I without my art?

“You getting settled in?” My mom popped her head in the doorway and leaned against the frame.

“Yeah, it's kinda weird though.” Dropping the penguin back onto the bed, I twisted to look at her.

She looked so tired, weathered in a way that made me sad for her. We had become the same person in so many ways. We had lost control of our lives, both of us walking this road to nowhere with no idea how to get off.

The lines on her face had thickened overnight, thick creases worked their way across her forehead, the crows feet at the corners of her eyes had turned to talons. She spoke with a voice that didn't sound like the woman I grew up with.

Her tone was always flat, lacking depth and emotion, as if she was hanging on by a thread and waiting for it finally break.

And I guess, for the first time ever, I understood her. I could see the suffering and confusion that plagued her every day.

I had spent so much time dwelling on my own feelings that I never stopped and thought about what she was going through.

My heart ached to tell her how sorry I was for being distant. If I was hurting this much inside not knowing where Liam was or if he was ever coming back to me, what was the weight she had carry for my father?

I loved him, and the fact that he was gone, it killed me. If I hurt that much for a man I had just begun to love, I couldn't even imagine the pain she truly felt and dealt with everyday since my father had left us.

“Well, things are different now, it's never going to feel the same.” Her eyes filled with distant tears as she looked around my room. “Nothing in the house will ever feel the same.”

“I'm sorry, Mom.”

“Sorry?” she asked, her brows angling down. “Sorry for what?”

“I'm sorry I left you when you needed me most, I'm sorry I wasn't here for you to cry with when Dad passed and that I've been gone for so long.”

“You haven't been gone, Honey, you've just been dealing with it the way you needed to.”

“No, I was gone, and I shouldn't have been. I should have been here for you, I haven't been a good daughter.”

“Don't say that.” Blinking her eyes, the tears trickled slowly down her cheeks as she stepped into the room and pulled me in for hug. “You are an amazing daughter, but it's not your responsibility to help me. I'm your mother, and if you needed the space to deal with all this, I was alright with that.”



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Tucking my face into her shoulder, I cried. I cried tears that I refused to let out when my father passed, I cried for the fire that almost killed me, I cried for everything I had lost. I cried for the fear of not knowing what our future held and if we'd ever get out of this rock bottom that had suffocated our lives.

And as the tears swept over my face, my mother hugged me tightly. She held me just the same as if I was five years old. She hugged me exactly like I needed my mother to hug me.

Taking a step back, she turned away from me. Sniffling, she wiped her cheeks, but didn't look back at me again. "I'm going to go start dinner, how does pot roast sound?"

"Good, it's sound good, Mom."

Nodding her head, she waved her hand up by her face and headed downstairs. Plopping down on my bed, the mattress squeaked with rickety springs. Taking in a deep breath, my chest twisted with a sharp pain, making me cough.

I was still hurting, but all in all, I was lucky.

There were a few burns on my arms and calves, my lungs were scorched from smoke inhalation, but someone was watching out for me from above. . . Because I was still alive.

Grabbing my phone, I sent Liam another text.

'I don't know where the hell you are, but please just call me.'

Hitting send, I dragged my feet back and forth across the carpet. It didn't feel right just sitting there and doing nothing.

My mother didn't want me to go by the building, she thought it would be too much for me to handle in my fragile state. And maybe she was right. But I wasn't going to stop seeking answers and justice for what had been done to Liam and I.

Too much shit had gone down for me to turn my head and walk away from it. I was done pretending that things would magically get better on their own, I was done waiting on other people to come to my rescue.

Jacob had done this and he needed to pay for it. I was going to make sure he got exactly what he deserved.

I can't just sit here, I need to stand up for myself and do something about this.

I knew what I had to do. There was no pause in my thoughts about where I needed to go to fix this.

Grabbing my bag, I slipped downstairs, and sneaked past my mother as she skirted around the kitchen preparing dinner. It surprised me that I could still remember where the floor boards were that creaked and cracked if you stepped on them.

I feel like a damn teenager again.

Speed walking up the street, I pulled out my phone and called a taxi. Waiting around the corner, I sat on the curb and watched the cars pass until a silver sedan slowed to a stop in the break-down lane.

“Take me to the police department.”

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Leaning against the front desk, I waited for the woman to lift her head and look up at me. “I need to talk to Detective Glenn.”

“Alright. . .” she said, placing her pen down and cupping her hands. “And who are you?”

“Glory Daniels.”

“Well Ms. Daniels, Detective Glenn isn't available at the moment, do you want to set up an appointment?”

Angling my head, I did my best to keep my composure and not get too snippy with her. “No, I want to see him today, I want to speak to him right now. This can't wait, it's important.”

