

A man and a woman are lying on a dark, textured surface. The man is in the foreground, looking up, wearing a dark tank top. The woman is in the background, lying on her back with her legs raised. The text "LOVE IS STRANGE" is written in large, white, brush-stroke style letters across the center of the image.

LOVE IS STRANGE

Whitney Bianca

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**by
Whitney Bianca**

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Love Is Strange
(I Know What Love Is #2)
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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

I stand with my hands gripping the cold metal railing. My fingers are frozen and painfully numb, but I can't move. I can't do anything but stare out at the churning black water beyond. The violent sea stretches in front of me, dotted with sharp white shards of ice. I can't tear my eyes away from it. As I stare into the dark abyss, a thought comes to me out of nowhere. A silent command in a voice that sounds like his.

I could jump in.

I could climb over the railing and let myself go. I could let the water swallow me whole. I could let my heavy wool coat drag me down. I could finally say a permanent goodbye to the shit-storm that has consumed my life.

I could.

He would hate that, I'm sure.

Would he?

I lift my foot, hooking the heel of my boot on the bottom rung of the railing. The wind kicks up around me, whipping my long hair around my face. Far away, I can see a shadowy fishing boat, inching its way across the horizon. I watch it for what seems like hours, but must only be minutes, but I only think of him. For the past three years, I've been waiting for him to come back to me. If he was standing here, right now, I would strangle him with my bare hands for making me crazy like this. Then I would smack his face and kiss his lips and pull his hair and wrap my arms around him and squeeze hard.

A scream echoes across the hard, icy darkness. It takes me a second to realize that my mouth is open and my throat feels as if it's been ripped open. I'm alone at the end of the world. No one else can hear my screams. All of the pain of the last seven years is bubbling up and there's nothing I can do about it. So I scream.

Elliot Pritchard, my worst enemy, the only man I've ever hated, is dead. Drowned off the coast of Alaska, they tell me, a few miles from where I now stand. My ordeal is officially over, they say. He'll never threaten you

again, they say. And yet, here I am, freezing my ass off hundreds of miles from home, still looking for him. I don't know if I'll ever stop looking for him. The sad, sick truth is that Elliot is inside of me, always. He surrounds me. His voice is in my ear. His hand is on my throat. His cock is perpetually hard for me and I want it so bad it hurts. I ache for him.

I know I should let him go. Spit on his grave and turn my back forever. I should, but I can't.

I *can't*.

I hate him for leaving me. I hate him for everything he's done to me. I hate him so much that I couldn't untangle myself from the truly maddening reality of hating him if I tried.

But it's not just hate that has me trapped.

Where Elliot is concerned, it's never been that simple.

I was stupid, I know.

I hadn't let my guard down, but I had stopped looking over my shoulder constantly. A week passed and then a month. I thought the heat had died down. The world kept turning. I went to work and came home. I called my mother like a good daughter and promised a trip home to Texas as soon as I could get away. There were no more heart-stopping knocks on the door and my muscles stopped locking every time I saw a police car or heard a siren. Life went on, but I wouldn't say it was normal.

It was too good to be normal.

The day that everything began to crumble started like the others had before it. I woke up as the sun rose. I dressed quickly, carelessly, and then hopped in my BMW and headed to work. I ate my morning bagel and drank my morning coffee – black. No milk, no sugar. I laughed with my co-workers Alisha and Carmen as I ate my salad for lunch. I smiled and waved goodbye as everybody filed out of the office on that Thursday evening, heading home to their families or to the nearest happy hour.

I stayed behind as I did almost every night, piled high with work from the bitch who'd held my job previously. The partners had fired her and

promoted me a few weeks before. The timing was unfortunate, but I didn't turn down the offer. The pay raise was significant and even though I was just a cog in the office machine and barely thought about my job beyond the building, it felt good to be promoted. The meaningless pat on the head felt important, like everything was finally going right. Suddenly, I was doing a million times better than just a few short years before. I had almost forgotten about how shitty things had been.

Almost.

There's an undeniable freedom in forgetfulness and denial, I'd say.

On that ordinary Thursday, I was in my little cube near the front of the dark building. The computer reflected a blue light on the acoustic-tiled ceiling, and my desk light pooled yellow around my feet. My mind was elsewhere as I typed up a storm, the clacking of the keyboard the only sound in my ears, other than the low hum of the central air. I swept my bothersome hair off of my neck and crossed my legs, my ass aching from sitting for so long. I glanced at my watch, biting my lip as I realized it was after 8:00.

I raised my hands above my head, my skin prickling with goosebumps as the A/C kicked into high gear. I stood on my bare feet, rising on my tiptoes to stretch out my calves. My respectable black pumps were kicked under the desk and my whole body was stiff. I craved a meal and sleep, but I also craved something else. *That* particular craving never went away. It was like an addiction and I was already late for my fix. Knowing it was time to go home, I dug my shoes out with my toes and reached for my purse on the back of my chair.

Then the air around me shifted.

I didn't see him until I turned my head, but by then it was too late. He was too close. A dark figure, dressed all in black, silhouetted by the fluorescent light from the office kitchen. My whole body went stiff. My hair slid out of the makeshift knot I'd tied it in and I didn't bother catching it. I just stared at him. He was tall and built, his shoulders wide and his arms big at his sides. His body was as loose as mine was stiff and he swayed forward, like he was ready to pounce on me like the animal he was.

"What are you doing?" I asked before I even realized my mouth was moving. It was like all the oxygen had been sucked out of my lungs.

“Door was open,” he said, his voice deep under the black ski mask that covered his face.

“We’re closed,” I said, my heart suddenly beating against my ribs. “I was just leaving.”

“You should lock the door when you’re here all by yourself,” he murmured, not yet making a move to come closer.

“I’m not alone,” I whispered.

“Only one car in the parking lot.” He turned his head from left to right, his eyes moving from empty cubicle to empty cubicle. “That’s your fancy little car outside, isn’t it?” His voice was rough, but slow like honey. I could hear the Southern drawl at the back of his throat.

“No.” My throat opened and I took a deep breath, my blouse tightening over my breasts. “I take the bus.” It was a blatant lie but I didn’t stop myself. He cocked his head and I could almost see the evil smile curl beneath his mask. He knew as well as I did that it was a lie. “It’s my co-worker’s car,” I continued, unable to stop myself. “He’s in the bathroom.”

“Is he?” he asked, his voice sharper than before, like a knife. “What’s his name?”

“What?”

“His fucking name,” he growled and I knew he was angry. “What is it?”

“Frank,” I replied instantly. He narrowed his eyes and took a step closer to me.

“Call Frank,” he said, his voice lower than ever. “Tell him to get his ass out here.” I shook my head without thinking, knowing my lie was easily exposed. A moment of silence passed between us, the roar of the air conditioner the only sound other than the beating of my heart. I didn’t want to be afraid, but fear still crawled under my skin like a virus. He wanted me to be afraid of him and in the dark, empty office, I couldn’t help it.

I was.

I dragged my teeth over my bottom lip and decided my only option was to make a run for the door. He was probably faster and he was definitely stronger, but I had to. I couldn’t just stand there like Bambi caught in the high beams of a Mac truck. It wasn’t in my nature. I like to think of myself as tough, a fighter. I wasn’t always a fighter, but I learned a long time ago that there’s only one way for a girl to survive in the world – by biting and

kicking and screaming. And shooting and stabbing, if it came down to it. He was itching for a fight, and I wasn't going to let him win it. Not easily, anyway. I raised my hand slightly, letting go of my purse strap in anticipation. His eyes caught the movement and, again, I swore I could see him smile under the knit mask that covered his face.

“Hey Frank!” he called out suddenly, making me jump. He wanted to catch me off guard and it worked. The asshole. In a flash, I darted around the side of my cube, the commercial grade carpet rough beneath my bare feet. I heard his heavy footfalls behind me and I stifled the scream that was forming in my throat. I ran through the darkness, the shadows of the empty cubicles looming all around me, sinister in a way I'd never noticed before. There were places to hide, but I didn't have time. I didn't have the headway I needed. I didn't have any space. He was everywhere. All around me. I could hear his evil laughter in my ears. I could feel him behind me, feel his fingertips on the back of my neck. I could *feel* the violence of his thoughts. He was a bad man, a man who liked to do bad things. I had no doubts about him.

I knew what he wanted.

Excitement shot up my spine as I leaned toward the nearest workstation and pulled out the chair, shoving it around behind me, trying to block his path. The chair tipped over with a crash, the sound like an explosion. I glanced back over my shoulder and a sound halfway between a laugh and a scream escaped my lips as he bounded over it with an undeniable athletic skill. He closed the gap between us easily, the air around him vibrating with his electric energy. Before I knew it, he was on top of me, his big hands altogether too close for comfort.

Asshole.

He caught me around the waist, his arm hooking me right under my ribs and shoving all of the air from my lungs in an instant. His breath was raspy in my ear as he pulled me back against his chest. His free hand shot up the back of my neck and I only had a second to try to jerk my head away before his fingers tangled in my hair. He yanked hard and the back of my head bounced off of his shoulder. Lights strobed in my field of vision and I blinked through the distraction, digging my nails into the long-sleeved T-shirt that covered his arm. I kicked my legs as he heaved me up off my feet, my heel making contact with his shin. I heard him grunt and he threw me to

the side. I couldn't stop a hoarse, breathless scream from escaping as his unyielding arm dug into my midsection. His fingers tightened in my hair and I gritted my teeth, the pain shooting down my back and prickling in my toes.

“Let me go!” I managed to get out as a hot tear rolled down my cheek.

“No,” he said simply, his voice strained from the exertion.

“Take my purse. Take my car,” I whispered, like I didn't know what he's really after. “Take it and go.”

“You think that's what I want?” He nudged his chin against my jaw, the touch light in contrast to the vise-like grip he held me in. “Money?”

“Take it,” I repeated, my eyes pointed up at the ceiling, trying not to focus on the desperation that was creeping over the edges of my mind. At that moment, I was under his complete control but I knew I just had to find his weak spot. All men have a weak spot. I had to find it, but in order to do that I had to stay calm. It would be easy to give in to hysteria, but then I'd be the weak one.

I don't like being the weak one.

“Take it,” I said again.

“Oh, I will.” He inhaled sharply, rudely. “You smell good,” he said, his voice laced with amusement, but carrying the unmistakable undercurrent of danger. “Like a woman should smell.” He relaxed his grip on my hair and I felt my shoulders sag in relief. I didn't realize how tight my muscles were until that moment. “Do you smell that good everywhere?” he asked, dropping his arm from around my waist. I took in a huge gasp of air as my lungs re-inflated. Immediately, I tried to take jump forward away from him, but he pulled me back by my hair. “I bet you do.”

“Don't touch me.” I flung an elbow back, my sharp bone connecting with his hard stomach. He moaned softly and the sound sent a flush of warmth through me.

“Keep fighting,” he breathed. “Keep fighting and maybe I'll let you win.”

“Fuck you,” I hissed, jabbing again, harder. He let out a low breath and let go of my hair. I jerked forward, my hands stretching out in front of me, reaching for something - anything – to fight him off with. Then he shoved me sideways and I stumbled into the workstation to my left, my hip colliding with the sharp edge of the desk. The items on the desktop rattled

and a picture frame, filled with smiling faces, fell forward onto the glass. Before I could steady myself or figure out a plan of escape or fight, he was on me again. He hauled my ass up on the flat surface and I swung at him, my palm connecting with the side of his face. He growled and yanked his mask up, exposing his cruel mouth.

Then he kissed me.

Well, to say he kissed me makes it sound almost romantic, when in fact there was nothing romantic about his attack. It was brutal, the way he grabbed my chin and shoved his tongue between my lips, forcing his way inside of my mouth. His fingers pressed into my sensitive skin and I knew I would be bruised there, marked by his strength and want. My head dropped back as he leaned over me, his kiss taking over everything. I nipped at his tongue and he dipped his thumb into my mouth, forcing my teeth apart. I shoved against him in frustration, but he didn't let go. His dark eyes were on mine as he thrust his tongue in and out of me and I didn't look away. I couldn't. I pressed my hands to his chest, but it was useless. He was too big.

I was no match for him, but I already knew that.

I dragged my hand upwards and snatched the mask off his head, revealing his dark hair, long on the top and short on the sides. I yanked on the dark strands and he moaned into me, his hands dropping heavily to my thighs. The smooth leather of his gloves caught on my sweaty skin as he shoved my legs apart. I kicked at him and he sidestepped, avoiding my attack. His swift movement broke the kiss and I used the opportunity to slap his face again, the satisfying crack of the skin to skin contact echoing across the office.

He lunged at me again, shoving his hand between my thighs. I clamped them shut, trapping his fingers. We were both breathing heavy, our lips inches from each other. I could still taste him in my mouth, sweet and sharp, but salty as well. Dark blood glistened in the corner of his mouth from my last attack, and I could almost taste the iron of it on my tongue as well. I jerked my knee upward, aiming for his balls, but he used the movement against me and forced himself further between my legs.

“Why did you leave the door unlocked?” he said and it took me a minute to comprehend the words because I was focused on his bloody lip.

“Fuck you.” I balled my hand into a fist, but he grabbed my wrist, his long fingers circling around it and rendering it useless.

“You left that door open just for me, didn't you?” He dropped his chin to look in my eyes again. His gaze held a manic glint, sparkling with excited malice in the low light. “You knew I was coming. You were waiting for me.”

“You're insane,” I hissed.

“You were waiting,” he repeated, dragging my hand to the front of his jeans, where his erection strained against the thick fabric.

“I forgot to lock it,” I said, my breath catching in my throat as my fingers found the thick ridge of him. My eyes slipped shut as thoughts assaulted my brain... thoughts of him thrusting his big cock in me, forcing himself inside of me again and again. Thoughts of how he would feel. Thoughts of what he would do to me. Thoughts of what he would make *me* do.

“Shit,” he said, holding my hand steady against him. “You like to lie, don't you?” He pressed his lips to my temple. I flexed my fingers, my the skin of my palm itching. “Why do you keep lying to me?” He dragged his teeth down the side of my face, his breath tickling my cheek. His arm encircled my waist, pulling me closer to his chest. I gripped his erection and he moaned, rolling his hips against me. “Goddamn, I want you,” he whispered harshly in my ear. “You want me too, don't you?”

“No,” I said immediately, shaking my head.

“Liar,” he said, and I could have sworn I heard his voice in my brain, not in my ear. Then he leaned back, giving me space again. I opened my eyes and took a deep breath, my ribs crying out at the simple movement. He dropped his hands to his belt and I knew what was coming next. I scooted quickly to the side and slid off the desk, my feet dropping to the floor. I backed out of the cubicle, banging my elbow on the way out. He followed me, unzipping his jeans. Stalking, slow and deliberate like the animal he was. A warning bell rang at the back of my mind and my stomach clenched.

I knew.

I knew how it was going to end up, the second I saw him standing in the dark. And sure enough, he grabbed me and swept me off my feet. I ended up on my back on the floor, his hand up my skirt, fingers pushing my panties aside. I threw my elbows out, scrambling onto my stomach and pushing myself to my knees. I tried to crawl away, the carpet burning a rash into my skin, but he grabbed the waistband of my skirt and pulled me back

down onto the floor. Then he covered me with his big body, slapping a hand over my mouth as he rolled me over onto my back. I raised my knee, getting him between the ribs, bone hitting bone. He grunted in pain and satisfaction flared up in me, my small victory seeming larger than it was. He hoisted himself up on his knees and stared down at me, the sharp lines of his face highlighted in the shadows. He was terrifying, but also impossibly handsome. I couldn't see his eyes, but I knew what I would find there – madness. Pure, unadulterated craziness.

He enjoyed my fight, as only a true deviant would.

He took off his gloves and tossed them aside. I squirmed and he slammed his thighs on either side of my hips, locking me beneath him.

“Don't,” I said, pushing and clawing against his thighs in vain.

“Don't what?” he asked, cocking his head to the side as he slid his hand into his pants. I watched him pull his cock out, biting down hard on my lip as he ran his hand down his thick length, like he was showing off for me. Then he let his dick go, and it bobbed in front of him like it was begging for my mouth. Then he dropped his hand to my chest and gripped the front of my silk blouse. “Don't what?” he repeated, mocking me. I swallowed hard, the warmth of his hand seeping through the thin fabric and into the skin below.

“Please,” I said, my voice soft. Like pleading with him would stop him.

Ha.

He smirked and unceremoniously ripped the front of my blouse open. I could hear the buttons land on the floor around me, hear and there. The cool still air of the office hit my sweat-damp skin and a chill ran through me. My nipples tightened and I arched my back involuntarily, the sensitive tips rubbing uncomfortably against the lace of my bra. He ran his warm hand up my sternum, almost delicately, like he didn't want to hurt me, but again, I wasn't fooled. He wanted to hurt me, badly. He wanted to hurt me until I screamed and begged and bled. He closed his eyes for a minute, savoring his victory.

