



I  
KNOW  
WHAT  
LOVE  
IS

*Whitney Bianca*

**I Know  
What Love Is**

**by  
Whitney Bianca**

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**(I Know What Love Is #1)**  
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**\*\*\*AUTHOR'S NOTE\*\*\***

**This is a work of fiction. The story contained within these pages may be considered objectionable and distasteful to some. As a writer, it is my job to tell stories and live inside my character's heads as I write. I do not judge my characters. However, I do not in any way condone their actions or the violent ways in which they express themselves.**

**This dark erotic tale is completely fictional and is no way intended for harm.**

**This is Joan and Elliot's story.**

**Reader beware.**

*love,  
Whitney*

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## Chapter One

The flat, red desert horizon stretches for miles all around me as I speed down the seemingly never-ending black asphalt road. I've been driving for a day straight but I don't have time to stop. I'm on a strict timetable.

I almost can't believe I'm back in Texas. After all this time, I'm finally home. It's strange, but I actually missed the oppressive heat. It's smothering and uncomfortable, but at least it's predictable.

Predictable is comforting.

I need all the comfort I can get.

I reach down between my legs and adjust the gun hidden in my left boot. I'm wearing my lucky blue boots, but I also know I have to make my own luck. The gun is one way to do that. I don't want to take any chances. I've spent hours at the shooting range preparing for today. I don't want to lose control if the shit hits the fan.

After all, I'm about to do something crazy.

Five years ago, I never would have imagined this life for myself. Five years ago, I was a carefree girl who lived in the bright sunlight.

I had no idea the darkness that could exist in this world.

I know now.

Believe me, I know.

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The night that changed my life forever was nothing special.

It was a typical Friday night in Texas. The music was loud and the booze was flowing. I didn't see him at first. I was standing by the bar, my white tank top riding up the curve of my waist and my jean skirt riding low on my hips. I felt sexy, carefree. After a long work week, I just wanted to kick back, drink a few whiskey-and-Cokes, and get laid. I remember that, after all these years. I was definitely looking for a man to take home.

For a long time, I would think back on what I was wearing, like it made a lick of difference. I was dressed to get laid, quite honestly. Short skirt. Tight top. Black bra. Maybe I was asking for it. Maybe I was a bad girl with loose morals and dirty desires. Lots of people are under the illusion that

good girls don't get raped. Bad girls, though, are asking for trouble and deserve whatever they get. But hell no, I wasn't asking for trouble, I swear. No one would ask for what happened to me. Silly me, I was looking to get lucky. What I got instead was a one way ticket to the dark side.

It had nothing to do with my clothes.

*He* told me later, his voice rough in my ear, that it was my hair. Long and dark, I used to wear it down my back in a loose braid. He said he saw himself wrapping my braid around his big hand and pulling. Yanking me down. He always wanted me down—on my knees, on my stomach. Down. Beneath him. And after awhile, he forced me to pretend to enjoy it. The sad thing is, eventually, I no longer had to pretend.

I did enjoy it.

That little tidbit? I've kept it to myself, all these years. Only he and I know how I come against his hard cock when he thrusts it into me, over and over.

I adapted to my environment.

I mutated.

But dammit, I didn't ask for it. I never asked for that, or all the shit that came after. Trust me.

Anyway, that fateful night in the bar, I didn't see him at first. I was preoccupied. The bartender was cute. He had dark hair, olive skin, a sleeve of colorful tattoos down his arm, and a plain gold band on his left ring finger. Married. What a shame. That didn't stop me, though. I was twenty-two, and as far as I was concerned, flirting was harmless. I can't remember exactly what I was saying, but I remember giggling a lot. I had one cowboy boot hooked on the rung of the stool next to me, my knee lifted and my thighs parted. A bead of whiskey rolled down between my breasts, after a bit spilled on the way to my mouth. It was a hot night in Austin, but the bar inside was dark and cool. Laughter and the hum of music lulled me into complacency. It was a great night. Nothing bad could happen. I was feeling good.

It was a dive. I used to love dives. Skeezy men and hipsters, drinking cheap beer and playing darts and pool. This particular dive bar, The Blue Mermaid, was leaning toward skeeze, but I was down with that. I lived up the street and it was close. When I found Mr. Right Now, there'd be no time to reconsider. I'd have him upstairs and naked in less than ten minutes.

That was my frame of mind at the time. No apologies, no regrets.  
This where I made my first mistake.

It took me too damn long. I spent too much time giggling with the bartender. I gave him too much time to scout me out. Too much time to figure out exactly what he was going to do with me.

I had to pee, so I sidled down the narrow wood-paneled hallway toward the ladies'. After I did my business and washed my hands, I glanced up at myself in the cracked, misty mirror. I remember this moment, in particular. This was the last time I looked at myself before it all went to hell. Old Me had golden skin, naturally tan from my Anglo-Mexican lineage and the Texas sun. Old Me had bright, laughing brown eyes and soft lips that glistened with a lipgloss sheen. Old Me had a curvy hourglass figure and toned muscles from jogging and volleyball on Saturdays.

Old Me was beautiful. Old Me was healthy. Old Me had a lifetime of possibilities ahead of her.

I realize I'm getting sappy. Forgive me. It's hard for me, you know? This little trip down memory lane is probably not good for me. I'm supposed to be moving on. If I was half as well-adjusted as I pretend to be, I might actually find something of worth in rehashing all this old bullshit. I wish I could be one of those women who uses her story to help others. I wish I could be one of those women who does tours of high schools and colleges to let other women know that they're not alone. *Rape is not something you asked for. Rape is not who you are.*

Alas, I'm not well-adjusted. I'm just good at faking it.

I bumped into a brick wall of a man outside of the restroom, my nose pressing into his chest and his big hands clamping down on my biceps. I couldn't help but take a big whiff of him. He smelled like beer, sweat, and the spicy scent of pine, like one of those cardboard trees that hang from rearview mirrors. All man. All brute.

He was wearing a black button up, black jeans, and steel-toed boots. His shoulders were broad, and his arms rippled with muscle under the thin fabric of his shirt. The skin on his face and forearms was dark, but his neck was pink, like he spent too much time in the sun. He worked with his hands, no doubt. Construction, road crew, or sanitation, I figured. My father ran a huge landscaping business in Dallas and I had grown up around those kind

of guys my whole life. They were burly, loud, and could be total assholes if not handled properly.

“Scuse me, sugar,” I mumbled as I stumbled back. He didn't let me go, though. He held me past all courtesy. He forced me to look him in the face, my eyebrows raised in a question. That was the first time he forced me to do anything, but it wouldn't be the last. But I didn't look him in the eye, not yet. My gaze was drawn to his mouth.

It's a strange thing to remember, his mouth. But that's the spot my eyes zeroed in on, in that moment. It was a straight line of a mouth, with a thin lips, and no beard or distracting facial hair. There was something cruel about it, but I didn't know what. Later I would know. Yes ma'am, I would.

“What's your name?” he said, his voice low. His fingers were digging into the flesh of my arms and I felt my brow furrow in annoyance. Who was this big motherfucker, thinking he could touch me? I wasn't smart enough to be scared. Yet.

“None of your business,” I said, the liquor giving me confidence. I tried to pull away, but he moved toward me, pressing me against the cheap wood paneling of the hallway, his thigh shoving between mine. Finally, I started to register the danger of the situation. My heart started pounding; blood throbbed in my ears. Blood also flowed to another part of my body, lower down. It's embarrassing, but it's true. My body reacted to his big thigh pressing against me.

I pressed my palms to his chest, still clinging to the hope that he would let me go if I asked him nicely to leave me alone. He was probably just a drunk asshole, I told myself. A drunk asshole who thought a pretty girl calling him 'sugar' meant he was going to get a free pass to pussy town.

His face was directly over mine, and I stole a glance at him. He was a handsome but hard-looking man, his nose blunt, but his cheekbones sharp. He was older than me, I guessed late twenties to my twenty-two. His green eyes were flat and dead, no feeling in them at all. I wondered if he wasn't just drunk. Maybe he was on something else? Meth and painkiller addiction was rampant in the South. But a tweaker wouldn't be as big as him. A tweaker would have tics and bad skin and bad teeth. A tweaker wouldn't be as calm and as sure as he was.

“What's your name?” he repeated, his voice softer this time. Despite the softness, I wasn't fooled. I knew I was in trouble, I just didn't know how



much.

“Look mister, I don't want any trouble,” I said, trying to keep the shake out of my voice. I held my hands up in surrender, but that only caused him to press himself harder against me. So hard, I could barely breath. He had me flattened between him and the wall. Both were unyielding and the air was slowly leaking out of me. I could barely take a breath. I could feel his erection then, through his jeans and my skirt. Scaring an innocent girl gave him a woody, I realized. Okay, maybe I wasn't so innocent. But that was still not a good sign.

“What's your goddamn name?” he hissed, and dropped his face to my neck. He bit me before I could even realize what was happening, his teeth sinking into the sensitive skin. My fingernails dug into his chest, but he didn't stop. His tongue lathed between his teeth, wetting the skin trapped there. My nipples hardened. My thighs clenched around his leg. My whole body tightened. It was the fear, I think. My whole body was frozen.

Finally, he released me and I heard myself whimper in shock. He pulled back, and blood stained his teeth. *My blood.* He dipped his head again, licking at my skin a few more times, to staunch the flow of blood. He moved fast, and my white tank top didn't get a drop of tell-tale red on it. Not then, anyway.

For a second, I wondered if vampires were real. Vampires like in mythology, not the glittery vampires in stupid movies aimed at teenage girls. Vicious vampires who would tear your throat out without a moment's hesitation. But vampires don't exist. Mr. Brick Wall was just fucking with me, terrorizing me. He liked watching me bleed. There are far scarier things to worry about than made-up bogeymen, believe me.

“Last chance,” he said then, licking his lips and grinding his hips into mine. I couldn't breathe. My head was swimming. My body was aching already, throbbing. I wanted to continue fighting. I really did. I wanted to knee him in the balls and run back to the safety of the bar. But it was too hard. He was too big. So, I sealed my fate.

“Daisy,” I whispered. “My name's Daisy, you fucking asshole.”

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She told me her name was Daisy, but that was a fucking lie. I didn't find out until much later that her real name was Joan, like that rock chick Joan Jett. She and her namesake had a lot in common, actually. Sexy dark hair, an I-don't-take-no-shit kind of attitude, and sneering lips. Sneering lips that looked fucking great stretched around my cock, once I forced all the fight out of her. I enjoyed that part—forcing her—a little too much, I admit.

Oh, fuck. That first night. My dick still gets hard when I think about it.

She was all tits and ass and long hair, and my eyes were on her the minute she walked into the bar. It wasn't the first time I'd seen her there, in fact. A few weeks before, she'd come in with a few other girls, but she stood out like a beacon amongst all the rest. Fuck, to this day, I don't know why she chose me, but she did. It sounds real dumb, but her body called to me. The way she laughed and talked with her hair and hands flying. The way she posed for smiling pictures with the other chicks at her table. My eyes followed her everywhere she went. The way she moved was seared in my brain, and all I could think about was her. Holding her down. Tangling my hand in those silky strands of long, black hair. Sucking on her tits. Clamping my hands on her hips and fucking her, hard.

Ever since then, I'd been waiting.

Waiting to get her alone.

The day started like any other. I woke up, headed to the construction site before sunrise. Worked in the sweltering heat until a cold beer sounded like heaven. Left work around seven, went home and jacked off, showered, then headed back out into the night, in search of a little trouble. I ended up at The Blue Mermaid, because let's face it, I was still looking for her. Her. Her. Her. Everything always comes down to Joan. That's why I'm in the shit I'm in now, because I can't give up that fucking girl.

Anyway, that night, I was hanging out, drinking my beer and not being too obvious about it, when she came in the door. Nobody followed her inside. She didn't meet up with anybody. She headed straight for the bar, alone.

Alone .

My fucking lucky night.

And she was just how I remembered her. Prettier, even. She was dressed like she was out to get some, though, and that pissed me off. She was looking for a man, and she was giggling and sucking on her drink

straw, but she wasn't looking at me. She was looking at the bartender like she wanted to throw up her skirt for him right then and there. My eyes never left her, anger building, willing her to look at me. If she was going to wet anyone's cock that night, it was going to be mine. I had waited long enough, dammit. I deserved her.

Turns out, she agreed with me. She told me so, much later. Whispered in my ear that she only wanted me, that she was mine forever and ever. Fuck, it makes me hard just thinking about her saying those soft words as I slid my cock in and out of her. No one else could have her then, and no one else can have her now. I won't let her leave me, and I'll kill any motherfucker that touches her.

That's a fact.

I used to not be so violent. I wish I could stop these urges, I really do. I don't want her to be afraid of me, but that's just my way. Nobody gets between me and what's mine.

And she *is* mine. Whether she likes it or not.

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“Daisy? That's a real pretty name,” he said, his intonation flat. I was just beginning to realize how fucking creepy he was. His eyes were on my mouth, and I clamped my lips shut. I was starting to sweat, and I just wanted to be free of him, but he wasn't going anywhere. He dropped my arms from his grasp, leaning one hand against the wall above my head, blocking the view of my face from anyone that might have passed by. The hallway was dimly lit anyway, so no one would be paying us much mind. My only hope was that someone would need to use the ladies' room soon. I would be able to signal them to help me. How foolish I was. I still had hope.

His other big hand began to roam, from my hip to the swell of my left breast. I shivered as he thumbed my hard nipple, not because I wanted to. I wished I could be like steel against him, not let him have any bit of me. But my body was weak. It reacted to his touch because under the skin, there are nerves, not brains. My brain was disgusted by him and by myself, but that didn't stop any of it from happening. When he shoved his hand under my skirt, he found me wet. He moved my panties aside and slid a long finger

deep inside of me, and something snapped. I began to fight. I shoved at his immovable chest, and when that didn't work, I pounded my fists against him and slapped his face.

You know what he did?

He laughed.

A slow and sinister chuckle, right before he lowered his mouth and kissed me, right on the lips. I screamed into him, but the sound was muffled. The music in the bar was too loud for anyone to hear me anyway. I was getting assaulted in public, in my own backyard, and no one was the wiser. He slid another finger inside of me, finger-fucking me hard enough to hurt. My hands circled around his wrist, trying to dislodge him, but I barely budged him an inch. His tongue thrust deep in my mouth and I could hardly remember to breathe. My chest was burning. Black dots were bursting behind my eyelids. I almost passed out.

I wish I had.

Instead, I was awake as he dragged me into the ladies' room and locked the door. He threw me up against the sink and the hard porcelain bruised the back of my thighs. I held out my hands, like that would stop him.

"No," I said, my voice weak. "No!" I tried again, hysteria making me shrill. He pretended he didn't hear me, fumbling with his belt, his eyes on my mouth. Pure terror was running through my veins. Again, I felt frozen, my muscles locking. He was so big, and I was so small. What could I possibly do? My mind ran over all the possibilities. Run into a stall and lock it. Try to push past him. Bang on the door and scream. Do something, you idiot! But time got away from me.

Before I could do anything, he was shoving my skirt up my hips. I tried to bolt, to slip around him, but he hooked his arm around my waist and shoved me back against the sink. My elbow scraped against the sharp edge of the soap dispenser and I hissed in pain. He had drawn more of my blood. It wouldn't be the last time, that was for damn sure.

"You want this," he was mumbling, one hand clenching around my neck as his other hand freed his dick from his jeans. "You can take it, Daisy."

Black dots danced in front of my vision again, as his big hand cut off my oxygen. I welcomed unconsciousness, but again, I wasn't so lucky. When he saw my head start to droop, he released me so quickly the world

tilted on its axis. The influx of oxygen to my brain made me dizzy and I felt sick. He pried my legs apart and stepped into me, his big Texas sized belt buckle dropping heavily onto my thigh.

My eyes widened when I saw his hard dick, aiming right at me. Like the rest of him, it was big. Too big. Again, I tried to scramble away, but he caught me easily, his hands on either side of my waist. He lifted me as if I weighed nothing, balancing my ass on the cold rim of the sink. I tried to kick my legs, but all that did was push my skirt further up my waist. My pink polka-dotted panties seemed so out of place as he ran the ruddy crown of his cock across them. They were so youthful, so innocent, so playful, whereas his cock was so brutish and blunt. Then he ripped them right off of me and stuffed them in his back pocket.

“You can take it, Daisy,” he repeated, angling his cock against me. I could only watch in horror as he breached me. Thinking back on it now, maybe my body didn't betray me at all. Maybe it was trying to help me, minimize the damage? Either way, I was going to get raped, and there was nothing I could do about it. I shoved against his shoulders and lifted my knees, trying to press them against his stomach and push him off. Trying to do something. But he just pried my knees open again and thrust his hips, sliding inside of me another few inches. My head dropped back against the mirror, my mouth gaping open at the feel of him, the violation. A grunted moan escaped my lips as he thrust again, going deeper.

*How much deeper could he possibly go?* I remember wondering. How naïve I was. How innocent.

When one of his hands clamped down on my hip and the other yanked my braid so hard that my head banged against the mirror, I found out how deep he could go inside of me. So deep that I felt like he could destroy me from the inside out. And he didn't let up. He plunged again and again, and I gasped for air each time until my throat was raw. When he swerved his hips and buried all nine inches of himself balls deep, I lost it. A raspy, throaty scream wrenched from my mouth as a sharp stab of pain-pleasure shot up my spine. He clamped a hand over my face, yanking harder on my braid with his other hand.

“Shhh, baby,” he murmured, his lips to my ear. “You love it, don't you?”

I felt my eyes rolling back in my head. My scalp throbbed, my body was being assaulted, and his hand over my mouth was making it hard to breathe. I heard my muffled whimpers, loud in my ears, as he fucked me. I have no idea how long he thrust his cock into me. I really don't. It could have been two minutes, it could have been ten. It sure as hell felt like an eternity. My legs hung limply over the edge of the sink, rocking with each thrust. My fingernails still clawed into his shoulders, but all my fight was gone. The bastard had won, and it wouldn't be the last time.

He dropped his hand from my mouth and kissed me again. I tried to turn my head away, but he grabbed my chin in an iron grip and forced me. He slipped his tongue between my lips, dipping and sucking, almost lovingly. Almost. Then he bit my lip hard, drawing blood. I jerked against him, my pussy clenching around his cock. He growled. Literally, growled.

“Fuck!” he hissed, ramming his hips into mine.

Pain got him off. Plain and simple. I would come to learn that well. He wanted my pain, he wanted my blood, and he wanted my fight. As he licked at my bloody lip, he sped up his thrusts. He dropped my hair and wrapped his big arm around my waist, pulling me closer. My scalp tingled as the feeling returned, but I would hardly call it a relief. Panic was welling up in me. A new horror was dawning on me. He was going to orgasm, I realized. His was going to shoot his disgusting come *inside me*.

Again, I was so fucking naïve, it's almost funny.

He pulled out with a groan, grabbing my hand and pressing it against the crown of his cock. It was warm and wet with my juices, and I just wanted to scream again. My pussy throbbed and tingled, but it was over. Or so I thought. He bucked his hips, and shot his hot come into my palm. I almost gagged. But he was just getting started.

“Swallow it,” he demanded, taking my wrist and forcing my hand to my face. “Every last drop.” I swallowed hard, shaking my head. His come was thick and white on my fingers, oozing down my palm. Not at all appetizing.

That wouldn't always be the case. Eventually, I became an old pro at guzzling come. I even started to like his taste, as crazy as that sounds. But on that first night, I was horrified.

“No,” I hissed, some of my fight back. I tried to free my hand from his iron grip, tried to smear his come down the front of his shirt. But he was

faster than me, and stronger. He slapped my hand to my mouth, his come against my lips before I even knew what was happening. Then he plunged two fingers into my sore pussy. I flung my head to the right, but I only succeeded in smearing cum on my cheek.

“Lick and swallow, Daisy,” he said. “Swallow while I make you come.”

So that's exactly what I did. What other choice did I have? His come was salty and thick, but I closed my eyes and forced myself to swallow. It was only then that the tears came, rolling down my cheeks at the utter humiliation. He chuckled again at my defeat, his big fingers relentlessly plunging inside of my ravaged body.

He didn't make me come though. I didn't give him that particular victory until much later.

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## Chapter Two

After he buckled up his jeans and washed his hands, he wet a towel and grabbed my chin. I didn't fight him; I let him wipe off my face. Then he tossed the towel in a toilet and flushed. He stepped close to me again and I jerked, my whole body at attention. I was so afraid he was going to touch me, I couldn't move. The fear rippled under my skin. He ran a calloused finger down my cheek and then, without another word, he left the bathroom. I had my head down, so I don't know how he looked at me before he disappeared. I don't know if he was smiling. I don't know if he was proud of himself. I don't know if he had remorse. At the time, I didn't care.

On shaky legs, I forced myself into a stall and wiped away all of the wetness between my thighs, using miles of toilet paper. I just wanted to get clean. I didn't even think about evidence or DNA. As far as I was concerned, nobody had to know about what happened to me. Now that he was gone, it was almost easy to pretend that it didn't happen. It was all a bad dream.

Except for my missing panties. The bruises. The bite marks. All that stuff was hard to explain away.

I stayed in the bathroom, in the locked stall, for a long time. Giggling, tipsy women came in and out, doing their business, completely unaware of the crime scene they were tromping through. Again, I don't know how much time passed. I was terrified, I can admit it. Terrified that he was still in the bar. Terrified that he would come back for me.

Finally, I made myself stand and emerge from the safety of the stall. Without looking in the mirror, I smoothed my clothes and hair as much as I could. I swept my braid over my shoulder to hide the marks his teeth had made in my flesh. I dipped my head to hide my lip. I left the bathroom and slowly made my way back to the main room. My knees were practically knocking together, I was so scared. Everything in the bar was still hunky-dory. *Welcome to the Jungle* played on the old juke box. Nobody seemed to notice me. I didn't look up, I just headed toward the door, like nothing was wrong. I pushed it open and the hot night air hit me.

Up until that moment, I was never more happy to breathe fresh Texas air. I could smell the hay from the nearby fields. I could smell the fried



chicken from the restaurant across the street. Shit, I could smell the cow pies in the air, but I didn't care. The familiar smells reminded me that I was alive. I had been through a terrible thing, but I was still alive.

I'm such a strong girl, right? That's what I thought, too. *I'm a survivor*, I used to tell myself. But what happens when there's nothing left to survive for? That's when shit gets really dark. Violent and vengeful thoughts start to take up all the space in your brain that used to be reserved for fun and laughter and love.

But I'm getting ahead of myself again.

That night, I didn't drive, because I lived five blocks away. So I stumbled across the gravel parking lot, totally forgetting that I left my purse—with my house keys, my wallet, my cellphone, my whole life—behind the bar at The Blue Mermaid. The Blue Mermaid, where I had no intentions of ever stepping foot again. This seeming mistake turned out to be a lucky break, though, on my part.

Thank heaven for small favors.

I wasn't really paying attention to what I was doing. I had my arms wrapped around me, and my head down as I walked. I trudged along, more out of memory than actually looking where I was going. My head was too clouded. My body was too numb. I was in shock. I became aware that a vehicle was behind me and I stepped off the road to let them pass. I was on a stretch of street with no sidewalk. This being Texas, the land of the Ford F150, where going anywhere on foot is frowned upon, this was not unusual. However, there were houses all along the road, with lights on. It was hardly deserted.

After everything I'd been through that night, I still couldn't sense the danger I was in.

The vehicle didn't pass, though. It slowed behind me, the headlights casting a white triangle of light in my path. I turned my head to look, my shoulders hunched up around my ears like it was cold outside. I realized it was a truck, most likely a ubiquitous Ford, and waved for it to pass. The truck still didn't go around me. It idled, like the driver was trying to make a decision.

A shiver ran down my back as the driver put the truck in park. No, it couldn't be, I thought. But a bad feeling hit me, and I couldn't shake it. I told myself I was being stupid. Mr. Brick Wall was long gone, right? But

when that truck door opened, and a pair of steel-toed boots hit the pavement, I didn't hesitate. I took off running into the dark night, fast as my lucky cowboy boots would take me.

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I swear it was only going to be a one-time thing. I had no intentions of seeking her out again. Her pussy had been so wet and tight, and her sweet moans and whimpers still echoed in my ears, but I was done with her. One time was enough, or so I told myself as I left her behind in the bathroom at The Mermaid.

I know Joan will never believe me, but I didn't follow her out of the bar that night.

I was sitting in my truck, minding my own business, my dick throbbing, reliving the feel of her body against mine. Her body fit me so good. I was flying high on the *feeling*. The rush of the orgasm. I was savoring it. There aren't many things in life that bring me pure joy. A pretty girl wrapped around my cock? That's what I call pure joy. I loved the fight she had in her, the spunk. When I licked my lips, I could still taste her blood, thick on my tongue.

I'm a sick fuck, but I'm not a hardcore criminal. At least, I wasn't then.

Kidnapping is a serious offense, and a whole can of worms I never had any intention of opening. Any criminal knows their limits. Me, I liked sex a little rough. But I didn't play with knives or guns or imprisonment. I knew that violent shit was a slippery slope that would get you put away for life.

So, when I started my truck and turned out of the parking lot, I was more shocked than anything to see her on the road. I'll admit it, my curiosity was piqued. She must have lived close to The Mermaid if she was walking. Or maybe I'd fucked her so good that I'd addled her brains and she'd forgotten her car back in the parking lot? I found myself driving behind her, keeping my distance, my headlights barely touching her. But then she noticed me. She turned her lovely face toward me and the light caught her cheek.

My heart jumped in my chest.

Suddenly, everything was do or die. I could ride on past, head home like I had planned, or... suddenly there was an *Or*. *Or* I could grab her,

throw her in my truck, take her home with me, and fuck her until I got tired of her. I thought I was done with her, but staring at her in the road, so vulnerable and alone, I realized that I had only just begun with her.

The possibilities were endless.

I was out of the truck before I knew what I was doing. She took off running into the darkness, and I'll admit, I didn't hesitate. I ran after her, like a bat out of hell. She was about halfway up the lawn of a little bungalow with a porch light shining bright when I caught her. I swung my arm around her waist and tackled her to the ground. She screamed, and the sound echoed across the street and reverberated deep inside my bones.

I still love to hear her scream. There's just something about the way her mouth opens and her eyes go wide. She's so beautiful when she's terrified. These days, I think I rubbed off on Joan a little bit too much. The girl has a sadistic streak a mile wide, and it's my own fault, I suppose.

Anyway, when we went down in the dark night, I straddled her on the dewy grass. I knew that once she started screaming, she wasn't going to stop. The girl was a fighter. So I reared back and punched her in the side of the head. It sounds fucked up, but I didn't put much force behind it. I didn't want to hurt her too bad. I just wanted to let her know who was in charge.

She flopped back on the grass, but she didn't lose consciousness. She got a good shot of her own in, her knee slamming into my thigh, missing my balls by mere centimeters. It still hurt like a bitch and I slapped her, hard, in punishment. I heard her gasp of pain, and it sent a shiver of lust through me. If I could hear that sound for the rest of my life, I could die a happy man. I knew then that I'd made the right decision. The girl who called herself Daisy was everything I'd ever dreamed of. Why only have her once? Why not have her as many times as I wanted?

A car drove by then, and I flattened myself on top of her. She squirmed, her hips bumping against mine, but I had about seventy-five pounds on her. I wasn't worried she would get free. As she writhed, I caught her arms and dragged them above her head. It was so tempting to pry her legs open and fuck her again, in the middle of someone's lawn, in the wild wide open, but I didn't. I was willing to wait.

The car continued on its way, not seeming to find anything strange about my truck, pulled over on the side of the road. Breathing a rough sigh of relief, I knew we didn't have much time. I had to get her into my truck

before someone got nosy. I got a good grip on her hair, wrapped my other arm around her waist, and hauled her to her feet. She screamed again, and I cursed my stupidity at neglecting her sexy loud mouth. That mouth was going to get a workout later, but for now, I needed her to shut the hell up. I yanked her hair harder, pressing my lips to her ear.

“Scream and I swear to God, I'll kill you,” I said mean enough to make her think I meant it. She went limp against me, but I didn't want to take any chances. I remembered her hot little panties stuffed in my back pocket. In a stroke of genius, I pulled them out and gagged her with them. She bit down on my finger in the process, but that only earned her another smack. Her rebelliousness didn't deter me.

At that point, wild horses couldn't have dragged me away.

I can be really stubborn sometimes. It's my fatal flaw.

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The bastard dragged me back to his truck and I couldn't do a thing about it. I tried to toe off my left cowboy boot and leave it behind, but my favorite blue boots wouldn't cooperate. The thought that I was about to disappear without a trace was horrifying. I was going to be one of those girls on the news, and my mother and father would be interviewed for the 11 o'clock show, tears staining their faces as they begged for my safe return. My mother would weep on my father's shoulder, asking herself why her only daughter had to be so damn rebellious.

“Why did she have to go to Austin? She should have stayed closer to home, where she would have been *safe*!” I could hear my mother's voice in my brain. Instead of being annoying, it was heartbreaking. I realized that she was right, after all. In that moment, I made a fierce silent declaration—if I survived whatever was going to happen to me, I would move back to the suburbs of Dallas. Without hesitation. I would never rebel again. I would be the perfect Southern daughter my mother had always wanted.

I kept kicking, but I was no match for him. He threw open the passenger side door of his big dumb truck and hauled me in, my knees banging against the dash. It was indeed a Ford, and I cursed, inwardly. Why couldn't he have been driving a Toyota? A Toyota would have been easier for the police to find in cowboy country. Instead of slamming the door, he

shoved in behind me. I spit out the makeshift gag and scrambled over the center console, trying to reach the keys. I don't know what my plan was, but I thought if I could just get the keys, maybe I could stop him from taking me.

Stars burst behind my eyelids as he hit me again, this time on the back of the head. I was going to be bruised from head to tail when he got done with me, I thought through the haze of pain. I slumped forward, my vision throbbing in and out. His fingers dug into my hips as he yanked me back onto his lap. I could feel his heart pounding against my back, and his erection against my ass.

“You're gonna be a good girl, Daisy,” he growled into my ear, his hands roaming up my front. Why the hell did I tell him my name was Daisy, you may ask? It was the name of my favorite childhood horse, a sweet palomino mare. I loved that horse. For whatever reason, her name was the first thing that popped into my head. At least I hadn't been dumb enough to tell him my real name. He tweaked my nipples and I clenched my fists, wishing so badly that I could hurt him. That very moment, I vowed to myself that by the time my ordeal was all over, I would take just as much from him as he took from me. If I was going to die, I was going to drag him down to hell with me.

To this day, I'm still working on keeping that promise.

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## Chapter Three

We drove awhile, for about half an hour, I would guess. He had my head on his lap the whole time, one palm pressed against my cheek, his middle finger straddling my eye. He sang along with the radio, his voice low and soft. Surprisingly, he didn't force me to blow him. Looking back, I wonder why. Did he take mercy on me? He was probably worried I would bite his dick off and he would lose control of the truck and crash into a tree.

I would've, too.

Eventually, we pulled into a garage and he put the car in park. I jerked against him, feeling my last chance for freedom upon me. If I could just get out of the truck, I could slip under the garage door and make another run for it. He seemed to sense my thoughts, and pressed his hand down hard on my face. I gasped in pain, opening my mouth to relieve the pressure on my jaw. I heard the garage door motor shudder as the door dropped closed, and all of my hope—poof!—disappeared.

He released me and I bolted upright. I looked around, trying to get my bearings. The space around us was dark, but seemed like a normal garage. Shiny garden tools were hanging on the back wall, glinting in the glare of the headlights. A tiny little shimmer of hope returned. Possible weapons were my only friends. He turned off the ignition and the headlights died, leaving us bathed in black.

“Daisy,” he said. I didn't respond. His hand found my bare thigh in the darkness. “I'm going to hurt you, baby.”

Those words sent a cold pang of fear right through my guts. Shit, just remembering the way he said it makes me shiver even now. All I could do was take a deep breath and force my brain not to shut down. Whatever he did to me, I had to keep sharp. Otherwise, how would I be able to save myself, if the situation arose? I was not going to be stupid, no matter how scared I was. I was going to try my hardest to survive.

He unlocked my door, the latch clicking like a challenge. The sick fuck probably wanted me to try and run, just so that he could catch me. I didn't move, just sat still as a statue. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction. He chuckled, opened his door and slid out. He stood by the door, waiting.

He could wait all fucking night, as far as I was concerned.

Impatience won out. After a quiet moment, he dove back in the cab and hooked his arm around my thigh. He dragged me out and up the two wooden steps into the house, as if I weighed nothing. He threw me down on the linoleum floor, hard, then slammed the door and bolted the lock with his key. I pulled myself up onto my hands and knees and looked around. We were in a kitchen, one that hadn't been remodeled since the '70s. The appliances were avocado green. The linoleum under me was peeling and yellowed.

I heard the tell-tale sound of his belt unbuckling and I tried to scramble to my feet. He was faster, though, and his boot met my ass, sending me tumbling face first onto my stomach. He was on his knees behind me before I could catch my breath, yanking my skirt down my hips. I rolled back and forth, trying to dislodge him, even though I knew it was no use. I was at a severe disadvantage.

After my skirt was yanked off of me, next went my shirt and my bra and lastly, my lucky boots. He threw them off into the darkness of the next room, and despite everything, I still tried. I tried to crawl across the dirty floor and get away. He let me, for a moment, as his shirt came off, and he twirled the fabric to fashion a kind of rope. Then he looped it around my neck and yanked me back against him.

My skin touched his bare skin for the first time. I hissed as if burned, repulsed. I didn't want any part of him touching any part of me. I would not get my wish, unfortunately. He reared me up on my knees, his erection pressed against my ass and my back against his chest. He fisted the rope of his shirt, choking me. I raised my hands, my fingernails digging into his forearms, his neck, anything I could get my hands on.

"Fight me, baby," he growled into my ear. I swung my elbows back, connecting with his hard abs. Unfortunately, the movement only caused me to choke myself more. I made an ugly, rough sound and he abruptly let go of the shirt around my neck. I gasped in air, choking as I dropped onto my hands and knees.

"You motherfucking... crazy... fuck!" I managed to get out as he laughed. He sat back on his ass, quickly divesting himself of his boots, jeans and boxers as I crawled toward the fridge. I needed to put some space between us. I knew it wasn't enough. It would never be enough. But I couldn't just lay there and wait for him to do whatever he was going to do.

When he was completely naked, he grabbed my ankle and dragged me back to him, my flesh scraping across the cracked vinyl floor. I moaned in pain as he rolled me over on my back.

“You're so fucking sexy,” he whispered as he threw my legs open and inserted himself between them. He dropped his head to my chest, sucking my right nipple into his cruel mouth. My back bowed, the pain-pleasure shooting through my body again. He sucked hard and I steeled myself for his teeth. The shock of the pain still surprised me, though, as he bit down hard on the sensitive bud. I screamed, my knees jutting up toward the ceiling and my heels digging into the floor. He licked at the blood, dragging a dark trail across my chest as he went in search of the other nipple. His dark hair was clipped short to his scalp, so I couldn't rip his hair out. I gritted my teeth, slapping my palms across his forehead instead.

He wanted me to fight, and I didn't disappoint him.

His nose was bleeding by the time he tried to pin my hands above my head. So was mine, to be fair. His slaps were painful, but I was getting used to the pain. After awhile, I hoped I would be immune. His hard cock pressed against me, but I wasn't wet, at least not like I was back at The Mermaid. My body was too busy fighting.

When he shoved into me, it felt like a knife stabbing me between my legs. I dropped my head back, as my vision flickered in and out. He shuddered, his big chest pressing against mine. I was distracted by the pain, so he finally succeeded in pinning my hands to the floor. We lay there for a long moment, not moving, as he savored the feel of me. My poor, abused body. A shiver went through me, as well. I rolled my head and my gaze found the mirrored eyes of a cat staring back at me from the darkness.

The crazy motherfucker had a cat. How ridiculous is that?

I would have laughed, if I hadn't been in so much pain. He sucked my battered nipple back into his mouth and I gritted my teeth against the sharp sensation. He flicked his tongue against the tip, and I heard a jagged cry escape my swollen lips. He rolled his hips, a few more painful inches sliding inside of me. My body was starting to respond, thankfully. I don't know if I would have been able to withstand his battering ram of a cock otherwise.

However, he was nothing if not impatient.



He spit into his hand and rubbed it against me, artificially wetting me. With a wild noise, deep in his throat, he began to buck his hips, fucking me in earnest. I opened my mouth to scream, but I couldn't this time. My throat closed up. My whole body was screaming instead. My head was throbbing, louder and louder, pushing out all other thoughts. To say it hurt would be an understatement. He sawed his gigantic cock in and out of me, harder and harder. At that point, I would have blown him all night if it meant the pain would end.

“Scream, Daisy. Let me hear it,” he growled against my chest, arching his back toward the ceiling as he pumped into me. I shook my head, still rebellious despite everything. “Let me fucking hear you scream!” he rasped. I remained silent, the slapping sounds our bodies made loud in my ears. He levered up, his shoulders broad as he stretched my arms spread eagle. The muscles in his arms rippled at the movement. The man was cut like a Greek god. He was all rock hard muscles from head to foot. It was a terrifying thing to behold.

His face was in shadow, but I could feel the anger radiating off of him. He wanted me to scream. He wanted to hear my pain.

He was going to *make* me scream.

My arms tingled. Pangs of electricity shot through my shoulders. My fingers started to go numb. I clenched my knees around his waist, struggling against him. He swerved his hips in a slow circle, and I couldn't help it—I sobbed out a moan. A tremble went through my body. I was stretched to my limits, in all ways. I had no doubt I was about to break, like a glass smashing into a million pieces on the floor.

“Please,” I whispered. I don't know why I did. I doubted he would take mercy on me, but it was worth a shot. He cocked his head and I could hear his ragged breathing all around me.

“Please what?” he asked.

“Let me go.” It was a stupid thing to say. There was no way in hell this crazy man was going to let me go after all the trouble he went to to abduct me. He didn't move for a moment, as if he was considering my request. Then, surprising me, he let out a hoarse sigh and released my hands. Immediately, I hugged them to my chest, covering my tits, which were wet from both of our perspiration.

With no warning, he slapped me, hard enough to snap my head to the side.

“Hear me now,” he said simply, leaning close and licking my stinging cheek. “You're mine, Daisy. Mine to do with as I please.” He dug his knees into the floor and crashed his hips against me. Once. Twice. “This pussy is mine,” he said, punctuating each word with his a thrust of his cock, each harder than the last. He swerved his hips, and I gritted my teeth, trying not to scream. He smiled, cruelly, like he thought we were playing a game. He hooked his arm around my leg and hiked my knee high. Then he pounded into me, destroying me with every thrust. I felt my body trembling and I tossed my head to the side, trying to keep my wits about me. It was hard to keep from losing my shit. Then he stiffened and tossed his head back, the muscles in his chest bunching. I felt him spurting inside of me as he came, hot and insidious.

Try as I might, that time I couldn't stop myself—I screamed.

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My come smeared her thighs, but I didn't stop. I couldn't stop. My mind was singularly focused on fucking. I was going to fill her with my come. I wanted to feel it gush around my cock, seep out of her, and pool on the floor.

And then, when I was able, I was going to fuck her again.

Her eyes were glazed, her swollen lips parted as she moaned. Her dark hair was like a halo on the floor around her head. Her face was pinched like she was in pain, but she wasn't fighting anymore. She was strong, but she knew I was stronger. I knew she could take all of me, that was all that mattered. I dipped a thumb in between her teeth, opening her mouth wide. Then I kissed her, sucking on her tongue and tasting her spicy flavor.

I had never been so turned on in my life. Hearing her plead, her voice soft and scared, had done something to me, deep inside. A flip had been switched. I was like a kid with a shiny new toy.

She was mine then, and she's mine now.

She will *always* be mine.

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## Chapter Four

I won't bore you with the details of the hours that followed. Basically, I was raped. Repeatedly. In many positions. I felt like a fucking sex doll, not a human being. He only stopped when he was too exhausted to continue. I was barely conscious myself, my mind going in and out every time the pain or the emotions became too intense.

When he was done, he hauled me up and threw me over his shoulder. I felt his come seeping down my thighs as he carried me deeper into the dark house. He flipped a light switch and the harsh fluorescent glare stung my eyes. I squeezed my eyes shut, my limbs limp and lifeless. My hair hung in my face, but I didn't move to push it away.

I felt about as alive as a sex doll, let me tell you.

The shock of the night had not yet worn off. Eventually it would, but by then I had been through so much that nothing could shock me anymore.

I realized we were in a bathroom when he turned on the shower. To my credit, I did try to struggle against him. I was convinced he was going to drown me. When he set me down on my feet in the mint-green tub, I sharpened my nails into claws and went for his eyes. He shoved me back against the tile wall, like a horse would swat his tail at a fly.

He stepped in after me, and I curled into myself in the corner, wanting to be as small and as far away from him as possible. He clamped his hand on my arm and yanked me under the warm water. I jerked in shock as his hands began undoing my braid, his fingers running through and untangling my long locks.

Immediately, I had the urge to chop my hair off. I would gladly be bald for the rest of my life if it meant no man ever touched me again.

He softly washed my hair with a manly smelling shampoo while I stood stiffly beside him, my arms crossed over my breasts. I didn't want to look down and see the blood being washed away. I didn't want to know how much he made me bleed.

"What kind of shampoo do you use?" he asked, his lips uncomfortably close to my ear. "I like the way your hair smells. Like flowers and honey."

I didn't answer him. He didn't stop touching me, though. He lathered his hands up with a bar of soap and ran them all over my body. I gritted my

teeth to stop myself from hissing in fear when he slipped a palm between my thighs.

“We're done fighting for the night,” he said, as if that would make me relax. He pulled me toward the water, and washed the soap away. I stood stiffly under the shower, tears threatening to fall. I held them in by sheer force of will. I was done crying over him. He didn't deserve it, and I damn sure couldn't afford to feel sorry for myself. When he decided I was clean enough, he wrestled one of my arms away from my chest and shoved the bar of soap into my hand.