“I'm sorry, he's not—”

Holding up my hand, I cut her off. “Look, I've been through a lot of shit, and I'm not leaving until I speak with him. My place was broken into, it was set on fire, and I know who did it. So if you could just get on your phone and tell him I'm here, I'd appreciate it.”

“Ms. Daniels,” the woman said, but a figure caught my eye in the background, drawing my eyes to it.

Holding my breath, I felt my veins ignite as my heart sped up and a cold sweat began to trickle down the back of my neck. Jacob Barnes was shaking hands with a man in a

suit. He didn't notice me standing there as he smiled and nodded, slapping the man's shoulder and heading for an exit against the back wall.

“That's him,” I said under my breath, whispering the words to the secretary.

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“What? Who's him?”

“The man that just left, he was talking to that officer back there.” Pointing through the glass window, she turned and followed my finger. “Is that Detective Glenn?”

“It is, but you need an appointment, I can help you with that. Let's—”

“Detective Glenn!” I called out, waving my arm and ignoring the woman. “Detective Glenn!”

His head snapped in my direction, eyes squinting to study my face. Standing in his doorway, he tilted his head and gave me a wary smile.

“I need to speak with you!” Yelling through the bullet proof window, I pressed my palm into the glass. “Please, Detective Glenn, I need to talk with you!”

Tucking a folder under his arm, he walked forward. The secretary stood up from her chair, leaning over the back side of her desk and whispering something into his ear.

“Glory Daniels, I'm Glory Daniels.”

As if a light went on in his head, he nodded and waved me inside. The secretary gave me a look, she wasn't happy that I refused the rules and went to him myself.

But this had to happen now, it couldn't wait. I wasn't going to stand idly by and let Jacob steamroll over me. His threats weren't just words, they were actions he followed through on. He needed to be stopped before he killed someone.

The door buzzed and I was able to pull it open. Detective Glenn greeted me on the other side, holding out his hand for me shake.

“Ms. Daniels, I'm happy to see you're recovering so well.” Giving me a smile, he fanned out his arm. “Let's go talk in my office, I have some really good news for you.”

“News?”

Thinning his smile, he nodded his head. “I was giving you some time to settle after getting released from the hospital, but I was planning on calling you in a day or so. This way, follow me.”

Walking beside the detective, he guided me into his office and pulled out the chair at the front of his desk. Sitting down, I placed my bag in my lap and laid my hands on top.

“Can I get you something to drink? Coffee, water?”

“No, I'm all set, thank you.”

Clearing his throat, he laid the folder he had been holding down and steepled his fingers as his eyes connected with mine. “So, I won't draw this out.” His smile thickened, pulling up high towards his eyes. “We know who destroyed your building and set it on fire.”

“You do?” I asked, confusion layering my tone.

I couldn't understand how he could know when I watched the person who had done it walk free from the station.

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe Jacob was just using it to try and scare me into selling.

“We do.”

“Well, who is it?”

Holding up a single finger, he sucked in a quick gulp of air. “Before we do that, I want to show you a set of photos. Tell me if you recognize anyone.” Opening the folder, he pulled out a sheet of paper and slipped it across his desk. “Take your time.”

Scanning the images, I looked over each and every one carefully. I didn't know any of the men he was showing me. Reaching the last picture, I leaned in closer.

“This guy looks familiar. He could be the one who broke in, his eyes stand out.”

“That is Clayton Dyer, and yes, he's the one we think broke in to your gallery.” Handing me a pen, he tapped the lineup image. “Can you circle his image and initial it for me, please.”

Following his instruction, I laid the pen down. “How do you know it was him?”

“We got a very reliable witness.” Taking out a second set of pictures, he pulled the first one away and placed the other down. “Can you do the same for me here, tel me if you recognize anyone.”

Looking over the images, I studied each face hard. Coming to the second to last in the first row, my hear stopped as my tongue swelled in my mouth.

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Liam. . . Why is Liam on here?

“Do you recognize anyone? If not, that's fine, we just—”

Placing the tip of my finger on Liam's face, I asked. “Why is his picture in here?”

“You know who that is then?”

“Yeah, of course I do, it's Liam Barnes.”

Pointing at the pen, he asked, “Can you circle and initial his picture for me.”

“What for? What's going on here, why do have him in this lineup?”

Pulling his hand back, Detective Glenn pressed the tips of his fingers together. “Glory, I don't how to say this, but Liam is the one who did all this. He's the one who set up the burglary and the fire.”

“What?!” My voice came out loud and angry. “No he isn't, he didn't have anything to do with this! Why would you even think?!”

Hanging his head, the detective frowned. “We have evidence against him and an eye witness to it all. His brother can place him there, Jacob gave us details he could only know if the person responsible told him. Clayton also told us that Liam had been the one who paid him and he's willing to testify to that on the stand.”