After that, I was his. For however long he wanted me. I couldn't move. I couldn't get away. I could fight, but the outcome would be the same. He slid his hand behind my neck and forced me up onto my elbows. My hair slid over my shoulders and into my face, and he swept it away as he

brought his hips closer. The head of his cock dragged across my lips and I could feel the slick of his pre-come.

“Open your mouth,” he demanded as his ready cock twitched in front of my face. I turned my face away, running my tongue over the salty wetness on my lips. He clicked his tongue, tsking at my little act of defiance. He fisted his hand in my hair and jerked my face toward him. Then he pinched my nose shut until I had no choice but to open my mouth and gulp in air. Then he slid the fat tip of his cock in between my lips and over my tongue. He moaned and bucked forward, shoving himself all the way to the back of my throat. I felt my eyes roll back in my head as he choked me, my fingers digging into the carpet. My toes curled and my feet pointed. He cupped my face with his big hands, his thumbs caressing my cheeks as he reared back. I moaned in relief as my jaw relaxed, my tongue swirling around the tip of him as he pulled out of my mouth. Then he dove in again, his hands stiffened on my face as he held himself on the edge of bliss. I knew he wanted to come, and I shuddered at the thought of his thick come sliding down my throat.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, he shoved my face away from him and his dick popped free of my mouth. It glistened in the low light, wet from my mouth. Then he was shoving my skirt up and throwing my legs open so fast I couldn't react. I couldn't do anything until he ripped my panties off and tossed them over his shoulder. Only then did my muscles come back to life. I shoved back, scooting on my bare ass, trying to get away. But he was doggedly focused. He grabbed my hips in a death grip as he lowered himself on top of me, pinning me to the ground. He was heavy and it was all I could do to force a breath into my lungs. I knew what was coming next, but it was still a shock when he breached me. He stilled on top of me as he shoved an inch inside and I bowed my back, the feel of him too intense for words or sounds or thoughts.

After what felt like a lifetime, he slammed into me without warning, smashing me against the unrelenting floor. My bare thighs tightened around his hips, his jeans rough against my electrified skin. He clawed at my chest, roughly freeing my breasts from my bra and pinching and squeezing the nipples until I slapped at his face and dug my heels into the carpet. Then he bucked into me again, his big cock invading and plundering me inch by inch.

"I want to rip you in half," he growled in my ear. "I want to destroy you." He punctuated his words with his hips, fucking me harder and harder. "Tell me you want it." He grabbed my chin and forced my face to his. His lips brushed against mine, and then he flicked his tongue over the swollen flesh. My eyes slitted open but I couldn't see. The world was dark. All I could feel and hear was him. "Tell me you love it," he whispered, then swerved his hips so slow that I gritted my teeth at the sharp sensation, the line between pain and pleasure mingling and blurring in an otherworldly way. It hurt, of course. My whole body hurt. But if he kept doing it, I was going to come.

And then he would win.

"You disgust me," I replied, the words strangling the moan in my throat. He snorted out a soft laugh, his breath hot on my lips and I inhaled, pulling him deeper into me without thinking.

"Say it again." He ground his hips into mine and I writhed beneath him, my body no longer under my control. I could feel all of my muscles tighten at once and he buried his face in my neck as I squeezed him deep inside. "*Fuck*," he hissed. "Your pussy is so tight for me." With a pained groan, he thrust again, his breathing ragged. "No matter how many times I shove my big cock into you, you're still so fucking tight." His vulgar words swirled through me and I rolled my head to the side, needing so much. I wanted him deeper inside and hating him at the same time.

It was sick, but I had no choice but to succumb. He didn't give me a damn choice. He ran a hand up my thigh, his fingernails digging into the soft flesh. I shivered as he roughly pulled my leg higher on his hip, opening me up wider for him. I moaned, the sound ragged and unsatisfied, as he slowed his pace. I could feel every thick inch of him inside of me, the friction and the sense of being filled to the edge of breaking slowly driving me insane. Then his thumb found the sensitive place on the back of my thigh, right under the swell of my ass. I threw my head back, my eyes squeezing shut and my whole body going tight.

"Son of a bitch," I murmured as I felt the orgasm coming over me. It was a black and dirty and felt like drowning, but I dove into it headfirst. He'd abused me and hurt me. After all that, he didn't deserve my orgasm, but I sure did. He dug his knees in and wrapped one arm around my waist, raising my ass off the floor, sensing my distress. My back bowed, my skin

stretched over my sore ribs, and I threw my hands out, grasping at the short fibers of the carpet as I came.

“You wish you hated me,” he said, his voice weaving in and out of my orgasmic haze. “But you love my cock too much.” I slitted my eyes open and he was staring down at me, his gaze flashing a dark fire. He pressed his tongue to the corner of his mouth, like he was plotting something. A thrill ran up my spine and I clenched around him, feeling how hard he still was inside of me.

It wasn't over yet. He wasn't done with me.

Sad to say, I wasn't done with him either.

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Chapter Two

He didn't say another word as he spun me over onto my stomach, like I weighed nothing. I grunted as my chest hit the floor. He lifted my hips but reared back. His dick slid out of me and I gritted my teeth to keep from calling out. I was wet, but it still felt rough and almost brutal the way he left me. My body didn't want to let him go. I felt limp, boneless. I couldn't do anything but lay there with my cheek against the carpet, breathing hard. My hair pooled around my face, blocking my vision. But I could still feel. I could feel his roaming eyes on my ass. I could feel the wetness smeared between my thighs. I could feel the cool air on my exposed flesh. I felt completely exposed to him, even though we were still technically almost completely dressed.

I liked it.

I liked that he was tense behind me, holding himself tight. I liked that he could see how he'd affected me. My pussy was wet for him – my pussy was his. And yet he held back, keeping himself on the edge, keeping himself from his own climax. I knew he was planning something devious, something sick, but I made no move to escape. I couldn't. He had me exactly where he wanted me.

When he ran a finger through my slit then pumped it inside of me, I moaned and rolled my hips. I was too sensitive, too swollen, but it still felt damn good. It made me crave his evil cock again, even though I knew he would wield it like a weapon. When he took his finger away, I scowled and worked my lower lip with my teeth, tension already gathering my belly again. When he thrust the finger, still wet with my cream, into my ass, I tasted the coppery taste of blood on my tongue. It took a minute for the ringing in my ears and the stinging in my ass to stop before I realized I'd bit my lip too hard.

“You like that, don't you?” he asked, sliding into me up to the knuckle. I couldn't stop myself and a strangled scream ripped from my throat, the sound loud in my ears. He pumped it in and out of me, rough and callously, and I screamed with each invasion. My screams only egged him on, and he

fucked me harder and harder until I pushed up on my elbows and threw my head back. The feeling was too intense. I wanted more or I wanted less. The sad thing was I wasn't sure which. I just craved... something. Nothing. Everything.

He curled his finger inside of me and I jerked against him, my body moving away from him automatically. But he wouldn't let me go. He wrapped his free hand in my hair, yanking my head back. "Get up," he rasped in my ear, his lips brushing against my skin, sending another electric shiver through me.

"What?" I breathed, the word slurred like I was drunk.

"Up," he ordered and I had no choice but to obey. We struggled to our feet, his finger still buried deep inside of me. My knees knocked together as he curled the finger again and I almost dropped, but his hand in my hair held fast. He hooked his chin over my shoulder, holding me against him. I could feel his erection pressing against my ass, hot and still sticky from my pussy. "Your desk," he growled. "I want to see your desk." I could only moan in response, my scalp and my ass aching and my pussy dripping. He bumped his pelvis against my ass, forcing me forward. I stumbled ahead, toward the light spilling out of my cubicle. He held on to me and steadied me as I walked on shaky legs. It seemed to take forever to get to the desk – every step his finger seemed to get deeper inside of me, more invasive. We turned the corner into my little work cocoon and he pushed me forward onto the hard surface of my desk, my elbows landing on stacks of folders and papers and sticky notes.

"This is where you spend your days?" he said, kicking my legs and opening my thighs. I gasped and craned my neck to look at him, wondering what he was planning for me. More fucking, definitely. But what else did he want? "Pushing papers? Sitting on your pretty ass and typing a hundred words a minute?" He pumped his finger in and out languidly, but narrowed his eyes in thought. "Do you like it?"

"Do I..." I trailed off, only able to concentrate on the slow slide of his finger.

"Do you like sitting here all day for hours on end?" He leaned over me. "Do you like this stupid, boring, piece of shit job?"

"It pays the bills," I murmured, dragging my tongue across my dry, injured lip.

“Does it pay for that fancy car outside?” He snorted out a derisive laugh. In tune, he thrust his hand hard against my ass. I called out, not bothering to hide what he was doing to me any longer. He'd already made me come, so it was no secret that he was torturing me, minute after minute, with every violent intrusion.

“What do you care?” I said and I could hear the want and desperation in my voice. He laughed again and shook his head. He ran his free hand slowly down my face, sweeping stray strands of hair from my cheek.

“Maybe you shouldn't work so much,” he said. “Or if you're going to be here so damn late, you really should lock the door. You never know who could be watching.” He dropped his face to mine and brushed his lips against my cheek. “And waiting.” He darted his tongue out and licked the ridge of my cheekbone. “Goddamn, you're so fucking good.” He moaned and then he was angling his big cock against me. He yanked the silky fabric of my skirt aside and spread me open. He slid inside again, my wet pussy giving no resistance. I lifted my hips to pull him deeper, despite the awkward angle. It was uncomfortable, but I didn't care. He covered my body with his, crushing me. My knees banged against the side of the desk as he fucked me but I moved with him, wanting him to come. I wanted to hear his breath in my ear as he exploded into me. Our moans mingled as he finger-fucked my ass and pounded my pussy. The feeling was too much and I could barely keep myself together. But I wanted to hear him come apart at the seams and only then would I be satisfied.

“When you're sitting here, I want you to think of me,” he gritted out, his voice as rough as sandpaper. “When you're staring at your computer, remember how I bent you over and ripped your clothes and fucked your wet cunt.” He inhaled sharply through his teeth and bucked into me, banging my hips into the edge of the desk. He slapped my ass and the sound rang in my ears. I clenched myself around him and he growled like the animal he was. He pressed his lips to my ear again roughly. “Remember how disgusting I was and how much you liked it,” he whispered and then abruptly pushed himself away from me.

My hips raised up off the desk, involuntarily, as the cool air hit my skin. I wanted him back, but he didn't care. He pulled away and I could hear his low exhale as the passion overtook him. I rolled onto my side, balancing on my hip in time to watch him come. He squeezed his big cock and let go,

spurting ribbons of his cream onto the faux wood grain of my desk. I lay there, mute and in awe, watching him. He dropped his eyes to meet mine and I could see that he liked that I was watching him. He pumped his hand, milking himself through his orgasm. His hand was slick with his release. I stared at his fingers without meaning to. I didn't want to tempt him. But it was too late. He released his cock and held out his hand, his fingers glistening and musky with his passion. I pulled my face away but he thrust the fingers of his clean hand into my hair, tightening his fingers and tugging at my scalp.

“Open your mouth,” he said, not asking. I tried to turn away but he wouldn't let me. He jerked my head back and tears prickled in my eyes at the sharp pain. He let out a little breath and cocked his head. “It's over.” He said the words so easily, like it was nothing. He brushed his wet fingers across my lips. “You can stop fighting.” He pressed his knuckle between my lips and I could taste him. I could smell him. He forced his way into my mouth and I moaned in response. He was pushing so far, pushing me to do things I never would do. And he knew it. He liked it. He smiled lightly as I gagged and tried to pull away. But he wouldn't have it. His grip in my hair was like steel. He wasn't backing down.

So I stopped fighting.

I sucked his fingers and wrapped my tongue around them, cleaning him off and swallowing it all. I could feel it roll down my throat. It seemed to warm my chest as it worked its way down to my stomach. I was sure I could feel it, invading my blood stream and all of my cells. His grip in my hair softened and his fingernails grazed my scalp, sending tingles of unexpected pleasure down my spine. Then he pulled away and I sucked my cheeks, tasting the last remnants of him.

“Now that,” he said, nudging me lightly forward. When I realized what he meant, my eyes widened.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. He'd already asked too much. I couldn't do anymore. My body ached all over. I felt humiliated, abused and used from the inside out. He snorted out an amused sound and shook his head.

“Get on your knees,” he said calmly. He didn't care what I wanted. He never did. He only cared about his own pleasure and driving me insane. He only cared about his power and his games. He could make me suffer again; he could make me obey. So I did as he asked. I slipped off the edge of the

desk and kneeled slowly, my legs shaking. "I want you to clean it all. I don't want to see any of it left." He scratched at the top of my head and it made me want to hum. Although in that moment I hated him, I couldn't deny that I was a slave for the little bit of softness and caressing he was showing me. But he untangled his hand from my hair and took a step back just as I was starting to get used to his soft touch. "Go on," he urged, his tone light but forceful.

I leaned forward and ran my tongue up the cool, smooth plywood of the desk, closing my eyes when his taste exploded on my tongue again. I should've felt humiliated and I did, but more than that, I felt dirty. I was slick between my legs and my whole body throbbed. My knees burned from the rough commercial carpet. But I didn't stop. I licked it until it was clean and then I swallowed it all. When it was done, I opened my eyes and swiped my hand across my mouth. I sat back on my haunches and looked over my shoulder expectantly. I don't know what I expected, but I was still surprised.

He was gone.

The office was silent and empty again. I was alone, the only sound the humming of the AC and the jagged sound of my own breathing. I stayed there on the floor for a minute, waiting for my heartbeat and my thoughts to stop racing. Then I stood on my weak legs, bracing myself on the desk. He was right; I didn't think I'd ever be able to look at that desk without thinking of him. I clutched the edges of my blouse, pulling them together to cover my chest. I ran my hand through my hair, waiting for the calm to come. Eventually the drug of what had just happened would wear off. I forced myself to walk back to where he'd thrown me to the ground. I stooped and ran my hands over the floor, collecting as many of the discarded buttons as I could. The blouse was ruined, but I didn't want to leave any evidence. I didn't want anyone else to know that something out of the ordinary had happened there.

I tossed the buttons into my purse and then I went to the closet where the cleaning service workers kept their cart. They would be there later that night to do their work, but I didn't want to wait for them. I grabbed the bleach and a roll of paper towels and went back to my desk. I sprayed everywhere his come and my tongue had touched. I imagined the bleach burning away all the evidence as I hurriedly wiped it up. The smell

assaulted my nostrils as I thoroughly finished the job, wiping and wiping until I was surprised the veneer still had a sheen. I put everything back and then went to the bathroom and flushed the paper towels, getting rid of the evidence in the most effective way I could think of. I forced myself to look at myself in the mirror. In the bright, offensive lighting, I looked objectively terrible. I ran my hands through my hair and splashed some water on my face. I told myself I just had to get home. When I got home, everything would be fine.

I slid on my trench and buttoned it up all the way to the neck. I grabbed my purse and did a quick one-over of the office. It seemed innocuous and normal, like always. But now it was ominous as well. The dark shadows of empty cubicles held an unspoken threat. The front door wasn't just the exit but also the place where he'd come in and shattered the silence. It felt like him in the office, now. It wasn't impersonal anymore. He'd made it very personal.

I turned off the lights and headed for the door. My heartbeat sped up again, wondering what I would find outside the door. I wondered if he would still be there. I wondered if he was really gone or if he was waiting for me. I shivered as I thought of him following me home, surprising me when I least suspected and when I thought I was safe and protected. He'd already destroyed that illusion. I was never safe.

I set the alarm as I went and then took a deep breath. The alarm beeped insistently, reminding me I didn't have much time before it set. I had to push open the door and go out into the dark night. I would be vulnerable again, but I'd never stopped being vulnerable. As the beeping sped up and time grew short, I forced myself to push open the door and step out into the cool air. The door closed behind me and the beeping stopped. I stared out at the quiet parking lot, the distant hum of the city the only sound in my ear. The street beyond me was quiet. The cafe across the street was closed. There was no one around.

My heels clicked as I hurried across the parking lot toward my car. If I could just get inside and get home, I told myself, then everything would be fine. It was the only thing I could do. But I didn't feel much relief as I yanked open the door and slid into the driver's seat with no fanfare. Nothing happened. No one was waiting in the shadows to grab me, kidnap me, drag me away from the safety of my everyday, predictable life. I jammed the key

into the ignition and then my blood went cold when I heard a movement in the backseat. A strong arms slid around my neck and pulled me back against the headrest, not enough to strangle me but enough to cement me in place.

"Boo," he breathed, his voice deep and his breath warm on my cheek. I jerked and turned my face toward his as he chuckled lightly. He was having too much fun, scaring the shit out of me and playing the mean little game he was playing. I shoved at his arms even though he was stronger than me. He always had been.

"Let me go, asshole," I said through gritted teeth but he didn't loosen his hold on me. He was laughing and it made me want to slap his face. I hadn't processed the emotions from earlier. My whole body felt raw and on edge. I suddenly had more fight in me. "Stop trying to scare me."