“Clean me up,” he demanded, turning his body toward mine. I forced myself to look at the ceiling. I thought I might vomit if I had to look at his body. He grabbed my chin and forced me to look him in the face. “If you want to use your tongue, be my guest,” he said, a small evil smile curving over his lips. I lathered the soap in my hands, swallowing hard. I reached out for him, my eyes shooting to the ceiling, but of course, that wasn't good enough.

“Look at me,” he growled. I jumped, my muscles tense. I'd learned to fear that animalistic tone of his. I forced myself to do what he said. My eyes locked on his mean, cruel mouth, then traveled upward to his flat, dead eyes. He had a mole beside his right eye. I told myself to memorize his features. For later. For the police report and sketch artist. My eyes continued downward, past his thick neck and sharp collarbones. His chest looked like it's been carved out of granite. He didn't have much fat on him, but he was bulky with muscle. His nipples were flat and brown. His cock was long, even when flaccid. Water dripped from the thick tip.

The temptation to punch him right in the balls swelled up in me.

Instead, I ran my soapy hands over his chest. I could have been a nurse giving an old man a sponge bath, it felt so clinical, but he was watching me. I could feel his heavy gaze on my face.

“Lower,” he said. I bit down hard on my lip and winced at the pain. I'd forgotten how sore my face was. I lowered my hands to his cock, as hesitant as if someone had asked me to touch a hot stove. He dropped his head back under the water, his chin jutting up to the ceiling. Quickly, I ran my hands down the soft length, then pulled away so fast I almost slipped and fell on my ass. “More.” His voice was gravelly, like cut glass.

“No,” I heard myself saying, like an idiot. He sighed lazily, rolling his head to look at me, as if he couldn't believe I was still attempting to deny my status. I was nothing, a sex doll to be used when he wanted me. He was going to teach me my place.

“Kneel,” he said. Immediately, I reached for him again, but his heavy hands dropped onto my shoulders, forcing me down. The time for a clinical sponge bath had passed. Drops of water hit me in the face as he pushed me to my knees. He slid his hands into my heavy, wet hair and guided my face toward his cock. My knees ached against the hard cast iron as I wavered on what I should do. I could bite his dick off, I reasoned, but he would definitely kill me then. I could grab his balls and twist, but I didn't want to know the consequences of that offense, either.

I licked my lips and he jutted his hips toward me. Leaning forward, I allowed my tongue to brush the skin of his cock. The muscles in his abdomen tightened, like he was in pain. I hoped, prayed, that his cock hurt as much as my body did, but I sincerely doubted it. I ran my tongue down his length, water pooling on my tongue as it ran in rivulets down his body. I had a fear of drowning, otherwise, it might not have been so bad.

The sad thing was, it wasn't the worst blow job I'd ever given. At least he was clean.

Since his penis was in my face, I studied it. It wasn't ugly or disgusting, actually. I noticed how the skin of his shaft was soft and silky and the crown was bulbous and a mottled pink. I memorized the maze of intricate blue veins beneath his skin. His dark pubic hair was coarse, but not completely unruly, like he'd trimmed just for me. If anybody ever asked me to identify his dick out of a lineup, I wanted to make sure I could.

After a moment's hesitation, I sucked the head between my lips, swirling my tongue around it, catching drops of water in my mouth. His cock was slowly stiffening, but was still spongy soft on my tongue. I ran my tongue up the underside, tracing the thick ridge there all the way to the tip, then sucked the whole length into my mouth again. It felt like I was doing some kind of science experiment without using my hands. It felt bizarrely asexual, despite having a man's cock in my mouth.

Unfortunately, this particular cock was connected to a real evil motherfucker, and while under his control, it was a tool of destruction. I got my wits back around me and abruptly released him, closing my mouth.

I realized I was making the assumption that if he wasn't hard, he wasn't dangerous. I flitted my eyes upward and caught his gaze. He was staring down at me, his hands still in my hair. But he wasn't pushing. He wasn't pulling. He wasn't being rough. He was just watching. I leaned forward licked him again, a small cat-like lick, right on the slit in the center of his crown. It tasted salty there, like his come.

I sat back on my haunches, waiting to see if he was going to be satisfied with the job I'd done. He was already well on his way to training me. He smoothed his hands around to my cheeks, slipping his thumbs between my lips. I couldn't resist—I bit down on his right thumb, hard, between my molars. He sucked in a sharp breath, but didn't remove his hands. His fingers caressed my cheeks as he ran his thumbs over my tongue. Water was splashing on my face and stinging my eyes, so, despite the danger, I closed them. My mouth was being explored by the crazy man who'd kidnapped me, but that was far from the worst thing that had happened to me that night, so I went with it. He was being gentle, so I didn't fight.

His calloused fingers were light but rough against the sides of my cheeks and the roof of my mouth. I shivered at the bizarre sensation. Why the hell was he touching the roof of my mouth? I opened my eyes when he removed his thumbs and slipped two fingers inside. He plunged them in slowly, and my tongue rose to meet them. His dick was still soft as he thrust his fingers in and out of my mouth. Without being told, I began to suck on them.

Now, I can't tell you why. Maybe I was trying to fuck with him. Maybe he was trying to fuck with me. I don't know. All I know is, I sucked on the man's fingers for a good five minutes as he plunged them harder and harder into my mouth. As I ran my tongue over their calloused tips, my nipples hardened. My hands circled his wrist as I licked and tasted him.

We had a moment. A bizarre moment, but a moment nonetheless.

Before I knew it, he pulled away. He turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, leaving me on my knees and embarrassed. If there was any more doubt as to who was in charge, he'd just given me a heads up. I was way down on the fucking totem pole. I pushed myself to standing, the muscles in my legs protesting. I wrapped one of his black towels around me, shivering despite the heat.

I was about to spend the night with my rapist. I wondered what he was going to do to me in an actual bed. I wondered how much more trauma would I be able to take? How much more pain? With a shudder, I realized I didn't have my birth control pills. I didn't even have a damn toothbrush or a comb. My hair was dripping down my legs, the water pooling on the tile floor beneath my feet. I bent at the waist, opening the cabinet below the sink.

And, as if the night couldn't get any worse, the man didn't own a hair dryer.

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After I prepped the bedroom for us, as quickly as I could, I made my way back to the bathroom. She hadn't tried to run; she stayed in the bathroom like a good girl. From the darkness of the hallway, I watched her drying off with my towel, her eyes on the ground, her long legs glittering with droplets of water. The memory of her hot mouth softly licking and sucking my sensitive cock did something to me. It twisted an invisible cord buried in my chest. It was strange, but the shift was already starting.

I wanted that night to be the beginning of something real good. She could be my girl forever, I reckoned—on her knees, on her back, on her stomach with her face in the dirt. However I wanted her, I could have her. She would fight me, but eventually, she would relent. I would *make* her relent. I could make her do anything.

Hot liquid warmth reared up in me. I basked in the glow of my strength. Of my prowess. Of my power. I'd never, ever felt so powerful in my whole life.

It was an addictive feeling.

I was so focused on what I could take from her, and the power that I could wield, that I didn't realize that she wasn't weak at all.

It never occurred to me that she could take something from me. Something that would force me to my knees and rip my guts out at the same time.

That night, I was blissfully unaware of the agony that was headed my way.



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I knew he was standing in the hallway, just out of my field of vision. I took as long as possible, drying off without actually unwrapping the towel from around myself. My hair was impossible, so I gave up on it. It was going to dry into mangled, matted curls, but that was the least of my problems.

It was hard, but I avoided my own eyes in the mirror. I didn't want to see what he'd done to me. My face ached and felt heavy in places, the bruises swelling under the skin. I desperately wanted to look between my legs, however, as if I would be able to see what exactly had been damaged and if it was repairable. But there was no way in hell I was going to do that with him watching me.

At least I wasn't bleeding anywhere. I took that as a good sign.

I jumped when he appeared in the doorway of the bathroom. I wondered if I was ever going to get used to the sight of his naked body. The perfection of him was fucking with my mind. Rapists were supposed to be disgusting, with bad teeth, beer guts, small dicks, and hairy backs. At least, that's how my innocent brain had pictured them. Men whose interior ugliness showed on their exterior flesh.

Again, I used to be so naïve.

The worst monsters are the ones that don't look like monsters, because they fool you into complacency with their beauty. While you're busy mooning over their six-pack or their dazzling baby blues, they sneak up behind you, hit you over the head with a club, and drag you back to their cave. It's been that way since the dawn of man. Since the age of the neanderthal. I know that, now.

Cornered like a bunny in a trap, I made myself look him dead in the face. I was scared, but I didn't cower. I'd already been raped, beaten, used up. I wouldn't allow myself to be broken. He blinked down at me, his arms above his head, gripping the doorframe. He was so big, I almost sobbed out loud. He had all the power in our dynamic and I was so weak. Hopelessness flooded my chest, even as I told myself I would never let him break me.

When he stepped closer to me, I instinctively took one step back. Making an impatient sound, he grabbed me roughly by the shoulders and whirled me around so that my back was to him. He yanked the towel from

my body, and even though I tried to hold on to it, it fell with a light thump at my feet.

I felt him running his hands through my hair, not-so-softly pulling the tangles out. I stood stiffly, my hands covering my breasts as he groomed me. The ends of my hair stopped just above my ass, and he didn't miss the opportunity to drop his palms to the soft skin. He hadn't yet abused me there, but I knew it was coming. How the hell I would prepare myself for that particular violation, I didn't know.

“Your hair is perfect,” he said, like I cared what he thought. He massaged my ass cheeks in earnest then, his nose pressed against the back of my head. When he slid his hands around my hips to my lower belly, I clenched my thighs tight. He chuckled against my scalp, splaying his palms over my womb. “You're perfect, Daisy.” I could feel his cock stirring against my ass, and I immediately took back every mildly good thing I had thought about his dick.

It was a nine inch devil, plain and simple.

His hands were roaming again, his fingernails dragging up my forearms. I held my breath, knowing what was coming. The man was insatiable. In a quick movement, he hooked his forearm around my neck and clenched his bicep, like he was going to choke me out. Then he dragged me out of the bathroom, down the long hallway, my heels scraping against the shag carpet, and into a dark bedroom. He threw me on top of a soft bed and crushed me beneath his heavy, damp body.

As he pinned my arms down under his knees and thrust his cock into my mouth, it dawned on me that I didn't know the crazy motherfucker's name.

After everything we'd been through, he hadn't even bothered to introduce himself.

## Chapter Five

I slept like the dead that night, surprisingly. When he wrapped his hateful self around me, I felt like there was no way I would be able to sleep. My jaw ached after he face-fucked me, my damp hair was twisted around my neck, and I was tied so tight, it was impossible to get comfortable. Despite all odds, his deep breathing lulled me to sleep and I fell into a dark pit of unconsciousness.

I used to look back and wish I had never woken up. I used to wish that he'd accidentally pulled the belt too tight around my neck and I'd slowly choked to death before morning. Then it never would have happened.

What happened that day changed everything. Even now, I don't understand why it happened. I know no one else will probably understand. It's my deepest secret, believe me.

Maybe it was self-preservation. Maybe it was Stockholm Syndrome. I'm not sure. I've never talked to my non-existent therapist about it.

Either way, there was no excuse for my behavior.

When I opened my eyes on that sunny Saturday morning, my body sagged and tears welled up. It hadn't been a bad dream. I truly was bound to a bed with a naked stranger next to me. My body ached all over, inside and out. My hands were numb and electric jolts of pain were shooting from my shoulders to my wrists. He'd bound my arms behind me with a leather belt, and looped another belt around my neck, effectively binding me to the headboard. The skin of my neck felt chafed and raw, and my muscles felt stiff and rusty.

I sniffled, forcing the tears back. He stirred beside me and I froze. With a deep, raspy breath, he sat up, his broad back to me. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed, not looking at me. He stood and stretched his arms over his head, muscles rippling all over the place. He walked around the edge of the bed, dropping his hand to caress my thigh. I held my breath as he leaned over me, my eyes feeling like they were going to bug out of my head, but all he did was undo the belt and free my neck.

Swiping the sleep out of his eyes, he guided me down the hallway to the bathroom. His cat, a white and black spotted calico, watched us impassively from the living room, licking a paw. He pushed me into the

bathroom, forced me down onto the toilet. I stared up at him as I peed, not bothering to be embarrassed. He hadn't unbound my hands though, which lead to an awkward moment when it came time to wipe. He assisted me, which was disgusting, but he didn't seem to mind. I wondered how many women's asses had he wiped in his lifetime to be so blasé about it?

After I finished, he urinated as well, scratching his abs lazily as I kept my eyes to the floor. After flushing, he walked me back to the bed. I fought him as he tried to loop the belt around my neck again, but, after he tweaked my nipple hard enough to burn, I lay still, chastised. When I was bound again, he crawled onto the bed beside me, settled his head on my chest, and went back to sleep.

The sun streamed through the faded floral fabric of the curtains, and I got a look around the bedroom. It was simply furnished, containing a dresser, a bed, two bedside tables, and one of those full length, hinged dressing mirrors that I'd always wanted as a kid, ever since I saw *The Little Mermaid*. My favorite scene was when the sea witch Ursula was disguised to ensnare the stupid prince. She changed form in front of the dressing mirror, revealing her true evil self. She was so deliciously devilish and smart. I never told anybody, but I wanted to be just like her when I grew up.

Silly, huh?

My eyes kept moving around the room and I wondered whose house we were in. It didn't seem like the evil man asleep on my chest really lived here. His clothes were tossed around, but other than that, it reminded more of my grandma's house than a place where a man lived. The furniture in the bedroom was all very old. Midcentury, I'd guess. And kind of... girly. All the pieces were painted white, with gold accents. Like a woman had picked out the matching set at Sears for her wedding registry in 1960 and kept them for the next fifty years.

I strained my neck, looking around for any clues as to where the house was located. A piece of junk mail with an address, or a paycheck stub, or a magazine—anything. But I came up empty. I sighed jaggedly, resting my head back against the pillow. I stared up at the ceiling, telling myself I would be able to look around later when he unbound me. Maybe I would be able to find a cellphone and hide it until I could use it.

I hadn't totally given up hope.

If things had been normal, I would have woken up in my apartment around noon, dined on cereal in front of the TV, then headed out to the farmer's market. I let myself get lost in the fantasy for a minute, thinking about riding my bike down to the park in the bright sunshine. I could almost feel the breeze on my face.

Then I thought about what would happen to my cute little apartment. My mother would probably trash all the brand new furniture I'd just paid off because the style wasn't to her taste. My clothes would be boxed up and given away. I wondered who would water my plants, now that I was gone? My mother had a black thumb, and they'd be dead in no time. The thought of their leaves, withering and brown, made me unbearably sad for some reason. Eventually I drifted off to sleep again, preferring the comforting nothingness of sleep to the nightmare of my reality.

This is when things irrevocably changed. I let the line blur. It was totally my fault.

He roused me from sleep with his head between my legs. I didn't have to open my eyes to know what he was doing. I felt his rough wet tongue sliding into me, his big hands on my thighs. I didn't move as he worked me over, licking me like he wanted to get me off. I jerked against him as he sucked my clit, tossing my head to the side. I kept my eyes closed, not wanting him to know I was awake. If he thought I was asleep, maybe he would get bored and leave me alone.

It felt good. Despite the fact that he was a monster and my body had no business responding to him, it felt *good*. After a night of pain at the worst of times and discomfort at the best of times, it felt damn near heavenly. He dragged his wet lips up the skin of my inner thighs and I stiffened, expecting him to bite me. But he didn't. He sucked on my soft flesh, then returned to my pussy, dipping his tongue into me. He was breathing hard, his big hands spreading my thighs wide, his fingers digging into my skin as he devoured me.

As long as I kept my eyes closed, I could pretend it wasn't affecting me.

He flicked his tongue against my clit, and I grit my teeth to keep from moaning aloud. My perception zeroed in on his thumb, massaging the flesh right beneath my ass. Every time he moved the calloused digit, a shiver passed over my exposed skin. He probably didn't realize he was even doing

it, but he was undoing me. There was no way he could know. The flesh on the back of my thighs had always been extremely sensitive. His jagged breaths tickled the skin and goosebumps broke out all over my body. It seemed unbelievable that an erogenous zone still existed on my body, after my ordeal. I wished I could shut off all sexual feelings, and not respond to him at all. He didn't deserve my pleasure, but my body wasn't cooperating.

Maybe another woman would have been stronger than I was.

He was still licking me, soft, then hard, then soft again with his rough tongue. I could feel myself dripping down to the sheet below me. I didn't know how much more I could take. I fisted the sheet beneath my ass, the binding around my wrists driving me crazy. I wanted to pull free and shove his face away from me. I wanted to run from the room. His mouth felt good, but the pleasure was a new kind of torture.

When he dragged his mouth away from my pussy and scored his teeth across the back of my thigh, my back arched and I hissed out a jagged moan, a sound between pleasure and frustration. I clawed at the sheet beneath my bound hands, needing something to ground me to reality. I almost came, and my pussy clenched, craving more attention. I immediately regretted losing control.

A wave of pure, blood-red hatred hit me. I hated this evil motherfucker. Not only had he taken everything he wanted from my body, suddenly, he was fucking with my mind too. I dug my heels into the mattress, resolving to steel myself against him. His eyes were on my face now, and they looked wilder than I'd ever seen them. I was used to them being flat and unemotional. Now, his green eyes practically danced. He looked... excited.

Shit.

I turned my head, forcing my eyes to the opposite wall. I felt him crawling up my body, dragging his wet hot tongue over the ridge of my hip. I jumped as he sunk his teeth into the soft skin of my lower belly, but he didn't grip hard enough to break the skin. I blinked in relief, my eyes still on the ugly fabric of the curtains. I studied them, memorized the curve of the yellow flower petals on the pattern, wanting to busy my mind. Anything to stop my body from reacting to the feel of his tongue, which traced slow circles across my exposed, unprotected skin.

My hands were clenched so tight my fingernails were digging into my palms. My breathing was shallow, and a cold sweat broke out across my

chest. He dropped a hand to my thigh, and I sensed his calculated gaze on me. He ran his hand all over my thigh, watching my reaction. I kept my face blank, praying that he wouldn't find the spot. But I wouldn't be so lucky. He pinched the sensitive area below my ass and I gasped.

He chuckled and I cringed at his victory.

He lifted my leg and my knee brushed my chest. Then his hand returned to the spot, pinching and teasing as his mouth continued to roam up my front. My brain was on the verge of shutting down. My eyes drifted closed, desire slowly drowning me, but when I realized what was happening, I snapped them open. I wished he would slap me or punch me. He closed his mouth over my breast and I felt the air freeze in my lungs. I waited for the pain. I prayed for it.

Pain would destroy the lust. If he shed my blood, my body would remember what a monster he was. Pain was black and white. What he was doing to me existed in a gray area, and I hated the way he was making me feel. However, his mouth continued its seduction. His hand was drifting away from my thigh to my pussy. I was helpless to stop him as he began strumming my clit as his tongue flicked against my nipple. A rough moan forced its way out from between my lips. Again, I was on the edge of an orgasm that could destroy me. Just as I felt like I couldn't take any more, he reached behind me and unbuckled the belt that held my hands.

My mind came back to life. As soon as my arms were free, I began to struggle. I pressed the heels of my palms against his shoulders and shoved him hard. His mouth released my breast, the skin puckered and swollen from his attention. Like a rabbit, I tried to dart away. I pushed off the mattress with my heel and slid upward toward the headboard. He grabbed me though, pulling me back beneath him. His body was as immovable as always, and he caged me in with his hands on either side of my face. His face hovered above me, his lips inches from mine.

"I'm gonna make you come," he said simply. I shook my head no, hoping to earn a smack for my rebelliousness. He raised an eyebrow, but no smack came. He ran his thumbs over my lips and my eyes dropped to his mouth, waiting. Waiting for whatever horrible thing he was going to do. I could feel his erection like a hot iron against my stomach. "Daisy," he said, so low that I wondered if his voice was in my mind, somehow.

I closed my eyes as he dipped his thumb and his tongue into my mouth. The kiss was messy, his thumb hooked in the side of my mouth, holding it open. A drop of saliva escaped, rolling down my chin, as he sucked on my tongue. I squirming beneath him, my hips bucking ever so slightly under his weight. His big cock was heavy against my thigh. A traitorous feeling was welling up in me, like I was empty and needed filling. My hands dug into the skin stretched over his ribs, on either side. I could feel his heartbeat, pounding.

I glanced over to the full-length mirror, and I saw our reflection. I saw his big erection against my thigh. I saw the muscles under his skin moving as he positioned himself above me. We looked like any lovers would, except that were weren't. He followed my eyes to the mirror and let out a low breath.

"Watch me," he growled. He dropped his other hand between us, adjusting himself to enter me. I'd almost forgotten the damage he'd done to me the night before. Almost. As he pushed into me, my eyes flew open, a whimper escaping from my throat. I watched the head of his cock disappear inside of me and I couldn't stop myself.

"Oh God," I whispered, like there was a such a thing as a god up in heaven watching out for me. My whole body went rigid.

"Shh," he murmured as his thumb, wet from my mouth, traced my lower lip.

He was being so gentle. Bizarrely gentle. He pushed deeper, and my body gave no resistance. No pain came. It was disconcerting to say the least. I watched my body swallow his big cock, every inch. I sucked in air as I suppressed a moan at the sight. He took my chin in his fingers, forcing my eyes back on him.

"We look good together, baby," he said. "Don't we?" He dipped his head to kiss me again and I didn't move away. I let him.

I let him have sex with me.

I didn't fight anymore. In fact, I moved with him. I rocked my hips, letting his cock slide deeper inside. He kept up a slow, languid rhythm that didn't bring me any pain. It was a lazy fuck, perfect for a sunny Saturday afternoon. The kind of fuck I might have hoped for if I'd actually found someone to take home the night before, instead of being raped and abducted.



Too bad it was completely and undeniably perverted.

The friction between us began to build, and it felt so wrong, but so good. I dropped my hands to his ass, feeling the hard muscles there flexing as he rolled his hips. He tugged at my lower lip with his mouth, stretching my flesh. Something about the small movement, tinged with the reality of his power over me, sent a surge of lust through me. He grunted as I jerked my hips against his, his eyes on mine.

“Let me feel you, baby,” he whispered, then kissed me again with his cruel mouth and his evil tongue. He had me, completely and totally. I was his captive, his sex doll, his slave. But as he slowly fucked me on that Saturday afternoon, his tongue caressing mine, it felt like he was making love to me. I'm not an idiot—I know what love is and that ain't it.

It just *felt* like it.

He quickened his pace. Our moans intermingled in my ears. My skin stretched tight over my bones. My toes curled. I tried to resist, I really did. I fought until I couldn't fight anymore. The tension was ready to destroy me. And it did.

I came with a ragged cry, my body squeezing around his cock like a fist.

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Joan doesn't believe me, but that's the moment I fell in love with her. Years later, I can still remember her face so crystal clear in my mind. She was looking right at me, her bedroom eyes heavy, my tan leather belt still looped around her neck. She was stiff beneath me at first, but then her luscious body softened. She held me. She kissed me as we fucked each other. She let me give her an orgasm, her pussy clenching around my cock like a vice.

I didn't expect how much she would affect me.

I like sex, the rougher the better. That's no secret. I've always craved the dirty shit, the depraved shit, the shit polite society frowns upon. But I'm still a human being, deep down. I can get attached to other people. I had friends and a little bit of family, people who cared about me. Well, I used to have people, anyway. She's all I have now.

I may be a man who likes sex, but I *love* fucking her. I love licking her pussy. I love biting and sucking her tits. I love the way she looks at me with her big brown eyes. I love the way she smells. The way she tastes. The way she breathes.

I love all of the mysteries of her body and her mind.

That Saturday afternoon, the first time we made love, she shuddered beneath me as she came, her thighs tight around my hips. My cock was begging for release, but I didn't want to rush it. Her lips were swollen and pink, and I kissed her again, the messy way our tongues tangled together driving me wild. I liked how we were messy together. The sex wasn't clean. It wasn't perfect. It was raw and real.

I pumped into her, not too hard but not too soft, and I could feel her cream gushing around me. She moaned into my mouth, her hands running up my sides. I swung my arms back, capturing her wrists. I brought her arms up and wrapped them around my neck. She still didn't fight me. She was soft and pliant and I liked the way she felt, wrapped around me. I liked how her tits were smashed against my chest, and I liked the way our sweat mingled together as we fucked.

I dragged my mouth down her chin, the taste of her salty skin on my tongue. I slid my cock deeper inside of her, the pleasure so fucking intense I almost couldn't take it. She made little moaning sounds in her throat, like she was in pain. I flicked my eyes to her face, making sure she was still with me. She was biting on her lip, her eyes glazed.

"Did you like that, baby?" I asked, rolling my hips and gritting my teeth as the sensation traveled up my spine. I could take all the pleasure I wanted from her body, but her pleasure was a more intangible thing. I'd hurt her, there was no denying it. I would hurt her again. But she'd let me give her pleasure, too. I wanted to be the only man who could give her pleasure. Possessiveness, ugly and harsh, reared up in me again as my gaze raked over her beautiful face. "Say you like it," I whispered, needing to hear her say it.

She moaned in response, lifting her head to look at the place where our bodies joined, where my cock slid in and out of her. I followed her gaze, and was treated to the sexiest sight in the world. I shuddered, watching as her pussy swallowed me, devoured me. She dropped her head back, eyes

drooping closed and I captured her lips again and kissed her hard and deep. She trembled against me, her arms tightening around my neck.

“Say it,” I demanded softly. “Tell me how good it feels.”

“It...” she trailed off, and I dropped a hand to her thigh, finding that sensitive spot she'd revealed to me earlier. Her eyes widened beautifully and her pussy clenched around me and I felt a burning heat well up inside of my chest. My balls tightened. My dick swelled. I was ready, I just needed her words. “Fuck! It feels so good,” she cried, throwing her head to the side, her words cutting through me like a knife. I bucked into her one last time, my body finally giving out.

I fell in love with her as I exploded inside of her.

She was mine, but I was also hers.

We belonged to each other.

Afterwards, as we lay tangled together, sweaty and breathing heavy, on top of the sheets, she asked me what my name was.

“Elliot,” I said. It didn't occur to me to lie.

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## Chapter Six

Saturday bled into Sunday. Those days are blurry in my mind, for whatever reason, probably repression. I remember we slept a lot, his big body wrapped around mine. When he woke up, I woke up. When he wanted to fuck, we fucked. When he was hungry, we ate. When he had to pee, we pissed. We were attached at the hip.

He knotted a long length of old twine rope around my neck, but didn't bother re-binding my hands. When it suited him, he yanked on his homemade leash, pulling me against him, sometimes gently, sometimes roughly. He could switch from gentle to rough in the blink of an eye, but I started to learn the signs. If his breathing slowed in his chest, and his cruel mouth ticked at the corner, he was usually about to get mean. It was a subtle change, but by Sunday night, I was in tune with him. I could sense his mood

In the middle of dinner, I was kneeling at his feet, my leash wrapped around his forearm. He was feeding me some meat, I think it was chicken, his greasy fingers dipping into my mouth. I know I was licking at him, my eyes trained on his. I knew how quickly a caress could turn to a smack, but I was relatively relaxed. My body still ached, but I was used to the ever-present throbbing pain. At least I was healing. And sometimes, he made me feel good enough to forget.

I had lulled him into a sort of comfortable companionship. Maybe he lulled me as well, but I hadn't given up, even if I had stopped fighting him overtly. It was better for me in all ways if I didn't fight. It could be... pleasurable if I didn't. Sometimes he would focus on getting me off, and he was learning, too. What I liked. How to touch me so that I would moan and writhe against him.

With every fiber of my being, I hated him.

*Elliot.* I let the word echo in my brain, reminding myself that the devil had a name.

But the more I sucked on his fingers, the tighter my muscles clenched and my spine straightened. I was letting myself go again, to the inevitable. I kept my hands on the floor beside my hips, obediently, the position forcing my breasts to stand at attention. He pulled his arm back, tearing more

chicken off of the bone on his plate. He lifted the meat to his own lips, chewing slowly. I watched him, swallowing hard. We were caught up in some kind of seductive dance. Both of us had done more fucking than talking in those two days. Sex and violence were heavy in the air. It was inescapable. It was all around me, threatening to smother me.

I almost missed the signs. His mouth ticked and I barely had time to steel myself. He stood abruptly, the table quaking, the ceramic plate clattering. The leash cinched around my neck shockingly fast. My hands immediately flew to my neck but the rope was already digging into my skin. He yanked at the tether holding us together, and I fell forward, my air flow completely cut off. I clawed at my neck as my eyes bulged. Blood thundered in my ears. Finally, after what seemed like forever, he closed a hand around my neck and raised me up, until my toes barely brushed the carpet. Then he threw me across the top of the table, stomach down.

I took in a deep gasp of air, and it cut through my injured throat like a knife. I coughed, my vision darkening. He ran his calloused fingertips down my spine, into the cleft of my ass. I gulped in air, but I didn't move. I didn't fight him. He continued exploring, running his hands down the curve of my ass to the back of my thighs and lower. He lifted my left foot off the floor and pressed a kiss to the arch.

A foreboding shiver ran down my back.

He wrapped the length of rope around my ankle, bowing my body and forcing my head upwards. If I dropped my foot or my head an inch, I would slowly strangle myself. My fingernails dug into the wood of the well-worn tabletop, panic rearing up in me. Somehow, I don't think his mother or grandmother envisioned Elliot tying up a girl and raping her on their formal dining table when they served the Thanksgiving turkey or the Easter ham.

I took a deep breath, pressing my palms to the cool, hard wood. I told myself to relax as much as I possibly could. It would be better that way. He leaned over me, one hand gripping my hip, the other hooked over my shoulder as he pushed deep. I was ready for him, but he still took my breath away. The gentle imposter was gone. In his place was the true Elliot, the monster that I had met on Friday night. He drove in and out, his invading cock callous and relentless.

I cried out as he slapped my ass, the sound reverberating through the room. My throat felt shredded, and tears welled up in my eyes. I craned my

head so that he could see that he was hurting me. He liked to see my pain. It turned him on. I blinked, letting a drop cascade down my cheek. He hissed in a sharp breath, and growled out my name. Well, the name he thought was mine.

“Open that mouth again, Daisy baby. Scream for me,” he gritted out, his muscles tight, his neck sinewy. He slapped my ass again, and I was pretty sure I was going to have a purple bruise in the shape of his hand on me for days. I awarded him with a jagged, hoarse scream and a few more tears and he came, his body jerking as he filled me up.

I realized I had been holding my breath, and I let it out in a whoosh. He leaned forward on to me, his sweat-damp chest pressing against my back. With a bone deep sigh, he unravelled the rope from my foot and let it drop. Relieved, I pressed my cheek to the tabletop as he sagged his weight onto me. He pressed his face into my hair and his hand found mine, closing around it. I stared off into the living room, feeling his come seeping down my thighs although his cock was still inside of me.

“Fuck,” he whispered, his breath tickling across my skin. A few minutes passed, and I wondered if he'd fallen asleep on top of me. I let my eyes drift around the living room. Like in the bedroom, the room was full of midcentury furniture—a low slung couch and Naugahyde easy chairs. Stained and faded green shag carpeting stretched wall-to-wall. A new flat screen TV was planted on top of an ancient floor model. His and my clothes from Friday were still flung on the floor, my cowboy boots and his steel-toes tipped on their sides in the middle of the floor. His jeans were crumbled beside them, and I stared at them blindly for a few moments until it slowly dawned on me what I was seeing.

My heart stopped in my chest.

His keys were in the pocket of his jeans.

*His keys.*

I bit down hard on my lip to keep a giddy yelp from escaping. I had a chance. It was a small, unlikely chance, but I was going to fucking take it. I closed my eyes as a wave of relief washed over me. My ordeal might soon be over. If I was smart. He stirred on top of me, and my breath caught. He propped himself up on his elbows and pressed a kiss to my shoulder.

“You still hungry, baby?” he asked, his voice drowsy. I shook my head no and he levered himself off of me. We both grunted as his still-hard cock

slid out of me, tender after the ride he'd subjected me to. I rolled over onto my side and snuck a look at him. He wasn't paying any attention to my miraculous discovery. He was looking at me, his eyes raking over my exposed body. I lay there, still and silent, trying not to draw attention to the excited blood pumping through my veins.

"Don't move," he said, then turned and walked to the kitchen. He didn't let go of the leash though, the rope stretching between us, connecting us through space. He returned with a wet paper towel and he wiped me clean, softly, between my legs. I watched him, the cool wet towel soothing my enflamed flesh. I resisted the urge to shiver and sigh at his soft touch. I wasn't fooled by him, but it did feel good to be taken care of.

He wrapped his hand around the leash, beckoning me to him gently this time. I sat up and slid my throbbing bottom across the cool wood and off the table. He stepped close, pressing his forehead against mine and looking into my eyes. I'm not going to lie - the intensity that burned in his gaze scared me. Long gone was the flat, unaffected expression he'd had the first time he'd pressed his body to mine at The Blue Mermaid. It seemed like a lifetime ago, but it had only been days. Back then, I was merely a means to an end, a way to scratch an annoying itch. Now his eyes held a slightly manic light, and I could practically hear the thoughts whirling around in his crazy brain.

He wanted to keep me forever.

He thought I was *his*.

I, however, had no intentions of being his special pet. He could pat me on the head a million times, but he only had to snap one time and I'd be dead. It would only be a matter of time before he killed me. I already knew how it would probably happen, too – he'd fly into a rage over some little thing, or the urge would simply come over him, and he would strangle the life right out of me. He was the type who could kill with his bare hands and not think twice about it. Maybe he'd shed a tear or two over me, but I doubted it. Then I would be buried in the back yard, next to Fluffy.

No fucking way was I going to let that happen.

I had to take my chance.

I took his hand in mine, sliding my fingers between his. He hissed in a sharp breath, as if surprised that I was touching him of my own volition.

“Can we watch TV?” I asked softly, as if I was scared to speak. Immediately, he was suspicious.

“Why?”

I shrugged, innocently. He worked his jaw, as if he was trying to figure out what I was up to.

“Kiss me,” he demanded. I took a shaky breath, and slid my arms over his neck, like I knew he liked. I let them sag a little until he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me close. “Tighter,” he whispered. I obliged him, clenching my arms tight until our lips were almost touching. I darted out my tongue, flicking it against his lips. “Fucking kiss me,” he growled, and I knew I was pushing my luck. I stood up on my tiptoes and let my lips brush his. Barely. I wanted to leave him begging for more.

My plan worked. He dropped his hands to my ass and hauled me up against his chest. He carried me to the couch and sat, forcing me to straddle him. His cock was already stirring between us. He wasn't done with me for the night, but I was counting on that. I had to fuck him so good that I'd knock him out cold, long enough for me to get away. Seduction was my mission if I chose to accept it, and believe me, I accepted it.

He pulled on the leash, bringing my face close to his once more. He sucked my lower lip and I moaned. What was it about that that made my thighs clench? I hated that he knew what buttons to push on me. After two days, he had explored every inch of my body from the soles of my feet to the roof of my mouth. Like any man, he liked my breasts and my ass and my pussy, but he was more possessive than normal. He hadn't ignored any patch of my skin. He'd licked and sucked all of me, claimed all of me for his own.

I pushed up on my knees, repositioning myself directly over his erection. Then I pulled him close and kissed the shit out of him. I dipped my tongue between his lips and fucked him with it. He massaged the magic spots at the back of my thighs, right under my ass, and I moaned into him. We moved together, turning each other on with our mouths and our hands. I switched off my brain, not wanting to feel any shame or embarrassment. I was fucking for survival, and I was going to make it count.

I dropped a hand between us and began stroking him, running my palm over his slick crown. He bucked into my touch, sweeping his hands up my back. I arched into his touch, my nipples hardening. When he was rock



hard, I slid down his body and took him gently into my mouth. I acted unsure at first, licking slow and not sucking too hard or deep. I didn't want to arouse suspicion by being too enthusiastic. He bucked his hips, and I knew he wanted more. He tasted salty on my tongue and I closed my eyes, running my tongue down his length.

"Suck me, baby," he said, his voice hoarse and strained.

I dipped my head, taking him deeper. I waited for him to grab my head and force himself down my throat, but he didn't. Instead his fingers ran through my hair, softly, brushing it away from my face so that he could watch me. As a reward, I released him from my mouth and focused on his balls, sucking the soft skin in between my lips. I stroked his iron-hard cock with my hand while I worked his balls with my tongue. He was making pained noises, and I kept at it, wanting him mad with lust.

"Fuck," he whispered, his fingers fisting in my hair. "Look at me, baby." I ignored him, sucking on the soft, sensitive skin as his grip tightened on me. I knew he was going over the edge. "Goddammit, look at me!" he said, his voice strained.

My lips felt bee-stung and swollen as I came up for air. I dragged my eyes up to his face, a flutter of something like excitement in my stomach. His eyes were flashing with that manic light again. His erection was flush against his stomach, practically throbbing with his arousal. He was ready. I knew he wanted me.

He would always want me.

He wound the leash around his hand, pulling it taut, and I knew it was time. I stood slowly, keeping a bit of distance from him, as much as the tight leash would allow. He was breathing hard, his chest heaving. He raised his free hand, stroking me from my knee to my inner thigh. I felt the goosebumps rise on my skin at his touch. I felt powerful in my ability to drive him mad with lust, even as he had me at his complete command.

"I want you fucking dripping for me," he hissed, sliding his fingers into me. I rolled my hips against him as his thumb found my clit. I was still wet from the sex on the table, but it wasn't enough. He ran his tongue over his lips and I realized I wanted him to put his mouth on me.

"Lick me there," I said, my voice stronger than I intended. His eyes darkened and I immediately cursed myself, afraid I had ruined the hold I

had over him. It had to be his choice. It was all about him. His pleasure was paramount, if I was going to get what I wanted.

“Come here,” he demanded and pulled me to him, his fingers buried inside of me. I gasped and my nipples hardened painfully at the sensation. I fell into him and he caught me, wrapping his arms around my thighs and pressing his face into my stomach. I braced my hands on his shoulders as he leaned forward, burying his mouth in my pussy. I squeezed my eyes closed and bit down hard on my lip so I didn't scream. How had he learned how to do it, I wondered. How had he learned to lick and suck me and make me want to come? It was unfair how he'd bent my body to his will. He caught me off guard again, roughly lifting my knee onto his shoulder. I fell forward again, my hair brushing the skin of his back as he clamped his hands on my hips, steadying me as his tongue dipped inside and his lips sucked on me. I dropped my chin to my chest, my hair hanging in my face as I tried to hold on. I could feel my mouth gaping open as he attacked my clit with his evil tongue.

Fuck, it felt good.

It also felt disgusting, dirty, and illegal all at the same time. The urge to scream welled up in my throat, but I didn't.

“Elliot, it feels so good,” I bit out instead. Forcing my mind to go blank, I ground my hips into his face. His fingers dug into me, bruising skin, but I didn't care. He growled out something incoherent, his mouth vibrating against me. Then the world tilted on its axis as he yanked me back down onto his lap. He shoved a hand through my hair, getting it out of my face as he bucked his hips, impatiently. I hinged myself up, fisting his cock as I pressed it against my slick opening. We were both scrabbling, in a lust filled rush. His arms encircled me, pulling me close as I slammed myself down, impaling myself on him.

I threw my head back as he slid inside, my body protesting the intrusion at first, but then stretching to fit him, as always. I lifted up on my knees, controlling how fast and how deep he went. It felt so different when I was on top of him. Like I was actually in control. He buried his face in my neck, sucking and biting down lightly on the skin. I gritted my teeth as I rode him, sparks rippling under my skin every time my nipples brushed against his chest.

“Say my name again, baby,” he said, his lips moving against my skin. “God, fucking say it again.”

“Elliot,” I whispered, drawing out the syllables for miles.

“Yes,” he hissed, as I rocked my hips against his, my body melting like butter around him. “Tell me you love my big cock,” he said, his stubble raking across my sensitive collarbone. My whole body was sensitive and tingling. I swallowed thickly, remembering the feel of him in my mouth, the taste of him.

“I love your big cock,” I said, reminding myself that I didn't mean it, even as the words passed my lips. I shook away the conflicting feelings beneath my skin, wanting to be rid of them. I just wanted him to explode into a million pieces. I wanted him to pour all of his anger and craziness into me. I needed to be strong if I was going to get free. I needed to be strong and save myself, because no one else was going to do it for me.

I looked into his eyes as I fucked him, feeling something shift between us again. His eyes were glazed, his lips parted as I used my body against him. I wanted him to think I loved him. I wanted him to think I would never leave. I wanted him lulled into a false sense of security. I threw my arms around his neck, pulling him closer. He dropped his hands to my ass, holding me down as he drove into me, again and again. His moans filled my ears and, with all of me, I wanted him to come. If he took me with him, then so be it. I moved with him, drawing his pleasure out of him like an exorcism. My own orgasm snuck up on me, blossoming slowly as he worked his lips and teeth against my throat. I threw my head back as I lost control, but I didn't let myself feel guilty. That night, I was willing to be collateral damage, if it meant I would have a chance for a better tomorrow.

## Chapter Seven

He came hard into me, seconds after he rubbed my clit until I imploded again, grinding against him like my life depended on it. Shaking, a manic feeling shimmering under my skin, I collapsed into him, and he cradled me against his chest, laying me softly on my side on the couch.

I closed my eyes and forced my breathing to even out as he fell into a deep, sex-satiated slumber. My heart was going triple time, but I pressed my hand to my chest, willing it to slow. I didn't want him to feel it beating. I didn't want to give away how nervous and scared I really felt.

Hours passed, the TV bathing the living room in a flickering blue glow. He lay beside on the couch, his chest to my back, his arm flung over my hip and his leg tossed over mine. I was sweating and shaking, but I was ready to do whatever I had to do. His breathing had been steady for a long time. He was snoring softly, and I hoped he was as deep of a sleeper as I needed him to be. Too bad he wasn't a drunk, then he would have been dead to the world.