“No, no you're wrong. They're both lying to you. Liam didn't do this, Jacob is the one



who did this. That's why I came here today, that's what I was going to tell you. Jacob did all this, not Liam.” Jamming my finger into the desk top, I snapped my back straight and glared at him. “And you let Jacob walk out that door, he's free, he's out there and he needs to be stopped.”

Arching a brow, the detective thinned his lips. Pulling out a stack of papers, he slipped them across the desk. “Do these look familiar?”

My eyes darted from him to the papers. “What are these?”

“That is the purchase agreement you signed. Jacob brought it in as proof that you two were working together and his brother didn't like it. Did you sign those documents?”

All the air in my lungs spilled out with disbelief. I thought Liam had torn them up and thrown them away. “I did, but not because I wanted to. Jacob had threatened me, I tried to tell you that before. I thought I didn't have a choice, that I had to sign them in order to make him stop. But Liam ripped them up, he tried to help me, he tried to save my business. Liam saved me, he's the one who pulled me out of that building as it burned around me.”

“Maybe Liam isn't the man you thought he was. Did you ever think of that?”

“Detective Glenn, Liam is exactly the man I thought he was. He's not the man you think he is.” Tilting my head, I studied his face. “Where is he? Where is Liam?”

Leaning forward, his voice was harsh and demeaning. “He's exactly where an asshole like him deserves to be. He's safely locked up behind bars, awaiting trial for what he's done to you.”

No! He didn't do anything!

“You're wrong, you're so goddamn wrong!”

Softening his face, he pursed his lips. “Glory, I understand this is difficult for you to process, and you might not want to hear it. Jacob told me all about how his brother worked you over, but Liam—”

Refusing to let him finish, I snapped. “Liam isn't the bad guy here, Jacob is. I called you and told you he threatened me, he did exactly what he said he would.” Clenching my teeth, the detective looked at me like I was crazy. “What do I have to do to prove it to you?”

“Ms. Daniels, you need to face the facts here. Jacob told me all about how he tried to scare you, and he feels really horrible about it, but he's trying to right his wrongs. And after what Liam did. . .” Pausing, he shook his head as if it was the most awful thing he had ever heard. “Jacob knows his brother is dangerous, he doesn't want to see anything else happen to you.”

“What?!” yelling, I threw my arms in the air. “That's not true! Liam isn't dangerous, Jacob is lying!”

“He gave us proof, Glory, do you have proof that he's lying? Can you give me something tangible?”

“Proof? You want proof?” Arching my brows, I let my eyes steady on his. Shoving the chair back, I jolted to my feet. Veering my stare, I snarled. “I'll get you your fucking proof.”

Storming out of his office, the rage I felt bubbled through my veins, making me more angry than I had ever been before.

I was the victim.

I was the one who had lost everything.

I was the one who had seen the look in Jacob's eyes.

And I was the one who was going to put him behind bars.

### Chapter Nineteen

#### Glory

“I have something you need, can you meet me?”

Chuckling, Jacob huffed into the phone. “There's nothing you have that I need. I already have it all, or did you forget that?”

Dick.

Taking in a slow breath, I kept myself calm, not letting his asshole ways get to me. “Well, you own the lot now. I have insurance information to give you so you can send in a claim for the fire.”

I wasn't sure where the idea came from, but it hit me that night after I left the station. I had signed those papers before the fire, which in theory meant that I didn't own the building when it went up in flames.

“Insurance claim. . .” His voice trailed off as he processed what I said. “Why would I need to file a claim?”

“Because I didn't own it anymore when it caught fire, you did. So. . .” Letting my words trail off, I waited for him to see where I was going with this.

“So, I'm the one who can collect the insurance money.”

“Bingo. You know for someone who is supposed to be a real-estate genius, you're pretty damn stupid.”

“Screw you,” Jacob growled through the receiver. “Meet me at the lot at two o'clock, you can come say goodbye to it while you're there. How does that sound?”

Hanging up, I didn't give him the satisfaction of an answer. I was ready to jump through the phone and strangle him right then and there. It took everything I had to not scream and yell at him, to not call him names and give him the pleasure of thinking he had won this war.

He won't win this. He just lost and he doesn't even know it.

Grabbing my tote, I jogged downstairs and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” my mother asked. She was standing in the hallway, wiping her hands on a towel.

“I just have a few errands to run.”

“Errands?” Cocking her head, she eyed me, trying to read between the lines.

Smiling, I gripped the strap of my bag and twisted my toe into the floor. “Yes, Mother, errands.” My tone was sarcastic and dry as I gave her a playful grin. “What am I fifteen again?” Giggling, I stepped to the door and opened it up.

Laughing, she cupped her hands on her hips and lowered her lids. “I know you're not a kid, Glory, but are you sure you're alright to be running around?”

“I'm fine, I'll be back a little later.”