"You like it," he said. "You like what I do to you." I shook my head and he chuckled again because he was evil. Then he pressed his mouth to my temple, his lips soft but insistent. He kissed me then pulled away, taking the pressure away from my throat. I took a deep breath as he sat back against the backseat. The leather seats creaked as he moved. It was dark in the car, and his essence, his presence, had completely taken over. I could smell him all over me and I knew he would love nothing more than taking me over, body and soul. He wanted everything and he had no problem with trying to take it.

"Put your seatbelt on," he demanded, lazily. I didn't move, just stared out the windshield at the empty parking lot. I couldn't figure out how I was feeling. There were too many emotions flowing through me. As always, it was his fault. When it came to him, things were never simple, especially not emotions. "Were you afraid of me?" he asked, his voice softer.

"I don't know," I responded, begrudgingly. "Yes."

"Good," he said and my eyes shot up to the rearview mirror. It was too dark to see anything except the silhouette of his head against the back window. I couldn't see his face, but I imagined he was smiling in self-satisfaction. But when he spoke again, he sounded anything but satisfied. "You should be afraid of me. Sometimes... The way I think about you - what I think about doing to you..." He trailed off and I resisted the urge to turn in my seat to look at him. "I scare myself," he said, the words low, but loud in the muffled quiet of the car. I didn't say anything as his words

seeped in. I immediately regretted saying I was afraid, because it wasn't true. Not exactly. After everything he'd done and I'd done, not much scared me. Only one thing did, actually.

After a minute, he shifted in his seat and let out an impatient, yet tired sigh. "We gonna stay here all night, Joanie?"

"We'll stay here as long as I feel like it," I shot back, but I put the key in the ignition anyway, because it wasn't smart to keep sitting there in the open. I backed out of the parking lot and we drove for awhile in silence. I glanced up in the rearview mirror, but he was slouched in the seat with his head down. He was a dark, mysterious figure, not the man I was used to. He was the night crawler, the criminal, the hulking dangerous looking one that people avoided on the street. But he was also mine.

The more I thought about it, the more angry I became. All the feelings of the night – the fear, the desperation, the lust - were compounding into one. I was angry at him, for risking everything for a thrill, for a game that we were both going to lose eventually. Everything we'd gone through, everything I'd done and everything I'd fought for could've been lost in an instant. It still could be lost, if the wrong person saw him or saw us. If the wrong person looked too deeply, it could be a disaster for us.

"What are you doing?" I said, when I couldn't keep silent anymore. "Why are you here instead of at home?"

"I wanted to surprise you," he replied.

"I don't like surprises," I said. "There are too many things that could go wrong."

"I don't care."

"So you don't care about going back?" I asked. "You don't care about getting caught?"

"I'm not afraid of that," he said, his voice flat and unemotional.

"Be afraid for me, then. What do you think they'll do to me? I'm the one harboring a fugitive." I heard him lean forward and then I felt his fingers on my neck.

"You'd be fine," he whispered. "You can cover your own ass." He pressed his lips to my jaw, tickling me with his unexpected gentleness. "You're a great liar. I'm sure you'd come up with something." I stared straight ahead as my stomach rolled. The thought of them taking him from me... I didn't like to think of it. The thought of losing him felt akin to death,

like the most crushing sense of sadness that I had ever felt. Elliot couldn't go. I couldn't fathom it. All I knew was that I couldn't let that happen. Neither of us could let it happen.

We didn't talk for the rest of the ride home. There was so much more to say, but I didn't know how to say it. Or maybe I didn't want to say it. He'd left the house specifically to come for me, to be with me. He'd risked himself for me. Or did he? Maybe it didn't have anything to do with me at all. I didn't know, but I didn't like it. I didn't like any of it. The pressure felt less and less the closer we got to home, but it didn't go away. I was impatient as I turned down the street, just wanting it to be over. In the twenty minute drive from the office to my condo, so much could've gone wrong. But it didn't. And then it was over.

I pulled into the garage and parked. Then I pressed the button and watched the door slowly close behind us. I got out of the car without another look at him, grabbing my purse and hurrying to the door that connected the garage to the kitchen. I could feel him behind me, his hands reaching out for me, but I stayed out of his grasp. I didn't want to think all the things I was thinking. I just wanted to get into the safety of the house and shut out the rest of the world. I only made it as far as the sink before he grabbed me and flung me against the counter. He pressed me against it, not letting me move away from him.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked, his eyes finding mine. I wanted to look away, but I couldn't. The manic fire was flickering behind his eyes again, and I knew that meant he was angry now too. But I didn't care. He'd been careless. I had every right to be angry with him.

"Why did you leave the house?" I asked, breathlessly, the words tumbling out. "Don't leave."

"I'm supposed to wait here for you to get home, like a fucking pet?" He ground his hips into mine. "Am I supposed to wait around for a pat on the head, like a good boy?"

"I can't lose you," I said, not caring how desperate I sounded.

"Baby, you are going to lose me. It's just a question of when." He said the words so roughly and so sure, like it was the only truth. Panic roared up in my and I slapped him across the face.

"Don't you fucking say that," I hissed as his head snapped to the side. "Never say that." His nostrils flared and his mouth ticked up. In a flash, he

had his hands around my neck. A thrill ran through me and i arched my back, wanting him so badly I didn't know what to do with myself.

I couldn't lose him.

Ever.

"You're right Joanie," he said as he squeezed, his eyes glowing with unhinged power. I raked my hand down his ribs, wanting to score his skin with my fingernails. Then he slanted his mouth over mine, kissing me hard and deep. He dropped his hands to my trench-coat and slowly, softly, unbuttoned it as he ravaged my mouth. Then his hands were running all over my tits and my chest, like he was trying to memorize the feel of me all over again.

"They belong to you." I whispered against his lips. "I belong to you."

"Fuck yeah you do." Then he lifted me onto the counter and shoved my legs apart. I helped him, shoving my skirt up over my thighs. He grabbed my knees and pulled me into him. I can feel his erection against my thigh. It doesn't matter that he's already fucked me once tonight. I want more. I'm insatiable. "No one can change that. No matter what happens."

"And you belong to me," I said, wrapping my arms around his neck. A felt a shiver of lust go through him. He bucked his hips again and I moaned.

He loves when I touch him like that.

"Say it," I demanded, then pulled him closer and sucked on the tip of his tongue as he freed his cock. He broke the kiss and stared down at me, his eyes guarded but full of love for me. "Elliot belongs to Joan. Say it," I urged.

"Goddammit, Joanie," he hissed. "I'm your fucking slave, aren't I?" Then he pounded his big cock into me until I screamed. He slapped a hand over my mouth and it was hard to breathe, but I didn't care. I didn't care about anything but him. There was a voice in the back of my brain telling me that it wasn't going to last. Both of us knew it, but I was still pretending. I didn't want to think about what could happen to him or to me. I didn't want to think about the future, because I was only living for the moment. Later, as we lay side by side in bed, exhausted but still awake, he whispered roughly how much he loved me in my ear and I wanted it to never end.

What a moment it was.

But it didn't last, of course.

That kind of happiness never lasts.

Gray hazy light streamed through the curtains.

It was barely past dawn but I was already wide awake.

The cotton sheets were soft against my cheek but the hemp ropes burned around my wrists. I winced as he tightened the bindings but I didn't dare complain. If I complained, he would just tighten them more. Or worse. My ass was in the air and my wrists were bound behind my knees and I was completely naked and at his mercy. He liked me best like that. The position I was in made it a bit hard to breathe and my vision was starting to go blurry. My neck was going to be sore the next day, I knew. I made a mental note to make him give me a massage before I went to work. I was already tired from the long night we'd had. I'd only gotten a couple of hours of sleep and now he wanted to play again. The light was hazy outside of the windows because the sun hadn't come up yet.

He was impatient and rough, yanking on the rope as he finished knotting it around my wrists. I moaned lightly, trying to muffle the sound in against the softness of the bedding. Then he had mercy on me. He forced his arm under my ribs, grabbed one of the heavy down pillows and thrust it under me, raising my tits and shoulders off of the mattress. The stress on my neck is instantly reduced and I squeeze my eyes shut in relief. I didn't dare say 'thank you' but he knew. Besides, he would soon pay me back for the bit of kindness he'd shown. He'd easily be twice as brutal as kind before he was done with me.

He ran his hands up the back of my thighs and I tried to contain my shiver of pleasure but I couldn't. He knew exactly how to touch me to lessen the discomfort. All of a sudden, all of my attention was focused on the sensitive skin of my thighs as opposed to the tingling and burning of my wrists. I wanted more and not soft touches. I wanted whatever he was going to do and I wanted it as soon as possible. He moved on, his fingers teasing the perfect spot under the swell of my ass and then kept going, frustrating me for the sake of being an asshole. He knew with one pinch of my spot, I would be dripping wet for him. But he didn't want me dripping yet. He wanted to torture me.

I didn't know what I'd done to deserve it, but it didn't matter. I bit my lip to keep from moaning. I wasn't going to beg, not even when he dipped his thumb inside of me and teased. He dragged his thumb down through my slit and then circled my clit and I could feel how wet I was already. It hadn't even begun yet. He kept stroking me, gently but insistently, and I squeezed my eyes shut and pressed my face into the pillow. I wanted to scream at him to fuck me, to punish me for whatever I'd done. That gentle but non-committal pressure made me want to slap or kick at him to get a reaction. But that was the point. He wanted to make me suffer and he was going to do it his way, not mine. That was what my life was – suffering and begging and coming and then doing it all over again.

It was all I'd ever wanted. All I'd dreamt of all those nights when he was in prison. Every time that I fucked someone else, every time I tried to get revenge on him by giving my body to other men, I'd dreamt of that moment. I'd always belonged to him and I was waiting for him to come and re-claim his property. As strong as I was and as much as I could do anything that I wanted to do out of the bedroom, when it came to him, I wanted his power. I wanted his pain. I wanted him to take it out on me. I didn't even question it. I just succumbed.

When I felt his tongue, I couldn't hold it in anymore. I moaned into the pillow, then turned my head to gasp for air as he began working his rough, slick tongue over my asshole as his thumb circled my clit. I tightened my hands into fists, my whole body going tight as he nudged at my tightness with the tip of his tongue, pushing into me insistently. He increased his pressure on my clit and I dug my toes into the mattress trying to keep myself upright. It was hard not to collapse into myself.

I screamed when he slapped my ass, hard. It was unexpected and it made my pussy clench. I wanted to be filled. I wanted him to slam his big cock into me and make it hurt. He knew that, so he wasn't going to do it. Instead he chuckled lightly and then dipped his thumb back inside of me, just deep enough to tease but not satisfy. I tried to roll my hips and take him deeper, but he pulled his hand away. Then he was tongue-fucking me again, forcing the tip of his tongue inside of me again. I was loosening up for him and he knew it. When he pressed his thumb to the tight ring of muscle, I bowed my back and waited for the burn. I craved it. And I wasn't

disappointed. He pushed inside without any fanfare. He didn't take it slowly or carefully. He just did it. Finally. That was the Elliot I wanted.

"Yes, more," I said before I could stop myself, even as the burn brought tears to my eyes.

"What did you say?" he asked, thrusting deeper until I didn't know if I could take it. His thumb wasn't anywhere near as thick or big as his cock, but at that moment, it felt like it. It felt like I was overflowing, even though I wasn't anywhere close to being full. I was still so empty. I licked my lips, wishing his cock was in my mouth as he finger fucked me.

"I..." I trailed off, not sure what he would do if I gave the wrong answer.

"You want more, baby?" he asked, thrusting his thumb in and out, his fingertips digging into the soft flesh below my lower back. I'd never known I was sensitive there, but as he touched me it felt like a million sparks were going off under my skin. "How much more do you want?" He pulled his thumb away and I moaned and shook my head. No. I didn't want him to leave me empty. I could feel myself throbbing, vibrating. "Two fingers?" he asked and I could hear the cruelty in his voice. "Four?"

"Hmm," I hummed, because it sounded like heaven and hell to be stretched like that.

"I bet you could take my whole hand," he whispered and I could hear the evil behind the words. I couldn't imagine how that would feel. I couldn't imagine him destroying me like that. He knew it would be painful. He knew it would hurt me and make me scream and maybe even bleed, but he didn't care.

"No, God no," I moaned, wondering how it would be possible.

"God?" he asked, and I could practically hear the cynical curl of his upper lip. "I'll be your god." Then he forced two fingers inside of me, the dry pressure making me sob into the pillow. The fabric pressed to my cheek was damp with my saliva and my tears but he didn't care. "But I won't have mercy on you." He ground his hand into me, forcing himself deep. "I want to see you gaping open like that," he whispered. "I want to see how pretty you are on the inside."

I felt my throat closing up, the fear rising in my chest so quickly that I felt like I couldn't breathe. I wondered how it would feel to be ruined like that, to be so destroyed, and yet I'd still be crying for more. I knew myself. I

knew that once he was inside of me, I'd want more, no matter how much it hurt. I made a strangled noise as he thrust harder and harder, the burn turning into a friction that felt just as good as it didn't.

"You make it so fucking hard to play with you," he said, his voice just as rough as his touch. "I'm about to come and I haven't even fucked you yet. What's the fun in that?" he asked, his words jagged and pointed. Then pulled his fingers away and spanked my ass again with his open palm, harder than before. I screamed and screamed as he hit me again and again. My abused flesh stung and prickled but I didn't tell him to stop. I just took it. I took it, again and again. Then his angry tantrum ended, just as abruptly as it began. I felt his weight shift and then leave the mattress and I turned my head to watch him. He was still wearing loose gray sweat pants and I could see his erection straining the front. I knew it must be difficult for him to ignore it, but he did. He was more focused on making me suffer.

He crouched down, the muscles in his bare chest flexing with the movement and reached under the bed. I heard the familiar slide of the leather bag across the floor and I knew what he was going for. In the years that he'd been gone, I'd built up an assortment of toys. There was the typical dildos, plugs, vibrators, and restraints that anyone could find at any decent sex shop. I'd added to the bag since he'd been home, but the collection had grown from the standard brightly colored latex toys. The bag was fuller, but with odd things that didn't necessarily belong in the bedroom. A coil of hemp rope and a coil of nylon rope. A length of small metal chain. An old wooden spoon with a long handle. Leather gloves. A white tube of plumbing pipe. He had a never-ending imagination when it came to sexual deviance. He'd had years alone to think of all the dirty things that he wanted to try. I doubt we'd even cracked the surface. There was no end to his appetite, but with him, there wasn't an end to mine either. I would do anything for him. Well, almost anything. And he knew it. He dug around in the bag for a moment and then flicked his eyes up to meet mine. I turned my head away, pressing my mouth to the pillow. I bit down on the fabric as stood again. I didn't want to see what he had. I wanted it to be a surprise.

I felt the warm slick of the lubricant and I bit down harder, trying to prepare myself for what he was going to do. But it still felt shocking when he pushed the rounded tip of the plug into me. I knew it was the bigger plug by the way it stretched me, so slowly because he wanted to torture me. He

wanted me to feel all of it as it entered me and I did. I jerked my hips, wanting it inside as quickly as possible but he didn't let me have it. He teased, rolling it in a circular motion and stretching me wider, making me whine. I dug my fingernails into my palms as he pressed it deeper and then pulled back, then did it all over again.

"Don't," I managed to say, even though it was probably a mistake to try to talk. "It hurts."

"You like when it hurts," he said. "You like it when I rip you open."

"No," I said pitifully but he laughed, a low sinister chuckle that made my toes clench. "I don't."

"You want to bleed, baby?" he asked, then thrust the plug all the way inside until the flared molded bottom was flush against me, making me call out in a combination of pain and unbridled lust. My eyes went blurry and I bit down harder on the pillowcase. It was big and the fit was snug, too snug. I could feel myself slowly accepting it, but the position he had me in left me too open, too exposed. There was no way to temper the feelings. It felt too intense. My breathing was getting more and more shallow and my thoughts were starting to dull, but the intensity was building low in my belly. I could feel drops of my arousal slowly rolling down my thighs toward my knees. My fingernails dug in my palms so hard they could've drawn blood. But that wasn't the kind of blood he wanted. He dropped to the bed beside me and I forced myself to look at him. Tears were running down my cheeks and my hair was sticking to my face. I bet I looked terrible. But that's the way he liked me. All fucked up and crying over him. Wanting him like an addict.

He stretched out beside me, propping his head on his hand. He ran his eyes down the length of me, his eyes darkening. He ran the tip of his tongue over his bottom lip and I remembered how that tongue had just been against me. I remembered how it felt. I shivered and then I moaned lightly when my muscles tightened around the plug. I still felt full to the brim, but the feeling was starting to subside. I was starting to want more again. More of him. More torture. Just... more. He reached down into the waistband of his pants and stroked himself lightly, his eyes returning to mine. He wasn't going to give me what I wanted just yet.

"Remember how it used to be," he said slowly, choosing his words carefully. I didn't like to think about the past and he knew that. But I knew

immediately what he was talking about. He was talking about Austin. He was talking about the little dark house on the tree-lined street and the things he had done to me there. I shook my head, trying to force the memories, sharp like shards of a broken mirror, out of my brain. I didn't want to think about those times. I wanted to think about the then and now, about how he was in my bed, in my house. How he was not the same Elliot as he was then. Before he was a stranger. Now he's *my* Elliot. "I used to be able to play for hours," he said, watching for my reaction.