Biting down on my lip, I scooted closer to the edge of the couch. Then I froze, waiting for any reaction from him. Nothing. Again, I moved another inch closer to the edge. He let out a sigh, but didn't wake. I hooked a leg over the couch, putting my foot on the floor. My heart was in my throat, but he didn't stir. Finally, I slid out from under his heavy limbs and lowered myself soundlessly onto the soft carpet. The couch frame groaned slightly at the pressure and again I froze, the sound loud as hell in my super sensitive ears. I sat there for a full minute, so scared I couldn't move. Then I forced myself to scoot back on my ass toward his jeans.

The leash pulled taut against my neck, and I realized I was still tethered to him. He had the rope wrapped around his hand. My fingers found the knot at my throat. It was a complicated knot that he'd probably learned in the navy or the boy scouts or something. *Shit*. I felt panic rising in my chest. Telling myself to calm down, I began to work at the knot. My nails were ragged and broken, but there was still enough length on them for me to get a good hold. After a few moments that felt like hours, the smaller part of the knot came free. The bigger part was easier, and I almost couldn't believe it when the rope dropped into my lap.

Gnawing at my lip, I slid back on my ass until I reached his jeans. I kept my eyes on him as I wrapped the jeans into a ball, not wanting the jangling of the keys to wake him. I found his shirt a few feet away and grabbed that too, along with my boots. I scooted toward the kitchen, keeping my eyes on him. His naked body was pale in the light, stretched out as he slept. But sleep didn't make him any less dangerous.

He was a dragon and I knew he'd be deadly if roused.

When I reached the kitchen, I pulled myself to standing, slowly, soundlessly. I backed up toward the door, sliding his black shirt over my head. It smelled like him, but I ignored that. I turned toward the door and nearly jump a foot. I clenched my arms just in time, barely preventing my boots and his jeans crashing to the floor. Elliot's cat was sitting in the corner of the kitchen, silver eyes staring up at me. I let out of a puff of air, wishing I could strangle the little jerk. The cat had almost ruined everything.

Muffling the sound of the keys in the balled up jeans, I extracted them from his pocket. Luckily for me, he wasn't one of those types that carried around a million keys, half of which didn't even unlock anything. He had two fobs for his truck, and three keys that looked like house keys. I tried the first, sliding it into the deadbolt, my fingers shaking so bad I was positive he would be able to hear me. The lock didn't turn. Steeling myself against the disappointment, I tried again with the next key.

The lock clicking open was the sweetest sound I'd ever heard. I swallowed my sigh of relief and moved on to the lock on the cheap knob. It was a simple turning lock, and within minutes, I cracked the wood door open and slipped into the dark garage. I pulled it up lightly behind me, not wanting to risk making noise by shutting it completely. Butterflies attacked my insides as I slipped my boots on, one by one.

I only had one chance. I knew I'd probably only get about two minutes head start. I lifted a shaking hand and let it hover over the garage door opener. Once I pressed that it, I knew he'd hear the rumbling and screeching of the mechanism. He would wake up and I'd have to run like I'd never run before. There was no other option.

I took a deep breath. I was as ready as I'd ever be.

I slammed my finger down on the button.

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The air was cool as I took off down the dark road. My boots pounded the pavement as I ran down the center of the street, my hair streaming behind me. Houses dotted his street, and a few porch lights were on, but I didn't stop. I just wanted to get the hell out of there, get as far away from him as I could. I knew I didn't have much time.

At the end of the street, I slowed, deciding which way to go. There were no cars on the road and I made a left, running back the way I assumed we'd come. I wasn't totally sure where I was, although I was pretty sure I was on the outskirts of Austin. He hadn't taken me that far. I ran along the sidewalk, dipping in and out of the glare of the streetlights. I prayed for a car to drive by, but none came. I ran a few more blocks and then slowed to a walk to catch my breath, glancing behind me as I did. There was no one there.

I wondered if the garage door opening had woke him up or not. It sounded so loud to my ears that I thought the whole damn neighborhood must have heard it. I shook off the fear and told myself that I had to keep going. I couldn't worry about him. As far as I knew, he was still asleep on the couch. I pulled my hair off of my sweaty neck and tied it into a knot on top of my head. I didn't know what I was going to do, exactly. I didn't know where I was or how long it would take me to get home.

All I knew was that I was free.

It was at that moment that I remembered my purse was at The Blue Mermaid. I didn't have my cell phone or my keys or my wallet. I didn't know how I was going to get into my apartment once I got home. I didn't have time to cry, even though I wanted to. I just had to keep moving.

I was about a mile away when I felt him behind me. I don't know how to explain it other than a I could feel a shiver run up my spine. My stomach dropped and I forced myself to look over my shoulder. Sure enough, when I glanced back, I saw him. He was barefoot, in jeans, running down the center of the street. Fear froze time, and I had a strange vision of him as a high school football star, running for the touchdown and basking in the adoration of the crowd. It was Texas; every boy played football at one time or another. He had the body for it, that was for sure.

Strange, the thoughts that run through your mind when you're paralyzed with fear.

I took off, a scream escaping my lips and echoing across the quiet, dark landscape. I ran into the cornfield on my left, the dry stalks smacking me in the face. I felt the tears on my cheeks, but I didn't bother swiping them away. I tripped twice; both times I got back up and kept going, despite the bruises on my knees and the scrapes on my palms. I didn't know which way I went, I just kept going, swerving right and then left and then right again. When my throat was raw and I could hardly breath, I slowed to a stop and tried to listen. I knew he was coming for me, but I had hope. I hoped he wouldn't be able to find me in the tall stalks.

It was my one chance to get away. I was completely convinced that if he found me, I'd never get free again. I tried to be quiet and hold my breath, but it forced its way out of my lungs in jagged sobs. I was hyperventilating and I couldn't calm down.

Not when Elliot was coming for me.

A snapping sound had my senses on high-alert. Another snap, and I shot my eyes around me, looking for him. I spun around to run and catapulted myself straight into his arms. I screamed as he pulled me close to him, his bare chest slick with sweat. I fought against him, swinging my arms and kicking on our way down, but when my back hit the ground, the wind was knocked out of me. He was heavy on top of me and I could scarcely breathe.

"I got you, baby," he said, his voice rough in my ear. "I fucking got you," he repeated like he couldn't believe it. I could hear the anger at the back of his throat and sure enough, his fingers clamped around my neck and squeezed. I felt my eyes bulge out of my head, my hands scratching at his naked arms and drawing blood. "You think you can leave me?" he gritted out, the muscles in his chest straining as he strangled the life out of me. "You don't get to leave."

I whimpered, the fear of dying so palpable I could taste it on my tongue. I knew he was going to kill me, I just didn't realize how soon he would do it. I kept struggling because my body wouldn't stop, but I didn't really feel flesh hitting flesh. I felt like I was floating above my body, watching Elliot kill me. Our skin glowed white under the moonlight and the cornstalks walled us in, leaving no room for escape. It felt claustrophobic and terrifying.

“You're mine,” Elliot rasped, sounding unhinged. He was finally losing it, I realized. “You're fucking mine and I'm never letting you go. *Never.*” He squeezed hard to emphasize his point and my vision blacked out. The ringing in my ears went silent and I couldn't hear or see for what felt like hours. I was dying and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

Then he released my neck and I was back in my body in a flash, painfully retching up the little bit of food I'd had that night. He hovered over me, his hands roaming all over my body, as if checking if I was in one piece. I had no control over myself for a long while, I'm not sure how long. I could only curl into a ball and try to breathe.

He took my chin in his hand, roughly angling my face and forcing me to look at him. The tears clouded my vision and made it hard to see his face, but he softly wiped them away, like he hadn't just tried to kill me.

“You were planning this, weren't you?” he asked, his voice low. “It was all a lie, wasn't it?” I couldn't speak, so I didn't answer him. My silence angered him and he tossed me roughly over onto my back. I moaned in pain, arching into him. He angled himself between my legs, thrusting his hips into mine, reminding me that he was in charge. “Answer me!” he growled, lowering his face so low that his nose brushed mine.

“No,” I whisper, my voice hoarse and broken.

“That's fucking right,” he responded. “I know you liked it. I felt it.” He ran his lips across my cheek and I shuddered, anger and hatred boiling under my skin. “Your body doesn't lie to me, even when you do,” he said. “Does it?”

“No,” I forced the word out, my teeth clenched. I wanted to say whatever he wanted to hear. I wanted him to be happy with me, happy enough to let me live. I didn't know that a quick death might have been preferable to what the future held.

I didn't know a lot of things. I was swiftly learning, though.

With a low sadistic laugh, he hauled up my limp body and tossed me over his shoulder, like I weighed nothing. I didn't fight—my body was weak and my spirit was broken. My one chance, and I'd blown it. I was beaten and we both knew it. He'd broken me, just like he knew he would. He carried me down the dark street and all was quiet.

I must have passed out, because when I woke, I was in the garage and the air was heavy and hot. My hands were bound above my head and my



wrists ached. I still had my boots on and his shirt, I realized as I slowly got my senses back about me. My skin was stretched across my stomach and I could feel my shoulders were tight with tension. He'd strung me up like a *piñata*, my wrists tied with a stretch of rope that was thrown over a beam in the ceiling. He'd hung me so high my toes barely brushed the concrete. I had to stand on my tiptoes, my calf muscles screaming out in protest.

When I felt his hand ran down the curve of my exposed ass, my whole body stiffened. He was behind me, but I couldn't turn my head to look at him. Instead, I stared up at the ceiling beam, at the rope that was tightly pulled over the wood. I could hear it creak as I yanked hard on it, my wrists and shoulders crying out in pain.

"Let me go," I choke out. "Elliot, please." I knew my chicken was cooked, but I still couldn't give up. I had to believe that he had a soft spot for me, somewhere deep inside of him. He could have killed me in the field, but he didn't. I figured he probably just wanted to torture me some more, but again, I foolishly held out hope.

"You don't get it yet." He drew his hand under the shirt, across my hip and over my stomach. "This belongs to me," he murmured as he dipped two fingers down past my bellybutton and stopping just short of touching me where my traitorous body craved. Torturing me. "These legs belong to me," he said, forcing a knee between my legs and shoving them open. I bit down hard on my lip, feeling like I was being pulled apart at the seams again. He was good at that, stretching me to my breaking point and then stretching some more.

"These beautiful tits," he whispered and I gasped as he reached around me, his forearms brushing my nipples through the thin fabric. He ripped the shirt I was wearing, his shirt, open. The buttons flew this way and that, pinging across the floor and disappearing in the darkness. "Mine," He trailed his palm upwards to my throbbing neck, his fingers merely teasing the sore skin. "Even the oxygen you breathe belongs to me."

I moaned, the sound loud in the still air. He chuckled like the devil he truly was and stepped away from me. I heard the tell-tale sound of clothes rustling and I knew he was taking off his jeans. He dropped them to the floor and I shot my eyes back to the beam. I knew what was coming, or so I thought. I knew I could survive whatever he had in store for me.

So I thought.

He slid his evil hand between my thighs and I jumped. Sweat beaded on my forehead and my heart raced. I knew I should have been used to the way his hands felt on me, but I wasn't. I was scraped from head to toe from the corn field. My throat was bruised painfully. But my pussy still clenched when he touched me.

Then he drew his finger up the crack of my bottom and my eyes widened. I knew immediately what he was going to do and fear hit me right in the guts.

"I want every bit of you to be mine," he whispered and I shook my head.

*"Please, Elliot,"* I said through clenched, chattering teeth.

"Have you ever had another man here?" he asked, thrusting his finger inside me, slowly, stretching my tightness to fit him.

"No," I whispered, hoping he would have mercy on me. Again, I don't know why I still believed he would have mercy.

He pulled free of me and I gulped in air, wishing he would have just killed me. He'd already ripped me apart and ruined me. He'd already taken most of me and then some. And now he wanted more. He would never stop until he completely owned me. Every drop of blood. Every orgasm. Every gasp and every scream and every moan. He wanted it all.

I had no choice but to hang there and let him take it.

I felt cold wetness when he brought his finger back. Tears prickled my eyes but I didn't let them fall as he lubricated me and prepared me for his sinful desire. He was gentle, as always, until he ran out of patience. He fisted his hand in my hair, yanking my head back, as he angled his hard cock against me. The tears began to fall then. I was terrified of the unknown pain. As scared as I was, I was still unprepared.

His cock was slick as he thrust inside of me, the head of him stretching me wide. The pain was like a red streak through my brain. I screamed, my mouth open even after the sound was gone. My throat felt like it had been ripped out and I couldn't scream anymore, even as he plunged deeper inside me. My body fought his intrusion, but he was stronger. Lifting my thigh and hooking his arm around me, he found another angle and thrust his full length inside of me.

A strangled, wounded sound emanated from my throat, but no screams would come. My tears quickly dried as well. My face felt frozen in a silent

scream as he drove into me, slow at first but gaining speed. His low moans echoed in my ears, the sounds getting wilder with each passing second.

The pain seared me like a hot brand. He was branding me, I realized, leaving a mark on me that I would never forget. He tightened his hand in my hair, his teeth scoring my neck and biting my earlobe. His other hand roamed up my front, pinching my nipples and making me squirm and writhe against my binds. My mind began to stutter like a broken record, and I knew I was losing it. Every thrust was like a shock of electricity to my body. It was like I was getting shock therapy as I was going mad. I almost wanted to laugh.

“You were put on this earth for me,” he said roughly in my ear. “You belonged to me the moment you were born.” He reeled back and then slowly thrust deep again. My body accepted his intrusion, stretching around him. My eyes bulged as he filled me so completely. I had never felt—never dreamt of feeling—the way he was making me feel. I felt helpless, used, broken, destroyed. He was destroying me from the inside with every swerve of his hips and every thrust. It felt like his body was joined with mine, like I was no longer a single person. He had forced himself inside of me, all the way to the root of me.

He hadn't left a part of me untouched.

I was starting to believe him. He was drilling it into me, over and over. In the dark heat, my mind was slowly losing all sense of reality and it was becoming harder and harder to deny.

I was becoming his, whether I wanted to be or not.

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Somehow, I sensed she was gone. I don't know how, but even in the depths of sleep, I was searching for her and couldn't find her. When I woke up and she wasn't there, the rage was hard to describe. It welled up in me, hot and black and boiling. It flowed out of me like an unstoppable tide. It took me two seconds to realize what she'd done. The rope leash I'd fashioned for her was abandoned on the floor. Her cute little boots were gone, and the house was still and silent.

She fucked me like she loved me and then she left me.

I'll admit I almost strangled her to death. When I had my hands around her neck, I wasn't thinking clearly. I was overcome with the rage. And, if I'm completely honest, I was afraid. Running down the street in the middle of the night looking for her, I was terrified. Terrified that I would never see her again.

But fate was on my side.

Bound with her hands above her head and her cute little boots on, she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. She was wearing my shirt and seeing her covered in something of mine sent sparks of electricity, prickly and hot, down my spine. I stared at her for a long time, wondering how I was going to punish her for running. She was bruised and bloodied, but her eyes still flashed with life. She still wanted to fight me.

I loved that about her.

I knew I had to show her that she could fight me, but I would always win. I had to show her that she truly belonged to me, in every way. I wanted to claim her for myself, completely and undeniably.

I knew exactly what I wanted to do.

She was scared. I could smell it in the air, along with her sweat and her arousal. I buried my face in her neck, sucking in the scent of her like a junkie. If I wasn't careful, I was going to lose myself completely in her. It was almost impossible not to lose myself in how good she felt and how good she tasted and how good she smelled. After two days, I didn't want to be without her. The girl was everything to me. I knew it then, and I know it now.

I was totally and completely fucked over her.

Without any hesitation, I buried myself in her, forcing myself inside. I watched as her beautiful ass swallowed every inch of me. She took everything I had to give, her body molding around me, her tight walls squeezing and crushing my cock until I felt like I was going to die.

She felt like heaven.

How the hell did she think I would let her leave me?

No fucking way. No fucking way will I ever give her up.

Her ass was just as good as her pussy and I fucked her hard and fast like she deserved. Like we both deserved. When I thrust every inch of me into her and rolled my hips, she screamed again. Not with her mouth. With her mind. I heard it in my ears as if she had screamed aloud. I took all of

her pain and her want and need into myself and I couldn't take it. My cock exploded and I growled like an animal, hugging her to my chest and pressing my face to her hair. She let out a strangled whimper and I pumped into her once more, letting her tight body milk me completely. I rode the wave of the orgasm, my teeth on edge and my muscles tight, and I couldn't stop until I reached the shore.

As I shuddered and quaked, she went limp, dropping her chin to her chest. Finally, wanting to see her eyes, I slowly disentangled myself from her. I moaned as she released me, missing her tight warmth immediately. Her breathing was heavy and deep, matching my own. She didn't look at me, but I could hear what she was thinking. The sex was better than good- it was life changing. Life altering. As my come dripped down her thighs, she knew that she wasn't going anywhere. She knew that she was mine. She had no choice. There was no alternative.

I stepped around to face her, but she wouldn't look at me. She shivered as I lifted my hand to smooth her sweaty hair out of her face. She was still scared, but not of me. Scared of our connection. Scared of how close we were. I ran my hands up her ribs, feeling her lungs expand under my touch. I could feel her heart pounding as well, like it was in my own chest. I dipped my head to kiss her, forcing my mouth over hers. She tried to pull away, but I wouldn't let her. No, she didn't get to refuse me anymore. I sucked her bottom lip, like I knew she liked, and she shuddered again, goosebumps breaking out on her soft skin.

Lifting my hands, I untied her binds quickly. She sagged into me, her legs buckling and her arms draping around my shoulders. I lowered her slowly to the cold concrete ground, holding her to me. I wrapped my body around hers, needing her closer. As close as possible. I gathered her against me on the floor, pulling her thighs around me and she didn't fight me. Her head rolled back and her eyes were glazed and dark, staring at me blankly. I stroked her cheek, wanting her to know that I knew.

I knew exactly what she was feeling, because I felt it too.

"I love you," I whispered, right into her ear.

## Chapter Eight

**Pain.**

Pain was my reality. Pain from head to foot. My body ached all over.

“I have to punish you,” Elliot said that morning as he strung me up by my wrists again. “Otherwise how will you learn?” I winced as he pulled the rope tight, but he didn't loosen it. “You're smart, you'll learn.” Looking in my eyes, he dropped to his knees and licked my clit before he left for work, giving me a shivering orgasm to remember him by. Then, with an evil smile, he got in his truck and backed out of the garage, closing the door behind him. He left me all alone.

*A human piñata.*

The heat of the day seeped into the dark garage and sweat dripped down the curve of my spine. I shifted my toes, trying to relieve the pressure on my wrists, but my ankles ached just as much. The toes in my right foot were numb. He promised he would be back at lunchtime, but I had no track of time. I didn't know how many hours had passed or how many more I would have to suffer.

I wondered if he was thinking of me hanging helplessly while he toiled away at work. Vulnerable, like a lamb to the slaughter. The thought of me waiting for him probably had him hard all day, itching to come home and fuck me like I deserved. My eyes rolled in my head, unconsciousness beckoning. It was hard to breathe. The air thickened with each passing moment. With my arms raised, it was difficult to force air into my lungs. I remembered a random fact from my Catholic school days. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, it wasn't the blood loss that killed him.

He suffocated.

A laugh escaped my lips and echoed in the empty space around me. He'd let me live, but I was dying anyway. Maybe I would be dead when he got home and he would drop to his knees in shock that his favorite toy was gone. My smile faded when I realized that I didn't want to die, even to spite him.

Despite everything, I still wanted to live. People had surely noticed something was wrong. Someone would be looking for me soon. My co-

workers, my friends, my parents. My mother called me a dozen times a day, so she surely knew something was amiss.

Dropping my head back, I stared up at the knots that bound my wrists. He had to have been in the boy scouts, I decided. Either that or the navy. His knots were complicated and difficult to figure out. My fingers barely brushed the rough rope, so even attempting to untie them was a pipe dream.

I couldn't scream, even if I wanted to. He duct taped my mouth, as a precaution. The bastard was a fast learner. He was going to keep me under lock and key. It would be a long time before I would be able to gain his trust again, if I ever did. I wondered what he had planned for me. He was probably thinking up new ways to keep me imprisoned that very second.

He seemed like the industrious type.

I closed my eyes as a wave of dizziness, nausea, and pain swept over me. My stomach was empty, so I couldn't throw up, thankfully. I didn't want to drown in my own vomit, that was for sure. My knees buckled and I gritted my teeth as the rope pulled hard on my joints. The rope creaked loud against the beam as it pulled taut with my weight. I felt like I was being drawn and quartered, pulled apart like that guy from Braveheart. The pain was white hot, and my vision blacked out. The rope creaked again and I felt myself falling. At first, I assumed I was falling into a faint... but then my knees hit the concrete floor, hard.

I screamed, the sound muffled by the tape, and for a long time, all I could do was lay on the damp concrete, blinking in disbelief. Blood rushed into my numb digits, the pins and needles waking me up out of my pain-haze. I sat up, my brain spinning as I realized what had happened.

The old rope had weakened and snapped under my weight.

I was free.

Hysteria welled up in me, light and giddy. I pulled my hands onto my lap and stared down at the knots. I knew I could figure them out, just like I had the leash. But I needed time.

Time was one thing I didn't have a lot of.

I shot my eyes to the crease of light under the door. I couldn't tell the position of the sun from the small amount of light. I knew he was coming back, I just didn't know when. With a struggle, I stood. Moaning as my hips and knees and shoulders protested, I walked slowly to the wood stairs that lead to the kitchen door. I tried the knob and it was locked.

Evil bastard.

Glancing around the garage, I noticed the toolbox in the corner. There had to be something in there that would cut through the rope. I ripped the duct tape off my mouth and took a deep breath. Hope was back, alive and kicking.

I had another chance and, this time, I wasn't going to blow it.

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I was a fucking idiot. I know that now. I never should have left her alone. If I had stayed home that day, everything would have been different. Everything would have worked out the way I wanted.

I should have known.

I never fucking get what I want.

I was driving home for lunch and I drove past the hardware store. An interesting thought appeared in my brain and I made a U-turn and went back. I bought yards and yards of shiny new rope. The length of rope I had her tied with wouldn't hold for much longer and I knew that. It was old, from my grandpa's ranch hand days, but it was all I had.

Besides, I loved how the rough twine looked wrapped around her soft skin.

I couldn't stop from smiling as I walked through the aisles, ideas pinging around in my head. Maybe the garage could be our little playground. I thought of the gifts I could give her, all of the things I could build. Her punishment could last as long as I wanted it to.

Again, I was so focused on my own sense of power, my own feeling of complete domination, that I didn't think to worry about her. She'd already run once, but I caught her and punished her. She wouldn't try that ever again, I was convinced. I was her king, she was my queen. She would be at my side, where she belonged, as long as *I* wanted her there.

*Fucking idiot.*

As I turned the corner onto my street, I saw right away that she was gone.

The garage door was gaping open like a laughing mouth, taunting me. The black anger swelled in me again. Swerving, I drove around the cul-de-sac and back out to the street. She couldn't have gotten far, I told myself. I



would find her, just like the night before. I would hunt her down and drag her back. When I laid eyes on her, I didn't know what I was going to do.

The only thing I knew—it wasn't going to be pretty.

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The city bus let me off at the corner by The Blue Mermaid. The driver eyed me, pity and suspicion in his gaze. He knew something bad had happened to me, but he wanted to believe me that nothing was wrong. If he believed me, that meant he could look the other way. It meant that I pulled the sleeves of Elliot's shirt down over the bruises on my wrists. I popped the collar and arranged my hair on my shoulders to hide the marks on my neck. In Elliot's garage, I found an old pair of jeans. They were too big on me, but they were clean. They would get me home without too many stares.

I knew I looked terrible, but I didn't want to arouse suspicion.

I just wanted to get home.

The bus roared off, and I wrapped my arms around my midsection. I was nauseous at the prospect of returning to The Mermaid, but I didn't have a choice. I crossed the empty parking lot, knowing that they were just opening up. I hoped that Chelsea was behind the bar, because she knew me and she would believe my lie. Even if she didn't, I would be gone before she could ask too many questions.

I opened the door and squinted immediately at the changing light. The sun was bright outside, but the bar was dark as a cave. Thankfully, I would look even less shitty in the dark light. Smoothing my hair, I jammed my hands in the pockets of the jeans, trying to look as nonchalant as possible.

Chelsea was behind the bar, luckily for me.

"I'll be right with you, hon." She shot me a look, then did a double-take, recognition lighting behind her eyes. "Jo?"

"Hey," I said, my voice hoarse. I cleared my throat, ignoring the pain that flared down my windpipe.

"Jesus! What happened to you?" the pixie-like blond stepped around the bar and rushed over to me.

"I had a bike accident on Saturday," I said, the rehearsed story flowing out my lips with ease. "A truck ran me right off the road."

“You want a drink? You look like you could use it,” she said, her eyes wide.

“I think I left my purse behind the bar on Friday,” I said, taking a shaky breath as I darted a glance to the dark hallway in the back. I could see Elliot's hulking form, waiting for me in the shadows. I knew he wasn't there, but it was all I could do not to scream.

“Oh! Yeah I saw a bag back there. If I had known it was yours, I would have brought it to your place.” Chelsea looked at me, concern a scowl on her face. I didn't know if she believed me or not. The only thing I cared about was getting the hell out of there.

“I wasn't home. I was at a friend's house,” I said with difficulty, my body shaking without my permission. “But thanks.”

“No worries,” she said, leaning over the bar and digging around. Finally, after what seemed like hours, she lifted my bag with a triumphant smile. “This is it, right?”

“Yup, that's it,” I said, reaching out for the canary yellow designer purse. It had been an expensive present from my mother for my birthday. I clasped the leather bag to my chest, like an anchor. At that moment, it was the only thing keeping me standing.

“So this friend is of the male persuasion, I take it?” Chelsea asked, a glint of mischief in her eye. I forced myself to smile and nod. “Next time I see you, I want details.” She pointed a neon-painted nail at me and I nodded again, knowing I'd probably never see her again.

“Alright, thanks Chels,” I said robotically, turning to leave and trying not to look down the hallway again.

“See ya, Jo,” Chelsea called out, and I could feel her eyes on me as I made my hasty exit. I hoped she wouldn't call the police, but even if she did, I knew I would be long gone before they showed up.

At that moment, I didn't give a shit about justice. I didn't give a shit about nailing Elliot's dick to the wall. I just wanted to run, far away where he couldn't find me. He was probably out looking for me right now. If he found me this time, I knew he would kill me. Well, first he would play with me—make me bleed and make me scream.

No way in hell was I going to let that happen.

I was going to get the hell out of Austin and never look back.

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I drove blindly, every minute that I couldn't find her ticking by loudly in my brain. The longer it took, the less likely I was to find her. I knew it, and yet, I was in denial. Panic had replaced my rage. Confronted with returning home to an empty house, I had never felt so much fear.

If you'd asked me before if I would ever be so mixed up over a girl, I would have laughed in your face. Little did I know the shit I was about to go through.

I found myself in the parking lot of The Blue Mermaid, drawn back to the place where we'd first met. I could almost smell her when I walked in the door, and I closed my eyes and breathed deep. When I opened them, I half expected her to be there, standing at the bar with her short skirt and her cute little boots on. But she wasn't there.

It was the middle of the day and the bar was empty. The blond bartender glanced up at me, a smile on her face.

"You need a drink, big man?" she asked, her eyes bright. She was pretty, but she was nothing compared with my Daisy. My girl was everything. She was all I saw. Stupid me, I still thought I had a chance of finding her. I nodded at the bartender and took a seat at the end of the bar, my eyes darting to the door, as if my girl was going to come walking in.

I drummed my fingers on the oak slab as the blonde sidled up to me. "Whiskey. Straight," I grumbled, not bothering with niceties. She nodded, her smile fading a bit, as if she sensed I was like a powder keg, about to explode. She poured the drink and slid it to me, then made her way to the opposite end, keeping her distance. I didn't blame her. I wasn't exactly good company.

I rolled the glass between my palms, staring down at the amber liquid, trying to form a plan. She lived close to The Mermaid, I knew that much. I figured she'd been walking home when I snatched her. I could feel her. She was close. I darted a look at the dark hallway in the back, where I'd backed her up against the wall. I could almost feel her breath on my face and her lips on mine. I stood, almost like a zombie, and walked toward the back hallway.

The darkness was calling my name, in her voice. I could hear her whisper in my ear. As I ran my hand over the wood panelling on the wall, I

could hear her moan. I pressed my forehead to the cool wood, telling myself that I was going to find her. I was going to find her and make her suffer for the shit she was putting me through.

Then I was going to make her love me.

The ladies' bathroom was empty when I walked in and flooded with light from the single window. I went to the sink, my eyes searching. I didn't know what I was looking for until I found it. A long black hair, curled on the tile floor below. It was hers and to me, it was proof. Proof that what we had was real. It had happened.

I wasn't ready to give up.

I don't think I'll ever be ready to give it up.

Two cops were standing by the bar when I returned to my drink. The Mexican one glanced my way, then turned his gaze back to the blonde bartender. I sat on my stool, eyes on my drink, but my ears open. My gut told me that the cops had something to do with Daisy, somehow.

"So when was the last time you saw Joan?"

"Jo? A few hours ago," the blond said.

"Her mother said she couldn't get ahold of her all weekend. Called in a missing person's report."

"She left her purse here, right under the counter. Probably had her phone in it," the blond continued. "She said she'd been with a friend all weekend."

"You got a name for this friend?" one of the cops asked. I shifted my eyes to watch the exchange, not able to resist. The big one with the crewcut leaned closer to the bar, his eyes on the blond's tits.

"I don't know. She didn't mention that," she said, crossing her arms over her chest. "It was a guy, though."

"Well that's all she wrote," Crewcut scoffed and glanced back at his Mexican partner. The Mexican shot a look my way and I didn't bother looking to drop my eyes.

"She was real banged up, though," the blonde said, snapping her gum. "Looked like she'd been beat up. Said she was in a bike accident." A shiver of recognition went through me. They were talking about my girl, I realized. I tried not to let the shock show on my face, but I don't know how successful I was.

"Hmm," the Mexican cop murmured, his eyes still on me.

“Are you going to go over and check up on her?” Blondie asked, her voice lower, like she didn't want me to hear.

“We already stopped by her place and she wasn't there,” the Mexican said. “If you hear from her again, you let us know.” He pulled his eyes off of me and slid his card across the bar. The blond took it and nodded.

“Don't be shy, now,” Crewcut said, still leering. I turned away and tossed back my whiskey, trying to process the new information. My eyes caught my own in the huge mirror behind the bar. I looked haunted. I could see the rage under my skin, like a dark sickness. I watched the cops exit behind me, the bright sunlight slicing through the room when they opened the door. As it closed behind them, I pulled out my wallet and tossed a few bills on the oak bar.

It was then that I noticed the pictures.

Polaroids were taped along the bottom of the mirror. There were pictures of the blonde bartender with the name 'Chels' written on it in black marker. There were pictures of other bartenders, a few I recognized. I stood and leaned closer.

“Stupid cops,” the blonde murmured. Then she stepped around the bar and went to the door, watching the cops as they left. “They don't give a shit about her.”

I looked from picture to picture, my eyes scouring every face. I knew she would be there, and sure enough, I finally found her. In a picture taped to the bottom right corner of the mirror, my girl smiled back at me, her bright eyes flashing and her hair dark around her face. She had her arm around the blonde and she wore red devil horns on her head. At the bottom of the picture 'Jo and Chels, Halloween' was scrawled in black.

She'd lied to me.

Her name was Joan.

It was like the clouds opened up and the rain poured right on my fucking head. I hopped the bar and grabbed the picture off the mirror without another thought.

“Hey!” the bartender yelled behind me. “What are you doing?”

“Taking a souvenir,” I murmured, tucking the picture in my back pocket.

## Chapter Nine

Two years.

Two long years.

I hadn't seen Elliot, in the flesh, for two years, although I'd seen flashes of him everywhere I went. He was lingering at the end of the block when I drove to the grocery store. He was sitting in the corner at the coffee shop. He was in the shadows beneath my window at night. He was always there, always at the edge of my subconscious.

I left Austin the day I escaped, packed my clothes and left everything else. I threw my bags in my car and was gone within the hour. I retreated to the safety of my parents house in Dallas and I didn't speak about Austin.

Ever.

When I showed up on my parents' doorstep, looking like hell, there had been questions, of course. I told them that I'd been in a bike accident and then went upstairs to my childhood bedroom and slept for a week. When I finally emerged from my hibernation, my body was healed and I went on with life like I'd never met Elliot. I got reacquainted with a boy I went to high school with and we began date. It got serious quickly and, before I knew it, we were engaged. For awhile, it was like I was completely normal again. And yet, I wasn't. I never would be again.

A year passed, uneventfully, and I let myself relax a bit. I told myself that the more time that passed, the less likely it was that he would find me. Unfortunately, a nagging need to find *him* had started pounding in my brain. In the middle of the night, I would get this crazy urge to know exactly where he was and what he was doing. In my mind, I went over the road map of Austin, trying to remember exactly where his house was. For some reason, I lost all sense of direction the second I got on the city bus. Then I transferred to another bus and my wrecked brain couldn't keep up.

At the time, I didn't care if I knew where he lived. I just wanted to get away.

So I began taking trips to Austin, every few months so it wouldn't seem too suspicious. I would drive around, trying to find his subdivision. I would drive around for hours, looking, but I never found it. It was for the best, I

told myself one night after a failed attempt. I knew I was becoming obsessed with finding Elliot. I knew it was unhealthy.

But I couldn't stop.

The next time I drove to Austin, I started looking for construction sites. When I found one, I would park across the street and study at every face. I would memorize every burly man in a dusty hard hat, looking for him. I knew he worked construction, or at least he had when he'd kidnapped me. The day he left me hanging in his garage, he'd had a hard hat in his hand as he left for work. That's really the only thing I knew about him for sure, other than his first name.

What was I going to do when I found him? I had no idea. The plan was not well thought out. It was just my way of doing *something*. No one knew what happened to me. No one knew that Elliot had gotten away with everything he'd done to me. I didn't want him to get away it. I wanted him to suffer.

It was crazy, and I knew it. But I couldn't stop myself.

This was when I made my second mistake.

On a bright and sunny April day, I finally found him. After years of seeing him everywhere, he was suddenly right in front of me. Well, across the street, but it was still too close for comfort. My body clenched up immediately, my fingers gripping the steering wheel until my knuckles went white. For a long time, I couldn't move. I could only watch him.

He still seemed the same. He still *moved* the same. He was just as dangerous as ever, his body as lethal as I remembered. His face was still chiseled and ruggedly handsome, but the mask had lost a little of its luster. He no longer looked like a normal, everyday Joe. There was something dark and twisted lurking under his skin, just itching to get out. The other guys kept their distance and he kept his distance from them. He didn't smile and he didn't joke around.

He looked like a ticking time bomb.

I should have driven off. I should have never been there in the first place. But I didn't move. I just sat there, like a sitting duck. I watched him for at least an hour, until he strolled away from the site, his white T-shirt stained brown with dust. He headed across the street toward me and my muscles sparked to life. I started the car and peeled away from the curb. My foot was heavy, and I put the pedal to the metal as I sped past him. He

stopped in the middle of the street to let me pass and I couldn't stop myself from glancing out the window at his white shirt, bright in the sunlight.

Then I took a quick right and drove as fast as I could, wanting to get as far away as possible. Sweat dotted my brow and my heart was racing as I got back on the highway toward Dallas. I was sure he hadn't seen me. Even if he did, I would be far away and untouchable. The whole car ride back, I told myself I was never going to return to Austin. I told myself that it was all over and that I had to stop obsessing. I told myself it would all be okay and that I would be fine.

Looking back, all the shit that happened after that sunny spring day in Austin was completely my fault.

I can admit it—I was a fool.

Because of my foolishness that day, I will always have blood on my hands. There's nothing I can do about it.

After all these years, I've finally given up on trying to get clean.

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I drove home to Austin without incident, thinking I'd dodged a bullet.

I didn't realize how much I'd fucked up until about three weeks later.

As I stood on the porch and waved good-bye as my parents' BMW slowly drove down the driveway, I felt a wave of unease wash over me. The gate closed automatically behind them and I dropped my hand to my side, my smile fading. The sky was cloudless and sunny. The day was beautiful and warm. I should have felt peaceful and relaxed. My parents were going away for the weekend, so I invited my fiancé over for a romantic date. I should have felt excited that Trace was coming over. I had a big night planned for him. I had a three course meal to make and a pretty sundress to slip on. I was going to put on my face and do up my hair. I was going to look real pretty for him. I was going to smile and laugh and be his fiancée. I was going to be normal.

Being normal was exhausting.

I stood longer than I should have on the porch, looking down the expanse of our manicured green lawn. Our house stood on an acre of property at the end of a cul de sac in an old-wealth neighborhood. I could see our neighbors' mansions across the way, nothing out of the ordinary.



The street was empty of cars. I didn't know why I felt a shiver of anticipation run down my spine, like a fingertip. Running my tongue over the roof of my mouth, I swept my eyes across the perfect grass once more, then forced myself to go back into the house. I locked the door behind me and punched in the alarm code, like I always did.

In my mother's professionally designed kitchen, I arranged a whole chicken in the roasting pan, stuffing the cavity with lemon wedges, thyme, and garlic cloves. I shoved it into the oven at 350 and made my way upstairs to shower. The house was silent and still, more so than usual. I froze in the hallway, my ears perking up. I listened to the air in the house for a full moment, then continued into my bedroom. I had many rituals like this. I would often stop and listen. I would glance out windows looking for intruders. I always checked my closet and under my bed before I lay down to sleep at night. It was ridiculous, but such was life.

I undressed in my bedroom and then padded into my en suite bathroom. I opened the glass shower door and turned on the water, staring off at nothing while I held my hand under the spray, waiting for it to turn hot. Before stepping into the shower, I returned to the hallway and listened; it was still quiet. The smell of cooking lemons and garlic had already started seeping through the house. Satisfied I was still alone, I stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind me. I flicked the lock on the knob as well as the deadbolt I'd installed before I stepped into the shower.

I sighed as the hot water rushed over my tight muscles. I dipped my head back to wet my thick shoulder-length hair, closing my eyes. I stopped wearing my hair long after I returned to Dallas. At first, I'd chopped it all off and had a pixie cut. My mother hated my hair that short, and she gave me no peace, so eventually I'd settled on shoulder-length. It was still long enough for a man to fist his hands in, so I hated it.

Such was life.

I let my mind drift. I ran my hands up my body, feeling my flat stomach and the heaviness of my breasts. I had lost weight in the years since my ordeal, but my breasts hadn't shrunk, strangely enough. I ran my thumbs over my nipples and they hardened. I tweaked the sensitive buds, telling myself that I needed to be 'on' for Trace tonight. I had every intention of being a normal, sexual woman who enjoyed making love to her fiancé . We'd had sex before, of course, but tonight I wanted to actually

enjoy it. I deserved it. I was feeling selfish—I had given Trace many orgasms and I wanted some in return. I also wanted to feel really and truly close to him. I wanted to be able to hold a man and not think of Elliot.

*Elliot.*

My hand froze on my breast. An image of his cruel mouth flashed in my brain. I thought about how he looked, sauntering across the street in his sweat-soaked shirt and jeans. I bet he still smelled the same. I bet he still fucked the same. I wondered how many girls had there been since me? A familiar wave of guilt washed over me. If I had been strong enough to come forward, if I hadn't been stupid and gotten the hell out of dodge, maybe I could have prevented more girls from meeting Elliot in a dark bar. I could have stopped him. I could have locked him up and thrown away the key.

Shaking my head, I began to shampoo my hair. Guilt was useless. It wouldn't help anyone. It sure as hell wouldn't help me. Regret and shame were two more of those useless emotions I'd had just about enough of. Thinking about Elliot had my heart pumping and my blood flowing. Years had passed, but the memory of him had never faded. It had only gotten stronger with age. Seeing him had only fanned the flame. No matter how much I wanted to be free of him, he had an undeniable hold on me. I'd never gotten closure and I knew I never would.

Soapy water ran down my body, over my sensitive breasts and down my thighs, but I ignored the sensations and finished with my shower quickly. I dried off impatiently, freeing myself from the steamy bathroom and heading for my closet. I pulled out the white cotton sundress I'd mail-ordered from a fancy boutique in Beverly Hills just for Trace. He was going to lose his shit when he saw me in it, sans bra. A smile curled over my lips. I might be totally fucked in the head, but at least I was still trying.

I thought back to the moment Trace proposed to me. It was after church on Sunday. The whole family went out for brunch at my mother's favorite restaurant in Dallas, Cafe Pacific, and Trace had dropped to his knee in front of everybody. I remember how my face froze in a grotesque-feeling smile as I felt everyone's eyes on me. I remember wanting to scream and run from the dining room. But I didn't. I said yes.

Arranging the dress on the bed, I let my towel drop to the floor. Flopping on my back on the bed beside my dress, I closed my eyes and pictured Trace. He was tall and lanky, his shoulders broad. His body was

well-formed from years of track and field in high school and he maintained his workout even though we'd been out of school for almost six years. He had strawberry blond hair and straight white teeth. He was attractive by anyone's standards. Determined, I imagined pulling off his trademark plaid button-up off and running my hands down his smooth back. I imagined kissing him and letting him pull me close. In real life, when he touched me, he was gentle and soft and reverent. But, this time, in my mind, he wasn't gentle. I imagined him fighting his way in between my legs and thrusting his big, evil cock inside of me.

The problem was, I had stopped picturing Trace.

Elliot had taken his place.

His manic eyes were boring into mine. His rough hands were forcing my thighs open wider and wider. I arched my back, trying to claw myself free, but freedom was impossible. He was already deep inside, his hard body completely melded with mine. I remembered the way he used to kiss me, the way he used to taste me and suck me. I knew I would hate myself when it was over, but I didn't care. I imagined his tongue against mine, plundering my mouth as he fucked me hard.

I was wet as hell within seconds. I was so turned on, I felt a little crazed. Suddenly, the only thing I wanted was to feel a release and it was so close. I didn't care how I got there. Fuck my inhibitions. Fuck my guilt. I imagined Elliot invading me, using my body for his own pleasure. I was his slave all over again as I rubbed my clit and tweaked my nipples, my whole body tightening with tension. My toes curled and I dug my heels into my quilt. Finally, when I couldn't take anymore, I imagined his hand closing around my throat, choking me as he fucked me. I bucked against my own hand, a moan hovering at the back of my throat as I came.