Nodding, she gave me a thin smile. “Just don't push yourself, you're still recovering.”

Closing the door behind me, I walked the few blocks up to my gallery. My feet were moving, but I couldn't feel the ground beneath me. Every step felt like my feet were weighed down in cement blocks.

I knew what I was going to find when I got close enough to see the building, I knew that the nothing I thought I had was going to feel even worse the first time I saw it with my own eyes.

Nothing could prepare me for the devastation.

And I still pressed on. I was doing this for Liam, I was taking on his brother and forcing myself to see the pile of dust that was my world.

It was worth it, all of this was worth it to save the man who had saved me.

He didn't deserve to be behind bars, he didn't deserve to suffer for something his brother had done.

Was I afraid of Jacob?

No.

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I probably should have been. If I had been thinking with my head instead of my heart, maybe that fear would have punctured the surface and made me rethink what I was about to do.

But the love I had for Liam was stronger than any fear.

Stopping at the corner, I knew the second I took that left my building would be visible. I was frozen for a moment, unable to move, unable to coordinate my feet and my brain.

My head began to throb and my lungs began to squeeze. I couldn't breathe, my mind was running with images of what was around the other side of that turn.

You've got to do this. Don't back down, you can't back down!

Taking in a deep breath, I closed my eyes. Tipping my head up to the sky, I let the sun hit my face and warm my skin before I walked right into the belly of the beast.

Taking the first few steps blindly, I slowly peeled my lids open, keeping my eyes on the clouds. I didn't want to look, I almost couldn't.

I felt my heart hammer inside my chest as I painstakingly lowered my gaze. Sweat trickled down my temples, the hair on the back of my neck stood up as my body trembled uncomfortably from head to toe.

It really is all gone. . .

Tears swept down my cheeks instantly as my eyes settled on the blackened and charred remnants of my gallery. It was unrecognizable.

The roof had caved in, the windows were broken and what shards remained in the sills were covered in soot. There was no siding left, no sheet-rock or slick wood. Everything was cracked, snaked with trenches and dark as a raven's feathers.

“Oh my god.” The words tumbled out quietly as I pressed a palm to my forehead.

Walking slowly, I dragged my feet over the pavement, my eyes wide with shock. Stopping, I was standing at the edge of the front door, an unrecognizable door I hadn't ever seen before.

It wasn't my door, this place wasn't my place. This was something different.

Sobbing, I laid my hand against the wood, feeling the brittleness of the splinters. Pulling my hand away, I stared at the black dust on my palm and watched as my tears dropped like rain off my cheeks, landing in the center of my hand.

“Pretty, isn't it?” His voice cut through my head, making me want to throw up instantly.

Snapping my head up, I twisted on my heels. Wiping away the tears on my face, I didn't want Jacob to see me crying.

“This is awful, it's not pretty.”

Shrugging his shoulder, he walked around me, letting his eyes troll the building. “We have different views on beauty.” His hands were tucked in his pockets as he cocked his head over his shoulder and gave me a sinister grin. “This is a master piece in my eyes.”



“You're a sick fuck, you know that?” My jaw clenched as I glared at him, unable to look away. “It never had to go this far.”

Letting out a soft laugh, he stroked his jaw. “You know what,” he said, pointing a stiff finger in my direction. “You're right, had you only listened in the first place, maybe we wouldn't be standing here.”

Cocking my jaw, I veered my stare. “Don't you dare put this on me. I didn't do anything wrong, you just think you can take anything you want. But it doesn't work that way, you won't get away with this.”

Taking a step towards the building, Jacob gripped a piece of wood and broke it off. Spinning it in his hands, he kept his eyes down. “I already have.” The corner of his lip curled up as his lids hooded.

“Why? Why did you do all this to me? Why did you do this to your brother?”

“My brother doesn't deserve shit. He thought he could just rule our empire when he felt like it.” Hardening his jaw, he spoke through clenched teeth. “He won't be able to do that anymore, not from a cell. Arson is a pretty severe charge, he won't see the light of day for a really long time.”

“He didn't do this and you know that. It doesn't bother you that he's going to do time for something you did?”

His neck thickened as he lifted his eyes to mine, his pupils shrunk down to the size of a pen tip. “Liam got what was coming to him, and I'd do it all over again if I had to.” Crushing the wood in his hand, he wiped away the shards, letting them fall to the ground as he took a long step into me. “Only I would do it better. I'd make sure you both didn't get out.” Another step forward brought us toe to toe. “I'd make sure you both took your last breath in that building. Because I always get what I want. Period.”

“Why don't you say that again?”

“I'm pretty sure you heard me just fine, bitch.”

“I did, but I'm not sure the detective did.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:36 pm*

Jacob's lids shot open as his brows narrowed into the bridge of his nose. “What did you do?”