"I remember," I whispered hoarsely. My throat was dry and I swallowed, but it didn't help. I wanted his cock in my mouth, I decided. I wanted to suck him deep until I made myself choke. That would shut him up and make us both happy.

"You're trying to ruin me, woman," he said, moving his hand over his cock. I can only watch the movement through the fabric of his pants. He won't let me see him yet. I think about begging him to see it, begging him to let me watch him jacking off in front of me like I wouldn't suck him or fuck him until he came as hard as he ever had. My body clenched around the plug again and my skin tingled and itched under the drying trails of arousal marking my thighs. I wanted him to fuck me, more than anything. I wanted to hear his moans and I wanted him to lose control.

"Punish me, then." I'm pushing it, but I can't stop myself. He snorted out a little laugh and shakes his head. He wasn't going to give me what I wanted. Not then, anyway.

"It's getting late," he said, his voice thick.

"Hmm?" I murmured, not comprehending what he was saying. I was too distracted to think straight.

"It's almost 7:30," he said, his hand still working over his erection. Slowly. Methodically.

"I don't care," I said, because at that moment, being late for work was the furthest thing from my mind. "It hurts, El. *Please.*"

"I don't like it when you leave," he said. "I want you to stay with me."

"I can't," I said, my hips jerking involuntarily. "Nothing can change. Everything has to stay the same. Otherwise people will start to suspect things."

"I don't give a fuck about other people," he said, his breath catching in his throat when he made a sharp tug on his cock. "I only care about you and

me.”

“Let me go,” I whisper. “Untie me.”

“Why would I do that?” he asked, furrowing his brow. He looked so good to me, I realized, even though my haze. He'd always been good-looking but now it was painful how attracted I was to him. I wanted to run my hands over his face and pull his hair and bite his lips and suck on his tongue. I wanted to ride him while I stared into his eyes. I wanted all of his wildness and weirdness and intensity focused only on me.

“I want you to come inside me,” I said and it sounded so simple. “I'll do whatever you want me to do before I go.” He stared at me, his eyelids heavy but his eyes still sharp. He pulled his hand out of his pants, leaving himself hard and unsatisfied.

“No,” he shook his head slowly. He sat up slowly, his beautiful body moving in the best ways. I watched him because I couldn't stop myself. He leaned over me, his skin pressing against mine. He was so warm and I moved toward him involuntarily, wanting more contact. He fumbled for something and then pulled back and away from me. I whined again because it wasn't fair. He kept giving me a little bit and then a little more and then taking it all away. He turned back to me, holding my phone. He swiped it and unlocked it. I didn't care that he knew my password, I cared more about what he was doing.

“Elliot,” I said, trying to force myself to be firm with him. It was hard with my plugged ass in the air and my arms tied, but he had to know I didn't want to play anymore. Well, I did, but I wanted it now. I was impatient. He slid his hands under me and forced me upright, so that I was sitting on my haunches. The world went on its side for a moment as I got used to it. I was dizzy as the blood rushed back to my brain and I gulped in a big breath of air. He slid behind me and pressed his chest to my back and supported me with his arm around my waist. I dropped my head back onto his shoulder, not knowing what he was doing but not fighting him either. I felt the cool glass of my phone pressed against my ear a second before I heard a dial tone.

“Call off,” he said, his lips brushing my other ear.

“What? I can't,” I hissed but then a click sounded and someone answered on the other end.

“Good morning, this is Amber. How can I direct your call?” the bright voice of the office secretary chirped in my ear. It always amazed me how awake she could sound before nine in the morning, which is when I usually fully woke up from my daze. Those days, being with Elliot all night, I was sleeping less but getting better rest than I had in years.

“Amber, it's... uh...” I trailed off when he dropped his hand to slide a finger against my clit. Then he bumped his hips against my ass, nudging at the plug that was snug inside of me. “It's Joan Vasquez,” I said forcing the words out although my brain was going blank. “Is Frank in?”

“No, he's not usually in for another fifteen minutes,” she chirped back, her voice cutting through the lusty mist that was taking over my brain. Elliot's hands were roaming again, squeezing and cupping my tits and pinching my nipples. I wanted to smack his face but I couldn't. I was at his mercy, like always. “Do you want to leave a message?”

“Can you uh, just let him know that I won't be in today,” I said, the words hitching in my throat as his erection against my bound wrists. I stretched my fingers out, trying to touch him, but he moved away from my grasp. “I'm really... I woke up feeling really bad. I think I might be getting the flu,” I said, pushing out the words so I could end the call as soon as possible.

“Oh! That's too bad,” Amber cooed and I could tell she didn't care. This was no big deal, I told myself. This was not suspicious, I told myself. People took off all the time. Nobody was looking at me, not even the police. I wasn't a threat to anybody. I was just like any other woman working a boring, nondescript job in the middle of a big city. Anonymous. I had no family here, barely any friends. No one was paying attention to me. But I still knew not to get too comfortable. To keep my head down as much as I could and make people think I was normal. Thankfully, I've always been a great liar.

“Can you let him know?” I asked. “I'll also... I'll also send um....” I bit down on my lip and closed my eyes as he tweaked my nipple, hard. He wasn't making it easy on me, but when had he ever mad things easy? I was used to it, but it still took me a minute to get back on track.

“Yeah you can send him an email but I'll also make a note of it,” Amber was saying, not waiting for me to finish my train of thought. “Feel better, okay?”

“Okay, thanks,” I replied robotically, my mind already drifting away from the conversation. “Bye,” I said and then he pulled the phone away from my ear and hung up. He tossed it to the mattress and then grabbed my jaw roughly, angling my face toward him. I could feel him moving behind me, shoving his pants down over his hips. I could feel the warm, smooth tip of him pushing against my ass, insistently. Impatiently.

“Good girl,” he whispered, the words sharp and harsh. He was finally letting himself go. He'd been holding himself back, I realized. When he knew he had me all to himself, he changed. He let the animal in him take over.

“Fuck you,” I said, because I knew the effect it would have. And I was pissed at him for torturing me and making me change my day to accommodate him. My whole body was humming for him and he didn't care. He didn't care that he was making me crazy. All he cared about was himself. His lips curled into a small, cruel smile at my words and I felt my stomach twist.

“That sounds like Daisy,” he said. “You want to be Daisy?” He slapped my ass then, hard, and I clenched my teeth against the pain. I was so sore from his earlier abuse but he didn't care. Then he slid his hand into my hair and yanked my head back again, exposing my throat. He ran his tongue up the side of my neck and I stretched my hands out, trying to touch him. I moaned as my fingertips met his warm skin. He jerked into my touch and I knew he was close to giving in. He couldn't hold out forever, no matter how much he may have wanted to. He knew it too but he was stubborn.

Before I knew it, I was face first on the mattress again. My shoulders muscles pulled uncomfortably as my bound hands hooked around the back of my thighs but I barely had time to register the pain before he was angling himself against me and pushing his thick, hard cock inside. I was ready for him but at the same time, I wasn't. I forced myself to keep my eyes open and alert, because I didn't want to miss a single second or a single inch. I wanted to feel it all. We could fuck a million times in a million different ways and it would always be just as good as the last. Sometimes better. Sometimes wilder. Sometimes more desperate or more loving or more soft and slow. But always good.

The soft thick fabric of his pants brushed against my thighs as he bumped his hips against my ass, forcing several more inches of himself into

me. I felt it all. His big cock was stretching me open, but there wasn't as much room with the plug still lodged inside of me. The effect was breathtaking. My nerve endings were singing. Screaming. But I couldn't make a sound. My throat was frozen and my mouth was dry as he pushed me past my limits and then kept going. The rope burned against my wrists but I couldn't help but fight my bondage. I pulled at the rope, trying to wrench my hands free. It didn't work, of course. He tied strong knots, unless he wanted me to get free. And that day, he didn't want me to get free. He wanted me to be his for however long he wanted me.

He strummed the base of the plug as he reared back, pulling his thick cock out of me inch by glorious inch. I shivered and I felt the wetness dripping down my thighs again. I was going to be covered in my own arousal soon. He pulled hard on the plug, nudging it along my sensitive insides and a painful moan ripped from my dry throat. Then he plunged deep inside of me, filling me in the way I needed. But it took a minute to recover. A minute that he didn't give me. He thrust in and out of me, hard, the sound of our skin slapping echoing in my ears. His fingers dug into my hips and his thumbs pressed down on the base of the plug as he fucked me like the mad man we both knew he was. I bowed my back, my body involuntarily moving away from his onslaught. But he didn't let me.

He held me tightly to him and rolled his hips and we both moaned together, because it was too good. He knew exactly what to do and even if I fought him, I knew that too. My nipples rubbed against the soft sheets and the sensation was frustratingly gentle. I needed more. I needed his lips and his teeth. I wanted his mouth on me, on my tits and my neck. I wanted his hands in my hair. But the absence of those things turned me on as well, because I was deprived. I was full but empty. The frustration made me whine and snap my hips, searching for more. He grabbed my flesh and held me in place and I thought I heard him laugh.

Beside me, my phone began to vibrate, the feeling echoing through the mattress. He slammed into me once more before reaching down and grabbing the phone. A drop of sweat was making its way down my back and I could only focus on the prickly sensation because I couldn't swipe it away. It just added to the frustration. He leaned over me, setting the phone down for me to see the screen.

"It's your mama," he said and I could hear the devilish glee in his voice. I knew what he was going to do the second before he did it and I swore right then, I was going to smack him upside the head when I was free. He swiped his thumb and answered the call and I could've killed him. He pressed the phone close to my ear and the one voice I didn't want to hear the most filled my ear.

"I know you're getting ready for work but I had to call," my mother said and I closed my eyes and swallowed hard, trying to find my own voice. "Do you remember your friend Melanie? From high school?"

"Mom, what?" I said, because I had no idea what she was talking about. My brain was working properly. He rolled his hips and my pussy clenched around him, the feeling almost painful. I was so wet but it still wasn't enough.

"Melanie, well I can't remember her last name. But she was the one with the long red hair. She was on the volleyball team with you that one year."

"Sophomore year," I murmured then bit my lip to keep from screaming. His fingers are roaming again, rubbing all over my thigh, just missing the spot. I can feel my skin move for him, adjust to his touch. My whole body has adjusted for him and he knows it.

"Right," my mother agrees over the line. Her canned voice would normally be a comfort, a reminder of home and simpler, happier times, but right now she's everything I don't want to be reminded of. When I'm knee-deep in Elliot and letting myself be debased like this, I don't want to think of my family. I don't want to think of their suffering and their worrying about me. "I saw her yesterday at the gas station on Horton. I was buying Daddy his diet cola and his tobacco and she was in line and she recognized me before I recognized her. She came up to me "Oh Mrs. Vasquez, do you remember me?" Just like that. And you know what? She had the most beautiful baby on her hip. Brown eyes and red hair, just like Melanie." My mother could go on like that for an hour, I knew. Elliot was still having his fun. He was slowly pumping in and out of me like he had all the time in the world. But his hand was perilously close to the spot right below my ass. The spot he knows.

"That's nice," I said blandly because I couldn't think of anything else to say. I didn't care about Melanie from volleyball and her baby. I could barely

remember what Melanie looked like, especially at that moment. I could barely remember my own name.

“The baby's name was Andromeda,” my mother said. “Can you believe that? Andromeda. What a name. I bet her mother had a fit. Although I guess a healthy grandbaby is blessing enough, you can't nitpick too much.” My mother clicked her tongue and I knew what she was trying to say. She was easy to read, even when I was half-underwater and almost drowning in lust. She wanted me to get married. She wanted to argue with me over baby names and she wanted me to ride with her to the gas station to get Daddy's smokes and his Coke. S

Mostly, she wanted me home in Dallas.

“Mom, I have to...” I had something to say but I forgot it instantly, the second he pinched the spot. I heard him chuckle because he thought he was winning and he was right.

“I know you're busy, but I just thought of it just now,” she pushed. “Melanie said to tell you hi, and she asked about you and Trace, which was a little...” It was my mother's turn to trail off. “I didn't tell her any details though, I just told her that you two broke up a while back. I didn't tell her any details.” My mother repeated the last line, like it should make me feel something. But I couldn't think about Trace or any of that, not when I'd already sold my soul to a handsome, evil devil. I wanted to kill Elliot for answering the phone.

“Good,” I said because I wanted the torture to be over. “I have to go now.”

“Are you okay, sweetheart? You sound like you swallowed a frog.”

“I'm fine,” I whispered as his fingers stroke a circle around the spot. Then he was pinching it, lightly, then harder. My whole body went stiff because it was too much. All of my thoughts and feelings zeroed in on what he was doing. And he knew it. Without further ado, he hung up the phone and tossed it across the room, onto the overstuffed armchair. No more distractions. He was tired of playing his power games because he'd already won. One hand found my clit and the other kept pinching my thigh and then I could feel the climax ripping through me, slow like the ripping of a piece of paper. It wasn't violent like a stabbing, but slow and torturous just like the whole morning up to that point. I opened my mouth and let it out, all the frustration. He slammed into me when he heard my strangled cry and

he slammed into me again, angling his hips upward, his cock and the plug working in tandem to send me over the edge.

It felt like bliss and a punch to the face.

It was worth it. So worth it.

I had a smile on my face when he pulled out of me and shoved me over on my side. I was limp and didn't fight him as he untied my hands and slid on top of me. He quickly fastened me to the headboard, tying a complicated knot to keep me in place. He was crushing me but I didn't complain. I just gulped in air and his scent, wanting to run my mouth over every inch of his sweat-moist skin. He pushed me onto my back and slid back between my legs. He kissed me, finally, his mouth brushing over mine and then sucking my lower lips between his teeth. I tilted my head back and tilted my hips for him, submitting in every way possible. I just wanted him. And he wanted me. Nothing else matter as he rode me hard, his muscles going hard as stone right before he came. Then he fucked me through his orgasm and I could feel his come on my thighs, a thick mixture of both of our pleasure spreading all over me. I didn't realize it then that it was the beginning of the end. I didn't realize how quickly it was going to crumble. If I had maybe I would've held on tighter. Maybe I would've pulled him close and figured out how to never let go. But I didn't know. Maybe I could've stopped it, but instead I chose not to see it coming.

I chose to be a fool.

Chapter Three

We didn't get out of bed for the rest of the day. We drifted from sleep to fucking to sleep to lovemaking and back again. On Saturday, he had me on the dining room table and on the living room rug. I was on my hands and knees until my knees were bruised and scratched raw. On Sunday morning, after he fucked me soft and slow, he hooked his arm around my neck and held me to his chest, rolling over so that I was sprawled on top of him. I stared up at the ceiling, feeling his lungs expanding and retracting beneath me with each breath he took. I reached my hands up into the air, stretching my muscles. My shoulders and neck were still sore from the events of that weekend and they protested the movement. My joints were achy in general. My hips and knees especially. But as I stared up at my hands, the raw pink and red skin around my wrists couldn't go unnoticed. The marks called attention to themselves, like tattoos or brands. I stared up at them, memorizing them for the sake of posterity. Every mark was different, every time. No two marks were ever the same. When they healed, they would be gone forever.

"This is how it should be," he whispered in my ear. "We don't need anything else. Just each other."

"We need other things," I said, running my fingers over my palms.

"Not much." He pressed his face into my hair and I didn't say anything else because I didn't want to ruin it.

On Monday, he let me go.

I could tell that he didn't want to. I could tell he wanted me to stay there with him and kneel at his feet with my head on his thigh as he watched TV. I could tell he wanted me naked and tied to the bed when he got the whim. But we'd already done that all weekend. Three days of playing wasn't enough, but it would have to do. I pulled on one of my new turtlenecks and pulled the neck up high to cover the purplish new bruises and the yellowing old bruises on my throat. I pulled on a cardigan with long sleeves to cover the red marks on my wrists. Luckily, all the other marks he'd left on me were easily hidden under my clothes. But I would have to be

wary all day of keeping my wrists covered. Two weeks before, I'd gotten careless and my sleeve slipped back during a meeting. I didn't notice it until I caught my co-worker Janice staring at my wrist. I didn't want to repeat that. The last thing I needed was people getting curious and gossiping about me. I needed to stay as normal as possible for as long as possible.

At least until we figured out what we were going to do.

He slid his arms around my waist and settled his chin on top of my head, pulling me close to his naked chest. I pretended to ignore him, putting on my earrings and spritzing perfume on my wrists. When I tried to push away to pick out a pair of shoes from the closet, he tightened his arms around me.

"Don't work late tonight," he said, his voice husky in my ear. I scoffed, crossing my arms over his.

"Don't tell me what to do," I said, even though a part of me definitely liked when he told me what to do. I don't deny it - I liked when he sounded so possessive. It turned me on. But it also frustrated me because there wasn't enough time. There wasn't time to be with him in the way that we both wanted. I had to keep a routine. I couldn't deviate without being suspicious. I'd already taken off more sick days than usual since he'd been with me. I couldn't keep drawing attention to myself. Not until the heat died down.