*Elliot! Fuck, fuck, fuck!* my mind screamed as my eyes rolled back in my head, a muffled grunt the only sound that I allowed myself to make. My body spasmed, the aftershocks of pleasure sizzling through me. When I was spent, I dropped my head back, limp and breathing like I'd just run a marathon. When my breaths returned to normal, I opened my eyes and listened. Nothing had changed. The air was as still and as quiet as before. I was still alone in the house. I sat up, my body still tingling from the orgasm, and immediately pushed it out of my mind. I'd come with Elliot's face in my mind and his name on my lips, but I told myself it meant nothing. I shut

down my mind and refused to feel anything, one way or the other. The less I felt, the better off I'd be. The important thing was I was in a sexual mood, not how I'd gotten that way.

Trace rang the doorbell around 7:00 p.m., when the blazing Texas sun was starting to drop in the sky. I checked myself out in the antique mirror in the foyer and pasted a big smile on my face. I looked effortlessly attractive, like I hadn't spent an hour applying makeup and curling my hair. My feet were bare, my toenails painted a shell pink that my mother would have approved of. I looked like a fresh-faced innocent girl, a girl that nothing bad had ever happened to. When I swung open the door, Trace's face brightened in simple, pure happiness, his eyes flitting from my smile to my tits, perky and well-showcased in the dress.

"Goddamn, Jo. You know how to make a man feel welcome," he said, his voice warm and smooth. Familiarity and comfort rippled down my spine and I stepped forward, tilting my cheek up for a kiss. He wrapped his arms around me, kissing me on my cheek as expected. But then he surprised me, dragging his lips to my mouth and kissing me like he meant it. I felt my hands circle his neck as his arms pulled me close. A giddy feeling went through me. This was normal. Making out with your fiancé was normal. Feeling tingly as your fiancé kissed you was normal. I lifted up on my tiptoes, licking at him and sucking his tongue into my mouth. He jerked against me, surprised at my passion. He pulled away, staring down at me with heavy-lidded eyes. He let out a shaky breath and laughed. "Aw, babe, I missed you, too." I laughed along with him, and took a step back.

"You better have brought your appetite," I said, my voice abnormally cheerful. I always sounded like my mother when I talked to Trace, like nothing was wrong now that my man had arrived. She had the little Southern woman thing down pat and I had learned from the best. I waved him inside and shut the door, forcing myself not to glance out onto the lawn again. There was nothing there, I told myself. I punched in the alarm code again and followed Trace into the kitchen.

I listened to him talk about his day, laughing and responding at the appropriate times. I set the chicken on the counter to cool, tenting it with aluminum foil to keep in the moisture, like my mother taught me. I chopped up the tomatoes and carrots for the a salad, a bemused smile on my face. I

whisked up a lemon vinaigrette dressing and handed him the butcher knife to carve the bird.

We were like two kids playing house, I realized.

It was so domestic, we might as well have been already married. I wished we already were. Then it would all be over with. I had placed a few bridal magazines on the edge of the counter, to make it look like I was deeply ensconced in planning the wedding. In reality, my mother had taken over the planning. I was barely involved. She picked out the flowers and dragged me to cake tastings and fittings. I did my part, showed up and smiled and acted excited. I couldn't wait for the wedding to be behind me, quite honestly.

I watched him carving through the crisp skin of the chicken breast and I felt my lips curve downward. He was doing it wrong, making a mess of the perfectly cooked meat. I caught myself frowning and turned away. I went to the fridge and pulled out one of my father's light beers for him. I popped the top and poured it into a tall glass, minimal foam.

"Sugar, why don't you go sit down at the table and I'll bring you a plate," I said brightly, holding out the frosty glass. He set the knife on the counter, pressed a chaste kiss to my cheek, and headed out onto the patio, where I had lit candles on the table in preparation for dinner. I take my time preparing the plates, measuring out perfect portions of meat and vegetables. A breast and a thigh for him, one half of a breast with no skin for me. My mother had reminded me a week ago that I was not allowed to gain weight, or I wouldn't fit into my wedding dress. It sounded draconian, but in reality, my appetite was mostly non-existent anyway. I ate merely because I needed to eat to live, not because I wanted to.

Like I said, I was an old pro at keeping up appearances.

We dined beside the olympic-sized pool in the backyard where I did laps every morning, the sunset a perfect romantic backdrop for our date. When the food was gone and the dishes cleared, I sipped my white wine and he drank his beer in companionable silence.

"Are you ready for dessert?" I asked, knowing he had an undeniable sweet tooth. He smiled goofily and nodded. A slice of cake could get him excited as a child. I stood and ran a hand through his hair on my way to the kitchen. Going through the motions. Playing the part of a woman who was blissfully in love. Sometimes I wondered if I was becoming a robot, acting

out a set of pre-programmed motions with no troublesome emotion involved.

Maintaining my code of silence was of the utmost importance. The more normal I acted, the less my family asked questions. The day I returned to Dallas, beat up and vacant-eyed, they looked at me with concern in their eyes. They demanded answers. I fed them the story about the bike accident, but I could never be sure if they truly believed me. After a lot of work on my part, I was back to being normal Jo. Beautiful, mild-mannered Jo, who had been a hell-raiser as a teenager, but now was getting married at twenty-four like a good Southern girl. Kids would surely follow and a mortgage and a dog and Sunday brunches with the grandparents after church.

Everyone would be thrilled.

My secret would be safe.

I slid the big knife from the butcher block on the counter and turned to the Lemon bundt cake I bought that morning, poised to cut a big wedge for my fiancé . I had no sooner breached the glaze frosting with the blade when the doorbell rang. I furrowed my brow, wondering who the hell it was. At that time of night, we usually only got visits from Mr. Evans across the way, letting us know that the dog had gotten out. Mrs. Evans had a chihuahua that loved to swim in our pool and piss on my father's perfect emerald green lawn. Lulu was his name. I liked to scratch him behind the ears and let him run free. He was a little escape artist and I could respect that.

To this day, I don't know why I didn't put the knife down on the counter. Instead, I carried it with me to the door. I leaned to the side, trying to make-out the figure standing on the porch through the side panels of the door. It was a dark, tall figure, and my heart clenched in my chest. A rolling wave of unease rippled through me and I stopped short, frozen in the middle of the foyer. I glanced at the alarm control panel, and noted with relief that it was still activated. I knew that whoever was on the porch could see a blurry version of me through the wavy glass of the windows. Whoever it was knew I was standing in the foyer, mere feet away.

I jumped when a hand pressed against the glass. It was a black gloved hand, big and threatening. My throat squeezed closed and I backed up. *No. No, it couldn't be*, I thought. I blinked my eyes, wondering if I was seeing things. I was silly enough to wonder if my masturbation session earlier had come back to haunt me. In reality, I'd done something far more stupid. I

thought back to my trip to Austin. I thought about Elliot, staring me down as I drove past.

I knew immediately that he'd seen me.

I was a fucking idiot.

The gloved hand tapped a finger on the glass and I turned and bolted into the kitchen, throwing myself against the sink and forcing myself to look out of the window above it. The lawn was in shadow, lit only by a few perimeter lights. I saw the man in black running toward the back and I couldn't help it—I screamed. He must've heard me, because he turned his head to me right before hopping up on the fence and hauling himself over.

I ran to the French doors off the kitchen, bolting them closed, my eyes scanning the edges of the dark lawn. It was only then that I remembered Trace. He was still sitting at the table on the patio. My eyes found his and he was glancing at me, perplexed. I opened and closed my mouth like a fish, actually debating with myself whether or not I should open the doors and let him inside. I didn't know how much time I had. Turned out not much. A sound jolted Trace's attention off of me, and then he stood abruptly, so abruptly that he knocked the chair out from under him. He lifted his hands up on either side of his face, as if surrendering.

*Shit.*

I forced myself to swallow and take a deep breath. I told myself to remember all the plans I'd made, all the ways I'd plotted to get out of a situation such as this. Run out the front. Trip the alarm. Fight the motherfucker.

Hurt him.

Kill him.

I realized I had the knife in my hand and I tightened my grip on it. Trace was backing up, and the man in black came into my field of vision. A silver gun was in his hand, trained right on my fiancé. Trace didn't look to me, perhaps trying to avoid drawing attention to me, but I already knew what the man in black wanted.

He wanted me.

After two years, he'd finally come for me.

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Joan Martina Vasquez.

That's her full name.

It's beautiful. As beautiful as she was, in her white dress, her shoulders and legs bare to my gaze as I stood beside the pool in her parents' backyard. I knew she wore the dress just for me, like she could sense I was coming for her. She looked pure and clean, like a bride on her wedding day. Her eyes were wide and wild, her thick dark hair brushing her shoulders. I'd heard her scream a few minutes before, and the sound sent a pang of longing through me. I'd missed the sound.

I'd missed everything about her.

Two years was a long time to be without the woman you loved. Too long.

I had my friend Mark at the DMV look up the license plate for me. When I saw a dark-haired woman scouting out the construction site, a ripple of anticipation went through me. It had to have been my girl, looking for me. And sure enough. The black BMW was registered to a Martin Vasquez, 2567 Magnolia Lane, Dallas Texas. An hour on the internet revealed that Mr. Vasquez had a 24-year-old daughter named Joan. Joan Vasquez had graduated Summa Cum Laude from the University of Texas in Austin and had a degree in business. Joan Vasquez had an inactive MySpace account she hadn't bothered to steel against prying eyes. Amazing what an internet search could reveal.

Joan and Elliot.

Putting the names together almost made us sound like two normal people, in a normal relationship. *Joan and Elliot live down the block. Joan and Elliot are coming over tonight for dinner. Joan and Elliot are going to fuck later.*

It had a nice ring to it.

First, I had some shit to take care of. Mainly, the motherfucker who stood in front of me. He was tall but younger than me, and I could see the fear in his eyes. He wanted to look at Joan, but he kept his face to mine. He loved my Joan, I could tell. I glanced to the table. Candles flickered, and a glass of wine with pink lipstick on the rim was half empty. I'd interrupted a romantic dinner, apparently. He probably thought he was going to get lucky with my woman later. How wrong he was.

His luck had run out.



Keeping my gun steady pointed at him, I reached around to my back pocket and found my handcuffs. I bought them online, but they were decent. Thick metal and police-approved. I tossed them through the air and he caught them. He had the reflexes of an athlete, and I cocked my head, sensing what Joan must see in him. He didn't look very smart, but he wasn't screaming and acting like a pussy. He was quiet, trying to stay strong for Joan's benefit.

I wondered how much longer he'd be quiet.

"Put them on," I said, motioning to a support pillar behind him on the patio. "Lock yourself to that."

"Listen, man, whatever you want, just tell me. I can get it for you," he began to bargain, stepping backward to the pillar. "My wallet is in my back pocket. I can get it for you."

"Put on the cuffs," I repeated, beginning to get impatient. Joan was still standing in the kitchen, her body pressed against the door, like she thought that flimsy barrier would keep me from her. She was watching her boyfriend and I, a blank expression on her face. His eyes flicked to her, following my gaze.

"Please," he said, and I knew that he was going to start being a problem. "Please, don't hurt her."

"Who is she?" I asked, keeping my voice neutral.

"My fiancée. We're getting married next month," he said, the cuffs still dangling from one wrist.

Wrong answer.

I sent a sharp glance to Joan and her eyes widened. She could see my anger, sense that I was about to snap. I pointed my finger at her, accusing her across the space between us, without words. How dare she? How dare she put some other motherfucker's ring on her finger when she belonged to me? Before I knew what I was doing, I stepped forward and swung my arm, smacking him hard in the head with the gun. He didn't go down, but blood streamed down his face as he reeled back.

I swung again, catching his jaw this time. He fell to his knees against the stone-paved patio and I kneed him in the face, breaking his nose. I heard the crunch of the bone and his grunt of pain and it satisfied me. I didn't completely blame him, of course, but a flare of hatred still shot through me.

This boy had been touching my woman, fucking her, putting his dick in the pussy that belonged to me.

Joan screamed again, banging her palm on the glass window pane of the door. The sound only got me more riled up. I bent, grabbing the guy's hands roughly. I was impatient, and I wasn't exactly gentle as I locked him to the pillar, his arms wrapped around it and the cuffs in front. His face was a bloody mess now, but it looked worse than it was.

"What do you want? Just take my wallet," he said, his voice strained. Both she and I knew what I wanted, but I was pretty sure her fiancé wasn't going to like it. I took a step back, tucking the gun back in my jeans. It was time.

The moment I'd been waiting for for two years was finally happening. Come on out, Joanie, I thought.  
Come for me.

## Chapter Ten

I pressed my forehead against the warm pane of glass, completely unsure of what to do. I felt horrible that Trace had gotten mixed up in my fucked up situation. He was bleeding and in pain now because of me. It was totally my fault that Elliot had found me. I had made a huge, stupid mistake, and I knew I would have to pay. But I was terrified. His anger was palpable in the air. I'd forgotten the thick air of violence and sex that followed him like a cloud. It hung heavy between us and I knew exactly what would happen to me if I surrendered.

My body made the decision for me as I backed away from the door without thinking. I had no choice but to make a run for it. Elliot cocked his head, stepping toward the house, sensing what I was going to do. I turned and ran, my bare feet slapping against the marble tiles in the kitchen. I heard a huge splintering crash as the French doors to the kitchen busted open. I didn't look back, even though my heart was in my throat. I could feel him behind me. He was so close. I made it halfway through the living room before he reached me, slinging a thick arm around my waist and throwing me off my feet.

We landed in a painful heap on my mother's expensive striped Dhurrie rug and the knife bounced out of my grasp and across the room. I screamed again, although I knew that it turned him on. I wished I could stay quiet, but my mouth wouldn't cooperate. I pummeled his shoulders and face, still covered in a ski mask that hid everything but his manic eyes and his cruel mouth, until he forced my wrists down to the ground. I swung my hips, throwing my legs back and forth, trying to push him off. But, as always, it was useless. He was too big, too strong, and too persistent.

"Joan," he whispered, drawing out the word. I stilled under him, my heart stopping. Of course he knew my name. If he knew where I lived, he knew my real name, but hearing it out of his lips was still a shock. My last line of defense against him was gone. He would be able to find me wherever I went now.

"Get the fuck off of me," I growled, hiding my fear under false bravado.

“Baby,” he whispered, running his leather-covered hand down my wet cheek, and I realized that tears were streaming out of my eyes. “I missed you.”

“Leave me alone,” I hissed, swinging my hips again.

“Jo! Jo!” I could hear Trace screaming out on the patio. “Don't touch her! Jo!”

“Do you love him?” Elliot asked, gripping my chin tightly.

“Elliot, get off me,” I said, using his name, hoping it would help my plight, somehow. I saw his lips curl in an evil smile.

“I asked if you loved him,” he repeated, his voice dangerously low. I clamped my mouth shut. I knew no answer would satisfy him. If I said yes, then he would kill Trace. If I said no, he would punish me for being with him, anyway. Really, there was no way he wasn't going to punish me.

“Jo!” Trace howled.

“Fuck,” Elliot said, fisting his hand in my hair and standing, dragging me with him. I gritted my teeth at the pain, knowing it was just a hint of what was surely to come. “He's gotta shut up, baby. Tell him to shut up.”

“Sugar?” I called out, shakily. I heard Elliot draw in a sharp breath next to my ear. He didn't like me calling Trace 'Sugar' but I didn't want to use his real name. Elliot didn't need any more ammo to use against us. He may have found me, but Trace was still an innocent.

“Jo?!”

“Babe, I'm fine. Just be quiet, okay?”

“Don't touch her, you son of a bitch!” Trace screamed. “If you touch her, I'll kill you!”

“Be quiet!” I called back. “Please.”

Trace didn't answer back and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Good boy,” Elliot said, his breath tickling my ear. “Joanie, what am I going to do with you?”

“How did you find me?” I asked, trying to distract him, trying to stall, anything.

“You found me first.” His hands were roaming up the bodice of my gown. “You were looking for me.”

“I was,” I admitted, swallowing hard as he slid his gloved hand inside the top of my dress and cupped my right breast. It was bare, ripe for his

plucking. I immediately regretted the decision to not wear a bra, although a bra wouldn't have stopped him. It would have just slowed him down.

"Why?"

"I don't know." I cut my eyes to look at him and he was breathing heavy, his face still hidden by the mask.

"Why did you leave me?" He moved in, his nose brushing my cheek. His fingers worked my nipple, not painfully, but roughly. My body started reacting to him, my heart speeding up my chest and my pussy clenching. I was already wet, and I didn't know whether it was a curse or a blessing. I had a feeling I was going to find out soon. I could feel his erection through his black jeans, pressed against my hip. I didn't answer him. "I've been going crazy without you," he whispered.

"You were already crazy," I said, not able to help myself. He chuckled, the sound sending a shiver of memory down my spine.

"I can't argue with that." He dropped his head to nuzzle my neck, his teeth skimming along my skin.

"Were there other girls?" I asked. I'd been eaten up with guilt ever since I fled Austin, worried that he was preying on other girls. I needed to know.

"Jealous?" he asked, his hand leaving my breast so abruptly I almost whimpered. He cupped my chin, guiding my mouth to his.

"Did you hurt anyone else?" I ask, breathless, but needing to know.

"No. None like you," he said, then kissed me. I shoved against his shoulder, pulling away for a brief moment.

"You piece of shit," I whispered, and I felt the sting of tears as the waterworks began again. This time, he was the one that didn't answer, just stared down at me with his dark, manic eyes.

"I didn't," he finally said, brushing his lips across mine.

"You're a liar," I said before he slipped his tongue into my mouth, just like how he used to kiss me. Like he was conquering me. Torturing me. He pulled my chin down, opening my mouth wider for him. He slanted his mouth over mine, thrusting inside and sucking. He slung his free hand around my waist, turning me to face him. My breasts pressed against his hard chest as he abused my mouth, bruising my lips with the force of him. His body surrounded me, and the memories welled up in my mind. All the horrible things he'd done. All the ways he'd used me. The ways he'd wrung

orgasms out of me like he deserved them. His fingers dug into my ass, cupping me through my dress, and I squirmed into him. I knew how much he wanted me. I knew he would overpower me. I knew fighting was useless.

I hated him.

Elliot, the man I hated with all of my heart, kissed me like he loved me with all of his.

It was a strange dichotomy. My arms hung limp at my sides, but my nipples poked through my dress, inviting his attention. My mind was screaming bloody-murder, but my body was softening, preparing for his intrusion. It was like no time had passed and we were back in Austin in his dark and mysterious house, where he had me all to himself.

I had to fight or I would be back there once more, with no hope of escape this time.

“Jo...” Trace's voice float through the ether, and I wrenched my face away from Elliot's. “Jo, talk to me. Tell me you're okay.” He sounded so scared, what was left of my heart broke for him. He didn't know the danger we were in. He didn't know how screwed up I was. He didn't know that I would never be okay.

“I'm fine, babe,” I said and I didn't miss the slight uptick in Elliot's lips. I knew what was coming and steeled myself for the blow. His backhanded slap sent me tumbling back onto the floor and I landed hard on my hip. I was up in a flash and scooted back across the floor, sliding my ass over the knife as I grabbed the handle.

“Don't talk to him!” Elliot yelled and I blinked. That was the first time I'd ever heard him raise his voice. My face throbbed, but I didn't let the pain distract me.

“I love him,” I said impulsively, wanting so badly to hurt him. He clenched his fists at his sides, his whole body tightening. “I love him,” I repeated, my voice sounding dead to my ears. “He's a good man.” Elliot's eyes flashed with a crazed light, and I knew my words were like a knife plunging into his heart. That was why I couldn't stop myself. I was happy to hurt him. Sadistic glee rose in me, pushing aside the mind-numbing fear. “He loves me. He treats me good. When he makes love to me, he makes me feel good.”

"I make you feel good," Elliot's voice dropped low again, his jaw clenched tight. "You remember how I used to make you feel." He looked like he was going to snap any moment. I only remembered the gun when he reached behind him and pulled it out and pointed it at me. I stared down the barrel of his gun, and for once, I didn't feel fear. Well, not much, anyway.

"I hate you," I heard myself say. "I left you because I hate you. Every time you touch me, I want to peel my skin off and burn it."

"You fucking lie!" he screamed, coming so close that the gun is almost pressed against my forehead.

"Blow my brains out. Splatter my blood. Kill me," I taunted. "I'd rather die than touch you." His lips flattened into a straight line. I could hear the light clatter of the metal as his hand shook, his finger poised at the trigger. "You don't love me. You hate me just as much as I hate you," I say softly. "Otherwise, you'd leave, too. You'd leave me and never come back." The air was thick between us. I couldn't breathe as the seconds ticked by. I felt certain he was going to pull the trigger. But he didn't. He let out a puff of air and let the gun fall to his side. Then he dropped to a crouch in front of me, his eyes level with mine.

"I can't," he said, simply, lifting a hand to sweep a strand of hair off my forehead. His eyes blazed a black fire and I knew it wasn't going to be as simple as reverse psychology or a gunshot to the head.

"Fuck you," I said, but it came out as a dull whisper, not an angry kiss-off like I meant.

"You will," he said with a wink, his lips curling in their evil way. My fingers closed around the handle of the knife, and I tried to prepare myself to stab him. My movement would have to be sure and strong, otherwise I wouldn't plunge it as deep as I wanted to. If I didn't, I wouldn't kill him with one blow, and it would have to be one blow. I knew I'd only get one chance.

"Jo!" Trace screamed and I gasped, the sound throwing off my concentration. "Jo!" Elliot sucked his teeth, standing so abruptly that I jumped. He cocked the gun and caught my eyes again.

"Don't move," he said, then strode through the kitchen toward the patio. I was up in a flash, the knife in my hand. By the time I got through the kitchen and to the patio, he was standing over Trace, gun raised, poised to shoot. I didn't think, just ran full-on into him, the power of it forcing all of the air out of my chest.

We landed with a hard splash in the pool. The impact was like a blow to the head. I gulped in water, my ears ringing as I sunk to the bottom. I could see Elliot's dark form above me, writhing in the water, kicking his legs. The gun floated past my head in slow motion, like a dream. I didn't swim, although my body was fighting for air. My fingers grasped at the water, my eyes bulged. I didn't want to die, but I didn't want to know what was going to happen with the rest of my life either. My mouth opened and closed as I choked. My throat tightened and the ringing in my ears quieted, the water drowning out all sound. My vision darkened and I closed my eyes.

Goodbye, cruel world.

Too cruel.

I felt his hands close around my wrist, yanking me upwards. I fought, but he held fast, and soon, I was crashing above water again, gasping and coughing and choking. My hair was plastered across my face and I couldn't see as I was hauled out of the pool onto the hard stone. Strong arms pulled me in close, my nose pressed into wet fabric that smelled of pine and chlorine. I could hear someone yelling my name and I remembered Trace. He needed me. I pushed and fought until I could get free, then crawled onto the thick green grass, my vision blurry and my limbs shaky. My dress tangled around my legs. My wet feet slipped and skid in the lawn but try as I might, I couldn't stand.

He grabbed my hips, forcing me down beneath him.

"No!" I screamed. "No!"

"Joan!" he hissed, in my ear. I didn't stop struggling. I kept pushing him away, my knees shoving into the grass as I kicked at him. I was hysterical, my body still not realizing that I was no longer drowning. He hauled me over onto my back, covering my body with his. He pulled off the ski mask and tossed it aside. His face hovered above mine, his damn beautiful face. I hated how dreadfully handsome he was.

Too bad he was a fucking psycho.

I bowed my back, my fingers clawing into the ground, even as my hysteria faded away like a fog. He ran a wet hand down the valley of my breasts, feeling my heart beat beneath his palm. I could feel his too, pulsing through his clothes and his skin. Then he kissed me again and I shoved my heels into the grass, pressing against him. He growled and dropped his



hands, shoving up my clingy, soaked skirt. I gasped in air between kisses, and then his tongue slid inside of me again, drops of water dripping down his face onto mine.

“Don't you fucking touch her!” Trace was screaming again, his voice carrying across the lawn. “Jo! Oh God, Jo!” I could hear the desperation he felt. It was as tangible as my own. My naked legs were open for Elliot; my dress was bunched around my waist. He reared up, freeing me in order to unbutton his jeans. I rolled over onto my belly and pushed up onto my hands and knees. My skin was covered in blades of grass and dirt and my wet hair was stuck around my face. The night was deathly still for a moment, no crickets, no Trace, no nothing. My own rough breathing was all I could hear, muffled in my ears.

Elliot looped an arm around my waist, pulling me back against him. He was already angling against me before my deadened motor skills kicked in. He slid inside of me, roughly, and an ugly, jagged sound ripped from my throat. It sounded wild, broken, like an animal caught in a trap. His cock stretched me, but it didn't hurt. He didn't force himself deep, at first. I tossed my head back, eyes to the sky, as he slid another few inches into me.

I couldn't believe it was happening again.

“Fuck,” he whispered, dropping his forehead to the valley between my shoulder blades.

“I'll never forgive you,” I whispered, even as my body accepted him and pulled him deeper. He began to move against me, sliding in and out. He yanked down the front of my dress, freeing my breasts. He kneaded them with his rough gloves, his lips pressed against the wet skin of my back. I heard a strangled cry and I knew it was me, that I'd become that wounded animal. He held me to his chest, his knees on either side of mine, and bucked hard, his hips against my ass. Then he did it again and again and again, until I lost count. Our grunting began to mingle, becoming one with each thrust.

It felt nasty and dirty and wrong and good and bad, all at the same time. His cock was so hard and big, and each thrust was forcing me closer to the edge of a cliff I didn't want to jump over. I didn't want to come with Elliot's cock inside of me, not ever again. The bastard didn't deserve it.

“Fuck, baby, fuck,” he chanted softly against my skin, dropping his hands to my hips, holding me tightly against him as he thrust hard, so hard I

had to grit my teeth to prevent a scream. A sharp cry still escaped. I rolled my hips to distract him, but the pleasure from the small movement caused my eyes to roll back in my head. My pussy clenched around him, and he jerked into me with a growl.

“Take it, Joanie. Take it,” he gritted out, hoarsely. Then he made me scream again, pinching the spot on the back of my thigh when I least expected it. “I didn't forget,” he growled. “Every inch of your skin belongs to me. Every. Inch.” He thrust hard to emphasize the last two words, and I dropped to my elbows, my forehead brushing against the grass. “That motherfucker never stood a chance.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, resisting the urge to look over at Trace. I don't want to see the look on his face as another man violated me right in front of him. Although I couldn't love Trace, I knew he was a good man. He loved me. He wanted to protect me. He would never fuck me on the ground, in the dirt, like we were two animals in heat.

With a growl, Elliot pulled out of me, and I moaned at the emptiness. Then the world spun as he rolled me over onto my back, repositioning himself between my legs, no hesitation. He pushed inside again, his eyes on mine. He balanced on his elbows, caging me in. He hammered into me, our hips banging together in a rough rhythm.

“I love you,” he breathed, wrapping his arms around me and holding me tightly against him. “I'm never going to let you leave me again.” A pang went through me at his words and I let my arms flop open, although I ached to grab him and hold on. Holding on would have given me an ounce of stability. As it was, I was at his mercy. And he fucked me mercilessly. My traitorous body gushed around him as he pumped in and out of me. Together, our bodies found a devastating rhythm. When he pulled at my lower lip with his teeth, sucking it into his mouth, my body gave out. An orgasm shot through me, painful in its intensity. His cock felt so fucking good inside of me as I clenched and pulled him deep. Another ragged cry ripped from my throat, piercing the quiet night. Then I was kissing him, sucking his tongue as he fucked me through my climax.

He came with a growl against my mouth, the veins in his neck bulging and his eyes closed. I felt him spurt into me, filling me up with his hot come. I threw my head to the side, feeling my body collapse into the soft grass. He followed me down, his body heavy on mine. Our bodies twitched

in tandem, the shock of the orgasm still rushing through me. He recovered first, pushing off the ground into a crouch. I didn't move as he pulled away. I just lay there, in shock. The dark sky yawned above me and I wished I could just disappear. I wished I could become a light breeze and float away, but as always, I didn't get what I wanted. Elliot stood, dark and big, towering over me as he zipped back up his pants.

"I'm going to kill you," Trace's voice echoed in my ears, and for a minute, I thought he was talking to me. I rolled my head, blinking to clear my vision. Trace's face was red, his cheeks stained with tears. His wrists were bloody, the metal of the handcuffs cutting into his skin. "I'm going to fucking kill you, you motherfucking son of a bitch!" he screamed, hoarsely.

Elliot walked toward him slowly, hinging at the waist to pick something off the ground. I squinted, trying to see what it was. My breath caught in my throat when I realized it was the knife. I'd dropped it when I tackled him. Forcing myself onto my hands and knees, I began to crawl through the grass.

"Elliot!" I screamed, but it felt like my mouth was full of cotton.

He glanced back at me over his shoulder, and I saw the evil smile on his face right before he stabbed Trace in the chest.

"No!" I heard myself wail, the sound shredding my throat. I struggled to stand, almost tumbling again when my leg almost gave out on me. I began limping toward the two men on the patio, my ankle screaming out in pain. I didn't know then, but I'd broken it when I shoved Elliot into the pool. A hairline fracture, but painful as hell anyway. I couldn't move as fast I wanted to, besides. The scene in front of me was like one of those nightmares where you try to run but you move at a snail's pace. I could see Elliot stabbing Trace over and over again, in slow motion. Trace slumped to the ground like a rag doll, his blood spreading thickly across the stone patio.

Elliot turned to me, slick red covering his hands, and he didn't expect me to grab at the knife. I felt the wooden handle in my palm and I pulled it toward me. His fingers were slippery, losing his grasp. I saw myself stab him in slow motion, the blade disappearing into the black of his shirt. It was a side wound, not square in the chest like I would have preferred, but it was better than nothing. He opened his mouth, then closed it again, like he was too shocked to say anything.

I stepped back, letting the knife clatter to the ground. My new dress was stained pink, all of a sudden. When I held out my hands and they were red with Elliot's blood, I couldn't help it. My mind felt light, almost like I was floating above myself. Nothing seemed serious anymore. Nothing was real.

As I stared down at my hands, I couldn't stop myself.  
I laughed.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Fuck.*

As I watched the knife slide into me, I almost didn't believe it. But then the white electric pain came, and I believed it. The love of my life stabbed me, then she laughed about it.

Joan tossed her head back, the laughter bursting out of her mouth. It was a beautiful sound. I realized with a jolt I hadn't heard her laugh since that very first night in the bar, all those years ago. It was a beautiful sound, and I imagined hearing it over and over again for the rest of my life. Love for her shot through me and I loved her more than ever, even as my blood oozed down the front of my shirt. Tears were streaming down her face when she finally stopped, and then she looked me dead in the eye.

"Are you going to die?" she said.

"Hell no," I said, pressing my hand to my side. It was only a flesh wound, I was sure. The knife hadn't gone that deep. I stepped closer to her and she jerked away from me, like I was going to hit her. Instead I pulled up her dress with my free hand, sliding her straps back onto her shoulders. Her hair was wet and starting to curl, mascara smudged down her cheeks, and blood was on her neck, but she looked fucking perfect. She stared up at me, her brown eyes strangely distant, like she couldn't really see me. She was in shock, I realized. "Come on," I said. "We have to go."

"No," she shook her head, furrowing her brow. Impatient, I grabbed her arm, stepping over the carcass of the man who'd dared to touch my woman. I pulled her along, pain radiating down my side. She tripped and fell into me and we banged into the kitchen island. It fucking hurt so bad I almost backhanded her for it, but I didn't. I was going to have to learn to restrain myself if I was going to marry her. Real men didn't hit women, I remember

my mother saying to me, a bag of frozen peas against her face after my old man slugged her. I didn't want to be that guy anymore, not for Joan.

She deserved more.

"Elliot," she said in a small voice.

"What, baby?" I asked between clenched teeth.

"I don't want to go with you," she said, as I dragged her through the living room, blood dripping all over the rug.

"Too fucking bad." I stop, pulling her into my chest and putting my bloody hands on either side of her face. She was everything. Fucking her again had put everything back in perspective. She may have agreed to marry that other fucking asshole, but she was made for me. Her body fit mine perfectly. She was the best sex of my life. The way she held me and kissed me and fought me... I needed it. I craved it. Now that I had her again, there was no way in hell I was giving her up. I would die first.

And if I died, she was coming along for the ride.

The thing between us was until death do we part, whether she realized it or not.

"Fuck you. No," she said, looking up at me, her eyes harder this time. She was trying to make me hit her, but I wasn't going to take the bait.

"You don't have a choice," I said. "I came here for you and I'm not leaving here without you."

She took a step back and I knew she was about to take off. I didn't give her the chance. I looped an arm around her waist and picked her up, although red-hot pain seared through me at the motion. I chose to ignore it as I hauled her out of the house. She kicked and screamed and squirmed, but I locked my muscles and didn't budge. Her screams echoed in the cul-de-sac, but the neighbors lived far enough off of the road that I wasn't too worried. I threw her in the passenger seat of my rented car and then we booked it the hell out of Dallas.

## Chapter Eleven

It was after 2:00 a.m. I was slumped low in the seat beside Elliot, all of my fight gone, officially. The shock had faded, but I still felt dead inside. My adrenaline had drained out of me slowly, leaving me limp. My body ached, I was cold, I had water in my ear, and the chlorine and dried blood that coated me was making me itchy. I could tell he didn't feel much better. He held himself rigid in the seat, his hand pressed into his side. He'd told me that the stab wound wasn't bad, but I didn't believe him. I wondered how close to bleeding to death he was. Because it was dark and he was in black clothes, I couldn't tell how much he'd bled. Not that I gave a fuck.

If he died, I would cry no tears.

"Almost there," he murmured, and we took an anonymous exit off the highway. There was no number marking the exit. There were no gas stations or Wal-Marts or McDonalds as far as the eye could see. We were out in the boonies. We drove along a dark winding road, the Texas horizon stretched out flat all around us. He took a few turns, and I tried to keep track of them, but my mind was mush. My memory was for shit. I had been through too much that night. My thoughts wandered back to Trace. I wondered if he was alive. I wondered if he was dead, and if that meant he was in peace.

His mother was going to be devastated.

She was a nice woman, short and plump, always with a smile on her face. Trace, a good Texas boy, loved his momma, and she loved him right back. I drew in a ragged breath. I was too hollow to feel grief for him, but I knew others would mourn him. He hadn't deserved what had happened to him. His only crime was loving me.

My crime was much more sinister.

I'd led a psychopath to my front door, literally. I would never forgive myself for my stupidity, especially if Trace died. When Elliot finally killed me, I would die knowing I deserved it.

After what seemed like forever, we pulled into the pitted parking lot of a shitty motel. It was a shabby one-level building where the doors to the rooms opened directly to the parking lot. Completely sleazy. The neon sign above us lit the car up in yellow light, and I watched Elliot out of the corner

of my eye. His face was hard with pain and fatigue and he was clenching the steering wheel as he maneuvered into a parking spot outside of the room labeled 5A.

“No problems,” he said, turning off the car. “No screaming. No drama.” I stayed silent and stared straight ahead. “Don't fuck with me. We're done fighting tonight.”

“We'll never be done fighting,” I said. He turned in the seat to look at me, his face hardened from the pain.

“I think we're fucking even,” he said, holding up his hand, covered in slick dark blood. I didn't answer him, just unbuckled my seatbelt and opened the car door. “Don't even think about running,” he said through gritted teeth.

Run where? I thought, looking around. I slid out of the car and immediately yelped in pain. A sharp, splintering pain shot through my leg when I put pressure on my ankle. I leaned against the car door, lifting my foot off of the ground to study it. Sure enough, it was swollen.

“You hurt?” he asked, opening his own door.

“Like you give a shit,” I muttered, hobbling around to the side as I shut the door. So much for running. I had absolutely nothing—no money, no ID, no underwear, no shoes. Only a bloodstained dress and a bum leg. I glanced around the parking lot. There was one other car in the lot, an ancient Ford truck, and two motorcycles. The light was on in the little office near the entrance, but I doubted any help would be found there. Deep in the country, folks tended to look the other way to avoid trouble. Besides, I was half-Mexican. I doubted anyone in those parts would be interested in going out of their way to help me.

I hobbled around to the front of the car, keeping one hand on the car. He dropped one foot to the ground, but didn't move any further.

“Joanie,” he growled and I felt the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. “Get over here.” I made my way slowly over to the driver's side. At that angle, I could see that his seat was stained with wet blood.

“Jesus,” I whispered. “You have to go the hospital.”

“I'll be fine once you patch me up.”

“Me?” I said, my voice going up an octave. He really was crazy if he thought I was going to help him.

“Help me, baby,” he rasped, turning slowly to drop his other leg to the asphalt. He let out a hoarse breath, closing his eyes as a wave of pain went through him.

“My ankle's fucked up,” I said.

“Just help me!” he growled and I relented, letting him slide an arm across my shoulders. I leaned against the car for leverage as I helped him slowly to his feet. He handed me the key and eventually we got inside the dingy hotel room. We must have looked a sight, me hopping on one foot and him leaning on a girl half-a-foot shorter than him. Once inside the room, I ran my hand along the wall for balance and led him to the bathroom. Luckily, the bathroom was right inside the entrance and not across the room. I didn't know how we would have made it otherwise.

I flicked on the light and he dropped like a sack of potatoes on the side of the tub. He almost took me with him, but I managed to grab ahold of the edge of the sink, which kept me from falling.

“*Fuck!*” he hissed, finally getting a good look at the damage. He tried to pull his shirt over his head, but couldn't. I helped him, leaning my hip against the sink for balance. I dropped his wet black shirt on the floor and finally got a good look at the wound I'd caused. The wound was a dark gash low on his left side. It looked terrible. Coagulated blood was smeared all over his side and arm. He reached over and grabbed one of the threadbare white towels from the rack and pressed it to his side. “Shit, baby. You got me good,” he said, squinting up at me. “Let me look at that ankle.”

I lifted my leg, placing my heel on the toilet seat. In the light, it looked pretty bad, as well. Bruised, angry red, and swollen to twice its normal size.

“Dammit,” I whisper. An injury like that killed all chances of escaping, for at least a few days, if not a week or more.

“Ain't we a pair,” he said with a Texas twang. He lifted a hand and fingered the hem of my once new dress, now stained and dirty. I hopped back, lowering my foot to the floor, away from his grasp. “Help me undress,” he said.

“No fucking way,” I replied, shaking my head.

“I need to clean up,” he said, through gritted teeth.

“No.”

“Stop fighting me!” he growled.



“I'm not your wife, I'm not your girlfriend, and I'm not your slave,” I said. “I'm not doing shit for you.”

He shot off the side of the tub surprisingly fast for a man with a hole in his side. He threw me against the wall of the bathroom, his hand around my throat.

“Do we need to have another conversation about who's in charge?” he growled, but I didn't cower. I stared him straight in the eyes, letting him know I wasn't his to control anymore. He swayed on his feet and closed his eyes for a moment, letting the pain ebb through him, and I acted without thinking, jabbing my finger into his side. He let out a pained howl and I thought I was going to pass out as he clamped his hand hard around my throat, completely cutting off my air. My fingers flew around his wrist, trying to dislodge him. Then, somehow, we ended up on the floor, me sprawled on top of him, and his eyes glazed and unfocused, staring up at the ceiling.

For a minute I thought he was dead.

Then he gasped in a sharp breath and I swallowed my disappointment. I lifted off of him, glancing down at his nasty wound. Fresh blood bubbled up in the gash and, without thinking, I grabbed the towel from the floor and pressed it to his side.

“That fucking hurt, Joanie,” he whispered, his face pale.

“I think you're dying,” I replied.

“If I'm dying, I'm taking you with me,” he said, closing his eyes and smiling. I glanced at the door, knowing that I could get away. I could take the car and drive it back to civilization, no looking back. Then cool metal clamped around my right wrist. I barely had a chance to register what was happening when he locked the handcuffs, one around my wrist and the other around his.

The son of a bitch.

\*\*\*\*\*

Some time later, I lay awake in bed next to him, listening to the pattern of his breathing. It was dark in the room and I had no idea what time it is. The heavy curtains were pulled over the windows, completely shielding us

from any light from the outside. We were both naked, after taking a shower. The room was hot, an ancient fan spinning hot air around above us.

After I bathed him, I stitched him up with an old small needle and thread kit we found in the drawer of the hotel room. The wound wasn't very long, so it only took about ten stitches. He looked like he was going to belt me in the face a few times when I stabbed the needle through his skin, but, surprisingly, he didn't. When I finished, he collapsed on the bed and passed out, still connected to me via the pair of handcuffs. I tried to pick the lock with the needle, but only succeeded in breaking the brittle metal of the needle. I examined the handcuffs, and they looked hardcore. Definitely police-issued. Impossible to break free from. Then I drew my eyes over his naked body. His wound was a blazing red and his skin was pale. He'd lost a lot of blood, I didn't know how much much, but he was definitely weakened. He would need food soon and water.

I needed food, too. Surprisingly, I was actually hungry, even though I'd eaten dinner that evening. Usually, I had zero appetite and skipped meals without realizing that I had. I pressed a fist into my belly as it rumbled. His chest rose and fell with each breath, his body still as perfect and toned as it had been two years ago. I winced in pain as I adjusted my ankle. I had it propped up on an extra pillow, but the swelling had only gotten worse.

There was a rotary phone on the bedside table beside him, but I hadn't bothered to try to make a call. I didn't want to be saved. I knew if I turned on the TV, the news would probably be blaring the story of a man who was killed in a home invasion, his fiancé abducted. I had made sure that Trace would be discovered—I'd left the front door open when Elliot pulled me out, triggering the home alarm. The police would have been there within the hour. They would have found all the evidence—the blood, the fingerprints, the gun at the bottom of the pool, my panties tossed in the middle of the lawn. They would watch the footage from the security camera that filmed the front of the house. They would see me being dragged off by a man all in black.

I could never be found.

I could disappear.

Just like that, Joan Vasquez could be no more.