Four cop cars came flying around the corner, sirens blaring, lights flickering red and blue. Slamming to a stop, the doors flew open and several officers jumped out, pointing their guns at Jacob.

“Get on your knees and put your hands behind your head!”

Jacob never took his eyes off of me as he dropped to the ground and braided his fingers against the back of his skull.

“You're going to regret this,” he said under his breath as an officer came up behind him and cuffed his wrists.

“No, I think this is beautiful. Don't you?”

“Fuck you!” he spat as the officer tugged him to his feet and pushed him towards the back of the car.

“Well, I got to give credit where it's deserved,” Detective Glenn said as he walked to my side with his hand out. “You were right, that dirt-bag had us all convinced his brother was behind all of this.”

Shaking his hand, I gave him a smile. “When does Liam get released? That's the only thing I really care about.”

Cupping his hips, the detective dug his thumbs into his belt. "I already made the call, it won't be long."

Standing by the gallery, watching Jacob tear me apart with his eyes as the officer shoved him into the back of the patrol car and drove him away, I actually felt good.

I wasn't going to allow that man to rule my life with fear or questions or worry.

It was over.

Glancing over my shoulder, I looked at my building, and that's when I realized it didn't really matter anymore.

Liam was right when he said that four walls didn't signify who I was.

It was just a building.

The building didn't make me, the walls didn't signify a piece of my father, my art wasn't created because of the gallery.

I was the glue.

Without me there was no building, without me there was no art or gallery at all.

Because I was the piece it needed to survive.

There would always be a gallery as long as I had a paintbrush.

And there would always be love as long as I had Liam.

### Chapter Twenty

Liam

“Come on, let's go.” The guard stood outside my cell, his face straight as an arrow.

Pushing up on the thin mattress, I swung my legs off the bed and placed them on the floor. “What's going on?”

“You need to come with me.” Stuffing the key into the lock, I heard the metal click. Sliding the bars open, he turned sideways and nodded his head. “Any time would be good.”

Standing up, I timidly walked towards the door. “What's going on? Am I going to see a judge or something? Did my case get moved up the list?”

“Something like that,” the guard said, shrugging his shoulder.

Curling his hand around my forearm, he led me towards the main lobby.

I was being held without bail, awaiting a court date that hadn't been set yet. No one wanted to hear a fucking word I had to say. And believe me I tried. I tried until I was blue in the face. It did nothing. No one wanted to listen, they just glared at me like I was lying through my teeth.

My lawyer advised me to shut up, he told me not to say another word until he had gathered enough information that worked in my favor.

As far as the police were concerned; I was a flight risk, I was an arsonist, I was a vandal and violent. And I had nothing to prove otherwise.

My brother had royally fucked me.

The fight we got into only gave way to him being able to press charges against me for assault. Next thing I knew I was being tossed behind bars, facing an up hill battle I wasn't sure I'd win.

He had planned it all, every last detail. Somehow, someway, he was able to link me to every little thing he did, either with a story or some form of proof that the detective saw as viable.

“How come I'm not cuffed? Aren't you suppose to cuff me before letting me out of my cell?”

“I don't cuff innocent men.” His voice was soft as the corner of his lip twitched into a slight grin.

“What did you just say?”

Stopping at a small window, he grabbed a clear bag from the ledge and slapped it against my chest. “You can go change.”

“I'm confused, I don't understand what's going on here. What is happening right now?”

“Mr. Barnes,” Detective Glenn said, coming up behind me and resting a hand on my shoulder. “I owe you an apology. We know the truth, we know everything about what happened, and I'm so sorry for not listening to you in the first place.”

I didn't know what to say.

At first I was angry, enraged by the fact that they just took what Jacob had hand delivered without giving me a platform to speak for myself.

But I didn't feel that right then. I was still confused, taken by the drastic shift in events.

Gripping the tops of my shoulders, the detective shook me lightly. “Relax, this isn't a trick. You can go get changed and walk right out those doors.”

“You're serious?”

“Absolutely.”

“What happened? How did this happen?”

Smirking, Detective Glenn rocked back and forth on his heels. “Well, we found the real bad guy. Jacob might have been able to pull the wool over our eyes for a short time, but he couldn't do it forever.”

“Is he. . .” Pausing, my eyes darted between his.

“He is, we grabbed him earlier this afternoon.”

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“So what happens now?” I asked, clutching the bag firmly against my stomach.

“Well, your brother goes away and you get to go live your life.”

“Just like that? I get to walk out those doors and this is all over?” Angling my head, my lids dropped, studying his expression.

“Well yes and no. We might need to ask you some questions about your brother, maybe even call you in during trial, if you're willing to take the stand against him. There's no pressure, I know it's not always easy for family to go against family. But do you think you'd be willing to do that?”