"You want me to come drag you out of there again?" His deep voice sounded so petulant, like an over-grown child. But it also sounded threatening, because I knew he was serious. I knew he'd do it again. "Because I will."

"No," I whispered, shaking my head. "No more of that."

"Are you telling me no?" he asked, lifting his hand and cupping my breast through the thick cotton of my shirt.

"Don't make things so difficult," I said, tilting my head to give his mouth access to my neck. But he didn't take the bait. He flicked at my nipple through the two layers of fabric – the shirt and my lace bra. My nipple goes hard immediately and I closed my eyes for a moment, letting him win for the brief moment.

"I want to bite here until you scream," he whispers, tweaking the hard little bud. I stifled my moan because I knew he was serious. He'd bite and lick and abuse me for hours, until I begged and screamed and pleaded for

him to stop. He liked it most when I begged and screamed. He always did. But the worst thing of all was that I liked it, too. A lot. Too much.

“Did you make coffee?” I asked even though I could smell the heavenly scent of it already in the air. I could only think of trying to divert attention away from what he was trying to do. He was trying to get me to beg to be bent over and fucked, but I didn't have time. It sounded so odd to ask him that, but so domesticated. In hindsight, I miss those moments the most. I miss the sex, of course, with every bone in my body. But the companionship, too. The waking up together and eating meals together and the fact that he would wake up while I was in the shower and make coffee for me in the morning. I didn't even ask him to; he surprised me with it one morning and then it became something I expected, even though I tried to pretend that I didn't expect it.

That tiny sliver of predictability was so addicting. I wanted more of it. I wanted normality, although I didn't know how that would ever be possible. But until then, I was just going to have to pretend that nothing was amiss, pretend that everything wasn't on the verge of falling apart. I could do that. I had gotten so good at pretending.

“No,” he lied and I smiled to myself. He let me go, finally, and I made my escape. I went down to finish getting ready. He pulled on one of the pairs of jeans I'd purchased for him and sauntered down to the kitchen when he was good and ready. He didn't bother buttoning them, and the dark hair that trailed out his waistband to his bellybutton was distracting, to say the least. I wanted to kiss him everywhere, all over his broad back and his muscular chest and his stubbled cheeks. But I didn't. I slid on my heels and smoothed my skirt and glanced at myself in the mirror by the door. I looked alright, albeit a bit flushed in the face. I spot-checked quickly, looking for any visible bruises. When I was satisfied that everything was covered, I turned to find him holding out my stainless steel travel mug for me. I stared down at it, a laugh bubbling up in my throat. It was a small thing for him to do, laughably mundane, but it still made me happy. Happier than it should.

I slid my fingers around the mug but he wouldn't give it to me. Instead he pulled me close and forced me to kiss him until he was satisfied. He grabbed my ass and forced me against him and I whimpered in protest as his stubble tickled and scratched my face. He didn't care. He wanted all he could get out of me before I had to go. I wondered what he did alone all

day. I hoped he had a good way to keep himself busy. I knew he was getting stir-crazy. I knew he was starting to get destructive again. He was getting more violent and possessive. But I didn't know what to do about it. I just kept putting it off until another time, thinking that I would take care of it later. I was hoping it would resolve itself, somehow.

My first mistake.

When he finally let me go, I slapped at his chest and grabbed the coffee and ran out before I rethought it. My job suddenly didn't seem anywhere near as important as staying with him. His presence was so addicting. I told myself it was mostly lust but, at times like these, it was more powerful than any other feeling I'd ever felt. Knowing what I know now, I would've stayed. I would've quit my job and done anything to stay with him. He was worth the sacrifice of having to rearrange my life. At the time, I told myself I was trying to figure it out. I was trying to plan it out and do it the right way. But we were running out of time. I could feel it slipping through my fingers. I'd just forgotten how quickly things could change. They could change in an instant.

He stood in the door of the garage as I got in my car. I purposefully didn't look at him until the garage door was rolling open and I was backing out. I blew him a quick kiss that he didn't reciprocate. I pulled out onto the street and then I strained my eyes and watched until I couldn't see him anymore as the garage door rumbled closed behind me. I looked around the neighborhood. It was a drizzly, gray morning, and there was no one on the sidewalk. No one seemed to be watching or paying attention. I didn't feel any prying eyes. Satisfied, I put the car in drive and headed toward downtown.

The coffee was stronger than I preferred, but I was getting used to the way he made it. He'd sweetened it with the vanilla almond milk that I kept just for coffee. Not enough, though. It was slightly more bitter than I liked. But I sipped at the hot coffee anyway because he'd made it. I didn't thank him for it, I realized. I wondered if he would punish me for it later. That would make it worth it. But I still felt slightly guilty about it. I wanted him to know I appreciated it. I wanted him to know that he wasn't useless or idle. I didn't know how long it would be until those feelings settled in. He was used to working with his hands, used to building and making things. I

wanted him to know that it wouldn't always be like this, but he knew that, too.

We were still living on borrowed time.

I could smell him on my skin all morning, even over the strong scent of my perfume. It was distracting, as I typed and made copies and phone calls. I tugged on my sleeves every few minutes, making sure they were still covering the marks. It was becoming a habit, slowly but surely. I'd forgotten to trim my nails that morning and some were still ragged from when I'd broken them that weekend, digging them into the ropes and the bed frame. I chewed on them absentmindedly as I sat in the Monday meeting, trying to pay attention to the numbers and market predictions but mostly staring at the plastic palm tree in the corner of the room and thinking about Elliot. I thought about his body, his long limbs and his rough hands and his evil smile. I thought about all the things we did and all the things there were still left to do. By the time the meeting let out, I was wet and longing for him.

It was only lunchtime. The day was only half-over. I sighed with relief when I stepped outside the office and the cool air hit my face. I had every intention of grabbing my usual spinach salad and an iced tea from the cafe across the street and then heading back to the office. I'd been distracted all morning and I needed to get up and move a bit. But a sudden idea popped in my head as I stood in the parking lot. I squeezed my keys in my hands, letting the metal cut into my skin. For a second, I debated on going to my car and masturbating to take the edge off. It wasn't dignified. It wasn't smart. But it would help. A little down and dirty in the backseat might help bring me back to attention, but it was risky.

"Joan? Joan Vasquez?" a voice said, a deep voice. An unfamiliar voice. I looked without thinking, assuming that it was someone from the office. But it wasn't. There was a black sedan in front of me and inside it was a man, a man who was looking at me like he knew me even though I couldn't place his face in my memory. I raised my eyebrows and stared at him, my heart rate spiking as I took in his faded blue button-up shirt and cheap tie and slightly rumpled and ill-fitting dark suit jacket. My first thought was that he looked like police. A detective, more specifically.

"Do you remember me?" he said, resting his arm on the car door and staring back at me with an expectant look on his face. He wanted something from me. But I had no idea what he wanted. "Detective Wilson. Me and my

partner came to see you a few weeks ago,” he added, smiling a bit and showing slightly crooked front teeth. “Gave you my card.” He was cute, in a boyish but manly way, and I immediately remembered him. I remembered how he looked at me as he stood on my doorstep. Like he was concerned and cared about me. But that was his job. It was also his job to suss out lies from the truth. He looked harmless, but he wasn't. He most definitely wasn't.

“Oh,” I said, immediately feeling on edge. I didn't know what the hell he wanted and I definitely didn't like seeing him, especially at my job. I didn't like him knowing where to find me, although I supposed it was easy enough to find out. I was supposed to be normal, I reminded myself. A normal maladjusted person who had run thousands of miles from home to escape my past. I gathered myself together in less than a minute, but I didn't bother hiding my change in mood. I wanted him to see that I didn't like being reminded of those bad times. I wanted him to feel bad for reminding me. I wanted him to keep feeling sorry for me. The more sorry for me he felt, the less he would suspect me. I always hated being pitied, but I could stand it if I had to.

“How are you?” he asked, knitting his eyebrows and staring at me intently. I dropped my eyes to the floor, still pretending to be upset. It would be easy to play off his need to want to protect me. I bet he had a Superman complex a mile wide. I haven't met many cops in my life, but it has been my experience that they want to help more than anything. They want to right wrongs and find justice where there really isn't any. It's honorable, really. But it was also a pain in my ass at that moment.

“I'm doing okay,” I replied and shrugged lightly, letting my shoulders slump. “Everything's fine.”

“There's no news,” he said, holding up his hand. “There will be though.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, feeling a muted pang of alarm in my brain.

“Soon. We'll get him soon,” he nodded. “Like I said before, he'll make a mistake. He'll slip up and when he does, we'll get him.”

“I hope so,” I said then glanced across the street at the cafe. I wanted to escape but I didn't know how to get rid of him. I couldn't help but feel that he was harmless, even if it wasn't true. He seemed sincere. But I also knew

that there was a reason he'd come to see me out of the blue. He must've been thinking about me. He must've been concerned with my well-being. I could use that. "Was there something else you wanted, Detective?"

"No, I just wanted to check in," he said. "You seemed shook up last time I saw you."

"I'm just living my life," I said with a small shrug. "I'm not going to hide away and let fear get the best of me." I let myself raise my eyes and meet his. I let my gaze linger on him a bit too long. He doesn't look away and I have a feeling my suspicions are correct. He's going above and beyond his job for a reason. And that reason is me. "Did you come all the way here just to check up on me?" I asked, lightly. He smiled shyly, dipping his head and looking away. That was definitely flirting, I decided. Awkward and strange, but definitely flirting.

"No," he lied, shaking his head. "I was in the neighborhood and thought I would give you a quick update."

"Do you do this often?" I asked, stepping closer to the car and crossing my arms over my chest like I was just as nervous as him. "Go out of your way like this for someone you hardly know?"

"Not always," he said, scrunching up his nose in a cute way. There was something about him, I realized. He knew it, too. Despite the fact that he was shy, he knew that some women found him attractive. He had a little bit of game and he was trying to use it on me. "But some victims are worth it." I frowned at the word 'victims' and he immediately knew he'd made a misstep.

"Victim, huh," I said, shutting down the flirtation in an instant. I was annoyed at how much that word could still affect me. It'd been years and I still didn't like it. It'd been years but I didn't want to be looked at like some pathetic damaged person that deserved pity and downturned glances. No one had called me a victim in a long time and that was how I preferred it.

"I didn't—" he started then stopped. "I didn't mean it like that."

"I appreciate you coming out here, but I'm fine," I said, dismissively. "I'm on my lunch break though, so I do have to go." I turned and walked around the back of his car before he could get another word out and continued across the parking lot toward the cafe, completely ignoring him.

"Hey, hold on!" he called out behind me but I kept walking. "Miss Vasquez!" I couldn't help but smile as I heard him call out my name,

because I knew I'd hooked him. He couldn't stand me thinking less of him. He wanted me to like him. And that made him weaker. He thought I was weak, but really I was the strong one. "Joan!" he called out when I didn't respond. I got to the end of the parking lot and glanced to my left and right, checking the street for traffic. Cars whizzed by in both lanes, preventing me from continuing on my way across the street. I said a silent prayer, even as I pretended to be impatiently waiting for the traffic to let up. A car pulled up next to me and I bit the sides of my cheeks to prevent myself from smiling. I heard him open the car door and I braced myself. "Do I have to apologize? Let me apologize," he said and I finally had mercy on him and spared him a glance. He was leaning against the car, his elbows on the roof. He looked so contrite that I almost felt bad for manipulating him.

Almost.

"There's nothing to apologize for," I said.

"Then why do I feel like I should?" he responded, knitting his brows again. "I didn't mean to offend you, really." A car blew by us on the road and my hair flew around my face. I lifted my hand to brush it away, happy with the distraction. His eyes watched my movement and I was even more convinced of his weakness. "Let me drive you. Wherever you're going."

"I don't need a ride."

"Please. Let me. I'll take you wherever you want to go."

"Anywhere?" I asked, allowing a small smile again.

"Yeah," he said and I could see the hope on his face.

"Alright," I said lightly, like it was difficult for me. I opened the door and he quickly ducked inside the car and cleaned off the passenger seat of the assortment of empty cola bottles and thick manila folders for me. I slid in and closed the door behind me, wondering if I was making a mistake or not. But it was more important for me to get as much information as I could get from the detective. I didn't know how much he knew. I didn't know how close they were to Elliot, how close they were to finding him. How close they were to figuring out who his accomplice was and what had happened to the other escaped prisoner. We'd buried him deep enough I wasn't too worried, but nothing was certain. It would be worth a few moments in the man's company for a bit of peace of mind. At least that was what I told myself.

“Okay,” he said, pulling out of the entrance of the parking lot and leaning forward to check the traffic. “Where are we headed?”

“Make a left,” I said, settling my purse on my lap.

“Yes ma'am,” he said with a throaty chuckle. Sitting so close to him, I could smell his aftershave, a spicy, minty scent that didn't smell bad at all. In fact, it smelled pretty good. I studied him as he watched the traffic, studied the hint of a five o'clock shadow on his chin and how his skin had a slightly olive tint. He was an attractive man, no doubt. He was the type I might've gone for in my dark years, the years when I ran around town with different men and different names like my pussy was on fire. It was fun at the time, but only because of the pain it'd caused Elliot. I never wanted to use another man as a substitute for Elliot again, though. It was never as satisfying. I had the real thing again; there was no need to try to find it in someone else.

“Now pull in here,” I said as soon as he pulled out onto the road. I pointed to the entrance to the cafe, which was several feet ahead.

“Here?” he asked and I could hear the surprise in his voice. It wasn't a very happy surprise but it still caused me to laugh.

“Yes, here,” I giggled. I actually giggled. The sound was so asinine, but also involuntary.

“Well shit,” he said with a laugh as he made a sharp right into the cafe's parking lot.

“I told you I didn't need a ride.”

“You were right about that,” he said, shaking his head as he turned quickly into an open parking spot. “But since you tricked me, I think you owe me,” he said, turning in his seat to look at me after putting the car in park. I swallowed, his words having some odd affect on me. I suddenly had the little nagging feeling that Elliot wouldn't like this much. In fact, I was fairly certain he wouldn't like it one bit.

“Owe you?” I asked, as innocently as I could muster.

“Yes,” he nodded slowly, the smile never leaving his face. “Let me buy you lunch.” I ran my tongue over my lips, pretending to mull it over.

“No,” I said and watched his face fall. His disappointment was so palpable it was almost endearing. “You can't buy my lunch, but will you have lunch with me?” I smiled as he perked up instantly. This was almost too easy. But I had to be careful, I told myself as we got out of the car. I had

to be careful because I was walking on walking on hot coals with bare feet. It was best not to get too cocky. It was best to keep a cool head, even if I wanted to poke and prod at him like a medical experiment. It was almost too fun.

I ordered my usual lunch and he got a sandwich and a Coke and we sat by the window. The view wasn't much to brag about but at least it was in out of the chilly air. I picked at my salad and watched him as he ate. Eating with the enemy wasn't nearly as bad as sleeping with the enemy, I figured. I still wasn't doing anything too bad, so I decided to push a little further. "So you've been thinking about me this whole time?" I asked, spearing a dried cranberry on my fork. "For the last few weeks, you've been wondering how I am?"

"No," he said, but then flashed me a smile and I knew he was lying. "I just thought of you this morning. And I realized we'd never followed up."

"You could've called."

"What if you didn't answer? I was close enough, I figured I would stop by."

"Where's your partner?" I asked, playing along. "Aren't you two usually a team?"

"He's busy," he said, dropping his eyes back to his turkey club, still lying like a rug. "Working another case."

"So you were thinking about me just out of the blue." I took a sip of my iced tea, wrapping my lips around the straw. I swallowed and watched his face. His eye twitched a bit and I almost missed it. Almost. "Maybe you've got some new information? Some new information you don't want to tell me because you think I can't handle it?"

"No," he said again, wiping his hands on his napkin.

"You say that a lot. 'No'. But I don't know if I believe you," I said. I set my fork down and gave him a patient look. Like I could wait there all day to hear the truth.

"The feds don't give a lowly Seattle detective like me the time of day," he said, crunching on a potato chip. "But I guess it wouldn't be completely true to say I didn't know anything."

"The feds?" I asked, my interest immediately piqued.

"The asshole skipped state lines," he said, staring at me intently again, so I know he's telling the truth. He's not avoiding my eyes anymore. "But

there's been no sign of him since Kansas.”

“Kansas?” I can't stop myself from blurting out the name. My first inclination was to scour my mind for any instance, any slip-up, where we could've been spotted. I thought we'd been careful, but it was impossible to be too careful. I also wondered just when Wilson or his partner would remember that I told them I was in Denver. Would they think it was more than just coincidence that I was traveling so close to where he was spotted? If someone somehow saw him in Denver, we'd be screwed.

“I shouldn't be telling you this,” he said with a sigh. “I'm not trying to scare you.”

“I'm not scared,” I said, then picked up my fork again. I took another bite, even though the spinach tasted like dust on my tongue. But I told myself that if the feds had any idea who had helped Elliot escape or what had happened to Lassiter, they would be the ones banging on my door, not Wilson. But I couldn't help but feel like it was only a matter of time.