I was going to leave Elliot as soon as I could, but I wasn't going back home. I could never show my face there again, now that they knew

everything. They knew I was damaged goods. The farce was over. I wanted to bury my old identity and all the shit she'd been through. I could start a new life, as a new person. A new person who'd never had anything bad happen to her. A new person who was a complete mystery to anyone she ever met. I didn't want to face the looks of pity from my mother and the way my father would avoid my eyes. I didn't want to see the looks on my brother's faces when they heard what had happened to me, the looks of pain and disgust.

I'd spared them from it for a long time.

Now, they would have to deal with it.

Elliot stirred beside me, rolling his head toward mine.

"Joan," he whispered. "You're here."

"Of course I'm here, asshole." I lifted my wrist, the metal that connected us clinking in response.

"I think I like it when you're feisty," he said. He lifted his hand and the cold metal touched my skin and sent a shiver through me. He ran his finger down the hollow of my stomach. "You're too skinny." He dipped his fingertip into my bellybutton. "When we get back to Austin, I'm going to make you eat." I bit my lip as he continued stroking me. I didn't dare move, but I wanted to shove his hand away. I didn't like how my body was reacting to his touch. "Do you like when I feed you?" he whispered, but I ignored him, keeping my eyes to the ceiling even as goosebumps rose on my skin and my nipples pebbled at his touch. He brushed his knuckles over my lower abdomen. "I'm going to marry you." He paused, letting the words sink in, his fingers continuing their dance across my skin. "Then you're going to have my baby. You'll love our kid and you'll learn to love me, too." He sucked in a rough breath, rolling over onto his side.

"Don't!" I hissed. "You'll start bleeding again."

"Shhh," he breathed, pressing his lips to the valley of my breasts as he dipped his fingers between my legs. He strummed my clit, his tongue working the soft skin stretched over my breastbone. "Joan, I'm sorry," he breathed into me. "But I wouldn't take it back, even if I could. Because now I have you."

"You don't have me," I moaned, the pleasure building low in my belly. I arched my back into his mouth, and he dragged his tongue across the swell of my breast to my nipple. He ran his rough tongue over the sensitive bud,

torturously slow. "You think you love me, but you don't," I gritted out, my teeth clenched.

"I do," he whispered, then sucked me into his hot mouth. As his mouth worked my breast, he slid a finger inside of me. A low cry escaped my lips, and I rolled my hips to meet the thrust of his finger. "My body knows yours," he replied, and then showed me that his words were true. He slid his finger in and out of me slowly, every inch of me reacting to every inch of him. Then he pulled out, releasing me. "Sit on my face," he demanded, rolling onto his back.

"I can't," I hissed, pissed at him for making me want him.

"I want to taste you," he said, his eyes, like two deep pools, on me. "I want to show you." His tone sent a pang of longing through me. I wanted him to lick me and taste me. I wanted the distraction he offered. So I sat up, lifting my leg gingerly, careful to not move my ankle. I hoisted myself up on one knee, sliding the injured leg over his chest. It was ridiculous almost, like we were two geriatrics trying to get it on in a nursing home. I giggled, the sound bubbling out of me before I could stop it. Then we were both laughing softly as we moved at a glacial pace, adjusting our injured selves against each other, until I was positioned over him, his nose nudging my clit. He blew a cool breath against me and I shivered. When he slid his tongue deep into me, feasting like he was dying of hunger, I curled my fingers around the cheap wooden headboard and held on. My body was stiff and tight, my mouth open and panting as he worked his evil tongue against me.

Our connected hands intertwined on my thigh, the chain of the cuffs brushing against my skin. He showed me how much he loved me with every lick and suck, every moan. A man couldn't lick a pussy like that without having some feelings for the woman attached to it. He worshipped me, leaving me dripping and ready for release. When he nipped at my thigh I knew he wanted to fuck me. I glanced back over my shoulder, and sure enough, his cock was hard. How he had enough blood left in him to get an erection, I didn't know.

He rolled us over slowly, giving me time to adjust my leg. "On your stomach," he rasped, out of breath. I didn't argue, just moved myself the way he wanted me. My body was crying out for him. It hurt, too, but I was used to the pain. He crawled over me, hiking my knee up as he slid between

my legs. He was inside of me a second later, his hard cock sliding in to my wetness with no resistance. I sighed deeply as my body melded around his, because it felt so damn perfect. He jerked his hips, then hissed out a breath and I knew the movement had caused him pain.

Good.

Every thrust caused me pleasure and him pain, but he didn't stop. He fisted his hand in my hair as hips pumped against my ass, all of his thick length embedded in me. We moved together, slow but desperate, just like that Saturday morning so long ago.

"Your body was made for me," he whispered. "It's mine." He thrust deep, letting out a pained, ragged cry. "It's all mine," he gritted out. I could hear the strain in his voice. I wondered how much he hurt. I hoped it was a lot. I hope it felt like I was stabbing him all over again with each thrust. The thought of how much I was hurting him sent a thrill of arousal through me.

"I fucked him," I said, then grunted hard when he bucked against me. He cried out again, and another thrill went through me.

"How?" he hissed. "How could you let him touch you?" He dropped his head to run his teeth across my shoulder and I bowed my back, letting my body press against his chest. The feel of his skin against mine was electric. All the nerve endings in my body reacted, the pleasure sizzling through me. "How could you let him touch you when I can give you everything?" With a sharp intake of breath, he reared his hips back, pulling out of me. I gasped, not expecting it. My body clenched, wanting him back. Then he repositioned himself against my ass. My eyes widened and I squirmed against him. "Don't fight me," he whispered.

"It's going to hurt," I grit out. "Both of us."

"It'll hurt more if you fight," he murmured, his lips grazing my shoulder. "Did you let him touch you here?" he murmured, sliding the thick head of his cock between my cheeks.

"Yes," I admitted, because I wanted to hurt him.

"Did you like it when he did it?" His voice was low and dangerous and I bit my lip, remembering how merciless he could be.

"No," I whispered and I felt his fingers gripping into my ass, his thumb dipping into my tightness.

"You like it when I do it," he growled out, and I opened my mouth to protest, but then closed it again. Maybe I deserved the pain. Maybe I

deserved everything that had happened to me. A man was dead because of me. Other girls may have been hurt because of me.

Elliot deserved the pain, too.

*Ain't we a pair.* His words echoed in my ears.

"Go slow," I breathed, dropping flat to the mattress, my cheek against the rough striped sheet. He placed his hand over mine, the handcuffs clinking metallic close to my ear. I heard him spit, lubricating me as he pushed against me. I'd let Trace have anal sex with me once, out of spite. I didn't want Elliot to be the only one who'd touched me there. I'd suffered through it, although Trace had been gentle. Too gentle. Elliot obliged me and went slow, but he wasn't gentle. There wasn't a gentle bone in his body.

The head of him pushed deeper and deeper and I lay there and took it, my fingers clenching the sheet. He gripped my hand as he slowly rolled and swerved his hips against my ass, burying himself in me. I could hear his breathing labor as his lust got ahold of him. I closed my eyes, focusing on the friction between us. I felt full to the brim, but I forced myself to breathe and relax into him. He moaned, his lips close to my ear, as I let my muscles loosen, and he slid deeper inside of me. He wrapped his free hand around my throat, bending me back against him.

I felt my skin stretch tight over my stomach and my breasts jutted out as my spine arched. My nerves tingled and a shiver went through me. I liked the feel of his big hand around his throat, although I knew I shouldn't. I knew it was wrong, but I didn't care. Everything was wrong about me and him, but I couldn't deny the way he was making me feel. The pain had ebbed away, and all of my focus was on the way his big cock thrust in and out of me, filling and stretching me. I was completely under his control.

He drew his other hand up to cup my breast and I hissed out moan, curling my fingers around his wrist, the hard metal still binding us together. He kneaded me and pinched my nipple as his thrusts grew more insistent. I zeroed in on the way he toyed with me, his fingers doing magical things to my nipple. I dropped my head back onto his shoulder, my mouth open at the sheer pleasure of it all.

He was a murderer and a rapist. He was crazy and unstable and wanted to possess me, body and soul, but when he made love to me, I couldn't stop myself from wanting it. He'd taken everything from me and I was messed up enough to keep giving him more.

I was drowning in him.

When he dropped our hands to my clit, I ground against him, working myself into a lust-blind frenzy. His deft fingers knew just how to touch me. He remembered how to get me off, and I didn't fight it. In the dark motel room, so far from home, I moved with him, pumping my hips into his as he fucked me.

"Don't fight me, Joan," he rasped, his fingers flexing around my throat. "You're *mine*." I swallowed hard, the words finally sinking in. They repeated in my mind as he dug his knees into the mattress and plunged into me, harder and harder. A cry was forced from my throat as the pain and the pleasure mingled low in my belly. His thumb strummed my clit as his middle finger slipped between my folds, and I fell into an abyss of climax. My eyesight blacked out as I came. The intensity tightened my muscles and locked my jaw and I screamed as my inner muscles spasmed and rippled around his girth. Feeling how big he was inside of me brought on another wave of torturous pleasure. It hit me out of nowhere and my eyes jolted open, although my vision was blurry. He'd fucked me too good. I officially lost all control.

"Elliot!" I heard myself moan, and he bucked and swerved, his own climax within reach. My insides hummed with the force of my double orgasm, and finally, he came with a pained moan. My body was so sensitive, I could feel him spilling and spurting inside of me, and I arched into him, wanting it all. His fingers continued to work against me as he jerked inside of me until we collapsed together, the heat between us our bodies seeping under my skin, into my bones.

Something shimmered between us, an electricity that was impossible to deny. I shivered beneath him, despite his warmth. He pressed his face to my back, his breathing sharp and heavy. He pulled out of me and I moaned at the release. My ass throbbed, my pussy throbbed, my whole damn body throbbed, but all of my anger and shame and fear had been fucked right out of me. Elliot was all that remained.

"Oh my God," I whispered.

"You're mine," he repeated, as he shuddered against me. "Say it."

"I'm yours," I breathed, knowing it was true as soon as the words left my mouth. I was Elliot's, whether I wanted to be or not. He had forced

himself into my brain, my *molecules*, and had changed me irrevocably. The girl that I had been before he'd come into my life was officially dead.

“Forever and ever,” he whispered.

“Forever and ever,” I repeated, drawing his hand out from beneath us. I slipped my fingers between his calloused ones, the handcuffs reminding me that I was his prisoner as much as he was mine.

I hated him, but I craved him. I wanted him dead, but I also wanted him to fill me up and fuck me and hold me tight against his unyielding body. Even now, years later, I can't stop myself from wanting him. We're stuck in a fucked-up web of our own making and there's no way out.

For either of us.

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## Chapter Twelve

I lay beneath him, my breasts smashed against the mattress and his chest against my back. His breath skimmed the sensitive skin of my back and I could feel his heartbeat through my skin. The curve of my ass fit in the curve of his pelvis, and we didn't bother moving. It wasn't exactly comfortable, but we still didn't move. Our bodies were too exhausted. Time passed and we slept and slept, the warmth of the room lulling us into deep unconsciousness.

An explosive crash jolted me out of sleep and I opened my eyes to a blindingly bright light, almost otherworldly in the dark room. I could hear a lot of screaming and I furrowed my brow because I couldn't make out the words. Everything sounded muffled. Elliot stirred on top of me, and then his weight was pulled off of me, roughly. The handcuffs that connected us yanked my arm upward.

"Wait! Wait!" I screamed, not even knowing what was happening. Reality seemed hyperactive, moving too fast to comprehend. A face came into my field of vision, a woman with dark skin and compassionate eyes.

"Joan Vasquez? Is that your name?" she asked, her voice authoritative but gentle. I nodded, and she leaned over and I felt her drape the cool sheet over me. I saw blood on my arm and I lifted it to get a better look. I realized I was laying in a pool of blood, still damp beneath me.

I heard a loud 'click' and my hand dropped, the metal cuff still attached to my wrist. They'd cut the chain that bound me and Elliot. I stared down at my hand, not believing what I was seeing, my blood-stained fingers brushing the dingy brown carpet.

"Joan, we're going to get you to a hospital, okay? Your parents will be there. They'll be so happy to see you," the woman said in her calm tone. She was a police officer, I'd realized as my dazed mind slowly began to focus. "You're going to be just fine."

"Where is he?" I mumbled, glancing around. More police officers stood silhouetted in the door, but the woman and I were alone in the room. He was gone.

There was slick wet blood on the floor, as well as a long-handled set of bolt cutters.

I couldn't help it. I burst into tears, the grief like an unstoppable wave.  
I had lost Elliot.  
I had lost myself.  
I had lost everything.

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## Chapter Thirteen

Later, when I read the police report, I found out that the officers had been hunting us for a day and a half. My neighbor Mr. Evans had given them the license plate number, having written it down when he saw the suspicious car in the cul-de-sac that fateful night. They finally tracked us down at noon at the motel in the middle of nowhere, specifically Hudson, Texas. Elliot and I were rushed to a nearby hospital, where they did a rape kit on me and cast my ankle.

Elliot ended up in the ICU.

The irony was that if the police hadn't busted in on us, he would have bled to death. He'd ripped his stitches out in the midst of our frenzied lovemaking. Without medical attention, he would have been dead before the day was out and I would have been free of him for good.

As it was, he ended up living, for better or for worse.

I truly didn't know how I felt about any of it. For the most part, I was numb. I went in and out of consciousness for a full day in the hospital and when I wasn't asleep, I pretended to be. A revolving door of my parents and my brothers stayed by my bedside, sometimes holding my blood-stained hand. I could always hear my mother's sniffles and light sobs, whether she was by my side or not. She was mourning her perfect daughter's future and the her perfect grandchildren that would never be born. She was mourning me, even though I'd lived. My worst nightmare had come true. My whole family knew what had happened to me.

They knew about Elliot, and everything he'd done. All the physical damage was in the police report for anyone to read. The tears, the cuts, the bruises, the broken bones. Now, I was just another rape victim, a broken, abused woman who deserved pity and concern. Elliot would be put on trial and I would be the star witness. Our story would be public knowledge, as much as it pained me.

The handcuff still encircled my wrist, like an afterthought. No one had noticed it, or collected it for evidence. My body had been scraped down for DNA samples, but the cuff still remained. It was tangible proof of my ordeal. There was no more denying, or pretending. I had been stripped bare.

I had nothing left.

Elliot had ruined my life, and yet... it felt like a piece of me was missing, knowing that he was gone. The moment I'd been dreading for years had happened. He'd hunted me down and found me. Strangely enough, now I was no longer scared of him. I was no longer scared of what he would do to me because I knew. I knew he loved me and wanted me and would do anything to have me. I also knew what I was capable of and the power I held. I was his blind spot. He'd made mistake after mistake when he came for me. He was literally crazy over me, and I could use it to my advantage.

He wasn't done with me, but I wasn't done with him, either. Not by a long shot.

I knew that he was in the same hospital, after I heard my father arguing with my brother Robert about where he was. Robert wanted to go upstairs to ICU and my father told him not to. Then they exchanged a few more heated whispers, but that's all I could make out. The need to see him snaked through me and took root in my brain. It made me antsy and it was hard to keep still. Finally, when I couldn't pretend anymore, I opened my eyes.

"Oh my goodness," my mother whispered, grabbing my father's arm. "Joan?" She stood, leaning over me, her cool hand caressing my forehead. "Jo-baby, momma and daddy are here."

"Hi," I murmured, tears blurring my vision. I hated to see my parents crying, especially over me. Especially since I didn't deserve it.

"How do you feel, baby?" she asked, her perfume wrapping around me like a cloak. I swiped at my eyes, my throat threatening to close up.

"I don't know," I forced out, avoiding their eyes.

"Do you... do you know what happened?" my mother said, her voice hesitant.

"Yes, momma," I said, getting it over with. The time for pretending was over. "I remember." I hear her breath catch in her throat, and I sigh. "But I'm okay," I say, robotically.

"Yes, you're going to be fine, *mija*," my father piped up, his deep voice rumbling in my ears.

"I know, daddy," I sighed, wishing the floor would open up and swallow me whole. The thought of my staunch and traditional father knowing that Elliot had fucked me six ways to Sunday was almost too

much. Old-fashioned justice was probably on his mind, despite him telling Robert to let the cops handle it.

"The police want to talk to you," my mother said. "When you're able."

"How's Trace?" I asked, finally forcing myself to look her in the face. My eyes flicked back and forth between them, waiting for the hard truth. I knew he was dead, but I just wanted to hear it. I *needed* to hear it.

"He's alive, baby," my mother whispered, her eyes glassy with tears. "He's been in and out of surgery, but he's alive." I felt my eyes drop closed and I just let the words sink in for a minute. Good, kind, loving Trace was alive. Neither Elliot, nor I, was a murderer. I felt my shoulders sag with relief and some of my crushing guilt ebbed away. "Were you there? When he was stabbed?" My mother's voice was low and horrified. I nodded and I heard her muffle a sob behind her hand.

"I'm sorry, mamma," I said, opening my eyes and staring down at my hands, at the cuff around my wrist, glinting in the fluorescent light.

"There is nothing to be sorry about," my father murmured.

"You two are alive, that's all that matters," my mother continued.

"Martin, the police. Get the police, please," she said to my father. He patted my knee through the sheet and then left, closing the door behind him. My mother leaned in and I knew what was coming.

"The doctor says that... that man..."

"He raped me, mamma," I said, turning the full force of my gaze on her. I didn't want to beat around the bush when everybody already knew what happened. The sooner it was out in the open, the sooner my mother could get used to it. "He raped me in front of Trace, and then he raped me later in the motel room." My mother's eyes widened and I felt almost bad for speaking the harsh truth. "He made me do things. I'm not proud of it, but I did what I had to do to survive."

"No, baby, no one thinks..." she trailed off again, then shook her head, her perfect blond hair moving with her. "You're so strong, Joanie. So strong."

"I don't feel strong, mamma," I admitted. "I feel broken and tired and used up. But I'm going to be okay. Believe me," I lied through my teeth, hoping that I sounded convincing. The dark-skinned policewoman from the motel gave a light knock on the door then and stepped into the room.

“Hello, Joan. How do you feel?” she asked, cocking her head. I was already getting annoyed with that question, but I shrugged in response. She stood at the end of the bed, a pad and pen in her hand. “Are you ready to talk?”

My mother made a strangled noise in the back of her throat and I knew she didn't want to hear me tell the story. She didn't want to hear about how Elliot had plunged the knife over and over into Trace after he'd overpowered and seduced me on the lawn. She didn't want to hear about how he'd fucked me in the ass as he declared his love for me. Not that I was going to go into all the nitty-gritty details, but whatever words were going to come out of my mouth, she wouldn't want to hear them.

“Can you give us a minute?” I asked her. She looked like she was going to say she wanted to stay, but then she stood and slipped from the room, closing the door lightly behind her. The detective looked at me, her eyes suddenly as worn-out looking as I felt.

“You ready?” she asked softly.

I sighed and nodded.

No time like the present.

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It was almost 1:00 a.m. when I finally got my chance. I convinced my parents to go to the hotel room they'd been staying in and sleep that night. They would be back in the morning to check me out. I was alone for the first time in two days. I slipped out of the bed, using the chair to steady myself. Then I pulled myself to standing, dragging my cast along the floor. My mother had brought my old pink terrycloth robe from home and I pulled it off the hook on the door and slipped it on. I poked my head out of the room, glancing down the empty hallway. The nurses's station was a few doors down, and I knew I would have to pass by it to get to the elevators. The only thing I knew was that Elliot was in the ICU. I didn't know which room he was in or how to get there.

I decided to try my luck with my sob story. I was a victim after all and I could milk it for all it was worth. I shuffled down to the nurses's station, my plaster cast scraping across the floor. A short plump nurse in pink scrubs

caught my eye and stood, opening her mouth. I cut her off before she could tell me to get back in bed.

"I'm Joan Vasquez—" I began.

"I know who you are," she said, and I checked out her name tag. Her name was Cynthia. She had bleached blond hair, acrylic nails and soft blue eyes. I thought I might have a good chance with her. She didn't look like a hard-ass in the least.

"I know he's in this hospital," I continued. Cynthia's eyes widened. "My attacker."

"I'm not at liberty to say," Cynthia said softly.

"I know he is. I want to see him," I say, keeping my voice light but strong. I was willing to squeeze out a few tears if necessary.

"Ms. Vasquez," she began, her brow furrowed.

"Please." I blinked, letting myself tear up. I saw the indecision cross her face. "I need to see him."

"He's in the ICU. He won't be able to talk to you," she whispered.

"I don't want to talk. I just need... I just need..." I let myself trail off, and took a deep jagged breath.

"Closure?" Cynthia supplied, her eyes concerned. I nodded, swiping at a tear on my cheek. Cynthia leaned closer to me, her eyes glancing down the hallways on either side of me. "There are police at his door. They won't let you in."

"I just want to see," I whispered back. "I want to see what I did to him."

"*You* stabbed him?" she said, eyebrows raising to her hairline. "Bless your heart."

"I had to," I said.

"You damn near killed the bastard," she said. "Good for you."

I sniffled, biting my lip as if I was unsure and vulnerable. She took pity on me, which I had been counting on. She sighed, tapping her nails on the formica countertop.

"You just want to see him?"

"One more time," I pleaded softly. "I go home tomorrow. I need closure."

"I know you do, darlin'." She gave a curt nod, making her decision to help me, and walked over to a folded wheelchair. She pulled it out and

wheeled it over. "Have a seat. I'll give you a ride." I let myself smile lightly and hobbled over to her and sat down. She rolled me to the elevators, and took me up to the seventh floor.

"He was in surgery today," she confided in me. "Had to have two blood transfusions. After all the good, average Joes that come through these halls everyday and don't always make it out, to see a devil like that make it through almost makes me question God's plan."

"Me too," I murmured, my heart clenching in my chest the closer I got to Elliot. I needed to see him, but I was scared to, as well. The feelings I had for him were terrifying and confusing, but also strong. If I closed my eyes, I could feel his body wrapped around mine, and his lips against mine. I could hear his voice in my ear, whispering that he loved me and that I belonged to him.

My obsession was just beginning.

Cynthia rolled me through the dark hallways of the ICU, waving at another night nurse who gave her a questioning look. The nurse didn't give us any problems, though, and we turned a corner and a policeman was revealed, sitting in a chair at the end of the corridor.

"He's a cute one," Cynthia said as we rolled closer, and the officer stood and crossed his arms. He was middle-aged, tough with a buzzcut and a red face. Not really my type, but more power to her.

"What are you doing?" he asked, keeping his voice low, but not disguising his annoyance.

"She wants to see the perp," Cynthia said.

"The perp? Christ." The officer rolled his eyes. "Been watching *Law & Order* lately, nursie?"

"It's Cynthia." She tapped her name tag with a long nail.

"Well Cynthia, you can turn your cute ass right around and take her back downstairs." He dropped his eyes to look at me, and I noticed his gaze soften slightly. Even a tough asshole of a cop pitied me. How pathetic.

"She just wants to see the bastard who did this to her," Cynthia said lightly, but with a slight edge. "For closure."

"It's not up to me." Officer Asshole shrugged. "No one gets through but authorized personnel."

"I'm a nurse."

"Not you. And definitely not her."



“Please.” I spoke up finally, my voice pathetic and pleading. I felt the familiar tears welling up in my eyes. “Just a minute.”

“Just a minute,” Cynthia parroted. Officer Asshole sighed, and suddenly, he looked very tired.

“Look, fuck this guy,” he said, his eyes on me. “Go home and get a therapist and don't let this rule your life. Living your life is the best revenge.”

I worked my jaw, trying to think of a good response. I let out a jagged breath, my chest tight. Elliot was so close. I wanted to leap out of the chair and bolt into the room, but I couldn't. It was frustrating. The thought that I wouldn't get to see him was making me anxious. It was almost like I was going into withdrawal, like I was addicted to him. I eyed the officer's gun, wondering... I don't know exactly what I wondered, but a violent thought definitely passed my mind. What if Elliot could get ahold of that gun? What would he do with it? What could *I* do with it?

“He's right there, can't she just look in the window?” Cynthia pressed. “For closure.”

“Please,” I pleaded, dragging my eyes from his gun to his face.

“Fuck,” he sighed, shaking his head.

“*Please*,” I repeated, and a tear ran down my cheek and dropped in my lap.

“You know, I have a daughter about your age. Twenty-three fucking years old.” He dropped his hands to his hips. “You can look in the window. That's fucking it. You get one minute, and then you'll be back on your way.”

“Deal,” Cynthia said, and I could hear the smile in her voice. “One minute.” The officer stood aside and Cynthia rolled me to closer to his room. The door was closed, but there was a rectangular window on the wall, looking directly in. I dropped my foot to the floor, slowing the movement of the wheelchair.

“I need to stand,” I said, and Cynthia hustled around to help me.

“You got it?” she asked, her hand on my elbow when I was upright. I nodded and limped slowly to the window, my heart in my throat. Cynthia, thankfully, let me go alone. I didn't want to have to snap at her, after how nice she'd been. I had a desperate need to be alone with him, somehow. Well, as alone as I could be with two people watching, that is.

Finally, I reached the window and as soon as I saw him, I felt like I could breathe again. He looked terrible. He had an oxygen tube snaked under his nose. His eyes were closed, his lips in a straight line. He was pale under the fluorescent light and his cheekbones looked sharper than normal. He was handcuffed to the bed with a fresh pair, but he still had our matching cuff on his left wrist, the chain hanging down. I lifted my hand, wanting to knock on the window to wake him, but I didn't. I pressed my palm to the cool glass, my breath fogging it. I felt my tears flowing in earnest, and I didn't know why I was crying.

I wasn't sad. I didn't know exactly what I was feeling, but it wasn't sadness.

I wanted him to look at me. I wanted him to see the distance between us, the distance that was only going to get wider. He was definitely going to prison, for a long time. He wasn't going to get to love me, he wasn't going to get to touch me, and he wasn't going to get to fuck me. His hold over me was broken. I wanted to see the haunted look on his face as it sunk in. I wanted to see the rage when he realized he wasn't in control of what happened between us any more.

I was in control now.

I felt a smile curl over my lips, even as my tears continued to fall.

I was going to make him suffer and I was going to love every minute of it.

He turned his head in my direction as if he could sense me standing there. His eyes opened to slits, then widened as he saw me. I could feel his heartbeat speed up in my chest. I could feel the desperation radiating through him in my own body. He wanted to touch me. I could see it in his eyes. I wanted to touch him, too, but *not* touching him was much better. I took all of his longing into myself, and it only made me stronger. He was the weak one and I was the strong one, for the first time ever.

He opened his mouth as if to speak and I shook my head. He clenched his jaw, wincing in pain as he tried to struggle against his bindings.

"Don't," I mouth.

He froze. The desperation was all over his face. I watched as the realization of his predicament come over him. It was a beautiful sight.

He threw his head back and howled, trying to wrench his wrists free from the handcuffs. I watched him struggle in vain, my pussy clenching in

response. He was sexy as hell when he was desperate and clawing. My eyes were locked on him, entranced. Officer Asshole was jolted out of his conversation with Cynthia and hurried toward me.

“Shit!” he hissed as he banged on the window with his ham-like fist. Cynthia hurried away, to get the other night nurse. Elliot ignored him and continued growling incoherently like a trapped animal, the veins and muscles in his neck tight as he tried to free himself. I watched from the safety of the window as the nurses and the officer ran inside, holding him down as they shot him up with a sedative.

“Fuck! Fuck!” he growled, his fingers straining toward me, his eyes on mine. Then he dragged his gaze away, staring off toward the ceiling. “DAISY!” He gave one last pained scream, his voice echoing in my ears.

I blinked slowly as he called me Daisy. I realized he didn't want them to know he was talking to me. He wanted to keep something between us. Something close to affection for him blazed through me. We still had a secret, a secret life that no one would know. The details of my abduction were known to everyone, but they would never know everything.

Even now, he calls me Daisy unless we're alone. All the letters I sent him in prison, I wrote as Daisy. It's become our code, of sorts. Our own secret, private language.

Just for us.

“Daisy. You... you know,” he whispered once more, his eyes glazing over as the sedative took hold of him. I nodded, my hand pressed to the window, my whole body tight. The sight of him rearing up violently had done something to me. I *liked* it.

“Fucking whack-job.” Officer Asshole hiked up his belt and shook his head in disgust.

“Who's Daisy?” Cynthia asked.

“You two get the hell out of here. I think we've had enough trouble for tonight,” he said, pointing to the door.

“I agree,” Cynthia mumbled, darting a look at him and then at Elliot. I hobbled to the doorway, unable to stop myself. I was drawn to Elliot like a moth to flame. His eyes were closed again and his body was limp, his hand hanging down toward the floor. My eyes zeroed in on his hand, remembering the feel of that hand on my body. The need to touch him

burned stronger than ever, but before I knew it Cynthia's hand was on my elbow, guiding me toward the wheelchair.

Officer Asshole stood in the doorway, his hands on his hips.

“Thank you,” I said to him as Cynthia wheeled me away, my tears drying on my cheeks.

“Remember what I said. Living is the best revenge,” he said, his soft tone in direct opposition to his tough stance. I nodded, craning my neck to keep my eyes on him as we moved down the hallway. He got smaller and smaller until we turned the corner and I couldn't see him anymore.

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## Chapter Fourteen

If I looked hard enough, I could see still the bloodstains.

My mother had the patio sandblasted and cleaned, but I could still see Trace's blood in the seams between the stones. I could see my bloody footprints and the dried brown drops of Elliot's blood by the pool. I didn't mind it though, not much. Every morning, I woke at ten, after my father had gone to work and my mother had gone to her real estate office downtown. I put on my one-piece purple suit and padded down to the pool, my ankle almost fully healed. I took the long way around where Trace had collapsed, so still and pale I'd been convinced he was dead. I walked down the steps into the blue water of the pool, warmed by the morning sun, and began my laps.

My mother wanted to sell the house. When they asked me what I thought about the idea, I shrugged. I didn't plan on staying much longer. I didn't know where I was going to go, but I knew I was going to go somewhere far away. I lifted my head for a breath, then ducked back beneath the frothing water. They didn't know that I was going to leave them. They didn't know that after the trial, I was as good as gone.

I was waiting to see where they were going to send him.

He was in a prison about an hour away, awaiting trial. It took a week before he was well enough to be transferred from the hospital in Hudson. I knew because I called Cynthia one night, at the nurses's station. She whispered the information to me like she was committing a cardinal sin. I thanked her and assured her I was seeing a therapist. She breathed a sigh of relief when I said goodbye. I promised her I wouldn't call again.

I thought I would be able to stop pretending to be normal after I got home from the hospital. But I'd been forced back into my good daughter role; otherwise, they worried. I saw the lines around their eyes. I would catch my mother staring at me, but my father rarely looked at me at all. My brothers and their girlfriends were over-protective, not letting me go out by myself. If I wanted to go to the movies, they wanted to go with me. If I wanted to go to the drug store for tampons, I had to have an entourage. It was sweet of them to care, but I hated every minute of it.

Trace was back home with this mother, but we didn't talk. He didn't call me, and I didn't call him. To be honest, I didn't mind. As far as I was concerned, Trace and I had been over the moment Elliot knocked on the door that night. I couldn't pretend anymore, especially not with a man who'd almost died for me. I felt guilty, but not guilty enough to marry him. That would just be cruel.

After all, I belonged to someone else.

I pushed off of the wall of the pool with the balls of my feet, my body spearing through the water. The trial date had been set. In three months, I would be called forth to testify in front of a jury and a judge about what Elliot had done to me. The most important thing was I would see Elliot again. That was the only thing I was looking forward to. I wondered how he was doing in jail. I bet he hated being caged in. I bet he spent his days thinking about me, wishing he still had me. I hoped he spent his nights tossing and turning and remembering how our bodies melded together, and how my skin smelled, and how it felt to fall asleep in each other's arms after a good fuck.

That's how I spent my nights. In the dark, I lay awake, my mind from wandering back to the last night we'd been together. He'd fucked me like he knew our time was up and he wanted to make it count. It had been so good, it was impossible to forget. I didn't *want* to want him, believe me. But the more time that passed, the more I craved him. The more obsessed I became. The more I wanted him to suffer as much as I had, and then some.

Then, when he'd suffered enough, maybe I would take pity on him.

Maybe I'd let him have me.

I know, I know. I sound like a total headcase. Even now, I go back and forth between absolute hatred for him and absolute, all-consuming desire. It's hard to divorce the two, really, where he's concerned. Since I was 22-years-old, he's been the most hated person in my universe, but he's been the only constant, as well. The threat and promise of him is always alive in the back of my mind. He's the only person I can truly count on to love me unconditionally. My parents and brothers can never know me like he does. He knows the dirty parts, the ugly parts, the crazy parts, because he's bred and fostered them in me. And he loves me anyway.

I also know all of his bad parts. I know what to expect. I don't fear him anymore.

In a lot of ways, I'm his mirror, and he's mine.

That warm sunny day in June, as I did my laps in the pool, my whole mind was focused on him. My first thought when I woke up in the morning was him. My last thought the night before when I crawled into bed was about him. I was completely and totally fucked-up over him, truthfully. I told my mother I would start going to a therapist, but I'd cancelled the appointment about fifteen times. I didn't want to get over him. I didn't want real closure.

The idea came to me out of nowhere. My head broke the surface of the water and I gasped in a breath, my fingers finding the concrete edge of the pool. I was going to go to Austin. If I left in the next hour, I could be back before my mother got off work. I hauled myself out of the water, drops flying to and fro as I jogged into the house, my ankle crying out in protest. I slowed in the kitchen, taking time to grab a banana out of the bowl on the counter. Then I was upstairs, in and out of the shower so quick that I practically got dizzy.

I threw on jeans and a black tank top, tied my wet hair in a messy topknot and slipped on flip-flops. I was on the road in less than twenty minutes, speeding toward the last place I knew where I could be close to him. I didn't know much about him, truth be told. I'd learned his full name and address from the police report. Elliot John Pritchard, twenty-seven, construction worker, lived at 45 Cherry Hill Drive. I'd memorized it. I was pretty sure I knew how to get there, but I programmed it into my iPhone as I booked it down highway 35 toward my old city.

I turned up the radio, letting my hair loose as I rolled down the windows. I turned on the classic rock station, screaming along to Nirvana and Metallica and Led Zeppelin as I drove. I felt free, for the first time in months. Shit, for the first time in years. I was on the open road, free from fear, free from my family, free from everything but the ache of craving someone I couldn't have. But I would never be free of him. His memory lived on the edge of my mind, slowly driving me insane.

Still, I was in good spirits as I breached the Austin city limits, finding the little subdivision where he lived relatively quickly. It was one of those neighborhoods built in the fifties, during the housing boom. All the houses were ranch-style boxes, on small lots with old-growth trees shading the street. It was almost picturesque, but I knew firsthand that cute little

neighborhoods like Elliot's could hold many dark secrets. I passed his house on purpose, doing a quick drive-by. His big black Ford truck was in the driveway, and I felt my heart jump in my throat, although I knew no one was home. I imagined knocking on the door and him answering it, shirtless, with his jeans hung low on his hips. Like he was waiting for me. He would grab me and throw me against the wall, like he'd been dying to touch me while I was away. I closed my eyes for a brief moment, letting the arousal pass through me as quick as the fantasy.

I parked the next street over. On foot, I backtracked to number 45, walking past his truck. I glanced in the window, I don't know why. I saw his hardhat in the front seat, but nothing else of note. I continued around to the back yard like I had every right to do so. I didn't bother skulking around the front. I didn't want to garner any unwanted attention. I didn't know if anybody in the adjacent houses knew that their neighbor had been arrested in Dallas for some pretty unseemly crimes, but I didn't want anyone to notice a weird girl wandering around, either way.

I hopped the low chain-link fence relatively easily, even with my ankle still being sore. The back yard hadn't been mowed in weeks, and looked pretty sad besides. An ancient swing-set rusted in the back corner of the yard and an overgrown flower bed lined the back of the house. Some bluebells still bloomed amongst the weeds. I stepped onto the cement back patio, tenting my eyes with my hands as I leaned into the look in the window. The glass was dirty, and the curtains were pulled shut, so I couldn't see much. I tried the backdoor, but it was locked. I kicked up the mat at the foot of the door, looking for a key, but found nothing.

I was going to have to break in.

The window over the sink was cracked slightly, and I pulled off the broken screen window and set it at my feet. I found a broken branch to pry the window open and felt a surge of victory pass through me when I got it open enough to get my fingers under the seam and shove it the rest of the way up. I hesitated a moment, glancing around to see if anyone was watching me, and then hauled myself up into the house.

I shimmied in on my stomach, scraping my skin awkwardly on the aluminum edge of the window. I caught myself on the edge of the counter, happy that I had the muscle tone from swimming to pull myself in. I finally landed on the yellowed linoleum floor, dropping to my knees painfully. I sat



there on all fours for a moment, getting my bearings. I was in the middle of the floor, where Elliot had raped me on that very first night.

It was strange to be back in the house after two years. Before, it hadn't felt like it was truly his house; now, I felt him all around me. I could smell his scent, lingering beneath the smell of stale air and rotting food. The house had been sitting empty for over a month, and it was depressing to say the least. It was almost like someone had died. I stood up after awhile, wandering into the stuffy living room. It still looked the same. Everything was the same. A pair of his steel-toed boots were by the door, and a black leather jacket was thrown across the couch like he was going to come back for it. I sat down beside it, lifting it to my face. His scent filled me up, took me back to the motel room when he slept with his body pressed against mine.

*Fuck.*

I was so messed up.

I slipped the big jacket on over my tank top, despite the stuffy stillness of the air, and wandered into the bedroom, looking at the old photographs that lined the hallway for the first time. There were faded pictures of people from another time, including an old man that kind of looked like Elliot. There was a smiling gap-toothed kid who had to be him, his green eyes bright and happy. I had never seen him look so happy. I took the frame off the nail and tucked it under my arm as I continued on to the bedroom.

The door was slightly open, sunlight pushing its way through the crack. I took a deep breath and pushed it open. His presence slapped into me and I froze in the doorway. His clothes were tossed about, and the bed was unmade, the pillow still indented from his head. But the real shocker: *my* clothes. The tank top, skirt, panties, and bra I'd left behind were washed and folded, placed on top of the dresser, like he expected me to come back for them. I ran my hand over them, then bundled them up to take with me. I didn't want any trace of me left in his house.

Well, no trace that anyone could see.

I couldn't resist sitting on the bed and then laying down in his shadow. I bet he lay awake in bed the night before he came for me, plotting and planning how he was going to take me. His plan had been to bring me back to Austin, back to this house, I knew. I rolled over, pressing my nose into the pillow and wondered how he planned to get out of the mess he'd made

of everything. I supposed I just going to have to sit back and enjoy watching him squirm. He deserved everything that was coming his way and then some. I ran my hand over the cool sheet, wondering what would have happened if he'd actually succeeded in getting me all the way back to Austin. If he'd been smarter and less crazy over me, it could have happened.

We could have disappeared and no one would have ever found us. They wouldn't have even known where to look. I would have become just another missing woman in a world full of them. I would have fought him every step of the way, but eventually, we would have slipped into a routine like before. Sex everyday, all day, and sleeping together all night. Maybe I would have even gotten pregnant and fallen slowly and fitfully in love with him, like he dreamed.

Who knows?

Most likely, we would have ended up killing each other. Shit, we still might.

The future is a mystery.

I ran my hand under the pillow and I furrowed my brow when I felt something underneath. I lifted it up, revealing a picture. When I flipped it over, I almost couldn't believe it.

It was the picture of me and Chelsea from The Blue Mermaid. A Halloween party, I remembered. I stared down at my younger, happier self, smiling like I didn't have a care in the world. I closed my hand around the picture and balled it up. Rolling back over onto my side, I shoved the remains of the picture into my jean pocket. I let out a slow breath, wondering how often Elliot had looked at the picture of a girl that didn't exist anymore.

I must've closed my eyes and dozed off, because when I opened them again, the light outside was hazy orange.

"*Shit!*" I hissed, sitting up straight. The digital clock beside the bed read 6:10 p.m. "*Shit!*" I muttered again, gathering up the things I planned to take from the house and shoving them under my arm again. I stood and jogged back to the kitchen. My mother was going to freak out. She would be home shortly and when I wasn't there, she would start blowing up my phone, no doubt. I'd never be allowed out of her sight again.

I spied a plastic shopping bag balled up on the dining room table and snagged it, shoving my clothes and the picture frame inside. I took one last

look around the house, and then hiked myself up onto the counter and swung my legs out of the open window. I landed hard on my feet and felt the vibrations go through my bum leg. I gritted my teeth at the pain, standing still on the concrete patio to let it pass.

That's when I saw the cat. Elliot's calico cat was sitting in the lawn, as sneaky as ever, its big yellow eyes on me. It didn't seem worse for wear, considering it had been on its own for awhile, but it did have a slightly feral look about it, as if it could fight or flee at any moment. I took a step closer and the cat didn't dart away, so I leaned closer, my hand out and low to the ground.

"Here kitty kitty," I whispered as the cat approached me, on dainty paws. It ran one soft furry cheek across the tips of my fingers, then another. "What's your name?" The cat, of course, didn't answer, but continued letting me pet her. I scratched her behind the ears, and I felt her whole body vibrating as she purred. "Do you miss Elliot? Did he used to pet you like this?" I continued talking to the cat like an idiot, but I couldn't seem to stop. "Do you want to come home with me?"

The cat purred in answer and I crouched down, running my hand down her bumpy spine. She was skinny, probably half-starved. "My mother would love you," I murmured, snorting out a laugh. My mother loved her expensive rugs and furnishings more than she loved animals. "But you're a nice kitty." She looked up at me, her little cat face so innocent, that I bit my lip and glanced back at the house. There was nothing for her there. If I left her, she'd probably end up dead in the street, a victim of a speeding car, or maybe a stray dog. I wondered if she knew how to survive on her own in the wild. She seemed tough, but not that tough.

A car honked on the street and it startled both of us. Just like that, she darted away, hopping the fence and streaking across the neighbor's lawn. I stood, my mouth dropping open like I was going to call after her, but I caught myself. I didn't even know her name. As she disappeared from view, I felt oddly disappointed. I wrapped my arms around me, realizing suddenly that I still had Elliot's jacket on. And I still had the picture of him as a boy.