“You bet your fucking ass I will. He deserves to spend the next twenty years behind bars, shit, longer if you can.” Looking down at the floor, I crooked my jaw. “After everything he did to Glory and myself, he can rot in there, I don't give a fuck.”

I'm sure some might think my reaction was harsh, cold even, I mean he was my brother. We were blood, we should have had a bond that was stronger than steel.

But there was one problem with that, my brother never cared about me. Not even when we were kids. Jacob was my brother by name and paper only.

Was he family? No.

Family looked out for each other, they felt for one another, they wanted the best for one another. Jacob didn't give shit about anyone else but himself.



This was black and white in my eyes, the fucker tried to kill me, he lit a building on fire with Glory and me inside.

What type of brother does that? How was I suppose to look past that?

Changing out of the jumpsuit, I left it crumpled in the corner of the stall. Attempting to turn my phone on, the battery was dead. Jamming it into my pocket, I checked my wallet to make sure everything was there and stuffed it into the other pocket.

Walking out into the lobby, the detective gave me a kind smile. “No hard feelings?” he asked, holding out his hand to me.

“You were doing what you thought was right, you were really fucking wrong, but it was done in good faith, so yeah. . .” Grabbing his hand I shook it with a firm grip. “No hard feelings.”

“Good, let me walk you out.” Holding out his arm, he started for the front entrance.

“So how did you finally find out I had nothing to do with all this?”

“I guess you could say you got lucky.” Pushing the door open, he looked outside. “And you had a guardian angel.”

Following his gaze, I stopped short.

Glory was standing at the bottom of the steps, her hands nervously fiddling in front of her waist. Her lips curved high as her eyes connected with mine.

That smile. . .

I couldn't live without that smile, I wasn't sure how I made it this long. I should have

died the second they closed the steel door, locking me inside.

Grinning, I walked down the steps. Her smile infected my heart, making my chest pound and my skin buzz.

Reaching out I grabbed her hand, and swung her arm side to side. “You did this?”

“Mm hm.” Biting her bottom lip as she nodded her head, her lashes fanned her lids.

“Thank you,” I said, walking my fingers up her arm and pulling her into my chest. “I don't know how you pulled this off. . .” Lowering my face, I traced my lips across her forehead, feeling her velvet smooth skin. “But thank you.”

Tipping her face up, her mouth turned paper thin as tears filled her eyes. “You don't need to thank me, it was the right thing to do.”

Glory had found a way to make things right, she took charge and didn't let Jacob intimidate her. I was so fucking proud of this girl. Proud of what she did for me. Proud that she had the balls to stand up to someone like my brother.

I was proud that she was mine.

Kissing her gently, her tongue teased the edge of my lips, tickling over the surface. Lifting my fingertips to her face, I brushed my knuckles across the apple of her cheek.

Moving my mouth across her skin, I placed my lips at her ear and whispered. “I love you, Glory Daniels.”

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Smiling, she chewed on her cheeks as her skin turned the prettiest shade of pink.  
“You mean that?”

“I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it. I love you, I've loved you since the first time I laid eyes on you.” Holding her jaw in my palm, I pressed my forehead against hers.  
“I've been waiting for you to come into my life, because before you, I didn't know what it meant to really love. I know now and I'm going to love you forever.”

Her eyes bounced between mine as she pushed up onto the tips of her toes. “I love you too.”

Before Glory, I was man set in his ways. I woke up ever single day not understanding what it truly meant to be alive.

But now, now I had the one thing I didn't know I was missing.

I couldn't see it until I had her and she was gone.

I would never let her go again.

Epilogue

Glory

Two and a half years later

The bell over the door jingled, causing me to stop mid stroke and hold still.

“Hello?” I heard the delicate voice of an older woman echo off the old brick walls.

Placing down my brush, I grabbed a hand towel and wiped my fingers. “Hello, how can I help you?” Stepping out from the back room, I gave her a friendly smile.

“Well, I've actually passed by here a dozen times, and every time this painting right here,” she said, pointing her finger at the back wall. “It always catches my attention. I was wondering how much it costs?”

“Oh, I'm sorry, that one isn't for sale. Unfortunately, it's part of my private collection. I probably shouldn't have it up there like that, but I love it too much to let it just sit unseen and collect dust. But everything on this wall. . .” Waving my hand around the wall to my right, I took a long step to the side. “It's all for sale.”

“Hm, alright.” Her tone sounded disappointed as she took a few steps closer to look at the paintings hanging in place.

“I also do private orders, I'd be more than happy to paint you something similar to this one. It just won't be exactly the same, I can't do that.”

The one she wanted was just for me. It was a woman balancing on the edge of a cliff, her face angled up at the sun, arms spread out as if she was about to jump. Everything around her screamed beauty.