“There's also been sightings in Texas and Oklahoma, so the investigation is ongoing. We're just waiting for one of them to fuck up,” he said and I paused at his words. “Which will happen. Pritchard and the guy he escaped with are both violent offenders. There's no way they'll be able to keep a low-profile. They can't help themselves. I just hope they'll be back behind bars before something bad happens to someone else.”

“Yeah,” I murmured, forcing myself to take another bite. “What do you think? About where they are?” I asked after a minute, after drinking more tea to soothe my dry throat.

“Nowhere near here,” he said reassuringly. “There's been no signs that he came this far north.”

“Yet. There's no signs yet,” I said, correcting him. At that point, I was beginning to wonder if it was truly only a matter of time. I was doing everything in an attempt to not be discovered but there were so many different ways to make a mistake. Elliot was already sneaking out of the house. During the day, I had no idea what he did. I didn't think he would do anything that stupid, but it was so hard to stop him when he got it in his mind to do something. He promised he would do everything to keep us together, but the whole world was out to get us. One wrong move and we'd be dead in the water.

Something had to give. Something had to be done.

I just had to gather up the strength to do it.

“Don't think like that,” Wilson said, leaning forward and putting his elbows on the table. The small table shook with the movement and my tea splashed in my glass. “Trust the system. Trust me.” I couldn't help the rueful smile that spread over my lips. There was no hiding it; I was too much of a cynic at that point. I was too jaded to believe that, no matter how sincere Wilson thought he was being. There was no protecting me from Elliot. There never had been. There never would be.

“I don't trust anyone but myself,” I said and it was the most true thing I'd said all afternoon.

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Chapter Four

She was lying to me.

From the minute she walked in the door, she was lying. I was sitting in the dark, waiting for her. After another day of fucking around and trying to keep myself busy, I was waiting for her to get home. I was counting down the fucking hours. When she left in the morning, I started my prison routine – hundred of crunches, pushups and squats. I worked out until my muscles burned and then went numb. Then I took a shower and jacked off because it was second nature. Then I cleaned the kitchen and made the bed. Then I tried to read one of the law books she had on her shelf, like I used to do in prison. But I didn't. Instead, I went into her closet and ran my hand over her clothes. It was becoming a habit but I couldn't resist. I liked touching her things. I liked being in the messy, quiet, enclosed space, filled with her scent. I stood back and stared at it for a moment, taking the chaos in.

Growing up, my grandmother arranged her clothes by color and occasion. Her church dresses didn't hang next to her nurse's uniform, never. Joanie didn't do that, but she also had a hell of a lot more clothes. She had dresses and skirts and blouses, all stuffed in and over-flowing. She had dozens of colorful scarves, competitive swimsuits and skimpier bikinis in clear plastic bins and designer handbags piled up on the shelf. Her shoes were tossed around willy-nilly, some stacked and others in mismatched piles. She had more shoes than she could ever wear. She had some in boxes that she'd never even worn. And everything was expensive because she was used to having money and spending it on herself. The clothes looked expensive and smelled expensive, because they smelled like her and she smelled expensive.

My favorite item in the whole lot was the dress she'd worn on the third day we were back in Seattle. We'd been laying around naked for two days and finally she'd gotten up and showered and put clothes on. She'd chosen a simple blue dress with fluttery sleeves and a hem that hit her calves. I let her dress because I wanted her to think that she was in control. I wanted her to think that she could do whatever she wanted. This was the new life that

we were going to build. There were rules. She was my woman, but she wasn't my slave. No leashes. No violence. But when we fucked, all bets were off. So I let her get dressed even though I wanted her to stay naked and available for me. But I soon discovered that it was definitely better when she had something on. The sound of ripping fabric is so satisfying. It makes me feel something deep in my guts, something close to the first time I ever fucked her. But I try not to think about that too much because I know she wants to forget it ever happened. It's better that way.

Afterwards, she pouted and was angry that I'd torn the seam, but she hadn't thrown it out like she said she would when she chastised me for destroying it. I found it in the back of her closet, hanging like any of the other dresses. I slipped it off the hanger and ran the thin blue fabric through my fingers, reliving the memory again. I could see her in the kitchen, barefoot with her back to me, her hair knotted on top of her head and her neck bare. I could feel the warmth of her skin under my lips. I could remember the way her shoulders tensed and her nipples went hard when I thrust my hand between her legs. I could hear her gasp when I ripped the dress and exposed her tits as I thrust my cock into her.

It was a good memory. Very good.

After awhile, I slipped the dress back on the hanger and slid it back into place. Then I closed the closet door behind me, just like she'd left it. I'd been away from her for too long. I liked feeling close to her. I was in her house, but that didn't mean I belonged there. Even though it had been a few weeks, it still felt foreign to me. It didn't feel like my place, because it wasn't. This was her, all her. I liked being surrounded by her. Sometimes. Other times I felt too impatient. When I looked out the window, what I saw wasn't familiar to me. There was no sun, no heat, no home. When I left prison, I didn't give a fuck about shit like that. I just cared about getting out and getting back to her. I did anything I could to make that happen. I lied to get what I wanted. I killed to ensure my own safety. More importantly, I killed for her. She wanted me. That was all that was important at the time. I was so fucking desperate. Desperation will make a man do crazy things.

So will love.

But the longer I sit, the longer I watch her leave every morning, the longer I wait for her to return, the louder the urges get. The bad thoughts that take over everything and make it hard to remember how to be good.

The night before, I'd been stupid. I knew it. I shouldn't have left the condo. I shouldn't have caught the bus to her office and exposed my face for strangers to see. But I wasn't thinking straight. I was only thinking about the urges. The urges are what's going to get me in trouble and I know it. But I can't stop it. Running my hand over her clothes and going through her things was one way to cope, but it wasn't enough. I knew it. I could feel it. But I couldn't tell her. I didn't want her to know. I didn't want to admit out-loud what a fine-line it was, between being the man that woke up next to her in the morning and the man that thought about killing and pain and ugliness like it was as normal as reading the Sunday paper. I didn't want her to look at me and see the man from two years ago. I wanted her to see a man that's trying to change, a man who was doing everything he could to belong in her world.

I could feel the shift, though. I could feel the change seeping into me. Something was coming. We were going to have to move soon. I knew it. We couldn't get comfortable in Seattle. We couldn't keep pretend like everything was peaches and cream and not expect it to blow up. We were getting too good at pretending. I wondered if she could see it, too. As I sat in the armchair in the dark and waited for her to get home, I wondered if she was making plans. I wondered if she was already thinking about where we would go and what we would do. I would follow her anywhere. I knew we couldn't go back home. The great state of Texas might as well break off and drift out into the gulf, because I knew I'd never see it again, not in this lifetime. I'd put up a fight and kill as many as I could if they tried to drag me back to prison. I'd die before they could take away everything I finally had with my Joanie. And I would take her with me when I went.

The lamp beside me turned on at 7:05 p.m. Like clockwork. She had the light on a timer, along with lights in the bedroom and kitchen. The house lit up and I woke up out of my morbid thoughts. As much as I couldn't stop the bad thoughts, I couldn't stop myself from selfishly wanting her either. I had ruined her life many times over but I couldn't let her go. I wouldn't. I would give up everything else, anything. It was so shitty of me, and I know that now. When I think back to those days in Seattle, I know that it was foolish of me to keep trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. The funny thing is, she would've been just fine without me. She's beautiful,

she's smart, she's rich. She never needed me. She never needed the trouble I brought when I darkened her doorstep.

And I couldn't stop making trouble, even if I tried.

When 7:30 rolled around, I cracked my knuckles, one by one. I could feel my whole body tensing up. I didn't like it when she stayed out late. Normally, by that time, I would've started making some food for her, but there wasn't anything in the house. We'd cleaned it out during our marathon session that weekend. It was amazing how hungry and thirsty sex could make somebody. We'd gone through a whole roasted chicken and two steaks, as well as the fancy little potatoes and the corn and the string beans she'd gotten from the farmer's market. I have no money and I don't want to take money from the secret metal box in the bottom of her closet where she kept a small roll of twenties, so I didn't bother ordering anything. Besides, it was too risky.

For the hundredth time since I'd been in Seattle, I wonder how much longer I can live like this. A man can't stay in a cage for too long. At least not a man like me. I stayed in one already, because they locked me in. I know Joanie didn't want to lock me in, but she couldn't help it. She was scared for me. She was angry that I'd left the house and put myself in danger. But she didn't understand. She thought she did, but she didn't. I didn't either, then.

When I finally heard her key in the door, I felt a sense of relief, an almost euphoric sense of happiness. It hadn't missed my attention that it wasn't too far off from a dog's reaction when their master returned from a day away. It was pathetic and I hate to admit it, but it made me more resentful. It made me want to grab her hair and make her wince and slam her against the wall and fuck her until she reminded me how much it was worth it. Instead, I forced myself to stay seated in the chair as she bustled into the kitchen, her heels clicking on the tile floor. She tossed her keys on the counter and set a bag down with a thump. I didn't last five seconds. I stood and walked to the doorway to the kitchen and leaned against it, my eyes drinking her in.

I sensed it the second she looked at me.

"Hi," she said and there was something at the back of her eyes that immediately hit me between the ribs. But she slipped on a smile like she could mask it from me. She'd put on a fresh coat of lipstick, I noticed. Her

lips were smooth and pink. Her hair was loose down her back and her trench-coat was belted at her waist, accentuating her perfect hour-glass figure. She looked so fucking good I forgot all about food. I was becoming a Pavlovian dog. I would start salivating at the sound of her keys in the door, at the sound of her car pulling into the garage. I didn't like it, but I couldn't stop it. I was her pet, pacing and impatient until she decided to return and grace me with her presence. And after hours of waiting, suddenly she was back. But it wasn't right. After all of my loyalty, she was smiling and hiding something from me. "I stopped by the market and picked up some things," she said. "You're probably hungry."

"I'll make it," I said, stepping into the kitchen. Her smile faltered a bit as I advanced on her and then she took a step back away from me and fumbled with her coat.

"Let me change my clothes and then I'll do it," she said. "I want to cook for you."

"I haven't done shit all day," I said, studying her face. "I can cook." She dropped her eyes to the floor to avoid mine, then she looked at me again, like she was forcing herself. "Are you gonna fight me over a skillet and an open flame?" I asked her, cocking my head.

"No," she murmured. I flung out an arm and caught her around the waist. I pulled her close and buried my face in her neck and took a deep breath. She gasped lightly and then looped her arms around my ribs. She squeezed me tight and I closed my eyes, the love I felt for her almost too much to bear. "I don't know if I'll ever get used to coming home and having you here," she said. I knew what she meant but it was still strange to hear. A little part of me told me to enjoy it while it lasted. She pulled away first, dropping her arms and pushing at me lightly. "I have to get out of these clothes or I'm going to scream."

"Fuck dinner," I said, running my hand down her hip and then squeezing her ass. "Get naked and I'll lick your pussy."

"I'm hungry. Aren't you hungry?" She shifted her eyes and then fumbled with her coat like she couldn't wait to get away from me. "We should eat first." She walked around me into the living room and I let her go. I stood alone in the kitchen, but I was tempted to follow her. I was tempted to grab her and demand to know what the hell was going on, but I didn't. I wanted to see how long it would take before she would tell me on

her own. I didn't know how patient I could be, but I would try. It could be a game for awhile. But I was competitive.

I always played to win.

Lunch ended just as strangely as it began.

I walked with Detective Wilson out into the parking lot, but I told him there was no need to drive me back. He smiled and nodded.

"That won't stop me from watching to make sure you get back okay," he said.

"I'm sure I'll be fine," I said. "I've been crossing streets since I was five years old. I think I can manage."

"Just don't forget to look both ways," he said, still flirting. "Otherwise I'd have to arrest you for jaywalking."

"Jaywalking?" I laughed. "You're starting to look a little desperate, Detective."

"Maybe I am," he said, then ducked his head like he was a shy little boy. I felt a twinge of sympathy for him. He had no idea what tree he was barking up. He had no idea the things I was capable of, the things I could and would do to protect my secrets. But for a brief moment, I had a flashback to another life, a life before Elliot. A life where I flirted and dated nice boys and didn't have a care in the world, except for what I was doing on Friday night. I had to let it go though. Like everything else, I let it go. Because Elliot meant more. Elliot was everything.

"Thanks for keeping me company," I said.

"I didn't mind, Joan," he said and my name sounded strange coming from his lips. It felt too close, too intimate. Maybe it was just the way he said it. "You can call me Aaron, by the way. That's my name."

"Good to know, *Detective*," I said, emphasizing the word. Then I raised my hand and gave him a light wave, as easy as if I hadn't thought about it beforehand. The problem was, his face changed. His brow furrowed and his eyes got sharp. I knew immediately. My sleeve had slipped down. The wicked red and purple bruises around my wrist were out in the open, revealing themselves at the worst possible time. I'd almost gotten away from the cop with no slip-ups. I was so close. I dropped my arm to my side

and smiled brightly, even though I knew it wouldn't make him forget what he'd seen. "I'm late," I said and then I turned and strode across the parking lot toward the street. He didn't follow me and I didn't dare look back. I just kept walking until I got back to the relative safety of the office.

A little mistake, but it was still a fuck up.

Elliot was staring at me, like he could read my mind. All through dinner, he'd been staring at me. I'd forced myself to eat a bit of the salmon he'd cooked for me, even though my stomach was in knots. I knew I should tell him about Wilson, but I didn't think it was worth it. I didn't think that it was worth the trouble and the worry. He was already on edge. He didn't need to know that the Detective was still interested in me.

"I'm not feeling well," I said, standing and picking up my half-full plate. I turned and went into the kitchen and scraped my plate. I told myself to get a grip; I was a better liar than this. I've lied so many times and never had anyone suspect a thing. But the stakes are so high, for me and for Elliot. It's making me nervous. I turn on the water and rinse the plate, staring at the bits of food as they wash away. I jerked in surprise when I felt his hand against my forehead.

"You don't have a fever," he said.

"It's my stomach," I quickly tossed out. "I think I had too much coffee today." He narrowed his eyes lightly and I remembered the coffee he'd made me this morning. "Not your coffee," I said, poking his stomach lightly. "The shitty company coffee. I had to drink whole milk today in it. *Whole*," I said, making an exaggerated face.

"You're so spoiled, you know that?" he said, but his face softened. I could see his guard falling and I felt myself relax. This would pass, I told myself. It could go away.

"I'm not spoiled. I just like what I like." I wiped my wet hands on the yellow dish towel. Then I did what I really wanted for the first time that night – I touched him. I put my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes. "The salmon was really good," I murmured, wrapping my arms around his ribs.

"You didn't eat it," he said.

"I did eat some," I protested. "I ate almost half."

"Bullshit," he shot back but he didn't move away from my touch. To the contrary. He picked me up and carried me upstairs like I weighed

nothing. I leaned into him, not wanting to fight it. He kicked the door closed behind us and tossed me lightly in the middle of the bed.

“The kitchen is a mess,” I said. “I should do dishes since you cooked.”

“You're sick. I'll do it,” he said, sliding his hands up my thighs and hooking his fingers in my waistband. He undressed me piece by piece, until I was down to my bra and panties. I threw my arms over my head as he ran his hands all over my body. He stroked up my thighs and over my belly and up my ribs. He avoided my tits and he didn't move to take off my panties, either. My nipples were hard and my pussy was wet and I had goosebumps, but he didn't stop softly caressing me. He didn't take off his clothes either or lay on top of me, like I wanted him to. I was bursting at the seams. Then, finally, he leaned in and kissed me on the forehead. “Rest,” he said, then stood. “I'll clean up downstairs and then I'll be back up.” He went to the door and then gave me a knowing look. I opened and shut my mouth, as the realization dawned on me, so close to telling him to stay but not wanting to expose my lie. He stood there for a minute, like he was daring me to say something. When I didn't, he turned off the light and closed the door behind him. I listened as he walked down the stairs and then I rolled over, feeling like I wanted to scream. He'd done that on purpose.

He knew I was lying.

Now, he was going to make me suffer.

He didn't touch me for two days after that.

On the night of the third day, I couldn't take it anymore. He wasn't letting it go. I told myself that it wasn't that big of a deal. Wilson hadn't tried to contact me again and he probably wouldn't. There was no harm in telling Elliot about the lunch and the FBI. The longer we played these games, the more harmful it would be, I reasoned. Of course, I should've told him the first night. I know that now, but at the time I didn't realize that the lie would be almost as bad as the truth.

He was in the middle of the bed, staring up at the ceiling. I stood in the doorway to the bathroom, drying off from my shower. I didn't bother putting on a robe or covering up. I dried off slowly, waiting to see if he was going to look at me. Waiting to see if he was going to get up and force me

to stop teasing him. He was calm, though. He was pretending to ignore me. I decided that enough was enough. I tossed my towel aside and crawled onto the bed. I straddled him before he could stop me.

"I know what you're doing," I said, arching my back and sticking out my tits, hoping it would entice him to play with them.