I wasn't leaving empty handed.

I quickly replaced the screen to the kitchen window, then glanced back over my shoulder, my eyes searching again for the little black and white cat, but she was long gone.

I hopped the fence, more carefully this time since my ankle was throbbing, and walked down the driveway to the sidewalk. No more looking back, I told myself. I hurried to my car and slipped inside, the sunset blazing in the sky. My phone was vibrating in my purse, which I'd stowed under the front seat. I knew who it was before I even looked at the caller ID.

"Momma, I'm fine," I said as soon as I answered, pinning the phone between my shoulder and cheek as I pulled onto the road.

"Where are you? I got home and you weren't here..."

"I'll be home in a little while. I'm out with friends," I cut her off, lying smoothly.

"Friends?" she asked, and I rolled my eyes. Of course, I hadn't hung out with any of my friends in months, but still. She didn't have to sound so shocked.

"Yes, some of my old work friends. In Austin." I threw that last bit out there and I imagined her having a mini-heart attack.

"Austin?!"

"I'll be home soon," I said.

"I don't like you driving on the highway so late at night," she said, like I was a teenager again. "You're not going to be drinking and driving, are you?" Being a 24-year-old woman who lived under her parents' roof had its definite disadvantages. Unfortunately, I didn't have other options, yet. I'd been unemployed for over two years, but that was all going to change. Soon.

"No, momma," I said benignly. "I'm driving, so I have to get off the phone now."

"You know I love you, right?" she said, and a teeny part of me squeezed inside. I wasn't worthy of her love, not anymore, but I took it anyway, because it felt good. I loved my parents, although I resented them. Maybe I resented them because of how much they loved me. I had become a closed-off, angry, vengeful person in the years since I met Elliot. I hated it, but I also wasn't willing to get help, so there you go. I was messed up and I was going to continue to be messed up.

I was going to wallow in it, because otherwise, Elliot would get off too easy, and I couldn't let that happen.

"I love you, too," I said and then hung up.

If I would have been smart, I would have headed home. Instead, I headed toward The Blue Mermaid.

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“Oh my God!” Chelsea exclaimed when I walked in the door. It was a Wednesday night, and The Blue Mermaid was almost dead. A few regulars hung around, at the pool tables and at the bar. I recognized a few of them, surprisingly. “Girl, look at you!” She stepped around the bar, arms outstretched. I stepped into her hug, my spine feeling stiff. “It’s been too long.”

“Two years or so,” I murmured, pulling back and giving her a bright smile. “I moved back to Dallas. It was really sudden.”

“The last time I saw you, you looked like hell!” she said, tugging on one of my shoulder-length curls. “I like this haircut on you. It accentuates your cute chin.”

“I have a cute chin?” I asked with a laugh, raising my fingers to my chin.

“Totally,” Chelsea said, nodding vigorously, her spiky blond hair moving with her. “So what’s up? How’s life?” I shrugged, following her back to the bar and taking a seat on a stool. “IPA, right?” she asked, remembering my beer of choice.

“Whatever’s on tap,” I answered, turning my eyes to the door, like I expected Elliot to walk in at any minute. “I’m in Dallas. Not much else to say.”

“Crazy, right?” she asked, plopping the cold beer down in front of me. “Your friend Janie still comes in sometimes.”

“I haven’t talked to her in forever,” I mumbled, thinking back to how fun and easy my life used to be. Janie and I worked together at the law office, two secretaries with no idea where their lives were heading. Back then, I wasn’t worried about it either. I had a job, money in my bank account, a decent sex life, and lived in a cool city. Life was grand.

“She got married,” Chelsea shrugged. “But it seems like everybody is, these days.”

“Yeah,” I said, glancing down at my left hand, where Trace’s ring used to encircle my finger. My hand was bare and weighed a lot less.

“Well, you look good, girl. Real good.” She leaned up on the bar, letting her eyes roam down my front. “You're still straight?”

“Yup, last time I checked,” I said, with a genuine laugh.

“Aw, shucks. Can't blame a girl for trying,” she said with a smile as she sidled down the bar to another customer. I took a big gulp from my glass, allowing my eyes to flit around the room. It felt strange to be out again, having a drink like I didn't have a care in the world. My eyes stopped on the dark hallway that lead to the bathrooms, where Elliot and I first met. What a romantic story to tell the grandkids, I thought sarcastically. However, I couldn't stop myself from staring into the abyss, until a dark haired girl stumbled out of the ladies', pulling down on her jean skirt. Then I turned away and downed the rest of my beer.

I didn't have much of a plan. I just couldn't stay away.

I wanted to hurt him, and the more I thought about it, there was only one way I knew how.

I cast my eyes around the bar again with a purpose this time. I found what I was looking for at the pool table, bent over, cue in hand. He wore a plaid button-up, rolled up at the sleeves, and ripped-up blue jeans that fit him like a glove. He didn't look anything like Elliot. He was lean, whereas Elliot was thick and muscular. He had dirty blond hair that hung down into his eyes as he took his shot, landing a ball in the corner pocket. He was probably a musician or an artist, or a barista or bartender. One of *those*, as my mother would say. He looked like someone who wouldn't have any problems with a quick hook-up, that was for sure.

Plain and simple, he was my type.

Well, what used to be my type.

He felt my eyes on him and he turned his face my way. I smiled and he smiled back. It was that easy. In less than an hour, he followed me into the ladies' bathroom and I locked the door behind us. I wore Elliot's leather jacket as the pretty boy bent me over the sink and fucked me, hard and fast and relatively satisfying. I had an itch and I scratched it. I have no regrets.

Well, maybe one.

I came with Elliot's name on my lips and his face on my mind.

So much for closure.

## Chapter Fifteen

The trial wasn't all glitz and glam like an episode of *Law & Order*. The courtroom wasn't gleaming mahogany wood, high ceilings, and chandeliers. It was a dingy white-walled, gray-carpeted room at the back of the courthouse in Downtown Dallas. There were no last minute objections or revelations that turned the jury one way or another, not for lack of trying by Elliot's defense attorney. There was a bit of excitement when Elliot changed his plea, but in the end, it was a pretty depressing way to spend a week.

I saw Trace in the hallway of the courthouse on the first day. He wore a suit I knew his mom had probably picked out for him and walked with a cane, slowly and methodically. It was hard to look at him, but I forced myself to. His mother Janet walked beside him and I could tell she wanted to help him, but she didn't. They both saw me at the same time and I felt their resignation and bewilderment.

This wasn't how things were supposed to be. Trace and I were supposed to be married by then. We were supposed to be starting a family. But as it was, I hadn't seen or spoken to him in five months.

"So good to see you," my mother whispered, holding out her arms to embrace Janet. Trace looked at me over their heads, his eyes dark and bleak. I stared back, not knowing what to do with my face. No smile, no frown, no tears, no nothing. I felt guilty and shitty, but I also had no interest in getting married. There was no hope for us. He knew it, too. I'd already mailed him the ring back. No note, just the ring.

"How are you?" Trace asked, his eyes still on mine. Then he dropped them to look at my mother before I could answer. "Mrs. Vasquez? How's everything?"

"Oh Trace, honey. Everything's okay." My mother squeezed his hand. "You look as handsome as ever, bless your heart."

"Nothing handsome about scars and a collapsed lung, ma'am," he said and I almost choked on my peppermint. My mother turned pale and blinked rapidly, like her brain had stopped functioning for a minute. I wondered if she was remembering the big ink-blot stain of Trace's blood on the stone patio, like I was. I bet Trace was remembering Elliot ripping down my panties and forcing his way in between my legs.

Such lovely memories.

"Momma," I finally spoke. "Let's go sit." We made our way into the ugly courtroom and took our seats behind the prosecutor's table. The prosecutor, a sturdy woman with silky blond hair and dark glasses perched on her perky nose, was nice enough. I had faith that she could win the case. Elliot had made it so easy for her, after all. The mountain of evidence was pretty hard to deny.

His lawyer was trying, of course. Elliot's official plea—not guilty by reason of mental defect. Not without merit, but hardly a slam-dunk. His court-appointed defense lawyer was a schlubby grey haired man in an ill-fitting suit. He looked a mess, but his dark eyes were shrewd. He seemed like a force to be reckoned with.

Elliot still didn't have a chance.

I was going to take the stand and destroy him. I had every intention of crying and detailing every dirty detail. I was going to tell them exactly how he stabbed Trace and raped me and threw me over his shoulder and kidnapped me. I was going to tell them about the cheap motel and how he made me stitch him up and then what he did afterwards.

I was going to tell them everything about that night.

But I had no intentions of telling anyone that Elliot and I had a history.

As far as I was concerned, it was of no concern. Elliot had broken enough laws to be convicted twice over. The weekend I spent at his house in Austin was still our dirty little secret.

My mother clamped her hands around mine and pulled them into her lap. She was already tearing up. I took a deep breath, annoyance swelling up in me. I just wanted all of it over. The sooner Elliot was in prison, the sooner I could get on with the rest of my life. I wanted him in a cage. I wanted him to suffer everyday. I wanted to wake up with a smile on my face, knowing that he was dying a little, everyday. He was a cancer in my body, and I wanted to cut it out.

I squeezed my mother's hands, turning my eyes to the door that I knew Elliot was going to walk through any minute. It had been so long since I'd seen him. I wondered if he would be like a stranger. Would I even recognize him? I leaned forward, impatience and anticipation making my pulse race. I jumped when a cop walked through the door, but he let it close behind him.



“Relax,” my mother whispered to me, but I didn't know if it was more for my benefit or hers. She'd been a bundle of raw nerves ever since the hospital, and I knew she tried to take my pain into herself, hoping to give me some relief. Unfortunately, pain doesn't work that way. There's more than enough to go around.

I wasn't prepared when he finally entered the courtroom, his hands cuffed behind him. It was very unceremonious. Nobody announced that he was about to enter. He simply strolled in and suddenly we were in the same room together for the first time in months. I hissed in a sharp breath at the sight of him. He wore a tailored black suit with a white shirt underneath and a gray tie around his neck. I had never seen him look so respectable. He would have been just as comfortable in that suit in church or a boardroom, as a contributing member of society.

He cleaned up real good.

His black hair was a little longer on top, slightly curly and brushed forward, like he'd just run his fingers through it. He kept his eyes down at the ground as an officer uncuffed him. I stared at him, willing him to look at me. I wanted him to see me. I wanted him to know that I was there, close enough to touch, but he wasn't allowed. I stare at him, but he turns his back to me. He and his lawyer dip their heads, whispering something.

Then the judge arrived and the trial began.

As more and more time passed, the angrier I got. He refused to look at me. He kept his eyes straight ahead and his face blank as the prosecutor made her opening statements. When his lawyer stood to begin his statement, I caught a glimpse of Elliot's hands. They were fisted on the table, clenched like he was trying to keep a tight reign on himself.

I could hear the minutes ticking by loudly in my brain. My pulse was pounding and I could barely sit still. I wanted to march across the court room and shake him. I wanted to slap his face and make him look at me. I wanted the satisfaction.

*I needed it.*

Tears of rage welled up in my eyes and I swiped them away impatiently. My mother squeezed my hand again. All of the court proceedings were on mute and fast forward. Before I knew it, the judge called for a recess and the first day of Elliot's trial was over. People around me began to stand and exit the courtroom. I stood too, robotically, but my

eyes never budged. Elliot stood and his shoulders were tense, like he could feel my gaze. He turned to face me, his head still dropped, as the officer cuffed his wrists.

Then it happened.

As he turned to exit, he raised his eyes to meet mine. A bolt of electricity shot through me and I froze. Time seemed to stop. All the memories of the night in the motel flashed through me. His breath against my ear. His body against mine. His hands roaming between my legs and pressed around my throat. I could tell he felt it, too. His eyes flashed and widened and he lunged forward. I jumped and the spell was broken. The sounds and people of the courtroom came back, loud and pushy in my brain.

The officer pulled Elliot toward the side door and I followed the crowd out of the courtroom. When I was outside in the Texas heat, I could finally take a deep breath. As the air filled my lungs, I felt an odd sense of calm come over me. For the first time in a long time, I felt like I was actually going to be fine.

Elliot was suffering and I was going to be just fine.

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To this day, the trial is a blur to me. It's hard to keep the days straight in my head. They all began to melt together. Everyday in the courtroom, it took all of my strength and attention just to keep my eyes off of her. I could feel her behind me, seated to my right. I could feel her gaze on me, like a red-hot iron burning me over and over. I wanted to know what she was thinking about. Was she remembering all of the shit that we did, all of the shit that she said?

Forever and ever. I didn't forget.

I never will.

I was royally fucked, yet all I cared about was her. I knew I was going away to prison, but the implications hadn't completely sunk in yet. My lawyer thought I had a shot at an extended stay in a mental hospital, but I knew that there was no chance. One look at the jury box and the jig was up. Those people didn't have an ounce of pity for my poor soul. They wanted me locked up with the other animals, never to see the light of day again.

I knew I deserved to be punished.

I had gone off the deep end. I was a lunatic when it came to my Joan, plain and simple. I kidnapped her. I stabbed a man for her. If I had my way, he would have died. He needed to be taught a lesson for touching what was mine. If I somehow made it out of the trial as a free man, I knew I would keep coming for her. I would never stop.

At night, staring at the cement walls of my jail cell, I couldn't sleep. I would think of her. I began to think that maybe it was better for her if I was locked up. I didn't know where my madness began when it came to her. I didn't know when it ended. I had hurt her. Many times. If—no, *when*—we were together again, I knew I would hurt her again. I would hurt those she was close to, those she loved. I wouldn't stop hurting her.

It's my nature.

But she would hurt me, too. She wanted to hurt me so badly, I could taste it.

In the courtroom, the only way I could think to keep myself sane was to stare at the wall behind the judge's head. If I looked at her, all hell would break loose. She was just too damn beautiful and too damn angry. The anger was coming off her in waves. It was intoxicating.

When the prosecutor called her up to testify, it took all my strength to stay in my chair and not jump over the table and throw my arms around her. I shifted my eyes to the officer standing a few feet away. I wondered how fast I could grab the gun from the holster on his hip. I could go down in a blaze of glory and take my girl with me. In that second, I was low on sleep and high on adrenaline. I felt like I could do anything, if I put my mind to it. But the moment of opportunity came and went as Joan drew my attention like a beacon in the dark courtroom. She wore a black knee-length skirt and a white blouse. Her shiny dark hair was longer than the last time I saw her, and she had it braided down her back. Lust slithered through me and I knew she'd worn it like that just for me.

She was taunting me.

She looked fresh and beautiful, her lips glossy and her eyes shiny with unshed tears. The jury loved her the second she sat down and I couldn't blame them. She stared past me and I knew that since she had my attention, she wouldn't give me the time of day. She was playing a game with me and I couldn't help but be pulled in. I kept my eyes on her as she squirmed in

her seat at the heat of my gaze. I kept my eyes on her as she swore to the tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Then she started to lie.

She told the court a story about a strange man who broke into her parents house, raped her, and stabbed her loving fiancé . She told about how the strange man kidnapped her and took her to a dingy motel in the middle of nowhere. She dabbed at her eye with a tissue between questions on cue. It was all a show. A damn good show. I almost laughed out loud.

When the prosecutor asked her to identify the strange man who committed such heinous crimes against her, she took a deep, shaky breath. Then she held out her lovely finger and looked me right in the eye.

“That's him,” she said.

“Let the record show that the witness has identified the defendant, Elliot John Pritchard,” the blond prosecutor said, her voice smug as hell, but I could barely hear her. For a minute, I had Joanie all to myself. She didn't look away and neither did I. The whole courtroom faded away and it was like we were back in the muggy, dark motel room. I could feel the blood oozing down my side from where she'd stabbed me. I pressed my hand to my ribs, involuntarily. The wound ached and throbbed, but I didn't mind the pain. I didn't mind anything at all as she lay beneath me. I could feel her chest rising and falling with each breath. I could smell the honeyed scent of her skin. She had a perfume that was uniquely hers and it filled me up with hope and love.

I was fucked, but it didn't matter.

Nothing mattered except her.

I didn't hear any more of the questions or any more of her answers. It didn't matter. She looked away but every so often, her eyes would flit back to mine as if she couldn't stop herself. I played along, my side still throbbing with phantom pain. After awhile, the prosecutor sat down and Williams, my lawyer, stood up. It was his turn to question Joan. He ran his hand over his beer belly and hiked up his suit pants. The old fucker drank too much and he was court-appointed so he didn't have to give a shit, but he was like a rottweiler after a bone. He wanted me to get off more than I did. He believed I could be rehabilitated with proper medication and treatment. Maybe he just wanted to make his name on a big case. Either way, he was determined.

“Miss Vasquez, did you used to live in Austin?” Williams asked, shifting his hips and crossing his arms over his chest.

“I did,” she said and her eyes darted back to mine. She wasn't happy with the question.

“For how long?”

“Five years. I went to U of T and then I stayed for a few months after I graduated.”

“So is it possible that your path crossed with my client, who also lived in Austin?” He blinked at her shrewdly from above the frames of his glasses.

“Austin is a big city,” she said, leaning forward in her chair like she wanted to stand and escape.

“Is that a yes or no?” Williams asked.

“Objection. Relevance?” the prosecutor called out.

“I have a point, your honor,” Williams said, jovially, his belly shaking. “My client resides in Austin. I'm trying to establish any possible links between my client and the victim.”

“Answer the question, Miss Vasquez,” the judge said without emotion.

“Yes, I suppose it is possible.” Joan's voice was harder as she replied, edged with broken glass. Her facade had crumbled a bit and I could see the real Joanie just underneath. The Joanie I had seen in that first night in Austin, so long ago. The Joanie who would punch and kick and claw when she felt threatened.

“Miss Vasquez, did you used to frequent an establishment called The Blue Mermaid?” Williams said and I shifted my gaze to him. I wondered where he was going. I was pretty sure Joan didn't want anyone to know about Austin. I didn't either, but I had my own reasons. She blinked rapidly, scooting forward in her chair again.

“Yes,” she replied.

“Did you ever meet my client there?”

“No.” Her voice is deadened and she no longer looked at me. All of her attention was focused on Williams.

“Miss Vasquez, did you ever have consensual sex with my client?” Joan's eyes widened and I felt my muscles tighten, protectively.

“Objection!” the prosecutor called out again. “Relevance!”

“The supposed targeting of Miss Vasquez by my client is very coincidental. I would like the judge to grant me permission to continue this line of questioning with this witness.”

“I’ll allow it,” the judge nodded and looked at Joan, expectantly.

“He raped me!” Joan hissed, the facade completely gone. The anger in her voice sent a shiver down my spine.

“Did you ever have consensual sex with my client?” Williams continued, persistent.

“No!”

“Miss Vasquez, after you moved back to Dallas to be with your parents, did you ever go back to Austin? For a trip, perhaps?” I could hear the glee in William’s voice. He was having fun, in the way only a defense attorney could, by creating reasonable doubt. A murmur went through the courtroom and I knew everyone was wondering where Williams was going. Shit, so was I. Joan’s eyes flitted back to me, and I could see fire dancing behind them. She thought I snitched. She thought that I told Williams all about what happened in Austin. I swallowed hard, clenching my jaw. I didn’t tell anybody.

I never have and I never will.

That will always be our secret.

“Yes,” she said, between gritted teeth.

“Did you go on a trip to Austin three days before this incident took place?”

“Yes.”

“Were you visiting a friend? Or perhaps you had another boyfriend on the side you were visiting?” Joan clamped her mouth shut and didn’t answer. Williams shrugged it off and continued. “Miss Vasquez, were you visiting my client?” he said, asking her point blank. I glanced to the jury. Their interest seemed piqued.

“No.” Joan’s voice was a low hiss.

“When you were in Austin, three days before this supposedly random attack, did you ask my client to kill your fiancé?” Williams went in for the kill and the prosecutor bolted out of her seat.

“Objection, your honor!”

“Reign it in, Williams,” was the judge’s response.

“Yes, your honor,” Williams said, chastised, then continued. “Miss Vasquez, did you ever have a relationship, sexual or otherwise, with my client?”

“No!” Joan screamed and it chilled me to my very bones. I couldn't help it, my dick went hard and all I could think about was twisting my hand around her braid and pulling her into my lap. I wished I could kiss her. I wished I could lick and suck on her pussy until she was nice and wet for me. I wished for her smile and her laughter and her softness. I wished it was just us, all alone in Austin again, the dark house like a cocoon around us.

I wished a lot of things.

I still do.

I slammed my hand on the table and it echoed through the courtroom. I stood and I could feel all eyes on me.

“Get control of your client, Mr. Williams,” the judge said. Joan sucked in a sharp breath, but didn't look at me. Her whole body was tight with restrained anger. She liked being in control, but Williams had stripped her of it. Just as I had. Williams nodded and bent toward me.

“What's the problem, Pritchard?” he whispered loudly.

“I want to plead guilty,” the words came out before I even knew what I was saying. “I want a deal.” Williams shook his head, like he couldn't believe what I was saying. He turned and addressed the judge again.

“I'd like to request a recess, your honor,” Williams said. “I need to confer with my client.”

“Recess granted. We'll adjourn until tomorrow morning at eight.” The judge banged the gavel and my whole life changed in an instant.

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Elliot took a deal with the prosecutor the night after his piece-of-shit attorney tried to discredit me on the stand. Just like that, the trial was over.

All Elliot asked for in his plea agreement was a sit-down with me.

I refused.

He had fucked me out of my moment. The trial was supposed to be my triumph. I was supposed to see Elliot beaten down and exposed and shamed. I wanted to see him thrown under the jail. I wanted to see his face when the jury found him guilty. That's all I wanted. I thought the trial would

be the magical cure-all that would push me out of the rut I was in. Instead, it was just another letdown, another time when I was naïve and thought the universe was looking out for me.

Instead I locked myself in my room and began my search. I didn't bother going to the sentencing. Elliot wouldn't get the satisfaction of seeing my face again. Basking in the blue light of my laptop, I figured out where I was going to go.

I was going to start a new life. A life far from all the shit I'd been wallowing in for way too long.

A life far from Texas.

A life far from Elliot.

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## Chapter Sixteen

Rain beat against the leaded glass windows behind me, and I pulled my cashmere sweater tighter around my midsection. A fire roared across the room in a carved limestone fireplace, but I still got the chills on rainy days. My body wasn't used to temperatures below seventy degrees, but it was a welcome change of pace. After a year in Seattle, the cold was finally starting to grow on me.

I sat in the fancy hotel lobby on a leather chair, light jazz playing in the background. A crystal chandelier glittered above my head and an expensive Persian rug was beneath my feet. I crossed my legs, my black pump bobbing up and down as I waited. I took a sip of my gin and tonic and licked my lips, the citrus zest prickly on my tongue. I was waiting for the man who gave me his number at the conference two days before. He was nice looking, about ten years older than me, and the complete opposite of the men I usually went for.

I was making a lot of changes.

The man was lean—from jogging, or the elliptical machine at the gym, I guessed—and looked good in a tailored suit. He didn't have a single tattoo, for crying out loud. He was a doctor, too. My mother would have jumped for joy, which was exactly why I didn't tell her. Not that I told her much of anything, most days.

I was trying on a new life for size. A new life in Seattle, Washington. A glamorous new life where I had a job and went on dates and did hobbies on my days off. I had friends again. I had a purpose for living.

Well, a purpose that didn't completely revolve around getting revenge on Elliot.

I knew that prison was where he belonged, but it was hard to be so far away from his presence. After years of obsessing over him, it was hard not to think about him.

Well, not just hard. Impossible.

I felt a light touch on my shoulder, and glanced up with my practiced smile. My heart sped up, but my smile didn't waver. I was a pro, I'm telling you.

"Rachel?" His voice was low and soft as he called me by my newest alias.

"Mitch?" I raised my eyebrows, and I knew that my eyes probably caught the light of the chandelier above in a pretty way. He got that look—the look nice men get when they're in the presence of a woman they want to impress. I let my gaze roam down the front of him, taking in his slightly rumpled suit. He didn't look haggard, though. He looked fashionably rumpled. Even his hair was rumpled, from his fingers running through it, no doubt. He'd had a long day at work. He wanted to unwind.

He was a sure thing.

So was I.

"Thanks for waiting," he said, folding himself into the chair beside me.

"Oh, I was just catching up on work emails," I lied smoothly.

"So hard to get away from the office," he said blandly.

"We're officially off the clock," I said with a knowing glint in my eye, dropping my phone back in my bag. He was preoccupied with my legs anyway, so I did the Sharon Stone-leg-cross, turning to the side a bit so he could only guess if I was wearing panties or not. He chuckled and shook his head, his ears turned red.

We were off to the races.

At the front desk, he handed over his black credit card and got us a nice room on a high floor, like a real gentleman.

He ordered a bottle of champagne for us and poured my glass, like a real gentleman.

He even fucked like a real gentleman.

I held onto the headboard as he rolled his hips against mine. The room was fancy, decorated in whites and grays and thick, sumptuous fabrics. The bed was soft and the sheets were high-thread count. Everything was so... gentle. It was too nice. Which was crazy. I went to one of the nicest hotels in Seattle for a hookup, I don't know why I was shocked that it was luxurious.

I opened my thighs wider, wanting him deeper. Harder. With a light moan, he sunk into me, quickening his pace. I knew he was getting close, so I moved with him, egging him on. With every thrust, I thought about Elliot and how much I hated him. I thought about how he was laying on a hard cot

in a prison cell and I was on thousand thread count sheets in a room that cost more for one night than he used to make in a week.

It had been over a year since the trial.

Well, 391 days, to be exact.

I knew where he was, but he didn't know where I was.

As it should be, or so I thought at the time.

I glanced over at the nightstand and saw my phone sitting there. I don't know what came over me, but I reached for it.

Before Mitch realized what I was doing, I took a picture. I picture of where we were joined, a little memento of my brand new life. He slowed on top of me, the muscles in his neck and arms straining with restraint.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"It was so fucking sexy, I had to take a picture," I purred, bowing my back.

"A picture?" he breathed, already thrusting into me again.

"No faces, just bodies," I whispered, turning the phone so he can see. He moaned, thrusting into me harder than he had all night.

"You're a bad girl, aren't you?" he murmured, dipping his head to kiss me. I tossed my phone on the pillow and wrapped my arms around his waist. A thrill went through me. I liked the title.

I was a bad girl. I was just beginning to realize how bad I could be.

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I don't know where the idea came from. I was laying in bed on a lazy Sunday morning, half-watching a cooking show and half-doing. My phone began vibrating on the pillow next to me and I lifted it to glance at it, my eyes blurry with sleep. It was a reminder I'd set, to mark our anniversary.

It was the anniversary of the day I first met Elliot in a dark hallway in a crowded bar and my life changed forever. For the first time in four years, I had forgotten it. I might have gone the whole day without remembering, if not for my own pesky thought to set a digital reminder. I tossed my phone across the bed and stared at the ceiling. The black anger swirled through me like a raging tornado, sweeping up all the good, normal thoughts and leaving only destruction in its wake.

Although Elliot was locked up, I wondered if he was being punished enough. Did he think about me everyday and wonder what I was doing? Did he remember our anniversary, or had he forgotten? The thought that he might have the luxury of forgetting had me sitting upright in bed, furious.

My phone vibrated again, the buzzing burrowing deep inside of my brain. I crawled to the end of the bed and grabbed it, turning off the alarm. I stared down at the screen, breathing hard. I don't know why, but I started looking through my pictures. I swiped through picture after picture. Some were with Mitch, the doctor; others were with Ryan, the personal trainer, and a few with Bart, the owner of a restaurant downtown. With every picture, I felt better. I had physical proof that I didn't need Elliot. Proof that I was moving on with my life.

Then it dawned on me.

I was out of bed like a shot, throwing on clothes and tossing my hair into a quick ponytail. I rushed down the stairs to the living room and threw on my jacket. I was on my way to the local superstore in twenty minutes flat. I bought a printer, photo paper, and ink. I was a woman on a mission. I couldn't stop smiling the whole time. I felt better than I had in a long time, truth be told. The stationary aisle caught my eye as I passed and I turned my buggy into it. There were rows of brightly colored stationary, like jewels, all lined up just for me. I ran my hand across the packages, trying to decide which one to choose.

Which one would Elliot like the best?

My hand stopped on a package of ruby red stationary, complete with envelopes. I bet that's the color he would have chosen. I kept going, finally deciding on a lovely peacock blue. I grabbed two packages without thinking, tossing them in the buggy. I hummed a mindless tune to myself as I made my way to the check out.

That afternoon, I printed out the first picture. It was a quick shot of Mitch's hand on my bare thigh as he fucked me. Almost artistic, I thought. I scribbled a quick note on the stationary and slipped the glossy photograph inside the blue envelope. I addressed it to Elliot Pritchard, prison number 0923875, care of Huntsville State Penitentiary, Huntsville Texas.

I sealed it with a kiss.

## Chapter Seventeen

Another day, another blue letter.

I thought I knew what was coming.

I still had the first one she ever sent, a plain blue envelope with a feminine scrawl in black pen on the front. In the almost two years since I'd been in prison, no one ever wrote to me, so it was a surprise. I had a friend in the mail room, Lassiter, and he smuggled it to me unopened. I took it back to my bunk, waited until lights out and then opened it, careful not to tear the colorful paper too much. It was a present, like Christmas had come early, and I wanted to savor it.

As soon as I opened the envelope, I could smell her. I pressed the paper to my nose like a junkie trying to get a fix. Her scent was all over the crisp folded stationary, and for a long time, I didn't even unfold the letter. I just lay on my bunk with my eyes closed, the pain in my chest almost unbearable.

I missed her.

As the days passed in my new gray existence, I felt like I was losing her bit by bit. Memories became distorted and warped. The facts and colors were fading, leaving me with just the longing. As I held her letter in my hands that night, I longed for her. Prison was a living nightmare. I was tough and nobody fucked with me, but everyday was a race to the finish line.

I still had twenty-five years before I would even catch a glimpse of freedom.

When I couldn't stand waiting anymore, I finally opened her letter. A picture fell out, and I held it up to the light. For a second, I couldn't even register what I was seeing. A hand. A thigh. A cock.

Then the shit hit me.

My Joanie was having sex with another man. I couldn't see the faces of the people in the photo, but I knew her body as well as I knew my own. I could see the two familiar moles on her thigh. I could see the thatch of dark hair at the apex of her thighs, trimmed in the way she always kept it. I could see the dip above her bellybutton that my fingers and tongue had memorized. I could see all of her soft skin bared for someone else. Some

other motherfucker was sticking his cock in my woman, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

She'd documented the occasion just for me.

"Happy Anniversary," she wrote, her pen marks sharp in black ink.

She might as well have stabbed me in the heart.

My vision blacked out for a moment and it was all I could do not to scream out at the pain that shot through me. She knew what it would do to me. She knew that it would destroy me. She knew that it would make me mad enough to kill. At that moment, I hated her with my total being. It was a black, all-consuming hatred, and I pounded my fist against the wall again and again, until my blood stained the concrete.

My Joanie knew how to hurt me. The first letter almost killed me. I didn't think I could take any more, but the letters didn't stop coming. Once every couple of weeks, Lassiter would hand me another blue envelope and I would hurry back to my bunk and rip it open. I was a junkie for her, through and through—I was hooked on the anger and I needed my fix. She sent me over twenty pictures, never any faces, but I always knew it was her. On her knees, on her back, on her stomach. Never the same picture. Always a new image to torture me, a new image to haunt my brain and make it impossible to sleep.

The rage swallowed me whole and everyday I fell deeper into the abyss. On bad days, I fantasized about wrapping my hands around her pretty neck and squeezing until I felt the bones crush. On good days, I dreamed of shooting the motherfucker that touched her in the head and then fucking her hard in the pool of his blood. I fantasized about fucking her until she screamed, fucking her until she admitted that I was the only one she loved, fucking her until she never wanted any other man.

I hated her so goddamn much it consumed me, but I loved her, too. The hate and the love mingled within me and, for a long time, I didn't know where one ended and the other began. She wouldn't ever stop, I knew. She would keep torturing me until she was satisfied I'd suffered enough. And the sad thing was, I didn't want her to stop. Every blue envelope was a sign that she hadn't forgotten me. Every blue envelope was a sign that I consumed her thoughts as much as she consumed mine.

I was fucked, but so was she.

We were in deep, but we were in it together.

As I sat on my bunk, a new, unopened envelope in my hands, that knowledge was my only source of comfort. I didn't know that she was about to change everything. I had no idea the tides were about to turn in my favor.

Shit, I still can't believe it to this day. The impossible became possible, with just one blue envelope.

Joanie came back to me.

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The thrill was gone, so to speak.

The high I got from putting a blue envelope into the mailbox slowly reduced to a mere buzz over time and then dropped down to a slight hum. It was still fun to think about his reaction to the different pictures I sent. I wondered which picture was his favorite. Maybe the one where I was bent over with my ass in the air, my hair covering my face? That was one of my favorites. But then again, I didn't know if he even looked at them. Maybe after the first one, or maybe the first few, he started tossing them in the trash. Maybe he didn't give a shit who I fucked or how I often.

As I lay awake night after night, I thought about it.

I wanted to know. I needed to know.

So I came up with yet another a crazy plan.

Everyday after work, I had to walk past a sketchy cellphone store on my way to the parking garage. It was a no-name place run by two Russians, and it oozed skeeviness, from the neon sign to the questionable merchandise that was behind the glass in the front. One day as I passed, the idea came to me out of nowhere, like a bolt of lightning on a bright sunny day. I stepped inside the small store, knowing exactly what I was looking for. The little store delivered, and my plan was ready to be implemented.

I walked out with a burner phone that worked on refillable calling cards. It had an untraceable number. As I drove home, I couldn't stop from smiling, the high making me giddy. I liked the feel of the secret phone in my hands. I liked the fact that it made me feel like I was outside of society and up to no good. I was treading in dangerous waters, and I liked it.

I printed out a new picture and scribbled the burner phone number on the back. Before I could talk myself out of it, I stuck the photo in a blue

envelope and walked down to the mailbox on the corner. I knew that what I was doing was stupid. I knew that it was probably a mistake, but I couldn't stop myself. I dropped it in the mailbox and then I waited.

It took over a month.

Just when I was sure that nothing was going to come my latest plot, I was at the local organic grocery store wandering aimlessly through the aisles when I heard an unfamiliar ring tone. At first, I thought it was someone else's phone but then I realized the sound was coming from my bag. My heart froze in my chest and I stopped dead in the middle of the frozen food section. I dug around at the bottom of my bag and found the phone. The area code on the caller ID was unfamiliar to me. It wasn't a Texas number.

I felt my shoulders droop at the realization that it wasn't Elliot. It was most likely a wrong number, I thought. I stared down at the phone as it rang and rang, debating on whether or not to answer it. Finally, it stopped. My heart was racing as I threw the phone back in my bag. I was pissed. I didn't know what I wanted, quite honestly. The thought of hearing his voice again was suddenly something I desired. After two years of working on making a new life, I was slowly reverting back to my old habits. If I wasn't careful, I would slip up and make another mistake. A mistake at that stage in the game could have cost me my new life, and I knew that. But I didn't care.

A light rain was falling as I left the store and I jogged across the parking lot to my car. By the time I slid in the front seat, my hair was plastered to my face and my mascara was blurry under my eyes. I swept it up into a loose bun, mentally yelling at myself for forgetting my umbrella again. In Seattle, there's no excuse for not having an umbrella. I wondered when I would stop being a Texas girl. How many years would it take before the old Joan Vasquez was completely gone? I placed my hands on the steering wheel and stared out at the drops of rain hitting the windshield, wondering what I was going to do next.

I knew that living was the best revenge, like that old cop had said so long ago. I knew that being in Seattle and being happy was the best possible thing for me.

Mentally, I knew that.

Emotionally, I still wanted Elliot to suffer. If he wasn't opening the blue envelopes, I would have to figure out another way to reach him.



I couldn't let him go.

A muted ringing drew my attention back to my bag, and I knew it was the burner phone again. I grabbed my bag and found the phone. It was the same number as before. Something warm uncoiled in me and I answered it without thinking.

"Hello?" I said. It was silent on the other line, but I could hear someone breathing. "Hello?" I repeated, my eyes still trained on the windshield. Drop. Drop. Drop.

"Joanie." The voice was light, but unmistakable. My mouth fell open and so many emotions flooded me—anger, sadness, rage, triumph, and something darker that I couldn't put a name on. For a moment, I wondered if I was dreaming. Was this actually happening? I drew the phone back from ear and stared down at it. Was I imagining that Elliot was on the other line, and did that mean I had officially gone of the deep end? I put the phone back to my ear, and I could still hear him breathing. "Why are you torturing me, Joanie?" he asked, low and dangerous. "Answer me."

"Because you deserve it," I whisper.

"I know I do," he said, his voice so close to my ear a shiver tingled down my spine. "But I can't take it. You're killing me."

"Good." A wet drop travelled down my cheek and I couldn't tell if it was a tear or the rain.

"Where are you?" he growled and without thinking I abruptly hung up. I took the battery out of the phone and flung both pieces into the backseat. Then I hightailed it out of the parking lot, just wanting to be home. At home, I could bury myself under the covers and hide. His voice still echoed in my brain. Out of nowhere, I was shaking and manic, my brain going a mile a minute. I had invited Elliot back into my life, but I was unprepared for the actual reality of it.

Mostly, I wanted to be in control of the situation.

He surprised me and I didn't like it.

I pulled into my garage and the door rumbled closed behind me. I let out a deep breath, letting the anxiety flow out of me. At home, I knew I was safe. I left the pieces of the phone in the car and carried my bags inside. I dropped the groceries in the kitchen and ran upstairs, shedding my jacket as I went. I kicked off my boots at the foot of the bed and crawled under the

warm down duvet. I shoved my hand under my pillow, my fingers finding the cool metal of the gun I kept there.

For a long time, I just laid there, getting my wits about me.

When it was dark outside, I finally emerged from the bedroom, calm and with a new plan. I went back out to the car. I sat in the backseat, searching for the pieces of the phone. When he called again, I would be ready.

I didn't have to wait long. At two in the morning, the phone rang again. I didn't hesitate.

I answered.

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"So what was in them blue letters anyways?" Lassiter asked me one day at lunch, his eyes on his food. We sat across from each other in the cafeteria but I barely heard him. I barely paid attention to much, those days. My mind was on one thing, and one thing only. "You got a girl on the outside?" He spoke again and I glanced up from my disgusting meal of mystery meat and watery mashed potatoes.

"What the fuck do you care?"

"Just making conversation, brother," Lassiter said, meeting my gaze. There was a strange glint in his eye, and I wondered what bee had crawled in his bonnet. We were close enough, and I knew I owed him for smuggling Joanie's letters to me, but that didn't mean I was going to have a heart-to-heart with him. "Is she pretty? I bet she smells good." I leaned back in my chair, focusing on chewing slowly so I didn't jump across the table and strangle him to death. I didn't want him thinking about my girl, although he had no idea who she was or what she looked like. Even fantasizing was too much. I didn't like anyone thinking about her but me. "Them letters smelled of perfume, that's how I know it's a female who sent 'em," he said, shoveling mashed potatoes in his mouth.

"Yeah," I said, my temper settling to a mild roar.

"What's her name?" He picked at his food, eyes roaming around the room nonchalantly, like he wasn't itching to know the answer.

"Daisy," I said, because I owed him something, but not that much. He nodded, running his tongue across his lips.

“She waiting for you on the outside?”

“I like to think so,” I said, because I did.

“What I wouldn't give for some pussy,” he said, shaking his head.

“Pussy that smells real good like that.” He laughed into his mash potatoes, an evil laugh that made me wonder just exactly what his inclinations were, not that I had much room to judge. “You a lucky man, Pritch.”

“Not lucky,” I growled, thinking about Joanie's legs wrapped around me and her mouth pressed against mine. It felt like a fist squeezed around my heart as I thought about all those pictures she sent. At all those late night phone calls, when her voice whispered in my ear but I couldn't touch her.

“She never comes to see you though, does she?” Lassiter said. “You never get no visitors.” He chuckled and swiped at his nose. “You can't trust cooze, Pritch,” Lassiter continued with a smile. “They'll cut your balls off and eat 'em.”

“That so?” I murmured, flexing my hands under the table. If given the chance, I knew Joanie would have loved to keep my balls in one her fancy designer bags. At that point, I probably would have let her if it meant I could touch her again. She was so damn far away. I knew she was in Seattle, Washington. She didn't know I knew, but I did. It didn't really matter, though. I might know where she was but I couldn't get to her.

Not yet, anyway.

“All those letters that come through the mail room, I see 'em. I see brothers who started off getting mail every day. Then it's down to once a week, then once a month.” He tipped his head back and downed his white milk. “They get abandoned in here. Forgot. Time goes on without them. The world keeps spinning. The postman keeps coming until he don't. Cuz he's forkin' your woman.” Lassiter let out a snide laugh.

I stared at him a long while, a slow plan forming in my head. It was a batshit, ridiculous plan, but I couldn't stop the thoughts from coming. Hope was pointless, but it was all I had.

“I can trust you, right?” I said without thinking.

“Swear on my dead momma's grave, you can trust me,” Lassiter said, his eyebrows jumping.

“You really want to know what's in those blue letters?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm,” he nodded, slowly. “I bet it's something real good.”

“You tell me how mail moves in and out of the mail room,” I said, my voice so low he had to lean in to hear me. “And I’ll show you.”

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## Chapter Eighteen

It was so easy to fall back into our old pattern.

Too easy.

“Open those legs wide for me,” his voice is a hoarse rasp in my ear. I obeyed, spreading my thighs. “I want to look at you.” I kept my eyes closed, focusing on his words. “I’m going to make you come, but first, I want to look at you.” I nodded, running my palms down my stomach. “Are you open wide?”

“Yes,” I nodded again, like he could see me. “I can feel your hands on me,” I murmured, dragging my own hands up my inner thighs. It was almost like he was in the room with me. After four months of stolen moments on untraceable phones, I was getting hungry for more. My obsession with him was only growing. It felt safe to talk to him in that way, but it was a false safety. Elliot had always been dangerous. He still was.

I’ve never forgotten that.