A bright sun created yellow and red swirls across a purple sky. There were mountains in the distance and the glistening waves of an ocean just beyond those mountains.

But you could see the pain in her stance, in the way her head was angled and her body was rigid. For all the serenity around her, the woman felt sorrow and anguish.

It was up to you, the viewer, whether you wanted to think she was about to jump or not.

In my head she wasn't jumping at all. I saw her as a woman accepting life. She was giving herself permission to love again, to laugh and smile and enjoy the things that mattered.

This woman was opening her arms to let it all in. She was embracing whatever gifts were sent her way. And she was willing to stand on the verge of certain death to accept those gifts.

Because that was life.

You can't live until you've lost. You can't appreciate until you have nothing.

“Really?”

“Absolutely, but let me ask you a question. What do you see in that picture?”

“What do you mean?” Angling her head, she glanced between the painting and me. Folding her arms across her chest, she stepped in and tipped her head back, taking on

a full view of the image.

“Do you see her staying right where she is or do you see her jumping?”

“Does it matter what I see?”

Walking up beside her, I cupped my hips. “It does.”

“To be honest, I don't see either.” Swirling her finger in the air around the shape of the woman, she said. “I see her flying. She doesn't stay at the edge and she doesn't jump off and fall, she flies.”

Squinting my eyes, I smiled. “That's perfect. I know what to paint you now.”

“Seriously? Just from that?”

The bell jingled again, causing us both to twist our heads over our shoulders. Instantly a smile split across my face.

“And what are you two doing here?” I asked, squatting down and holding out my arms.

Liam let go of our son's hand, allowing him to waddle awkwardly in my direction, his steps still new and uneven.

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“We were in the neighborhood and wanted to stop in and say hello.”

Grabbing little Holden, I swept him off his feet and spun him high in the air. His giggle came out loud and high pitched as he threw his arms out like he was flying.

“I'm so glad you did.” Rubbing the tip of my nose against my little guy's, I kissed his cheek and set him back down.

“If you're busy, we can come back after.”

Waving him off, I smiled. “It's fine, just give me a few minutes to finish up here, then I'm all yours.”

Liam leaned in and gave me a quick kiss. “Whoa, whoa, don't touch that.” Jolting forward, he ran at Holden, trying to catch him before he broke something.

“You have a beautiful family,” the woman said, giving me a soft smile. “I miss my kids being that little.”

Looking over at my son, my heart began to warm and my skin bristled with love. Liam was chasing him around the gallery and Holden was laughing hysterically.

“I'm sure I'll miss it too one day. For now I just enjoy each moment as it happens.”

The woman's eyes twinkled as she watched my child innocently enjoy a game of chase. “That's the best way to live.”

After having her fill out the contact form and give a deposit, I walked her out and shut the door behind her when she left.

Liam was sitting on the floor in the back room, the changing pad rolled out, and Holden on his back getting a new diaper.

“Well, that's it, I'm all done for today.”

Glancing back at me, his smirk held secrecy. “No, there's one more thing you need to do.”

“Oh yeah and what's that?” Crouching down, I passed him the wipes as he searched the bag.

“You need to go by the old lot.”

“The old lot?” Scrunching my brows, I tried to figure out why he was still asking me to do that. He knew my answer. He always knew my answer.

I hadn't been by there in over two years. It was too much, it brought back too many horrible memories. I avoided that area like the plague. There was more than one way to get to my new gallery, and I took every way except the one that brought me right past my old building.

Liam had done what he set out to do. He turned the old mill into luxury apartments, utilizing the ground level for small businesses, giving me a new home for my art. It was amazing.

It took about a year to finish all of it. The grand opening of the building was in the local paper and on the news. He was right from the start, I haven't had a slow day since. People flooded the gallery in the beginning, now I had a steady stream of new



and old customers.

Everything had come to together in the end.

“It's been long enough. I think you need to face your fear, Glory. I'll come with you—we'll come with you. You won't be alone, and I think it will really close that chapter for you. Once you get over your fear, you'll feel a lot better.”

Will I? I don't see how.

For me, avoiding it all together was the best route. The memories could stay dormant, the pain could stay chained inside, and I could focus on what really mattered; my son and family.

“Well, what do you say?” Standing up, Liam wrapped his arm around my neck and pulled my head against his stomach. “Will you do it for me?”

Pursing my lips tightly, I furrowed my brows. “Does it mean that much to you? You've been asking me for a long time to do this, and I always tell you the same thing.”

“You always say no. I guess I keep hoping one of these times you'll say yes.”

“Why? Why can't you just let it be?”

“Because this is our home, all of it. Do you want to explain to our son when he gets older why that street is off limits? Do you want him to see you not facing your fear when you tell him he needs to be strong?”

“Liam—”

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Slipping his hand up my face, he cupped my cheek. “Be strong, Glory, you know you can be.”