"Do you?" he asked, his whole body going stiff because of the temptation. He didn't make a move to touch me though. The manic flames flickered behind his eyes and I knew I was close to breaking him. I knew what I had to do.

"I have something to tell you," I said, squeezing my thighs around his waist. I leaned forward and rubbed my tits across his chest and let my wet hair slide over my shoulder so that he could see it. I admit I was trying to soften the blow, maybe make things a little easier on myself. I thought it would be better that way. "A cop came to see me the other day. One of the cops who came to the door. You remember?" I asked, running my teeth across my bottom lip. He didn't move. His expression didn't change. "He took me to lunch and I picked his brain. They have nothing. Not even the FBI. Nobody knows where you are." I bit down harder on my lip as I watched his face. Still nothing. His eyes were flat. His breathing was growing shallow and I could feel his heart, beating faster between his ribs. "He just came to see me at work. Because he was worried about me. That's all." I shrugged lightly, like it was no big deal. It wasn't a big deal.

I'd lied about it for two days, but it wasn't a big deal.

I don't know how I ended up on my back. It all happened so quickly. My wet hair snaked around my neck. I arched my back, gasping as he loomed over me, shoving my legs open roughly. He pulled his shirt over his head and threw my arms over my head. He wrapped the shirt around my wrists, tightly, until I couldn't move them. His chest was heaving against mine and his nostrils flared as he went still on top of me.

"What's the motherfucker's name?" he asked, his voice barely above a growl.

"It doesn't matter," I said, a thrill of fear running down my spine. I hadn't seen him that angry in a long time.

"Tell me his motherfucking name," he hissed, beating his fist into the mattress, once.

"Wilson," I said, swallowing hard. "He's a detective."

“Did you fuck him?”

“What? No!” I screamed, annoyed that that was the first thing he thought of. He didn't worry about getting caught or the fact that the FBI was looking for him. The only thing he thought about was his own petty jealousy. I should've known, I supposed. He'd done terrible things in the name of jealousy before. “We had lunch.”

“Why the hell would he tell you anything?” he said, bucking his hips against mine. “Why would he tell you things like that without a reason?”

“He hardly told me anything,” I said, trying to pull apart my bound wrists. But the fabric wouldn't budge.

“If he didn't tell you anything, why would you lie to me?”

“I didn't want to worry you,” I said, staring right into his eyes. I wanted him to know that I wasn't lying. I was telling the truth, finally.

“You're full of shit,” he said, then he reached between us and pulled his cock out. I could feel him angling himself against me and I whined, stuck between wanting it and wanting him to understand. But he didn't wait for me to get ready. He thrust into me, hard and so fast that it took my breath away. I bit down on my lip again to stop myself from screaming. “Did you fuck him with this pussy?” he asked, as he thrust again.

“No,” I gasped. “I didn't fuck him.”

“Why should I believe you? Maybe you sucked his cock with this mouth,” he said, grabbing my chin. “It's been busy, hasn't it?” He dragged his thumb roughly across my bottom lip and I tasted the iron tinge of blood. I'd bitten my lip too hard. I could taste my blood on his thumb. He dipped his thumb between my teeth, forcing my mouth open. “Did you swallow his come?” he asked, bringing his face close to mine. He dipped his tongue between my open lips, running it along mine. I closed my eyes and moaned as he fucked me hard and rough. It hurt but it hurt in the best ways.

When he put his hand to my neck, I didn't protest. I didn't try to pull away when he squeezed it, hard. I wanted it. I wanted him to squeeze until I went lightheaded and I felt like I was going to go insane. I liked it when he did it. But that night was different. I didn't realize how different it was until I woke up alone in a hospital, unable to speak, and strapped down. As he started to choke me, I didn't try to stop him. Not even when the room went black and I felt like I couldn't keep awake if I tried. I jerked against him, my body fighting him before everything went black, but he was too strong.

That was the beginning of the end for us. It was an accident, a miscalculation, a misunderstanding, but in the end, it didn't matter. The darkness still took us over.

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Chapter Five

I thought I killed her.

When I looked down and saw her purple face and her closed eyes and her gaping mouth, I thought she was dead.

I've never felt so much fear in my life.

I took my hands from around her neck and after a split second that seemed to last forever, she gasped, her whole body arching off the bed as her body took in the air she needed. But there was something wrong. There was an odd sound, a hollow, raspy sound in her throat.

"Joanie," I said, putting my hands on either side of her face. Her eyes were slitted, but I could see they were bloodshot. The color of her cheeks and lips were slowly returning to normal, but there were nasty red marks around her throat where my hand had been. "Joanie, look at me." Finally, her eyes rolled around and they focused on me. She blinked and I could see she was coming around. I took a deep breath, relief rushing through me. I don't think I'd ever been so relieved in my life.

It was short lived.

I unbound her hands and rubbed her soft skin between my hands. Her wrists were red and I kissed the marks. I loved my marks on her, usually. I loved leaving evidence of my affection on her body. But not that night. That night it was the worst possible thing. I'd lost control of myself. I'd fucked up and hurt the one person I cared about in life. She tried to take another deep breath and I could hear the rattling in her throat. She opened her mouth and tried to speak, but nothing came out but a croaking noise. Her eyes widened and I could see the fear there. I knew I had to do something. I had no choice.

I wrapped her up in the bed sheet and carried her out of the house. I put her in the car and I didn't give a fuck who saw us. She was scared and there was something horribly wrong with her and I didn't have a choice.

I took her to the hospital.

I watched them wheel her away as the E.R. doctors and nurses bustled around her. I stayed until they took her away from me. Then I went back

home because it was the only thing I could do. It wasn't safe anywhere else. It wasn't smart to stay with her, no matter how much I wanted to. So I left, like a piece of shit coward that I was.

I paced the living room floor for the rest of the night, back and forth, back and forth but nothing was getting better. There was no way around it. I'd fucked up royally. I'd ruined everything. And worst of all, I'd hurt her. The one thing I'd sworn I wouldn't do again. I did it. I lost myself in the anger and I'd done something I couldn't take back. I scrubbed my hands down my face, trying to wake myself up. I had to figure out what to do. I had to figure out where to go. I couldn't stay in her house anymore. She was angry. She probably didn't even want to look at me. If I could somehow apologize to her, to get down on my motherfucking knees and tell her I didn't mean it, that I was an asshole and I didn't deserve to have her.

How many times was I going to do that in my life? How many times until I actually stopped being a fuck-up?

I flung open her closet door and draped my arms on the shelf and leaned into her clothes. I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down. It felt like everything was crumbling and I was the one who was tearing it down with my own two hands. Her scent swirled around my brain and invaded my nostrils and my skin. It made me forget for a moment that everything was chaos. But it also made me think of her. She was all alone in that hospital. She was all alone and scared. And pissed. And in pain. Worst of all, I couldn't be with her. I couldn't leave the fucking house without being afraid someone would recognize my face. I might as well be as dead as Lannister was, rotting in an unmarked grave. I couldn't do shit. My hands were tied.

I couldn't stop the frustrated growl from escaping my lips, muffling the sound in her soft and colorful and expensive clothes. I dropped my hands and bunched them in the fabric, wishing her skin was what was under my fingertips, not that sad, thin substitute. I don't know how to stop the bad thoughts coursing through my brain. I think about hurting myself. About hurting someone else. About destroying everything, beating something until my knuckles were broken and bleeding and disappearing into the void where there were no responsibilities or allegiances or societal expectations.

I forced myself to pull away from her clothes because the scent was too much. I slammed the door shut and tried my best not to look at the chaos in

the bedroom. The lamp was still on its side on the floor and the sheets and blankets are pushed off the mattress, which is askew on the frame. Without thinking, I started putting the room to rights. I made the bed and fixed it so that it looked like nothing had happened in there at all. I adjusted the lampshade after replacing the lamp back on the bedside table and I noticed the drawer was cracked open. I could see the edge of the familiar corroded brass frame. I told myself not to look at it. I hated that she had that picture of me, but she hadn't asked me anything about it thankfully. I didn't want to talk about it at all.

I opened the drawer and shoved aside the pack of tissues and the condoms that covered the black velvet back of the frame. I pulled it out and flipped over the frame, the shock of seeing my five-year-old self still there. When I left Texas, I never thought I'd see shit like this again. Old family photos and Grandmother's furniture and Grandpa's odds and ends in the garage. Those ancient memories were the only things I was glad to leave behind. But here it was, still following me around like a ghost. But Joanie thought it was cute. She liked having a picture of me as a kid underneath the condoms in her bedside table. And for that reason and only that reason, I put it back.

I was craving a drink.

I was craving freedom.

I went downstairs but the air just as thick and stifling as it was up in the bedroom. I wanted to breathe fresh air. I moved from the kitchen to the living room and back again, tightening my fist in my T-shirt. It felt like my chest was tight. Joanie was the love of my life. She was the only one keeping me there. She was the only one keeping me in that moment. But she wasn't there. She wasn't there to keep me from losing my mind. She wasn't there to keep me from going stir-crazy.

A knock on the door froze me in my tracks. I crouched down instantly, without thinking. The drapes were drawn, but there was light poking in from the gaps between the fabric. I studied the clouded window beside the door, but I could only make out a dark figure. The doorbell rang then, echoing through the lower level of the condo. My heart started pounding in my chest and I felt an itch under my collar. I knew if I didn't move, they would most likely go away, whoever they were. I knew that, but it didn't stop me from stalking toward the door and silently standing to check the

keyhole. I don't know what it was, the adrenaline or the restlessness or the anger that I still couldn't get rid of. It didn't matter.

It especially didn't matter when I saw who was on the other side.

I didn't recognize him, but I recognized his clothes. From my years spent stuck in the justice system, I recognized the Sears suit and scuffed black shoes. I recognized the way he held himself and the way he was sniffing around. He was a cop, definitely a cop. There was no doubt about it.

He was Joanie's cop.

I watched as he took a step back and glanced up at the bedroom windows above. I wondered if he was looking for signs of life, for a sign of Joanie. He stepped to the side, his eyes darting to the picture window. I knew he probably wouldn't be able to see anything. I knew that if I stayed quiet long enough he would leave. I knew it, and yet I couldn't. I knew it but that didn't stop me from dropping my hand to the doorknob. I watched him through the peephole, his body distorted in the lens. I couldn't tell quite how tall he was or how strong he looked. He wasn't paying any attention to the door any more. He hopped down off the doorstep and walked closer to the window. He wasn't giving up, I told myself. He wasn't going away. It felt like he'd been there for an hour, but it had to've been seconds. My heart slowed in my chest and sweat beaded on my forehead. I wanted to know what he knew. I wanted to know what he wanted from Joanie. But most importantly, I wanted to crack his skull open and push all the thoughts of Joanie out. She was taken; she was mine. He wanted her, but he couldn't fucking have her.

So I did it. I didn't think anymore. I just turned the doorknob and let the door open a crack. It creaked lightly and a cool gust of air pushed it open further. I waited, waited to see if he would take the bait. It was foolish of me and I know that now, but at the time I couldn't think of anything else. I craved a fight too hard. I craved bone against bone and flesh and blood. I craved violence. And I craved some kind of ending, some kind of punctuation to the not knowing. It was my time to make something happen. Anything. So I did it.

I heard him return to the door step, his footsteps cautious. I heard a click, like a metallic button popping, and I knew he'd released the strap on his holster. I knew his gun would be at his hip, most likely his right side. I

planned for it. It was fucking stupid, because I could just as easily have been killed. But at the time, it felt like it would've been worth it. Maybe I should've let him do it. Or maybe I should've done it myself. But it doesn't matter now. What's done is done. I let the cop in, I invited the danger into Joanie's living room. I invited the violence in, not that it'd ever left since the moment I stepped foot in her cozy life. I asked for it and I got in spades.

But I never stopped loving her, even as I destroyed any future we had together.

I just couldn't help myself.

“Joan?” he called out, pushing the door open wider. I leaned back just in time so it didn't hit me, pressing my heels into the wood floor to catch my balance and keep from taking a step back. I sucked in a breath and held it. No answer. He tried again, taking another step inside. “Ms. Vasquez?” he said. Then he moved into my line of sight. I could see his profile and his hand curving around the door. Two more steps and he would be inside. Two more steps and I would have him. I didn't think about it anymore than that. I didn't think of it beyond what I wanted to do. It would be quick and rough but satisfying, like a fast fuck in a gas station bathroom. It was instantly regrettable, too, but I wasn't thinking of that at the time. I was single-minded, eyes on the prize like a starving lion looking on its last meal.

I was on him before he knew what had happened. He saw me out of the corner of his eye, or maybe he only sensed me, but I didn't wait for him to get his bearings. I pounced, hooking my arm around his neck and pulled him backward, making him lose his footing and stumble into me. He was bigger than I'd hoped and I had to exert more effort than I wanted to, but I was stronger. I was ready. I kicked the door shut behind him and then it was all up to me. It was time to get some answers.

Time to have a little fun.

Chapter Six

I moved through the dark hallways quietly, dipping into a random empty room every few minutes and waiting for the coast to clear. There were only a few night nurses on duty, and in the mood I was in, I didn't want to run into any busybodies and have words. My whole body was wired, every muscle jumpy and electrified. The violence made me like this. I didn't know what else I was capable of. I didn't want to know. I didn't want to back myself into a corner and have to fight my way out. I was itching for a fight, though. That's why it was fucking stupid to be there, but I couldn't help it.

I had to see her one more time.

She was smarter than I would ever be, but she was stupid when it came to me. I was her blindspot, her weakness. She was in denial, but I'd known for a long time that it was going to come to an end. The countdown had started ticking the second I got to Seattle. It was only a matter of time and now my time was definitely up. I'd slipped and fucked up and now there was no other option. I didn't want to hurt anyone else, but it was impossible. She would be hurt. She would curse me and fight me and try to dig in and hold on to me, that's why it had to be the way it was.

She couldn't know what I was planning. She couldn't know what I had done. Not only because it would protect her, but because it would prove to her all along that I was a monster. She thought I could be fixed but she was wrong. She thought we could play pretend and life would go along like gangbusters. Unfortunately, there was no fixing me. I had to go where all the other wild things were, where all the bad men like me went to try to escape the pitfalls, rules, and dangers of society.

But there was no way in hell I was going back to prison.

A single fluorescent light was on in her room, above the bed. Even though she barely looked like herself, she was still my beautiful Joanie. Her dark hair was spread around her pale face on the white pillow. The white bandage was thick around her neck. It was all white in there, clean and stark but still sickly, and I had the urge to grab her up and carry her out of there.

I'd done bad things to her and made her hurt, but I was still a selfish motherfucker. I wanted her smiles and her smell and her love all to myself. I wanted to wrap myself up in her and never let go.

I still want that.

Unfortunately, I fucked up too many times, so I had to pay the piper. I had to give up the one thing that made any sense to me in this whole shitty world, but it was the price I had to pay. I made the only choice I could at the time, but I do regret it. Joanie made sure I would regret it.

I regret a lot of fucking things.

I shut the door to her room softly behind me, trapping her inside with me. There was a thin white curtain hanging from the ceiling for privacy, and I pulled it closed around her bed, creating a cocoon around us. She rolled her head to the side and opened her eyes as I stepped close to her bed. For a long moment, I stared down at her and she stared back. I wondered if she was pissed, because quite honestly, she had every right to be. She jerked her arms, trying to lift them, and I realized that her wrists were tied to the bed with thick white leather straps. She stretched out her fingers like she wanted to touch me and I couldn't help but smile at her predicament. She was still my Joanie, tough as hell even when she was down and out.

"You tried to run?" I asked, keeping my voice low. "So they tied you down?" She scowled at me and mouthed something I couldn't quite catch. "Where the hell were you trying to go? You need to be here." She opened her mouth again and let out a little frustrated puff of air. I ran my hand over the smooth leather that bound her right wrist to the bed, feeling grateful. Grateful that she was still in the hospital where she belonged. Grateful that she was away from me, even though I hated it. She reached for me again, so I had mercy on her. I entwined my fingers with hers, touching her lightly. A single touch was enough to get my dick hard, but that wasn't the point. The point was that I was the one who hurt her, over and over again. The point was that it was my fault that all of the shit had rained down on both of us.

Because I couldn't control myself.

Because I would hurt her again and keep hurting her.

Don't forget, I reminded myself. Never forget.

"Asshole," she mouthed, exaggerating her lips around the word so I could understand. I leaned on the side of her hospital bed, draping my arms on the rail like I didn't have a care in the world. Meanwhile, every part of

me was pulled tight with self-control. All I really wanted was to crawl in the narrow bed with her and spread her legs and fuck her like the animal I was. I looked down at our hands, noticing the nicks and cuts on my fingers and the bruises on my arms. I pulled my fingers from hers and she lifted her head off the pillow like she was trying to get closer to me. Not able to resist, I reached out for her, running my raw knuckles across her cool forehead. She moved into my touch with her whole body, wincing like she was in pain. I felt it too, deep inside me. She didn't know, but somehow it still hurt both of us the same.