But I still can’t let him go.

“Fuck, I want to taste you.” He sounded pained and I understood just how he felt.

“How do I taste?” I whispered, dipping my finger inside of me. It wasn’t his hand, but it would have to do.

“Like peaches and cream,” he hissed and I knew he was just as turned on as me. “Drizzled with honey.” I bowed my back as his words danced up my spine. “I can taste you on my tongue right now.” He let out a slow breath and I reminded myself to breathe. I gasped as I played with myself, although I wanted so much more. “I want to lick you until dawn. I want to tongue-fuck you until you beg me to stop.”

“I want you to,” I reply, thrusting my finger in and out of me, wishing he was on top of me, wishing he was in between my thighs. Invading me. Consuming me, in only the way he can.

“I want your pussy all over my face,” his voice swirled around me. “Roll them hips, girl.”

“Ugh!” I gritted out, my teeth clenched, as I did what he commanded. My finger slid deeper and I added another.

“Fuck my mouth, baby. Fuck me good.” My whole body tightened, electricity humming around me. It sounds crazy, but I could feel it. I didn't even need him to touch me. Just his voice was enough to get me off. His gruff words were all it took. “I don't want to fucking breathe. Smother me, baby.” I moaned, my imagination running wild. I imagined my thighs clamped around his face, forcing him to pleasure me. Forcing him to make me come.

“Touch yourself,” I whisper. “Jerk off while you lick me.” I heard him hiss in a breath, and I knew he was doing what I asked. “Lightly. Not too hard.”

“Fuck you, baby,” he scoffed, his voice low and barbed. I could hear the violence lurking just below the surface of his words and I knew he wanted to hurt me, to fuck me hard until I screamed. I wanted that too, but there were thousands of miles between us. That wasn't going to change, no matter how many late night phone calls we shared. Pushing that thought out of my mind, I squeezed my eyes tighter shut.

“You will,” I said.

“Damn right I will,” he rasped and I smiled.

“I can feel you,” I whispered, my words coming fast as my body pulled tight and my nipples hardened painfully.

“Goddamn, I know you can.” With my fingers deep inside of me and his cocky voice in my ear, I bucked my hips and moaned, coming hard against my own hand. I muffled my cry into the pillow, wondering why a man that was fucking me over the phone could make me come harder than any other man fucking me in person.

I spent a long time trying to find another man that measured up to Elliot, and I hate to say it, but I never did.

I never will.

With a shaky sigh, I let my body relax into the soft mattress and rolled onto my side. I opened my eyes, and the room was still as dark and empty as it had been before. Then he said five words that changed my life forever.

“I'm getting out of here,” he said, so low I did a mental double-take to make sure I'd heard him correctly.

“Don't say that,” I whispered. “Don't say it out loud.”

“You scared?” he said.

“Can anyone hear us?”

“No,” he said. “We're good.”

“You can't bust out of a Texas penitentiary,” I said, sitting up. “They'll shoot you down.”

“I have a plan, baby,” he said with a low chuckle.

“You have a plan?” It was my turn to scoff. I ran my hand through my hair, yanking hard on the ends to wake myself up. “It's insane. Where are you going to go? What are you going to do?”

“I'm going to hitch a ride to Seattle, that's what I'm going to fucking do,” he hissed and I gasped. “I'm going to climb in your window and tie you to your big, warm bed.” I was silent for a long time, as I wavered between hanging up on him and laughing.

“How did you find me?” I finally asked.

“Post office code on the envelopes,” he said smugly and I knew he was smiling an evil smile.

“Shit,” I grumbled, because I should have thought of that.

Mistake number three.

I hoped it would be my last.

“Don't do it,” I said. I wasn't going to plead him to save his own life. That seemed... strange somehow. All I could do was ask him to reconsider. If he had a suicide wish, there was nothing I could do about it.

“I'm doing it,” he said stubbornly, and I knew his mind was made up. “Now, you going to help me or what, *Daisy*?” Warmth rippled through me at the use of our code word. He knew it would get to me. I dropped the burner phone to my lap and stared down at it. He was totally insane. He would never make it. But a part of me thought he might actually pull it off. With the right plan, maybe he could.

A shiver of adrenaline shot down my spine. I knew he wasn't lying. If he escaped, he would come straight for me. I would have to run, too.

Maybe I had never stopped.

I lifted the phone back to my ear.

“You there?” he said, his voice hard. I knew he was thinking just what I was—whether or not I was going to run.

“I'm here.”

“Don't lie to me and tell me you don't want me. I heard the way you just came for me, baby. I heard it.” His voice was low and dangerous again.

and I knew he was pissed. I knew what I had to do. I knew that there would be no coming back, but I didn't have a choice, not really.

I was done running.

"What's your plan?" I asked, curiosity getting the better of me.

"You in?" he said.

"No," I said. "Just trying to decide if I should be worried or not." He snorted out a mirthless laugh.

"You should be," he replied.

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He didn't call me for over a week after that.

A week was long enough for me to really think it through. I thought about every possible outcome. The chance of him actually succeeding was almost non-existent. That's what I told myself as I went about my life. I went to work. I went out for drinks with friends. I did dishes and ran the vacuum cleaner. I was going through the motions like a robot, just like I did in Dallas. My brain was preoccupied with all the possibilities.

When I passed a used car lot on the way home one night, something clicked in my mind. The only way he might have a chance of escaping was if he had someone on the outside, someone to pick him up and get him out of Texas as fast as possible. If he was on foot, he'd be picked up or shot before he got very far. The thought of him dead, shot down in the dirt like a dog, did something to me.

Something visceral.

If he was going to die, I wanted to be the one to do it.

Not that I wanted him dead.

If he was dead, it would be over.

It could have been over long ago. When he almost bled to death, it could have been over. When he went to prison, it could have been over. When I moved to Seattle, it could have been over.

But I couldn't let him go.

I didn't want it to be over.

If—no, when—he called again, I told myself I would try and talk him out of it. I would make him see how stupid the whole thing was. But as I waited, night after night, for his call, a niggling thought took hold. If Elliot



was free, we wouldn't have to rely on stolen moments and whispered phone calls. I would be able to touch him. He would be able to touch me, for the first time in years. He would be able to fuck me. Whatever sick fantasy he could come up with, I would be at his mercy.

What a delicious thought.

It was totally insane, but I wanted him. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted all of his sickness and darkness. I wanted all of his perversion. I wanted his violence. I had spent five years running from him. And for what? He would never stop chasing me. Our cat and mouse game would only end if I surrendered.

So I did.

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## Chapter Nineteen

That was then, this is now. My story is not a happy one, and I don't expect a happy ending. I don't expect that my prince and I will ride off into the sunset. I don't expect a happily ever after. I don't expect anything so clean and easy. My life is about to take a messy turn, and I know the end will be bittersweet, at best.

All the years of pain and depression and being crazy and obsessing has led to this point.

This moment.

I'm on a lonely road two miles from Huntsville, Texas. In the distance I can see the bright lights of the prison, a glaring reminder of what I'm doing.

Like Lou Reed, I'm just waiting for my man.

I sit in my new used car, sweat dripping down my nose. I gnaw at my lip as I keep my eyes on the edge of the road. It's pitch black outside, and I can barely see my hand in front of my face. I don't know how I'll see a man running from the tree-line across the street. I don't even know if he's coming, truth be told. I know the plan, but I have no idea if it worked or if he got caught or anything.

The not knowing is driving me up the wall.

The fact that I'm about to break the law is also not something I'm taking softly. I'm currently a law-abiding citizen. Any moment now, I'll step over the line and become an outlaw. I know there's nothing I can do about it now. Well, I could drive away, put the pedal to the metal and forget all about Elliot. I know the best thing for me is to leave him and never look back. I've always known that, ever since the cop told me to keep living my life in the hospital, all those years ago.

I can't do that to him, though.

After everything, I just can't. We're in it together now.

When I can't take it anymore, I open the car door and step outside. The night air is cooler than the stuffy air in the car, and I feel like I can finally breathe. I glance from side to side, my hearing amplified by my lack of eyesight. I can hear a coyote howl in the distance. When a twig cracks somewhere in the woods, I jump. It sounds so close that my heart starts beating like mad.

“Elliot?” I whisper. I listen hard, waiting to see if he answers, waiting for some sign that I'm not making a huge mistake by waiting for him in the middle of Texas at two in the morning. Another stick cracks off in the distance, followed by the brushing of leaves. I turn in a slow circle, squinting my eyes, trying to see anything in the crushing darkness.

Footsteps. I hear footsteps pounding toward me, and heavy breathing, like someone is running. I'm frozen for a long time, I don't know how long, but finally a spark in my brain makes me move. I hop back into the car, remembering just in time to close the door lightly. I poise my hand over the keys in the ignition, knowing that it was time. Time to go, or time to stay. I let out a slow breath, and then time is up.

A hand slaps against the passenger's side window and I jump nearly out of my skin. I hit the unlock button and the door opens. The car jerks with his weight as he slides in and I smell *him*. Warmth floods through me, and I turn in my seat to face him.

“Baby,” I hear him whisper and that's all I need. I practically lunge across the seat at him, finding his face with my hands. It feels like him and I have to resist turning on the pilot light to look at him. He's sweaty and breathing heavy and I almost can't believe he made it.

“You're here,” I hear myself murmur.

“Fuck yeah, I'm here,” he says with a snort of laughter. Then the back passenger door opens and I jerk my head to look in the backseat, although I still can't see anything.

“Who's that?” I say as the door slams shut.

“Drive bitch!” I hear a gruff voice hiss. I can feel Elliot's eyes on me in the dark and glare right back. Another person wasn't in the plan. We'd gone over and over the plan, in code of course, and he'd never mentioned another person. I drop my hands to the keys and start the car as angrily as possible, then press my foot on the gas. We take off down the dark country road, my headlights shining the way.

I keep my face forward, not looking at him, even as he drops his hand to my thigh. My anger is heightened by the danger of the situation, and I'm veering closely to hysteria. I think about the gun pressing into my calf, bound by an ankle holster. It's a .32 that I picked up a year or so ago. I'm a pretty good shot by now, and I had no intention of coming out empty-

handed to the middle of nowhere, with no protection. I may be a lot of things, but I'm not fucking stupid.

If Mr. Backseat wants to get frisky, I have every intention of shooting him right between the eyes. The only thing that would give me pause is destroying the mint condition fabric in my new Ford Focus with his brain matter. I don't want to fuck with the resale value.

Eventually we reach the highway, and I can finally check both of them out under the streetlights. I flick my gaze up to the rearview, and Mr. Backseat looks haggard and dirty, with dark circles under his eyes. He looks like a Methhead, skinny and craggy with a long face. Beside me, Elliot has that manic glint in his eyes, and he keeps them on me, dragging them up and down my body. I know he wants me. I can feel his arousal with every fiber of my being. His fingers flex on my thigh and I run my tongue over my lips.

I want him, too. I wouldn't be in this ridiculous situation right now if I didn't.

We drive on for an hour in complete silence, the rumbling of the road lulling my nerves. Elliot keeps his hand on my thigh the whole time, and I can feel his warmth through my jeans. However, I refuse to talk to him with a stranger in our midst. A motherfucking stranger, who's probably a murderer.

"Daisy," Elliot whispers, dropping his head back against the headrest. I ignore him for awhile, then I place my hand on top of his on my thigh. His hand is calloused as always, rough in all the right spots and I crave the way it will feel on my body later, when we ditch our third wheel.

We pass the border into Kansas, and I pull over at the first rest stop we see, as planned. I park in the darkest part of the stop, although the sky is starting to lighten to a dark lavender.

"Clothes are in the trunk," I say, opening the door and practically bolting out. I don't realize how thick the tension inside is until I step outside. I force myself to take a deep breath as I unlocked the trunk and pop it open. I feel Elliot walk around to me and then the other man is beside me as well. We're all lit up in red from the tail lights, and I'm not going to lie, both men look similarly sinister, their features heavily in shadow.

"Well, ain't you a pretty one," Mr. Backseat says, his hot breath too close to my face for my liking. I turn away, grabbing the duffle bag of

Elliot's clothes out of the trunk and tossing it in their general direction. Elliot catches it, his face blank and unreadable, as far as I can tell.

"Get changed. I'm going to switch out the license plate," I say, lifting out the Kansas plate I swiped a couple of days ago.

"Bossy, bossy," Mr. Backseat says, grabbing the bag from Elliot and strolling toward the little building at the other end of the parking lot. I don't look at Elliot as I crouch down, quickly unscrewing the little screws from the plate, just like I practiced.

"Where are dropping him?" I ask, my voice tight, letting him know exactly how much he's pissed me off.

"Topeka," he says, stepping closer to me.

"Topeka was not in the plan. We're supposed to be heading toward Denver." I finish screwing on the Kansas plate and he holds out a hand to help me up. I ignore him, standing so quickly I almost bang my knee against the bumper. His hands are on my hips in a flash, and he turns me around to look at him.

"Don't," he says, low, his face close to mine.

"That shithead is not going to fuck this up for us."

"He won't," he whispers, his hands gripping my jeans tight, like he wants to rip them off of me. "Goddamn, I want to fuck you."

"Guess you'll have to wait til Topeka," I say but I'm already leaning into him, our lips almost touching.

"Or I could drag you into that restroom." He drags a hand up my front, over my left breast. My nipple hardens immediately. "Or just throw you into the backseat." He thrusts his hand into my hair, pulling my head back. I gasp and he takes advantage, running his tongue along my lower lip. My hands have a mind of their own, gripping his shirt and pulling him into me. I can feel his erection, hard as steel, between us, but I give it no attention.

I still want to punish him, just a little bit.

"Starting this party without me?" a sick voice says out of the darkness. I stiffen, not liking his tone. Not liking it at all. Elliot stiffens as well but then he relaxes so quickly that if I wasn't so in tune with his body, I wouldn't have noticed it at all. Mr. Backseat tosses the bag at Elliot's feet and leans against the car, gazing into the open trunk. "You go get changed, Pritch. I'll keep your girl company." He smiles, and my heart goes cold in my chest. He's a bad man, a very bad man. I have no idea what his crimes

are, but I'm quite convinced that whatever he did, he deserved to be locked up for a long fucking time.

Topeka suddenly seems very far away.

"Okay," Elliot says and I blink, schooling my face so that my fear doesn't show. I hope Elliot can feel it, though. He pulls me toward him roughly and kisses me and I know immediately he's staking his claim on me. He dips his tongue between my lips and drops his hand to my ass and I can only hold on, working my lips against his in a silent request.

Don't leave me alone. Please.

But he doesn't listen. He lets me go and dips to pick up the bag.

"I'll be back," he says, and strolls off like he doesn't have a care in the world. I watch him, the familiar love and hate swirling through me.

"That Pritch. Who knew he was such a lady's man?" Mr. Backseat says, a laugh at the back of his throat. I force myself to look him in the eye. I know his type. He likes fear. He likes pain. He and Elliot obviously have some things in common.

The only difference is that I trust Elliot. Kind of. Elliot hurt me once, but now we're on the same page. This motherfucker and I will never be on the same page.

"You got a girl in Topeka?" I ask. "A family?"

"I don't need to go all the way to Topeka to find a girl," he says. Okay. So much for small talk. I hinge at the waist, grab the old plate off the ground and take a step back. He steps closer. "You want to know what I did?" he asks.

"Not my business," I say, attempting to appear blasé. Who knows if I actually pull it off, especially with my heart beating like a drum in my ears.

"It's your business to know what kind of a man you're driving all the way to Topeka," he smirks.

"The less I know, the better," I say, my voice as hard as I can muster.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," he says, then slams the trunk door shut. I jump at the abrupt noise, but I don't let my fear get the best of me.

"You trying to scare me?" I ask, cocking my head.

"A smart girl would be scared."

"A smart man who just escaped from prison might be a little grateful to the girl who's helping him out. A smart man might also back off of his very dangerous friend's girl." I manage to get out the retort without my voice

wavering. Mr. Backseat lets out a sinister chuckle, not at all convinced by my tough words. I feel a warning shiver go down my spine.

"You might want to have a conversation with your boy. Seems he's left you a little in the dark," he says, his voice smug.

"You ladies done gossiping?" Elliot's voice carries across the parking lot and my whole body releases a sigh of relief. "We don't have all night," he says, stepping around the car, his Texas twang heavy.

"We was just getting to know each other," Mr. Backseat says, his shoulder brushing against mine as he walks around to the passenger side. "Real nice girl you got here," he says with a smile as he slips back into the car. I catch Elliot's eyes over the roof of the car, and the manic light is shining bright within them. I roll my shoulders, trying to shake off the fear. I hurry over to a trash can and take the lid off. I bury the Oklahoma plate deep in the stinking garbage, then turn back to the car.

For better or for worse.

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We make one more stop on the way towards the heart of Kansas, and Elliot offers to drive. I stare at him for a moment over the gas pump, then nod. I don't want him to think I'm jumpy, although I am. I want him to believe I'm at ease. I want him to believe that I trust him. I have to believe that I can.

But doubts are creeping in. I want to know what he promised to Mr. Backseat, other than freedom. I know I'm out of the loop and I don't like it one bit.

I'm tired as fuck but I don't dare sleep. I catch myself nodding off and I force myself to shake it off. I have to stay sharp. I can feel their eyes on me. I rub my legs together, feeling the hard metal of the gun against my ankle bone. I need a reminder that I am strong. I'm not going to let anyone fuck with me.

No matter what happens.

"Take this exit," Mr. Backseat pipes up. Elliot obliges him and we get off the highway. The road narrows, the smooth asphalt of the off-ramp turning into a bumpy backroad. I hold my tongue, although I wish I was

back behind the wheel. We continue on, our surroundings growing more and more desolate.

Elliot makes another turn, down a dirt road. The butterflies in my stomach continue their fitful dance. I trust my gut and my gut says that this is not good. Wherever we're going, we're so far off the plan that I don't know how to get back.

I'm in trouble.

We're deep in a wooded area now, the straggly branches reaching above us like arthritic fingers. The sunny sky pokes through the foliage, oddly cheerful despite my desperation. Whatever is about to go down, at least I'll get to feel the sun on my face. I'll get a chance.

Elliot brakes and we slow to a stop.

"Fucking finally," Mr. Backseat growls out and I feel his fingers twirling in my hair. "I've been waiting all night."

"Daisy," Elliot says and my heart stills in my chest. "Get out."

I don't bother asking why. If he wanted me to know, he would have told me, in code. I open the door and set one foot on the ground. I'm tempted to take off running, but I force myself to wait. Like the last five years of my life, I'm playing Wait and See. Elliot doesn't look at me as he gets out of the car. The T-shirt I picked out for him stretches across his broad shoulders and how much bigger than me is woefully obvious. I back up, leaving my door open and my eyes on them. The two men watch me, and I don't like the way Mr. Backseat is eyeballing me. The clothes meant for Elliot are loose on him, but he's not small. He's still a lot bigger than me.

"What are we doing here in the middle of nowhere?" I finally ask, because I can't take it anymore.

"Yeah, what are we doing, Pritch?" Mr. Backseat asks, scratching his head, feigning confusion. Elliot's eyes are hard on me, and I know it's not good. It is so not good. "Come on, Pritch. Tell her that I'm about to get my knob polished by a pretty girl named Daisy." I can feel my eyes widen as I let it sink in. This crazy man thinks I'm going to have sex with him. *Elliot* has apparently promised me to him. For what? What did this man offer him in return? "You like it dirty, Daisy?" he asks, taking a step toward me.

"There's no way in hell," I say, shaking my head slowly, flicking my eyes to Elliot. He's working his jaw and I can feel his energy radiating off his skin. He's angry, I realize. His mouth ticks and I take another step back.



I get it now. This is about punishing me for the pictures, for the torture. Mr. Backseat grabs his crotch and licks his lips.

“Get over here, girl. I know you like to suck cock,” Mr. Backseat says. “I know you're a dirty whore. You want to take two cocks at once?” He adjusts his crotch, screwing his face up like he's ready to go. “What do you think, Pritch? I know you like to watch.” He grins, which only makes him look more menacing. Elliot's eyes darken, his anger shimmering between us like electricity.

There's really no other option.

I turn and run.

I dart through the trees, my lucky blue boots serving me well. I hop over branches and through the brush, cursing Elliot every step of the way. I wanted him so badly, I let it cloud my judgement. I wonder if I have enough bullets for both men. I just have to get rid of Mr. Backseat, I tell myself. I can handle Elliot. At least, I think I can. I hear the crushing of leaves and twigs behind me and I know that they're coming for me.

“Whoo! I like a chase, girl!” the creep yells, his voice echoing all around me. I make a sharp right, cutting off to the side. My shoulder slams against a tree and the pain radiates down my arm. I don't stop, though. I keep going. Eventually, I know I'll have to stop and face them. I can't keep going forever. Adrenaline is pumping, but I know I have to conserve strength. I zag again, changing direction once more. I calculate how long it will take to get my gun out of my ankle holster. At least ten seconds, twenty if I fumble. Twenty could give him enough time to catch up with me. It's a chance I'll have to take.

There's no other option.

I stop abruptly, dropping to one knee so fast that I rip my jeans on a rock. I wince as the sharp edge scrapes my skin, but I don't let it slow me down. I curse the holster until it unsnaps, and then I lift the gun and point. I'm not sure where to point, but I do it anyway. I swing my arm, my eyes searching for them. My heart is thundering in my ears and it's impossible to hear anything else. I force myself to count to ten, force myself to calm down with each number.

“Ain't you a cute little girl with a cute little gun,” Mr. Backseat says, his voice breathless as he stops less than ten feet from me. Elliot isn't with him and I feel my insides clench. My fear is he might be circling around

behind me. I can't fight a two front war and I know that. I have to get rid of Mr. Backseat as soon as possible. "I know you like a bad man. I can be that for you, baby." He licks his lips again, as if he's unfazed by the gun in my hand. He's trying to unnerve me, or he doesn't think I'll shoot him. Either way, he's barking up the wrong tree.

I pull the trigger.

I don't get him in the head like I hoped, but my bullet hits him in the shoulder. It's a consolation prize, but I see the spray of blood hit the tree behind him and I know I got him good. The blowback knocks me on my ass, but I scramble up as he sways on his feet, shock on his face.

"You're a wildcat, ain't you?" he says, his face pale. He stumbles toward me and as I take aim again, Elliot runs into the clearing. He slows to a stop beside Mr. Backseat, his eyes on my gun. His eyes flash with the manic light and I know he's pissed I brought a gun.

Tough shit.

"Stay back," I say.

"You got enough bullets to take us both down, girlie?" Mr. Backseat says, his voice shaking. I don't think twice—I shoot. My second bullet hits his thigh. His blood mists the air and he goes down on one leg with sickening scream. Elliot uses the distraction against me, tackling and throwing me back against a tree. The gun flies out of my hand, into the brush, as the air is knocked out of me. The rough bark of the tree scratches me painfully through my shirt. A desperate cry wells up in my throat as he slams his big body against mine, dropping his face to look me in the eye.

"You should have trusted me, *Daisy*," he hisses, tossing out my fake name like an accusation.

"Fuck you," I hiss back, refusing to show fear.

"You will," he says and kisses me, so fast my head spins. I push against his shoulders, conflicted. I'm pissed and scared and wanting so badly to trust him, but I don't. Not at all. But he doesn't budge, just continues kisses me like a man possessed. His kiss is messy and hard and all-encompassing. I can't help but get swept up in it. I've missed the way he kisses me. I've missed the way his body takes hold of mine and completely bewitches me. He invades me, thrusting his tongue against mine and sucking my lips and pulling my hair. He acts like touching me is his right and he's going to take what's his, by charm or by force.

Just like old times.

“Pritch! That crazy cooze shot me.” The man moaning and sputtering on the ground finally pulls Elliot's attention off of me. Mr. Backseat's looking right at me, and if looks could kill, I'd be dead as a doornail. “I'm gonna kill you, you bitch!” he hisses, bug-eyed and frantic, pain and anger tightening his face. He tries to stand, but falls back on his ass. Elliot disentangles himself from me, slowly. His green eyes never leave my face, but I dart my gaze between him and Mr. Backseat. The creep is still moving, despite his injuries. I'm not quite convinced he's no longer a threat.

If I still had my gun, I would put him down like the rabid dog he is.

“Pritch! I need a doctor, man,” Mr. Backseat moans. “Fuckin' kill that bitch and we can get outta here.”

“Everything I do, I do for you, Joanie,” Elliot whispers in my ear. Then he turns and advances on Mr. Backseat. The realization of his predicament dawns on the creepy asshole and he starts crawling away, dragging his bum leg through the brush.

“I'm your friend, man. You gonna choose crazy pussy over me?” Mr. Backseat throws over his shoulder, even though he knows his goose is cooked. “Pritch! No!” he screams. As I watch, struck dumb with dread, Elliot jumps on him from behind, his arm looping around the man's neck. He tightens his chokehold and Mr. Backseat's eyes bulge and his face goes pale. He struggles, but he's no match for Elliot. Elliot's eyes bore into mine as he strangles the life out of his former friend. I'm frozen, unable to do anything but stand there and watch a man die right in front of me.

It takes a long time for him to die.

Or maybe time has slowed. I can't tell. I can't stop staring at the expression on Mr. Backseat's face as the life leaves his eyes. It's oddly fascinating. And horrifying.

Finally, he's dead. His eyes go blank and he droops, his whole body going limp. Elliot shoves the dead man away and stands, swiping his arm across his forehead. His chest heaves and he's sweating like he's just been running a marathon. His eyes are manic, and I take a step back, flattening myself against the tree.

Elliot is back on me in a flash, one hand clamping around my throat and the other dragging my hand down to the massive erection tenting his jeans. I moan, the sound a mixture of the fear and desire I feel for him, but I

don't hesitate. I practically rip open his fly, freeing his big cock. I wrap my fingers around him, loving how warm and heavy he is.

I've missed him so much.

I stroke him and he growls like he's in pain.

"Harder," he hisses. I do as he commands, jerking him off fast, rough, and hard. He presses his forehead to mine, our breath colliding furiously at the exertion. It doesn't take long before he makes a strangled sound and stiffens. A smile curls over my lips as his hot come shoots into my palm. He doesn't need to tell me what to do.

I lift my palm to my mouth and lick up every bit of his come, eyes closed as I savor his taste. His breathing is jagged and I know I'm turning him on. After being in prison for three years, I know that was just an appetizer. The main course is surely coming up.

"I would never let him touch you," he says, finally, his voice hoarse. "I needed him to get out, that's the only reason I brought him."

"You didn't trust me enough to tell me," I say, dragging my gaze up to his eyes.

"I couldn't," he rasps. "It had to be real."

"My terror had to be real?" I ask, my eyebrows shooting up. "I had to be as terrified as possible?" He nods, the manic look in his eyes blazing. "Good job, Asshole. It worked."

"I know. I could see it. I could feel it. It made it easy to kill him." His gaze is drilling into me, deep under my skin, and I know he's telling the truth. I want so badly to trust him. But I can't. Yet. "I'm never sharing you again. That shit is done," he says and I feel his words deep within me. I believe him.

"I thought you wanted to punish me," I whisper. He thrusts his thigh between mine and twists my hands behind me. My heart jumps in my throat, and I don't know if I'm going to scream or come. Maybe both.

"I am going to punish you," he says, his lips brushing mine. "I've been thinking about how I'm going to punish you for three years." He grinds his hips into mine and I gasp out a moan, feeling completely and totally owned by him. I'm his and he's mine. It's never been clearer to me than right now. "Three long years," he growls, sucking my bottom lip between his teeth. I arch my back, pressing the length of myself against him. The tension of the last twelve hours dissolves like smoke, and it's just me and Elliot again.

Joan and Elliot, two normal, crazy-ass people.

“I'm going to punish you so hard, you're going to scream. You're going to scream so loud that it'll be embedded in my brain for another three years,” he whispers. “Fuck, I want to hear you scream, just for me.” He traces my bottom lip with his tongue and a shiver runs down my spine. My nipples are so hard, they could cut glass. I'm totally and completely mad for him, all over again. “But first, we have to take care of Lassiter.”

“Lassiter?” I murmur.

“Yeah, Lassiter.”

“Oh,” I answer, tilting my head to look around Elliot, at the dead man crumbled on the ground. Mr. Backseat has a name at last. “Yes. We do.”

Time to bury my first body.

I have a feeling it won't be my last.

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## Chapter Twenty

I wake up and my whole body aches. I don't know how long we've been asleep in the car, but my back doesn't like the lumpy backseat. My knees hurt and my shoulders hurt as well. But Elliot's face is pressed to my neck, his big body wrapped tightly around mine. We're dirty and we smell like sweat and earth and death, but I don't want to move. I want to cherish the feel of him for a little while longer.

We buried Lassiter in the shallow brush of the woods, then Elliot rolled a log over the spot to deter animals from digging him up. We buried him naked, without anything to identify him or be used as evidence. I pried the spent bullets out of a tree and pocketed the shell casing, leaving nothing behind. Elliot found my gun in the dirt and gave it back to me. I tucked it back into my ankle holster, feeling confident that I would no longer need it.

We slept longer than we should have. Our arms and hands and clothes are caked with the moist dirt of woods and I feel in desperate need of a shower. We have to backtrack almost a day's drive to get back on course, and I'm not looking forward to it. But we have to get out of Kansas as soon as possible. The longer we stay, the worse it will be for us.

I run my teeth along the shell of Elliot's ear, rousing him softly. I wish I could let him sleep, but we have to get moving. The plan's been shot to hell, but I'm not going to stop pushing. I have Elliot, finally, and I have no plans to give him up. He's mine. Period. He moans, his brow furrowing as he comes back to life.

"Wake up, my love," I whisper lightly, so lightly I almost hope he doesn't hear. I just want it to be a hint on his brain. A hint of a feeling. I don't really love him. Well, I don't think I do. Either way, I want him to think I do. He clenches his arms around me tight and I squirm a bit under the pressure. "El, wake up," I whisper again. He finally opens his eyes and I watch as he slowly focuses on me, his cruel mouth turning up in a smile.

"You're real," he says, his voice hoarse. "I thought I was dreaming."

"I'm real," I say, pressing a kiss to his temple. "We're real."

"Oh, baby." He squeezes me again and I can feel his erection against my leg. "I'm going to fuck you."

"I know, baby." I kiss him again. "But we have to go."

“No.” He shakes his head, burying his nose back in my neck. “It’s time for your punishment.”

Anticipation floods through me and my panties get wet on demand. I know we should get on the road. I know we can’t waste any more time, but I can’t stop myself from dragging my nails over his shoulders, leaving a trail of dirt on his shirt. I want him to punish me. I want it so bad it hurts. He lifts up off of me, arching his back and pulling off his dirty T-shirt. My hands immediately seek out his bare skin. He’s damp with sweat and I want to run my mouth all over his chest and lick every drop off of him.

He stares down at me, his eyes changing from sleepy to manic in no time flat. I bite my lip as he drags his gaze down my legs, his big body taking up all the empty space in my car. He’s bulked up since he’s been in prison, although I don’t know how that’s possible. He went from big to bigger. His arms are massive, his shoulders broader than I remember.

He’s terrifying.

A ripple of fear runs through me, but it’s tinged with arousal. Whatever he’s going to do to me, I want him to do it. I don’t care if it hurts. He can do whatever he wants.

“Get out,” he says, his voice low and dangerous.

“Get out?” I repeat, a pang hitting me low in the guts.

“Now,” he growls and I know it’s time to go. I scoot to sitting, my eyes on his, and then open the door. I bolt out, jogging across the road, putting some distance between us. I know he’ll hunt me down, and I can’t wait. He unfolds himself out of the car, slamming the door shut behind him.

“Check the trunk,” I call to him. He shoots me a dark look then unlocks the trunk. He pulls out the black bag I have in there, filled with things I brought just for him, including a length of rope. The rope I’ve been keeping for over a year, waiting for him to tie me up with it. His face darkens, and I know I’ve picked exactly the right gift for him. His eyes find mine, and I can’t help it.

I smile.

This situation is so messed up on so many levels, but I’m done apologizing. I’m done feeling guilty and feeling like I’m broken and I’ll never be fixed. I know what I want and I’m done denying it.

I want Elliot and all of his fucked-up, violent, psychotic criminal perversion.

“Take off your fucking clothes,” he says, raveling the rope around his forearm, then unraveling it. I don't hesitate. I pull my T-shirt over my head, then kick off my shoes. Elliot leans against the car, his eyes on me as he continues playing with the rope. I unbuckle my jeans, sliding them down my legs as quickly as possible. I feel dirty and sweaty, but I don't give a fuck. I want Elliot to get me even dirtier.

I stand there, naked in the middle of nowhere, and I feel right at home.

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I'm so hard it feels like my cock could slice through my jeans like a knife through butter. She's tied between two trees, her arms spread eagle, and her knees on the ground. Her bronzed skin is bared completely to me, all of her open and wanting. She's still skinnier than I want her, but her body will always be my temple. I'll worship her until the day I die. Her tits rise and fall with each breath and her pink nipples are pinched tight. The slit of her pussy is calling for me. Her panties are stuffed in her hot little mouth and her eyes are glazed and hungry.

God, those eyes.

I thought I would never see them again.

I still don't think she believes that I love her but it's true. As I look down on her beautiful face, I know it's true. She's given up everything for me, just like I gave up everything for her. We're completely even now. The past is not my fucking enemy any longer. I don't ever want to go back. I'll die first.

I stand back, admiring my handiwork, ignoring my dick for as long as possible. I want to keep this memory of her for the rest of my fucking life. She deserves every bit of this punishment, for what she did to me. Every new photo she sent was like a dagger to my heart. The pain would shoot all through me and the ache would never go away. I never knew love could hurt so bad, until I met her.

I'm going to hurt her right back.

I unbuckle my jeans and pull my cock out, circling my fingers around the base. Fuck, it feels good. I can't wait to plunge balls deep into her. The waiting is almost painful, but it's a good kind of pain. It's pain with an end in sight. I fist my hand in her hair, pulling her head back. She cries out, the



sound muffled by her gag. I run the head of my cock down her cheek, then over her lips, toying with her.

"You want to suck this cock?" I ask, tracing her bottom lip. She moans, her eyes glazing over and her eyelids fluttering. I know she's turned on. She wants me. She wants my cock. It's time to take back what's mine. I dip my fingers into her mouth, pulling out her panties. She gasps in air, but before she can take a deep breath, I plunge my cock deep into her open lips. I feel the vibrations of the gag at the back of her throat on the tip of me and it feels like fucking heaven. It feels like getting a fix from a drug, and I'm an addict, through and through.

I rear back, giving her some relief, but I don't let her get too comfortable. I love the way her jaw stretches open to try to fit all of me in. I love how the tears run down her cheeks as she gags and chokes on me. I plunge back inside of her hot mouth, the sensation tightening my stomach and making my heart stop. I see her gripping the rope with her fingers until her knuckles turn white, her wrists already red and raw from the rough twine. Saliva drips down onto her tits as her mouth gushes around me. She's so goddamn beautiful.

My Joan.

I pull out of her and she coughs and drags air in to her lungs. "Is that all you got?" she asks breathlessly, taunting me. I smile, tightening my hand in her hair. She whimpers, her eyes on my cock.

"No," I say. "Not even close."

I buck my hips, my cock coming within centimeters of her lips. She opens her mouth and darts out her tongue, ready for me to slide inside. But now it's my turn to tease. She wants it, so I keep it from her. She tries to lean forward and claim me, but I don't loosen my grip in her hair. She lets out a frustrated groan and I finally have mercy on her.

"Beg," I say. Pride flares up in her eyes and I smack her cheek with my dick to remind her who's in charge. "Beg," I repeat.

"Please," she whispers. "*Please*, Elliot."

"Open your mouth." She follows my instructions, but it's not good enough. "Wider." She drops her jaw so that I can see her tonsils, squirming against her bonds. I guide my cock against her tongue, the watching almost as good as the feeling. She runs her tongue up the underside of me, and my eyes roll up inside my head.

This is what I dreamt about all those years ago on that first night. Well, almost. Back then, I didn't dream big enough. I dreamt about keeping her all for myself, dominating her and making her submit, but I didn't realize how much better it could be. When she looks in my eyes, I know. We're in this shit together.

We're a team.

That's the best fucking part.

I want to come and watch her swallow it down, but I also don't want to let this moment go to waste. I'm free, for now. I'm not an idiot, I know the odds aren't good. I'm a fugitive, and that shit isn't gonna go away just because I'm a better man now than when I went in.

Well, maybe I'm not better. But I'm trying to be.

Joanie deserves it, after all she's been through.

She also deserves all the punishment I've got planned for her.

I jerk my cock out of her mouth before I blow and smile when she moans. Her moans are music to my ears, but they're not enough. I'm ready to hear her scream.

I release her hair and some of her dark strands still cling to my fingers. I watch them float off in the breeze, then I haul her up by her hips. She gasps, teetering on her tiptoes, trying to get her balance.

My hands holding her steady, I drop to my knees, her pussy level with my gaze. She's wet already, but I want her dripping and shaking and gushing. I want to know how much she wants me. Every night in my cell, I would think about the times I made her want me, the times she moaned and softened and looked at me like I was something other than a monster. Then she sent me pictures of her with other men, while they touched her and did what I wanted to do so badly. I would curse and rage at how trapped I was. Now that I'm free to do what I want to her, I take my time, licking a slow path from her clit upwards. Her knees shake, but I've got her.

She won't fall.

She arches her back, the low light through the trees accentuating every muscle of her back, every bone of her spine, every inch of silky skin. God, I love her so much. I didn't think it was possible to love someone as much as I love Joanie. She has all of my goddamn soul. I French-kiss her pussy as the tide of emotion sweeps over me. I'll do anything to have her. I've already killed for her. I'll kill again if I have to. I hope it won't come to that,

but I have no control over the future. The only thing I can control is the here and now, her orgasm and mine.

She tosses her head back, a low cry escaping her lips, as I circle her clit and suck on her sweet flesh. I'm almost ready. Almost. She clenches her thighs, her body jerking against my mouth. She's almost ready, too. I can feel it. Before she can come, I pull back.

“El, please,” she moans, but I ignore her. I leave her aching for more, standing slowly, both hands encircling her hips. She's shaking and her breathing is quick and shallow, and I know I've made her want me, but my mind drifts back to the photos. The photo of her mouth around another man's cock. The one of another man's cock poised to enter her pretty pussy. And my personal favorite—the picture where I could see her smile, at the edge of the print, as some other motherfucker did what I wanted to do so badly. I ripped all of the pictures to shreds and flushed them before I left the prison, but I wish I had that one, now. I wish I could let her know how that one felt.

The day I opened that letter, I beat a guy bloody in the cafeteria and ended up in solitary for two weeks. Two weeks to bang my head against the walls and break my knuckles on the concrete floor, thinking about her fucking other men and liking it. When they let me out, there was a new letter waiting for me, a new picture of her giving herself to someone other than me. The torture was never-ending.

The strange thing was the only thing that got me through my three years inside was that she continued sending letters. I would dread them and wait for them at the same time. Every time I got one of her blue envelopes, I knew she was still thinking about me, even as she tortured me. She still wanted me, in her way.

But that's all in the past now.

Well, it will be, once I'm finished punishing her.

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I roll my hips impatiently, wanting his hands to move, and wanting his tongue back against me. He's not moving though, he's simply standing behind me, so close I can feel the warmth radiating off his skin. Torturing

me. Punishing me. My arms ache, my head is swimming, and my knees are practically knocking together, but I'm all in.

I'm like a broken record. I go around and around, but my body always comes back to him.

He slides one hand up my hip and over my lower back, and I bite my lip in frustration. I know what's coming, and I've been waiting for it for the better part of three years. The waiting is killing me, hurting me, but for once, I don't mind the hurt. I'm expecting it, but it still takes me by surprise when he plunges his cock inside me, two fingers sliding into my ass at the same time. I almost scream, but I force my lips to clamp shut. He doesn't get it yet. The longer I wait, the better it'll be.

I close my eyes, my body melting around his. I can feel him stiffen behind me and he doesn't move, and I know he's been waiting for this moment as long as I have, and longer. I try to roll my hips and almost lose my balance, but he has a good hold on me. He moans as I fumble, trying to get him to move.

"Fuck me, baby," he growls, and the sound practically knocks me on my ass. We both slam into each other, our bodies banging out a primitive rhythm. Every inch of his evil cock fills me up, over and over again. He thrusts a third finger inside my tightness and I finally let him have it.

I scream, loud. The sound echoes off the trees and my throat feels jagged, ripped out. He grips my hip as he fucks me harder and harder. I know I did well, because he's become unhinged. I can feel how turned on he is. I can feel him swell inside me and stretch me. I'm on the edge of losing my mind too, and I don't care.

"You like how I do it, don't you?" he asks, breathless.

"Yes," I moan, wondering why I ever bothered with anyone else. No one else ever made me feel the way Elliot does, for better or worse. Ever since the night in the motel room, he's haunted me. I've dreamt of him. I've done things I never thought I would do. We've both been stupid. We've both been destructive and violent and bad. But all of that is past. In the here and now, it's all us.

*Us.*

I'll figure all the rest of it out later.

"I wish I had two cocks to fuck you properly," he says, his fingers stilling inside of my ass, and I arch my back, the pain-pleasure hitting me in

the stomach. I'm so close to coming, I just need *more*.

"Harder," I gasp. "Fuck me harder." He takes his hand away from my hip, and smacks me hard on the ass. The sting vibrates down my legs and I teeter, almost losing my balance. I cry out as he grabs me again, steadying me as the rope cuts into my wrists.

"You take what I give you," he says, his voice strained like his jaw is clenched.

"Then give it to me," I whisper, taunting him.

"Ungrateful," he hisses, but I can hear the uptick in his voice. I realize he likes it when I'm feisty. That makes me smile, but I hide it from him, letting the curtain of my hair fall in front of my face. "I'm gonna wipe that smile off your face, Joanie," he says, bucking his hips and plunging his fingers deep. That only makes me smile more, and I can't help it. He loops his arm around my waist, bending over me. His chest brushes against my back, and all my nerves fire off at once. I love the way his skin feels against mine. I clench myself around him and dig my ankles in. I'm ready and so is he. He growls in my ear as he speeds up his pace. I'm trying hard to hold on when all I want to do is let go.