My eyes darted between his as his thumb ran over the curve of my jaw. Holden cooed, baring his tiny little teeth as he smiled.

“Mama, Mama,” he said, stretching his arms out as I looked over at him.

Taking his small hand, I held it tight. Liam was right, I knew he was. I couldn't avoid that place forever. I was holding on to all the emotions and feelings by doing that.

I had to let go.

For my husband, for my son, and for myself.

“Alright.”

“Alright?” Liam asked, unsure he heard me right.

“Yeah, alright. I'll do it. You're right, I need to face this. I haven't done that yet, I buried it.” Rubbing my son's fingers, he grabbed his foot with his free hand. “I should free it.”

The three of us walked hand in hand towards my old building. I wasn't sure exactly what had happened to it since the fire. I let Liam handle that part. I couldn't do it.

I told him I didn't want to know about anything, to just do whatever the city wanted

and be done with it. I was hoping this day would never really come at all.

It's here.

I could see the street sign on the corner, so I started to slow down. Liam was still walking, but as he took a step, our son's hand jerked in his. Looking back over his shoulder, Liam stopped.

“What? What is it?”

“I don't know if I can do this.”

“You can do this, Glory, and once you do, you'll feel better. I promise you, you won't regret this. You need this, you don't know how much you need this.”

“But what if I lose it? Do you really want Holden to see me like that?”

Taking a long stride in, Liam picked our son up and set him on his hip. “What did we talk about when we found out you were pregnant?”

“We said we'd never hide anything from him, that we'd always show every side of ourselves. The happiness, the anger, the sadness, we weren't going to protect him from any of it. He needs to know it's okay to feel, regardless of what those emotions are.”

“Exactly. So let's show him how strong and brave you are by facing this together as a family.” Liam stretched his hand out, braiding his fingers into mine.

Taking in a deep breath, I nodded, allowing him to lead me forward. Scraping my heels against the cement, I shut my eyes and let him guide me.

Liam released my hand, wrapping his arm around my waist. “Open your eyes, Glory.”

“I can't,” I said, pinching my lids tighter.

“Yes you can.” His voice was soft as it found its way into my ears.

“Peek a boo, Mama, peek a boo.” Holden touched the thin skin of my lids, attempting to push them open. His poking became more hard, causing my eyeballs to hurt and water.

“Okay, alright,” I said, blocking his jabs. Blinking my eyes open, I kept them on Liam and our son.

“Look,” Liam said, flicking his head in the direction of my old gallery. “Just look.”

“Mama, see.” Holden held out his hand, his eyes wide and excited.

Taking in a long breath through my nose, I turned my head.

Oh my god.

What?

The charred remnants that I remembered seeing last time I was there was gone. There was nothing but green grass and flowers. A giant playground was set off in the back, benches speckled the outskirts, and a gazebo was smack dab in the center.

“How?” I asked out loud, not really directing the question to Liam. Jolting forward, I crossed the street without looking, hearing the faint honk of a car as I cut in front of it.

Tears filled my eyes as I stood at the edge of a small park. There was a plaque secured on a fence post, and as I read the name the bubbles of water on my eyes came splashing down.

Holden Park.

“Did you do this?” I asked as Liam came up beside me.

Placing our son down, I watched as Holden ran through the grass and started to climb on the jungle gym.

Liam tucked his hands into his back pockets, keeping his eyes on our baby. “I did.”

“I can't believe this.”

“It took me long enough to get you here.” Looking at me from the corner of his eyes, he smirked.

Wiping my cheeks, I let out a delicate laugh. “You named this place after our son. . .”  
Pausing, I sniffled, rubbing my nose.

“I named it after your father.” His hand pressed into the small of my back, pulling me into his hip. “Read the rest of the plaque.”

Dropping my eyes to the sign, I read the small print at the bottom.

Holden Park. Dedicated to Holden Daniels, husband and father. A man who gave more than he could ever know to this community.

Tears fell effortlessly down my face, dropping one after another onto the ground.

“You did this for me?” Looking up at Liam, he gave me a smile.

“I'd do anything for you.” Brushing the tears away, he scooped my face in his palms and kissed me. “I love you, Glory.”

“Mama, Dada, look!” Holden yelled to us.

Twisting to look at him, Holden was standing at the top of the slide. Sitting down slowly, he pushed off and went down.

“Yay!” I called to him, nuzzling my head into Liam's chest.

Clutching me firmly against his ribs, Liam rested his head on mine, and we both watched our little boy as he played.

This was the life my father would have wanted me to have. All of this right here.

There was no devastation at the old lot, there was no wasteland of burned wood and wasted space.

Liam had done something incredible, he gave it new life, he resurrected something that had been so tainted and made it beautiful again.

And together we had found eternal happiness.

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