He swerves his hips and it feels incredible, like all of my dreams have come true in that moment. I'm about to break and then he thrusts his fingers in and out. His fingers and his cock work in harmony in a beautiful way. My body pulses around him and I'm done for. I hear a strangled cry and I know it's me. I lose control of myself, jerking and tightening and throbbing as my orgasm rushes through me like a hurricane. I feel swept up, my head spinning and my mouth gaping open. I want him to fill me up, every hole. I want him in my mouth, in my pussy, in my ass. I want him all over and everywhere.

I want everything.

For as long as I can have it.

He pulls out of me and my whole body clenches. I scream in frustration, wanting him back but he doesn't listen. He lets out a jagged cry and I feel his climax spurting on my back. His orgasm goes on and on and he covers me with his come. I can feel it dripping down my ribs and I shiver in unabashed delight. Then he plunges his cock back into me, ready for a second helping.

He's insatiable.

He fucks me for what feels like hours, until my wrists are raw and bleeding and my legs give out. I take my punishment with a smile on my face because I know I've earned it. It makes me proud to know that I've given him almost as much pain as he's given me.

We're almost even.

Almost.

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## Chapter Twenty-one

We change out of our mud-covered clothes and then we get back on the road and drive for hours. I play the hard rock station and he smiles like he's surprised at the music I like. We stop at a little gas station on the border of Kansas and Colorado. I pull up to the pump and we both get out. I pay in cash and Elliot heads to the small bathroom around back. I switch out the license plates and we wash up as best as we can in the little sink, fill up our tank, and get back on the road.

We reach Denver a day later than I planned. We're both dead tired; I can barely keep my eyes open. It's dark and I drive around until I find a decent sized hotel with a pool and a big parking lot. I pull around back and park by a big dumpster that partially obscures the car. I feel Elliot's eyes on me and I glance his way. He's wondering what we're doing. He's wondering if it's smart. And he's wondering why I'm not asking him what he thinks we should do.

"Trust me," I say. He puts a ball cap on and pulls it low on his forehead as I park. "Stay here. I'll be back," I tell him and I turn off the car and open the door. I pause for a moment, considering whether to take the keys with me. The pause doesn't escape his notice and he stares at me, his eyes unreadable in the darkness. "Hand me my purse," I say. He doesn't move a muscle. "Please," I add, cocking an eyebrow. A moment passes and then he reaches down between his legs and pulls up my leather bag. I take it from him, my breath catching in my throat as he leans closer. "I'll be back," I repeat.

"I'll be waiting," he says as I step out of the car. I freeze as I feel his fingers drag up my thigh. I shiver as he hits the sensitive spot under my ass. A slow smile spreads across my face. His touch promises bad things, dirty things. Fucking him in a big, clean bed until we both pass out sounds like heaven to me right about then. I shut the door behind me and hurry toward the entrance. I glance around me, even though there's no one around to take notice. There's a enough cars parked around that I know my little Ford will go unnoticed. A man in a worn cowboy hat is smoking by the door and I nod in his direction. To be unfriendly would be more noticeable, I reckon,

even in a big city like Denver. I step into the bright, air-conditioned lobby with an easy smile on my face.

“Hello,” the barely-out-of-her-teens girl at the desk says, and I widen my smile to match hers. “How are you tonight?”

“Just peachy, thanks.” I pull out my credit card, secure in the knowledge that everybody I know thinks I’m in Denver for a job interview. I told them I’d be here a day earlier, but I tell myself that doesn’t matter. “I need a room for the night.”

“Two doubles or one queen?” she asks, staring down at her computer.

“Doesn’t matter. It’s just me,” I say, easy breezy. “I guess a queen, if you have it.”

“No problem, ma’am,” she says, and I blink at her calling me ma’am. I must look really old and tired, I muse. I wonder how many years Elliot’s taken off my life. I hand her my card and she hands me a key.

Elliot is leaning against the car, arms crossed, when I return.

“How did you pay for the room?” he asks, his voice low.

“With a credit card,” I shrug.

“So they can track you here?”

“Everyone thinks I’m here. This is my alibi. If we hadn’t made a little pit stop in Kansas, it would be airtight,” I reply. “Trust me.”

“Last time we got a hotel room, everything went to shit.”

“Yeah, because you had a shitty plan. I have a good plan.” I step closer to him. “Don’t fuck with my plan.” The air thickens between us with tension and I wonder if Elliot will listen to me. He doesn’t like to lose control. But then again, neither do I.

After a long minute, he snorts out a laugh and all tension fades, just like that.

“Joanie, you got a mouth on you, girl,” he says and I can’t help it—I laugh, too.

“Room 237,” I say, stepping around the car to pop the trunk. We get our things and then I head up to the room. Elliot follows, fifteen minutes later. At his low knock, I let him in and then lock the door behind him. The bed beckons, but so does the shower. He pulls his shirt off and tosses it on the bed. I stand back and admire him as he stretches his arms over his head, watching the muscles rippling under his skin.



He turns his head to look at me and I know exactly what he's thinking, because I'm thinking it, too.

“Why don't we put that mouth of yours to work?” he says and unbuckles his belt.

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Joanie's sleeping, her face soft and youthful. She lays on her side facing me, her eyes closed. She's relaxed and vulnerable, her fingers curling under her chin and her naked skin bared to my gaze. I study her, wanting to remember her just this way. She lets out a little sigh and I get the urge to kiss her. I run my nose across her shoulder and her fragrant skin is still damp from the shower. She doesn't stir as I trail my teeth down her arm and lightly nip at her. She's knocked out after the workout I gave her in the shower. I had her up against the cool tile walls, slipping and sliding our way to climax. Her breathing is soft and steady, but I can still hear her moaning and whimpering in my ears. This is what I've been waiting for, I realize. The three years I was in prison. The two years I didn't know where she was. So many years apart. I smooth my hand down her waist and over her hip and love for her swells in me.

After all this time, she's finally mine.

That shit in the Kansas was bad, and the blame is totally on me. I knew Lassiter was a crazy motherfucker, but I needed him. I promised him things I never should have promised, but I did what I had to do. She was scared and she was angry, but I know she understands.

Besides, she came prepared.

I glance over at her purse on the nightstand. I know her gun is in there. The gun she surprised me with. The thought that she doesn't trust me makes me want to beat someone's face in, but I get it. She's smart. She knew she would need protection. I'm just pissed at myself that I gave her a reason to use it. I proved her right. I know I have to stop fucking up. I owe it to her to be better. I drop my mouth to her hip and kiss her on the bone. I wrap my arms around her waist and hug her to me, desperation welling up alongside the love.

I've waited for years to touch her. I've waited for years to be her man. I press my ear to her chest and listen to her heartbeat. I don't know what I'll

do on the outside. I don't know what my life will be. I don't know how long until the cops catch up with me. But all the shit is worth it. As I lay there with my body against hers, I know that anything that happens to me in the future will be worth it.

I push her onto her back, roughly. She moans at the back of her throat, the sound dripping like honey down my spine. I suck her left nipple into my mouth, rolling the soft bud between my lips. She furrows her brow, her plump lips pressing together in a frown. She looks like she's in pain, but I know different. I release her swollen tip after sucking it hard, my eyes searching her skin for my mark. Sure enough, she's got a small white scar above her pink aureola.

I've branded her. The very first night we were together, I bit her tit, and all these years later, the mark is still there. I scarred her for life and it feels damn good. It won't be the last time, I think with a smile. I rub my rough cheek against her softness, then press a kiss to the valley of her breasts. When I glance up, she's looking at me, her eyes heavy-lidded from sleep.

I don't waste any time. I position myself over her and she opens her legs wide and invites me inside. I take it slow because I'm not in any rush. In fact, if I had one wish, it would be to make this night last forever. Being with her. Making love to her. I don't want it to end. I snake one arm beneath her shoulders and one around her waist, wrapping myself around her tight. She returns the favor, one hand on my ass and the other massaging my scalp as I thrust slow and steady into her.

She kisses me softly, her lips caressing mine. I kiss her right back, my heart damn near beating out of my chest. All I want is to be close to her. I want to crawl under her skin. I want to embed myself in her. A shiver of something warm and all-encompassing runs through me, so foreign that I almost don't know what it is. It takes me a minute to realize that it's happiness.

I'm happy.

I can die now, I realize. In this moment, God could strike me down and I wouldn't give a shit.

This is what she does to me. The love of a good woman can change everything. I know it. I'm proof of it. I smooth her hair off of her neck and dip my head to trail my tongue down the bulge of her vein. I can feel her blood pumping under her skin. I want to taste it. I want to feel it coating my

tongue. But I don't bite her there, even though I want to. From now on, my marks on her are going to be private, for my eyes only. I'm done sharing.

She bows her back and drags her fingernails down my neck, leaving a trail of prickly fire in their wake. I take in a sharp breath between my teeth, loving the hint of roughness behind her touch. I don't pick up my pace, although I sense she wants me to do just that.

"Mmm," she hums as I nip at her neck, harder than I intended to. It's almost impossible to keep myself in check, but I don't want to fuck up and come too fast. She rolls her hips, taking me deeper and deeper. Her muscles tighten and her lips part, and I know she's about to let go. My eyes find hers. I pump into her slow and then fast, my rhythm as jagged as my heartbeat. She writhes, pressing her perfect tits against my chest and digging her fingernails into my back. Neither of us look away as the tidal wave crashes into her and she takes me with her. Both of us cling to each other, desperate and clawing, breathing the same air and feeling the same fucking pleasure. I explode and then collapse into her, fatigue catching up to me with a quickness. She sighs heavily, dropping her head back on the pillow as her body softens beneath me. "How do you do that?" she whispers, pressing her fingers to her lips.

"Do what?" I ask, taking her hand and brushing my lips across her knuckles. She shakes her head, her eyes flitting away and then coming back. "Do what?" I repeat, biting her knuckles lightly.

"Make me come," she replies after a long moment, with a shy little laugh. "Every time." I love the sound of her laughter. I've heard it only a few times before, but I love it. I rub my face against hers, my stubble tickling her cheek, and she laughs again, swatting at me.

"I have a magic cock," I whisper in her ear. I think about all the other men she had when I was locked up, and I feel a wick of anger light in the pit of my stomach. But I know they couldn't satisfy her like I can. I know it deep in my soul.

"It's an evil cock," she replies through her laughter, wrapping her arms around my neck. "Supremely evil." I don't disagree with her. I just roll over onto my side, taking her with me. She sidles up next to me and I pull the sheet over us. The last thing I hear as I fall asleep is her laughter in my ears and it feels good.

Damn good.

When I open my eyes, the early morning sunlight cuts across the room. I scrub my hands over my face, forcing myself to wake up. I'm not used to sleeping through the night and it feels strange. I roll over and reach for my girl. My hand slides over the cool sheets and I know immediately.

She's not here.

I sit upright, the familiar black anger already bubbling up in my guts. I sit still and listen—the hotel room is quiet. She's not in the shower or the bathroom. Her bags are still in the room. Her purse sits on the bedside table, in a different position than how she left it last night. I bolt out of bed, my dick swinging between my legs as I grab her purse and throw it on the bed. I root through the bag and my suspicion is proved correct. The gun is gone.

I clench my fists, trying to reign in my anger. I don't know where she is and I don't like it. I hate it. She's left me too many times. I don't like thinking about those times. But the reality is looking me in the face. I'm not going to sit around and let her get further and further away.

I find my jeans and boots and shove them on. I throw the door open, my eyes scouring the parking lot. Her little gray car is still beside the dumpster, where she parked it last night. I don't know why, but it doesn't make me feel any better. She could be anywhere, with or without the car. I don't know how much of a head start she has on me. My heartbeat is pounding in my ears as I move down the breezeway, my vision slowly turning black. Murderous thoughts fill my brain and I can't stop them. All of my anger management counseling has been for shit, I realize. I want to hurt someone. Anyone.

Then I see her.

She's swimming laps in the the big blue outdoor pool. Her long dark hair streams behind her as she swims, her strokes long and sure. I stop and watch her, grasping the railing so hard the metal cuts into my palms. My eyes follow her every movement and I force myself to relax. She's still here. She didn't leave me. She didn't run. My boiling anger cools to a simmer as she swims, her languid movements calming me. A smile curls over my lips as a devilish thought crosses my mind.

I wonder how I'll punish her.

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I feel him watching me before I see him. Breathing hard, I pull myself up on the side of the concrete pool, the water splashing around me. I roll my shoulders as my muscles scream from the exertion. I glance around, feeling his eyes. I see him a second later, leaning against the railing on the second level of the hotel. Even from a distance, I can see he's angry. I push off the wall into a backstroke with a sigh.

I left without waking him because he looked like he needed the sleep. I figured I would be back before he woke. Now, I see my mistake.

I wonder if he knows that I hid the gun.

I still don't completely trust him, truth be told. The thought of leaving him alone with my gun doesn't sit well with me. Not that I think he'll hurt me. I'm more worried about the rest of the world. The last thing we need is him getting any criminal ideas. We're only halfway to Seattle and I don't want any more hiccups in my plan.

What's going to happen when we get back to Seattle? I don't know.

The future is the one thing I can't plan for.

But until then I want a smooth ride.

When I look up again, he's gone. I swim more laps, figuring I might as well finish up my workout if the shit's gonna hit the fan either way. I towel off afterward and then I take my time heading back up to the room. I want to give him time to cool off. But when I open the door, he's on me in half a second. I scream in surprise as he grabs my arm. My wet hair slaps against my back as I land on my stomach on the unmade bed. He yanks the towel from around my waist, leaving me in only my one-piece suit. I crane my neck to look at him as he leans over me.

"Don't say anything," he says, his voice low and dangerous as he undoes his belt. His eyes are manic and I freeze, knowing in I've earned a punishment. A delicious thrill goes through me, even though I'm pissed at him. I should be able to go out for a swim without him freaking the fuck out. But that's beside the point. He pulls his belt from his jeans with a whoosh and fashions the leather into a loop. My eyes widen as I realize what he's got planned for me.

Even though I know what's coming, the first smack across my ass is still a shock. I gasp in surprise at the sharp pain. Elliot swings again, and the leather cracks against my skin, the sound echoing in the room. I grit my teeth, fisting my fingers in the sheet. I'm not going to lie—it hurts. But I

take it. I haven't been spanked since I was a child. I didn't like it then...but maybe it's not so bad now.

I jerk as the belt lands on my sensitive flesh once more. I can feel the wetness already slick between my legs. What is it about this man that makes me crave pain? He's given me all of his darkness and perversion and I've soaked it up like a sponge. He spanks me again and I have to suppress a moan. He swings again and again, until tears are running down my face and I have to press my face into the mattress to muffle my screams.

Then he stops and tosses the belt on the bed beside me.

"Don't you ever do that to me again," he says.

"I'll wake you up next time," I say, not bothering with excuses.

"Yeah, you do that," he whispers. Without a word, he yanks at my one-piece, and I help him pull it off of me. He tosses it in a wet heap on the floor and then drops to his knees. I jump as his fingers caress my red, swollen flesh, even though his touch is gentle. Well, as gentle as he can be. He'll always be rough around the edges, but he's learning. When he drags his tongue up my thigh, I buck my hips in shock. He grabs my hips and holds me down as he licks me, up and down and all over. "It killed me," he murmurs. "When I thought you were gone."

"I'm not going anywhere, baby," I moan, my eyes rolling up in my head at the pleasure of it all.

"You sure about that?" he whispers, then bites my left cheek, hard. I grip the sheets so tight I'm surprised they don't rip. He releases me and licks at the stinging bite, soothing it with his rough tongue. Then he spreads me open and runs his tongue from my clit upwards, not leaving an inch of me untouched.

He's so damn thorough it's maddening.

When he's done driving me up the wall with his tongue, he hauls me against the bathroom sink and fucks me like he didn't just spend all last night fucking me. I watch his big cock pumping in and out of me in the three-sided mirror that surrounds us. My ass is red and mottled from his punishment and my wet hair is tangled around his hand. Our hips bang out a primitive rhythm and he sucks on my bottom lip just like I like. My tits bounce with every thrust and their movement only turns me on more and more. The pleasure is all-encompassing, but I wonder how long we can sustain this. How long can we use our bodies to numb us to the shit-storm

that surrounds us? The only thing I know for sure is nothing lasts forever.  
Not pain, not pleasure, not violence.

It all has to end sometime.

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## Chapter Twenty-two

We leave Denver after two nights, just like I planned. No drama, no bullshit. We check out of the hotel at four in the morning and don't look back. We have to be in Seattle the next morning or eyebrows will start raising. The drive is nineteen hours and, if we drive in shifts, we can make it. I want to pull in my driveway before the sun comes up and the neighbors start getting nosy.

I know my mother is probably freaking the fuck out already because she can't get ahold of me, but there's nothing I can do about that. I left my phone in Seattle so that no one can trace my location. I called her yesterday from the hotel in Denver, creating more concrete proof that I was there. It's all a part of my alibi. There's a paper trail that leads me to Denver and nowhere else.

When I get tired halfway through Idaho, Elliot takes the wheel. The sun is already dropping in the sky, casting beautiful amber light against the mountains in the distance. My stomach is bunched up in knots, but it's hard not to appreciate the scenery. I roll my head to look at Elliot. He's wearing sunglasses, chewing on a toothpick like he's back in Texas and we're going for a leisurely Sunday drive. He glances over at me, his cruel mouth softening into an almost-smile. I raise my hand, brushing my knuckles over his stubble. He turns his gaze back to the road and I let my eyes droop closed as the rhythm of the road lulls me to sleep.

When I wake up, I'm all alone in the empty car. I sit up, taking in my surroundings. I'm in a parking lot, I realize, behind a convenience store. It's dark all around me. I have no idea where I am. The car keys are gone, as is my wallet. My ankle holster is empty as well. I let out a shaky breath and yank back on my tennis shoes. Fear flares up in me. He wouldn't take off, I know he wouldn't.

But I can't help but think it.

I throw open the car door and step out into the cool night, wincing as my sore ass leaves the seat. I gnaw on my bottom lip as I hug my arms to my chest. I can feel the minutes ticking by and I wonder where he is. Panic rises in me. I don't want to leave the car, but I don't want to waste time either. Making a quick decision, I grab my purse and slam the door shut. I



hurry around to the front of the store, the bright fluorescent lights stinging my eyes. I push open the door and a bell dings, announcing my entrance. I smile up at the old man behind the counter, then walk from aisle to aisle, looking for Elliot. The first one's empty, as is the next. My heart jumps in my throat as I near the last aisle.

If he's not there, I'm going to lose my shit.

Sure enough, it's empty. I stand there, swallowing hard as the beer coolers against the wall hum, trying to figure out what the hell I'm going to do.

Then I almost jump out of my skin when a hand slides around my waist.

"Thought you were sleeping," Elliot murmurs in my ear.

"I woke up," I say, sagging my shoulders in relief. He chuckles, low and slow, and pinches my ass. I glare at him, but I'm pretty sure I can't muster an appropriate scowl. I'm so damn happy to see him, it's scary.

"What do you want to eat?" he asks, stepping around me and opening the cooler door. He pulls out three energy drinks.

"Something not too shitty," I say, picking up a snack cake and dropping it.

"Girl, you've been in Seattle too long. They got you eating organic alfalfa sprouts or some shit?" he says, giving me a sideways glance.

"No. I've been eating organic alfalfa sprouts since Austin," I say with a smile, then my breath hitches. *Austin*. I feel my face freeze as the bad memories invade my brain. I can see he's remembering the same thing I'm remembering. His face hardens. I drop my eyes and grab an apple bearclaw off the shelf. "It's got fruit, at least," I say.

"Mm-hmm," he murmurs.

"You want one?" I ask, raising my eyes to meet his again.

"No," he says. "I want two." I snort out a laugh, letting the tension dissipate before it strangles us. I grab the food and follow him to the front counter. The old man shuffles over to ring us up. I hold out my palm and give Elliot a pointed look.

"Wallet?" I say.

"You want to pay?" he asks, digging in his backpocket and pulling my expensive leather wallet out. "Be my guest."

"Thanks," I roll my eyes and turn back to the old man. He's taking his time ringing up our items and my gaze is drawn to the TV above his head. I stiffen. Elliot's face is plastered across the screen, along with Lassiter's. The volume is low, but I can still hear the news anchor's voice.

"In national news, two men escaped from a Texas State penitentiary three days ago..." The voice trails off as a loud ringing in my ears drowns it out. I feel Elliot stiffen beside me. I drop my eyes back to the old man, who's staring at me. His mouth moves but I don't hear what he says.

"What?" I ask and my mouth feels like it's full of cotton.

"That'll be eleven bucks fifteen, young lady," he says in a wisp of a voice. I nod, digging in my wallet and pulling out a twenty. I slide it across the counter and he takes it in his shaky hand. I glance back up at the screen. A Texas ranger is on the tube now, detailing the ranger's massive manhunt to find the two fugitives. I let my eyes shift to Elliot and I see his hand drifting around to his back.

I remember he's got my gun.

The old man is counting out my change, slow as molasses. I let out a low breath, willing myself to say calm. There's no sense in freaking out. I hope my calm rubs off on Elliot. I glance back up at the TV and it's flashing the big mugshot of Elliot again. Biting down on my lip, I figure a distraction is the best thing for all of us.

"You been busy tonight?" I ask, pasting a smile on my face. The old man doesn't look up, just continues counting change with his gnarled fingers.

"Not after the work rush," he says. "A few truckers passing through." I nod, feigning interest. He holds out his hand and I take the change, trying not to seem too eager. He looks up at me with milky, rheumy eyes, one completely covered in a cataract. "You have a good night now, ya hear?"

"You too," I say with a nod, then glance at Elliot. His eyes are dancing with a familiar manic light, but he grabs the food and follows me out the door, just as the nightly news goes on commercial break. He lets out a low breath behind me, but I wait until we're behind the store to whirl around and look at him.

"You have something else that's mine," I say, holding out my hand. He smiles a cruel smile, and I can see the violence behind it. He would have shot that old man if it had come down to it. I know he would have. He

reaches into the back of his pants, under his shirt, and extracts my little gun from his belt.

“Only took it just in case,” he says, dropping it in my outstretched palm. I close my hands around the cold metal and let out a deep sigh. “I guess this makes us even,” he says with a wink as he pops the top on one of his energy drinks. “For earlier.”

“My ass says we were already even,” I reply, dropping the gun into my purse. When I turn back to him, he tosses something round over his shoulder at me and I catch it with both hands.

“Saw that and I thought of you,” he says, leaning against the car.

I open my hand, revealing a plastic bubble from a kid's gumball machine. I hold it up to the light and snort out a laugh. Inside is a cheap metal ring with a shiny, fake sapphire.

“Thought you'd like that,” he says, his face in shadow so I can't see his eyes. “So, we even?”

“Yeah, we're even,” I murmur as I pop open the plastic bubble to get a better look. If he thinks he can buy me off with a cheap metal ring, he's crazy. But then again, it's almost... sweet.

“Let's ride,” he says, dipping into the driver's seat. I slide the ring onto my finger, rolling my eyes at my own cheesiness. I know the ring's fake and cheap and doesn't mean anything. But I put it on anyway. Then I hop in the car and we take off, into the dark night.

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A light mist falls as we arrive in Seattle, blanketing the city in a gray haze. The sun is still an hour off from rising and all is quiet. The streets are almost empty. Elliot leans toward the window as we drive past downtown, as the skyline glitters in the distance. Seattle, Washington is a big change for a born and bred Texan, and I know that firsthand. I thought it would be hard to adjust to all the rain and gray skies. Truth be told, gray skies fit my moods most days.

It takes another half-hour to reach my little bungalow in a nice suburb on the outskirts of town. I hit the button on the garage door opener and pull in next to my BMW. As the garage door closes behind us, I finally feel like I can breathe again.

We made it.

We're thousands of miles from Texas. Far from immediate danger. If we don't fuck up, Elliot could be a free man for a long time. I turn my face to look at Elliot and he looks right back at me. Now we just have to figure out what to do next. The hard part is over.

But then again, maybe it's just beginning. We still have to figure out what to do with the rest of our lives.

First, we need sleep.

"Come on," I say, looking away and getting out of the car. I'm tired as hell, but I know that busy day awaits me when I wake up. I have to scrub down and get rid of the Ford ASAP. It's the only thing remaining that ties me and Elliot together. We unload the car and then he follows me into the dark house. I flip on the light in the kitchen and toss my keys and purse on the counter.

Elliot's eyes roam, across the pictures of my nephews on the fridge to the slightly droopy flowers in a vase on the counter. He runs his hand over the glossy blue tile countertops, like he still can't believe he's here.

"Bedroom's upstairs," I say, beckoning him to follow me into the living room. His eyes take in everything, from my rustic brown leather furniture (a gift from my parents, of course) to my fledgling guitar collection.

"You play guitar?"

"A bit," I say.

"Any good?"

"I was in a all girls heavy metal band for awhile, in high school," I say with a smile. "I can kick a little ass."

"I bet you can," he says, his voice low. "What was name of the band?" He strums his fingers over the strings of my Fender.

"The Cheeky Cockettes," I say with a laugh. I haven't thought of my band in years, I realize. "We were a bunch of Catholic school girls who thought we were being clever."

"Little hellraiser, that's what you were," he says, a smile creeping over his lips.

"What about you?" I ask. "No, wait. Let me guess. You played football."

"All-American running back. Fucked up my shoulder first year in college. Dropped out, ended up in construction." His smile fades and he

moves closer to me, crowding me in the best way possible. “We done playing catch up?”

“Yes,” I whisper, my eyes on his mouth.

“Good.” He pushes past me and heads up the stairs. I twist the cheap metal ring around on my finger with my thumb, and I can see that it's already starting to turn my skin green. Sucking in a sharp breath, I follow him up the stairs. He's standing by my queen-sized bed when I enter my bedroom and I stop in the doorway to watch him. He runs his hand over the down comforter, again, like he can't believe he's here. It's strange to see him amongst my things. His black clothes and rough demeanor contrast with the white and airy fabrics that adorn the room. This bedroom is my sanctuary. I've never had any men in here before. It always felt too intimate, like I was letting them inside of me, somehow. I gave them my body, but none of them got any deeper. A fierce need for control over my personal life is the only thing that's kept me sane for all of these years.

Well, not exactly sane, but close enough.

As I watch him move around the room, I remind myself that I don't have to hide from Elliot. Even if I tried, he wouldn't let me. He would force his way inside and take whatever he wanted from me and I would be powerless to stop him.

“There's a bathroom through there,” I say, breaking the silence. He looks up at me and I point to the dark doorway in the corner of the room. I walk into the room and toss my bag on the armchair beside the closet. He ignores me, opening the drawer in the bedside table. I don't bother stopping him, even though I know what's in there.

He pulls out the small frame and holds it to the light to get a good look. I've looked at that picture many times over the years, ever since I stole it from his house. The picture of him as a happy child is the only one I have of him smiling. The others are pictures I cut out of the newspaper during the trial. I've got those stashed somewhere as well. He always glowers in those.

“Where did you get this?” he asks, his voice barely a whisper.

“I broke into your house,” I say matter-of-factly. “I stole it.” He places the picture back into the drawer, facedown, and slams it shut.

“Take off your clothes,” he says, already pulling his shirt over his head.

“No,” I say, knowing exactly what's going to happen to me for refusing him. His mouth ticks upward and I jump back before he can grab me. He

lunges forward and I back up until my back hits the wall. He advances on me slowly, like a lion about to pounce. I sidestep him, and his manic eyes follow me as I skirt around to the other side of the bed. He's getting excited and my heart is pounding between my ribs. The glow of the lamplight highlights every ripple and every cord of muscle under his skin as he moves toward me, and I'm temporarily distracted from giving chase. I want him to catch me, but I don't want to make it too easy. If it's too easy, it won't be any fun. For either of us.

I jump up and crawl across the bed on all fours, wrinkling the smooth linen of the duvet. He puts a knee up on the edge of the mattress and it sinks with his weight. He grabs my ankle, but I twist free, gasping for breath. I reach the other side of the bed and scramble off, falling to the floor. He's on me before I realized I gave him an advantage, shoving me over onto my back on the carpet. He yanks me closer to him, his big hands clamped on my hips. Overcome with the urge to fight, I push on his shoulders and smack his face, but it doesn't deter him.

It never did.

He rips my tank top over my head and crushes his big body to mine. He smashes his mouth to mine as he shoves my jeans down my hips. I try to push him off, but it's impossible. He thrusts his tongue in between my lips as he jams his hand between my thighs. His finger slides inside of me and I writhe against him. He's invading me, smothering me, wrapping me up in him. It's like we're back in his dark house in Austin.

It's like no time has passed at all.

He hauls me up and throws me on the bed. I lay there, trying to catch my breath, as he yanks my jeans and panties down my legs. He drops the jeans on the floor but lifts my little pink panties to his nose, a hint of a smile on his hard face. I know he's been waiting for this moment, even longer than I have. He tosses my panties into the corner and points down at me.

"Don't move," he says. This time I obey, my eyes following him as he unzips the black bag from the trunk. He pulls out the coil of rope, running the rough hemp strand through his hands. "Why did you go to my house?" he asks. When I don't answer, he sucks his teeth and gives me a dark look. "Why?"

"I don't know," I lie. He chuckles like the devil he is and shakes his head. He doesn't believe me. He places his palms on the bed and leans over

me.

“Did you go in the garage?” he asks, a fire raging behind the green of his eyes. I shake my head no, furrowing my brow. I remember now that his truck was parked in the driveway, not in the garage. At the time, I didn't think anything about it. The garage was the last place I wanted to revisit and I ran out of time, besides. He loops the rope around my neck in a fast movement and tightens it before I can stop him. “I had plans for us. Even when I didn't know where you were I was planning.” He ties the rope in one of his impossibly simple but difficult knots, his fingers moving with ease. “I built you something. A gift.” My heart is beating in my ears so hard it's almost hard to hear his words. He drops his head to whisper directly in my ear. “A cage.”

“What?” I gasp out, giving him a sharp look.

“Ironical, eh?” he says, but there's no humor in his eyes. “I planned to keep you in a cage, but I ended up in one instead.” He takes a step back and wraps the end of the leash around his forearm, pulling it tight and forcing me to sit up. The rough rope is already cutting into the sensitive skin of my neck and a weird feeling comes over me.

I don't know when it happened, but somehow, I've lost control.

I don't like it.

Not one bit.

He strokes my cheek and I feel tears welling up in my eyes. I can't stop them from falling, so I don't bother. He runs his rough thumb over my lower lip, then hooks it in the side of my mouth, forcing me open wide.

“Joanie,” he says, his voice low and dangerous. He runs his thumb over my bottom teeth and then thrusts it in my mouth. I moan, but I can't move away, even if I wanted to. The leash is pulled taut and I have no relief. I blink away my tears and stare up at him, trying to figure out the barrage of feelings rushing through me. “I'm a fucking idiot when it comes to you, you know that?”

I let out a sigh through my nose and nod, my eyes never leaving his. I understood. Believe me, I understood. I'd been such a fool over him for so long. The need to punish him had taken over my life. Now that it was over, what did I have left? What did I have left of myself?

Keeping the rope taut, he forces me over onto my back. He shoves his jeans down low on his hips and pushes my legs open with his knees. He

positions himself against me and thrusts inside of me with no warning. I arch my back, the movement forcing the rope to tighten around my windpipe. I gasp in air as he fucks me hard, all gentleness and semblance of softness gone. I grip his shoulders, trying to hold on, my nails digging into his shoulders and drawing blood. He growls, baring his teeth, at the pain. He pulls the rope tighter and stars burst behind my eyelids. I clench my jaw as he drops his whole weight onto me, holding me down. He grabs my wrists in one of his big hands and forces them above my head.

I can't move.

I have no defense against him. My consciousness zeroes in on the friction between us, how he's able to push himself so deep into me that I can't tell where I end and he begins. He grinds his hips against me, our bones banging together, again and again. He fucks like he's desperate, like he needs an answer to a question I don't know the answer to. My body responds without my permission and the orgasm explodes at the back of my brain. My vision goes black and my whole body locks tight. My mouth drops open in a silent scream and for several long moments, the pain and pleasure overtakes me.

He captures my mouth in his, kissing me through the violences of my climax. Then he drags his mouth away and rubs his rough cheek against the soft underside of my arm. A moan deep in his throat is the only warning I get. He bites down hard on my arm and I cry out in pain. His lips turn red with my blood and he licks at the wound he's caused. I can only watch him, tears dripping into my hair. His eyes roll back in his head and he bucks into me like a man possessed. I can feel his cock jerk inside of me, his orgasm just as violent as mine. Then he hinges up and off of me, pushing away. He rolls over onto his back, throwing his hands above his head, his ribs roughly expanding and contracting with the force of his breathing.

I can only lay there on my back, feeling thoroughly beaten. I feel like I've been punched in the stomach. When I can move again, my hands find the leash around my neck. I fumble with the knot, hands shaking, trying to get it off of me. Finally, when it comes free, I throw it across the room. I push myself up and straddle him so fast, he can barely react. His cock is still hard and I take it in my hand. He jumps against me, his muscles in his stomach tightening. I guide him inside of me and then slam my hips down,



taking all of him in one swift motion. He tosses his head back, his face tight. I ride him relentlessly, and it has nothing to do with pleasure.

I'm angry. Furious, actually.

I lean forward and close my hands around his throat. His eyes widen, but he doesn't fight me. He keeps his hands above his head, his hands tightening into fists. His muscles strain, but he doesn't touch me. I strangle him, my thumbs pressing into his windpipe, as I fuck him. Blind black rage consumes me. All of the rage of the last five years flows out of me. The beaten, destroyed, broken girl no longer exists. The rage makes me strong. It makes me powerful.

Elliot opens his mouth and his eyes bulge. His face is pale and his lips are turning blue. I don't care. I don't stop. He bucks his hips, forcing his cock deeper and I throw my head back, my hair teasing the skin of my shoulders. I ride him so hard it hurts, but I don't care. I take the hurt into myself and it only makes me stronger.

Suddenly, his hands are on my hips. His fingers flex into my soft flesh and I can hear it like a silent cry. I know if I don't stop I'm going to kill him. I could kill him and then it would all be over. I could bury him in a hidden grave like Lassiter, where no one will ever find him. No one will care if he dies. He's an evil man who's done nothing to warrant saving.

I should kill him.

But I can't.

I pull my hands away from his throat and he bows his back, gasping and choking. His hands clamp down on my hips and his cock swells inside of me before he explodes. He cries out hoarsely, his body convulsing as the orgasm takes over. I can feel the force of his orgasm and I can feel his come shooting inside of me.

I pry his hands off of me and climb off. Grabbing my thin robe from the hook by the door, I wrap it around myself and escape downstairs. I hurry to the kitchen, knowing exactly what I'm looking for. I grab my bag and root through. At the bottom are hard metal pieces and I close my hand around them. When I pull out my hand and open my fist, the spent shell casings roll around in my cupped palm.

Lassiter.

I shot him. I wanted to kill him. I was strong enough. I was fast enough. I was good enough.

I would have done it.

I remember his face the minute he died. How his eyes went from bright and full of life to blank and dead. A wave of nausea hits me and I throw myself over the sink. Bile rises in my throat and I choke on it.

I could have killed him, but I didn't. Elliot did.

Hate swirls through me and I crouch down, my hands on the rim of the sink. I don't know what's happening to me. My head throbs and my stomach heaves. I gasp and choke, coughing like maybe it'll dislodge the evil from my soul.

I can feel his eyes on me and I roll my head to look at him through. He stands in the doorway of the kitchen, his face in shadow. His pants are on, but unbuckled. Dried blood runs in rivulets down his arm and his neck is dusky and mottled from my hands. He keeps his distance, like he can feel the hatred that's bursting out of me.

"I never want to hurt you again, Joanie," he says, his voice low.

"How is that fucking possible?" I whisper. "All we have is pain. All we have is hurt!" Without thinking, I pitch the shell casings across the kitchen floor. They ping metallically off of the cabinets and floors before rolling away into the shadows. He scrubs his hands over his face and sighs, like he doesn't know what to say. There's nothing to say.

We're past the point of apologies.

"Tell me what to do," he crouches down, dropping to my eye-level. "I fucked up. Let me fix it."

I shake my head, pressing my forehead to the cool cabinet in front of me. Before I know it, his arms are around me and he's pulling me against his chest. I don't bother fighting. It's useless. Besides, it feels good to be in his arms. It feels good to bury my face in his neck and breathe in his scent.

After everything, I still crave his touch.

That's why I'm in the mess I'm in now because I can't let him go.

"Tell me what to do," he demands, his arms tightening around me.

"No more leashes." The thought comes to me out of nowhere, but as soon as the words are out of my mouth, I realize it's what I've needed to say to him for three days. We need ground rules. We need a basis to build on, if we're ever going to rise above all the shit that happened in the past. Maybe we can't ever move past it. Maybe I'm crazy and he's crazy and trying to be together is a pipe dream. But we're here, now. We only have each other. "No

more cages. I'm not your prisoner," I continue. He doesn't say anything, so I go on. "Whatever happens, we're a team. I have just as much to lose as you do if everything goes to hell."

He remains silent and I pull back so I can look in his eyes. His face is hard but I can see the softness for me in the depths of his gaze. He may be my weakness, but I make him weak as well. He doesn't want to lose me. He'll do anything to keep me. Some things never change. "I can't change that part of myself," he says. "But I love you. I don't want to hurt you anymore."

"Some hurt isn't so bad," I admit. "But I'm not your slave. I never was and I never will be."

"Fair enough," he whispers, pressing his lips to my temple.

"No more leashes," I repeat, closing my eyes and leaning into him. My body throbs and aches and suddenly, I'm exhausted. But his warmth surrounding me is a comfort.

"No more leashes. No more cages," he affirms, trailing his mouth down to my ear. "But handcuffs and rope and belts..." he trails off, his voice promising all sorts of deviant, dirty things.

"Mmm," I purr, throwing my arms around his neck and pulling him close. He hikes me up onto his lap and I straddle him, my robe parting to give him a good look. He takes advantage, sliding his rough hands between the cotton fabric and my skin. His fingers dance up my back as I press light kisses over his face. First his cheeks, then his nose, then both of his eyelids. I roll my hips against his, too sore for sex but craving his cock anyway.

*Bang!*

*Bang!*

The front door rumbles with the force of someone banging their fist against it. We both freeze, my wary expression mirrored on his face. I scramble off of him and stand, my eyes darting to the door. The early morning sky is lightening by the second, and I can see the dark figures silhouetted in the frosted glass panes. Two of them, I realize. Probably men.

"Seattle P.D., open up!" A man's voice calls out, muffled by the door. He raises his hand and bangs on the door again. I glance back at Elliot, who's crouched behind me on the floor. The manic light is flaring up again in his eyes, and I know if he feels like he's shoved in a corner, he'll become

violent. I hold out my hand, gesturing for him to stay down. He scowls, because he knows what I'm going to do.

Pulling my robe around me, making sure to cover any marks that might be on my neck or my wrists, I hurry to the door. I unlock the deadbolts, take a shaky breath, and open the door a crack.

"Hello?" I rasp, making my voice hoarse, like they've roused me from a deep sleep.

"Joan Vasquez?" The older cop says, leaning forward. They're wearing suits, not uniforms. These aren't just beat cops, I realize. They're detectives.

"That's me," I say, opening the door a little wider.

"A missing person's report was filed on a Joan Vasquez," the younger detective says, stepping forward. He's almost cute, but looks like too much of a Dudley-do-right to fit my tastes.

"Let me guess, my mother?" I say with a rueful smile. The two detectives share a look and I know I've hit the nail on the head. Leave it to Blanche Vasquez to overreact to a few missed phone calls.

"She said she couldn't get ahold of you," the older detective continues.

"I was in Denver for a few days. I forgot my cellphone at home," I say, acting like everything is a silly misunderstanding. "She's very protective."

"Miss Vasquez, do you know an Elliot John Pritchard?" the younger man says, his eyes softening as he looks at me. My heart hitches in my chest and I don't have to fake a reaction to the name.

"Yes," I whisper.

"I apologize, but I have to inform you that he escaped three days ago from Huntsville Penitentiary." He digs around in his pocket, and I grasp the doorknob like I need it to help me stay on my feet. "There's a manhunt, but he has yet to turn up." He holds out a his card and after a moment, I reach out and take it. "We have reason to believe he's headed this way. If you have any problems, you call me at that number."

I stare down at the card dumbly, like I'm in shock.

"Because of me?" I murmur. "You think he's coming this way because of me?" The detectives share another look. Bingo.

"Just give me a call. Any problems. I'll answer." The younger detective ducks his head, and I know he's sincere.

"We'll catch him," the older detective says. "They always fuck up eventually." I drop my gaze to the card again. Out of the corner of my eye, I

can see Elliot to the side of me. He's got my gun in his hand and his finger's on the trigger.

“Thank you,” I whisper, my eyes filling with tears on cue.

“You have a good day now,” the younger detective says. He feels bad for me. If it were up to him, guys like Elliot would be shot on sight. I appreciate the sentiment, but I hate being pitied. I nod slowly, staring at him until he looks away. Then they turn and walk down the slate stone path back to their black sedan. Beside me, Elliot drops the gun and rolls his shoulders. Nervous tension rolls off him in waves.

I know he would have shot them. Thankfully, it didn't come to that.

Our secret's safe for now. The future is a mystery, but today we'll get to sleep together, side by side. We'll get to eat together and fuck and laugh and live.

Like normal, everyday people.

A cool breeze kicks up, lifting the hem of my thin robe and causing goosebumps to prickle over my skin. Fog settles across the grass of my lawn like smoke. I glance up at the early morning sky. It's already cloudy. I predict another gray day in lovely Seattle.

With a smile, I slam the door shut.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

My name is Whitney Bianca and I'm a new dark erotica writer. My debut book, *I Know What Love Is*, will arrive in August 2014.

I'm a true fan of LOVE, romance, and sexy times.

I enjoy writing about power plays between two people, whether they're in love or in lust. I love taking my characters to the edge and shoving them off.

If you like to take a walk on the dark side, you're my kind of person. Maybe we can be friends.

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Thanks for reading!