She dropped her head back down on the pillow heavily, her eyes trained on mine. I let my scarred fingers roam through her hair, wondering how to keep the time from passing so I could stay. "I know, baby," I whispered. "I'm an asshole." She nodded slowly, fisting her hands in the light blue blanket that covered her lower half. "How do you feel?" She shrugged her shoulders slightly, her pink lips parting like she wanted to talk. I zeroed in on her lower lip, imagining the way it would feel against my tongue – soft and supple. I wanted to bite it. I wanted to suck on it until... but I was a piece of shit. She was in a hospital bed because of me. She might never speak again because of me. I had too much to atone for. I owed her too much. I didn't deserve her.

But I kissed her anyway.

I tightened my hand in her hair and dropped my mouth to hers, sucking her plump lip between my teeth without another thought. Then I plunged my tongue into her mouth, memorizing the way she tasted. Crisp and earthy, like a flower that had yet to bloom. She was as raw as I was, as filthy, as needy, and yet, still untouched by my evil, somehow. I hadn't poisoned her yet. I'd fucked her and claimed her and degraded her, but I hadn't ruined her. Not yet. I knew that the longer I stayed, the worse off she'd be.

There was still hope for her.

If I could let her go.

If.

At that moment, I honestly didn't know if I would be able to. I didn't know how I was going to force myself to leave the hospital and leave her all alone in the room. So I stayed longer than I should have. I ran my fingers through her hair as I kissed her. Her hair was long and thick, just like I liked

it. I told myself to remember how it felt. I told myself that the memories would be enough, when I got wherever the hell I was going. She was pulling on the leather straps, trying to get free, trying to touch me, but I ignored her. I broke the kiss and shoved the thin blanket off of her legs. She didn't fight me as I shoved my hand under the faded hospital gown they'd put her in. I forced my middle finger inside of her and she arched her back and furrowed her brow. I could see her nipples were hard underneath the light fabric and I couldn't resist pressing my face against her chest and taking a deep breath. The gown didn't smell like her though – it wasn't good enough. So I closed my mouth over her hard left nipple and teased her with my tongue as I pumped my finger in and out of her. My dick was hard, but I didn't pay it any attention.

This was my punishment, after all.

I'd fucked everything up and now I had to pay. I wanted to apologize to her and that was the only way I knew how. Sex was easy. Sex was automatic with my Joanie. Our bodies were attuned that way. Years ago, I'd forced it on her and she'd adapted. That's what she'd told me once. She'd adapted to the person she was now, she'd said. I knew I would have to adapt, too. I was still the same piece of shit I'd always been, but I could still feel a little bit of change in me. She'd changed me like I'd changed her. Unfortunately, shit shined up like a new penny was still shit. Sooner rather than later, I was going to have to learn to live without her.

I shoved open her legs and lifted her right knee, opening her up to me. She was already wet and my finger slid in and out of her easily. Her fingernails were gripping the leather straps so hard her knuckles were turning white, but she was no longer struggling. She'd realized it was futile. When I raised my eyes to look at her face, she was staring at me, her eyes as deep as the motherfucking ocean. She wanted to know what I was going to do, or maybe she knew. Maybe she could read my mind. She was so beautiful that for a brief second, I was selfish. For a brief second, I thought about closing my hands around her neck and finishing the job I started the night before. I thought about squeezing the life out of her, I admit it. Then I could go walk in front of a bus or shoot my brains out and we could be together forever. But she bit down hard on her lip and stared at me like she loved me and the bad thoughts fled my brain. My eyes never leaving hers, I lowered myself until my face was inches from her pussy. She blinked a few

times quickly and I wondered if she was trying to tell me something. But her pussy was calling me and I couldn't resist it.

I ran my mouth down the inside of her thigh and then flicked my tongue across her clit. As soon as I got a taste of her, I couldn't stop myself. I sucked at her and lapped at her slit, telling myself it was the last time. I had to make it good. I had to make it up to her. I held my breath until my lungs burned and buried myself in her, sliding my tongue in and out of her. She drew her hips back and pressed her heel against my shoulder and tried to push me off of her, but I closed my fingers around her ankle and pushed her foot down to the mattress. I gave her one last, long lick and then pulled away. I took a deep breath and looked at her. Her eyelids were drooping and her cheeks finally had some color. She was close, I could tell.

“You like it when I tongue-fuck you,” I said, my voice low and hoarse. I could feel her wetness all over my chin and I loved it. I loved when she was so wet for me. I loved making her gush. “Don't you?” She weakly tried to kick her foot and free it from my grasp, but I held firm. I leaned against her other leg, keeping it pinned down as well. She opened her swollen lips like she wanted to answer, but didn't mouth any words. I wondered if she could sense what I was doing. I wondered if she knew. An urge for violence suddenly reared up in me and I pressed my mouth to her soft thigh. “Joanie,” I whispered, feeling like a junkie on a binge. Then I bit her because I couldn't stop myself.

She went stiff against me and I knew I was hurting her. I dropped my mouth to her pussy again and licked and sucked her until she went soft again, pulling in her stomach in anticipation of her orgasm. I sucked her clit and flicked my tongue against her and she bucked her hips and I knew she was a goner. I didn't stop as her toes curled and she jerked against the leather straps. I dragged my eyes up to her face and her head was thrown back, the bandage on her throat exposed. I let her foot go and grabbed her hip, forcing her into me as I dragged my tongue between her pussy lips, lapping up all the cream of her climax. Then I pinched the magic spot just below her ass and she shivered into me. She gushed even more and I kept licking her until my jaw was sore because I couldn't stop. She tasted so fucking good.

I wanted to remember and I do.

I can still taste her. If I close my eyes, I can smell her and taste her. When I'm alone at night, I can almost pretend that I'm buried in between her legs again and all is right in the world. When we were fucking, nothing was ever wrong. It was when we stopped fucking that we had problems. The goddamn world was against us.

I still remember. I didn't forget.

I'll never forget.

When I'd woken up in the hospital bed, I'd wanted to kill him. I couldn't fucking speak and I couldn't fucking leave the bed. A bruised windpipe and damaged vocal chords were what he'd given me. He'd almost strangled me to death. I thought killing him was only fair.

But now he was here and I never wanted him to go.

Something was off, though. *He* was off. He was licking my pussy like he was addicted to it and I could barely think straight. I could only focus on his tongue and his lips and his hands. But that was what he wanted. I was strapped to a fucking hospital bed, there was no denying that. He wanted me to forget that he was the one who'd put me there. He was the one who was keeping me there. I wanted to yell at him to release the straps and take me home with him. I wanted to yell and scream and smack the shit out of him for everything. But I couldn't. I could only lay there and grit my teeth and lose my mind as he fucked me.

My whole body locked as the orgasm crashed into me. It wasn't surprising, really, but it was still a shock. I was pissed and scared and feeling loopy from fatigue and the pain medication, but he could still make me come. He knew my body better than I knew it myself sometimes. He knew what buttons to push and where to lick and kiss and bite. But I could see something on his face and behind his eyes. I could tell he was keeping something from me. I knew him, too, and he knew it. I wasn't fooled. That's why he was trying to distract me. But as the ecstasy took over, all I wanted was him on top of me. I wanted his mouth against mine and his dick inside me. I was still addicted to him. I wanted everything from him, but he didn't give it. He couldn't.

I sunk into the hard plastic-covered mattress beneath me, my bones going soft as the climax ebbed. He let go of my hip, finger by finger, as he pressed a hard kiss to my knee. Then he pulled himself up to his full height and dragged his hand slowly across his face, cleaning me off of his chin. I wanted to talk to him, badly, but my eyes were starting to droop. I was so tired but I wanted to touch him. I wanted him to touch me, but he took a step back away from the bed.

"Come here," I mouthed, annoyed that I couldn't speak. He was looking at the ground, so I tapped my knuckle against the side of the bed. He glanced up, looking at me through his dark eyelashes, and my heart jumped in my chest. I could be half-dead and I would still respond to his body language. His big shoulders were hunched and he had a violent, dark look on his face. The veins in his arms and neck were prominent. I would have recognized it from a mile away. He was horny and he wanted to fuck. He wasn't satisfied by licking my pussy, not even close. But he was keeping his distance and I wanted to know why. At the very least, I wanted him to look at me. To touch me.

I stretched my fingers toward him, but that was all I could do. I rolled my head, resting my ear against my shoulder and tried again. *"Elliot,"* I mouthed. *"Come here."* My legs were still pushed open like he'd left them, and my gown was still up around my waist. If he wanted to, there was nothing stopping him from fucking me. But I wanted him to let me go first. I wanted him to take me home and pretend that none of it had happened. I could forgive him, especially if he got down on his knees and grovelled.

He stepped closer to me, but he didn't look at me. Instead he pulled down my gown and gently arranged my legs under the sheet. I was growing impatient and crabby then, but my mind was sluggish. I wanted to sleep, at home in my own bed. But he was ignoring me. He wasn't listening.

"Go to sleep," he said, running his hand down my thigh. I yanked it away from him, wanting to get his attention. He scowled and grabbed my leg, pressing it into the mattress. *"Don't be difficult,"* he grumbled. *"You need sleep."* I shook my head slowly, lifting my leg into his touch. I tapped my knuckle on the rail again, more insistent. He moved fast like a gunshot and grabbed my hand, his long fingers wrapping around mine almost painfully. He took a deep breath and glanced at me out of the corner of his eyes. His face was half-lit from the light above my bed. One side was

completely in shadow from my perspective. At that moment, dread washed over me. It felt like someone had died. It felt like I was back on my parent's patio by the pool, dripping wet and watching Elliot stab my former fiancé over and over again. The feelings were crystal clear, despite the fact that so many years had passed and so much had happened since then. I felt like I needed to move, to run, to scream, but I couldn't. The world was changing but I couldn't do shit to stop it. I can't explain it, really. I just knew that something was very wrong.

Unfortunately, I was right.

I really hate being right sometimes.

"Daisy," he whispered, tightening his grip on my fingers. I shook my head. I didn't want to hear that name. Daisy only came out in emergencies. Daisy didn't exist unless shit was about to go down. Daisy was a panic button.

"No," I said, forgetting I couldn't talk. The word came out in an ugly, painful croak and tears immediately sprung to my eyes. He let my hand go and the blood rushed back to my fingers but I still reached out for him. I didn't want him to go. I didn't want to fall asleep and wake up alone. The thought of not being beside him was almost too much to bear. That's how far gone I was. I was so damn needy I almost want to puke when I think back on it. I was so needy for him it was disgusting. I don't think it was love though. It was sick and needy and pathetic, but it was never love.

He took my face in his hands and I felt my whole body leaning into him. His warmth was comforting, even if it was fleeting. "Stop being so goddamn stubborn," he said, his voice harder. I glared up at him as a tear rolled down my cheek. He caught it with his thumb and swiped it away. "Close your eyes," he repeated. His Texas twang was thick and I could tell he was as tired as I was. So I took pity on him and did what he asked. I closed my eyes and settled into the hard pillow. Within minutes, I let myself drift. I fell asleep like that, with his big warm hands stroking my cheeks and hair and his smell surrounding me and the climax he'd given me still throbbing in my brain. I think I probably fell asleep with a smile on my face, like an idiot.

That was the last time I saw him in the flesh.

As always, life dealt me a cruel hand. As the saying goes, the house always wins. I'm continually being dealt a shit hand. But I guess I make my

own bad luck. I still think of him before I go to sleep. I still think of him when I wake up. I still remember how it felt to sleep by his side and fuck him and kiss him. The wanting doesn't go away, the *need*.

But life doesn't stop, no matter how much you might wish to freeze time.

Knowing what I know now, I never should've closed my eyes.

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Chapter Seven

I didn't look away from the TV as the doctor or nurse bustled in and grabbed my chart. A soap opera was on, but I wasn't paying attention. My mind was elsewhere, of course. A million questions were running through my head and my skin and scalp was itchy. I needed a shower. My wrists were still strapped, so I couldn't even scratch at myself. I tapped my head against the hard pillow and stared at the TV screen like a zombie. When was I going to see him again? When was he going to come for me? What was he doing right then, at that second? Was he being safe? Was he thinking of me, too? I wish I could say that I don't still ask myself these questions at least once a day, but that would be a lie. Two years later and I still ask them.

"Rachel?" a male voice asked, surprising me from my stupor. I rolled my head to look at the speaker and squinted. He was a doctor, a good-looking one at that. And familiar. I furrowed my brow, running through my memories, as he stepped right up to the bed with a smile on his face. He certainly acted like he knew me.

And then it dawned on me.

Mitch.

Mitch, the fit doctor who always met me in fancy hotels and fucked like the long-distance runner that he was. Mitch, who was slightly balding but had good enough genes elsewhere to make up for it. Mitch, who I'd taken my first pictures with and sent in blue letters to a prison in Texas. I can't say I was happy to see him, despite the friendly smile on his face. A little too friendly.

I smiled back because it was a reflex.

"I can't believe..." he trailed off, his eyes running down the length of me and back to my face. "I haven't seen you in months." I shrugged lightly and smiled again, trying to remember what kind of person Rachel was. What persona had I put on when I fucked him? Was I an innocent girl or more raunchy? It was getting increasingly hard to keep all my past lives straight. "Don't try to talk," he said, glancing down at my chart. His smile faded a bit as he read through the information. I watched his face,

wondering what he was thinking. The name on my chart was clearly not Rachel. “Well,” he began, flipping through the pages. “What do we have here?” he asked softly. I tapped my knuckle on the bed guard, trying to get his attention. He glanced up and I shook my hands, the leather strap slapping against the guard loudly. He cocked his head and I knew he knew what I wanted. “You promise to be good?” he said, returning my chart to the wall. “The nurse made a note that you've been difficult.”

I opened my mouth and sighed innocently, shrugging lightly. I tried to look as sympathetic as possible. I mean, I was pathetic after all. I was tied down to a hospital bed without the ability to talk. I was pretty low, at that point. He stepped closer to the bed and reached down to touch the leather strap around my left wrist. His touch was soft, gentle. He pulled at the Velcro of the strap, the ripping sound a shock in the quiet room. I pulled my hand free as soon as I could and pressed it to my throat, gingerly feeling the rough gauze bandage there. I could feel how my neck was swollen. It was sensitive, but it didn't hurt. I'd had my pain meds for the day.

Mitch moved on to the right arm and before I knew it, I was completely free. I could leave anytime I wanted. I could go home and everything could get back to normal. I knew even as I was thinking it that I was being naïve. Nothing about my situation was normal. I couldn't talk, I didn't know when I was going to heal. I didn't know when I would be able to go back to work. Everything was a big mystery.

“I'm going to check your signs,” Mitch said, pulling his stethoscope over his head. “We're keeping you here for your own safety, you know.” He pressed the earpieces of the stethoscope in place and then leaned forward and lightly pulled my gown down over my shoulders, exposing the top of my chest. I darted my eyes to his face, wondering if he was remembering what I was remembering. The first night we were together in the hotel, he'd undressed me so gently and softly I'd almost wanted to rip my clothes off for him. I'd been hungry, then, and horny. He was a means to an end, but for him, so was I. And he'd liked it, after all.

He'd liked me.

The tips of his ears were red and I knew he probably was taking the same trip down memory lane that I was. “If that hematoma ruptures, you could have a stroke or worse,” he continued, his voice controlled and calm, as he pressed the flat metal piece of the stethoscope to my chest. I flinched

at the cold metal as it touched my skin. He looked ahead at the wall as he listened to my heartbeat. "We need to make sure your airway stays open as you began to heal," he said after a minute. Then he took off his stethoscope and draped it around his neck again. Our hands clashed when we both reached for my gown to pull it up. He retreated, of course, and his ears went a little more red. I covered myself again and he leaned against the side of the bed. "We'll discharge you tomorrow, most likely. So don't give the nurses any shit, okay?" he said, like he wanted to have something to say. After a minute, he finally looked me in the face. His eyes were kind, concerned. He was worried about me. I didn't blame him.

"Okay," I mouthed. He nodded and then was silent. We watched the TV together for an awkward moment, neither of us really paying attention. Finally, after what seemed like a long time, he dropped his hand to my arm. There were marks on my wrists from where I had fought against them and the straps had dug in. He rubbed his thumb over one of the pink lines in my flesh.

"Is there someone we can call?" he asked. "Someone to pick you up when we discharge you?" I thought about his question for a minute and then pointed at the fancy-ass pen in the pocket of his doctor's coat. He pulled it out and handed it to me, along with a little pad he unearthed from his pocket. I quickly jotted down my friend Carmen's number. She worked in the cubicle close to mine and we often ate lunch together. I'd gone to her baby shower the year before. She owed me.

"Good, good," he murmured, tucking the pad back into his pocket after glancing at it. I almost expected him to make some excuse and leave then, but he didn't. He surprised me by reaching toward me and squeezing my shoulder. I furrowed my brow wondering what he was doing, but I didn't move to toss him off. His touch was warm and in that moment I realized how lonely I was. "What happened?" he asked, his voice just as gentle as his touch. "Did someone hurt you?" There was something in his voice that hit me in my chest. I wanted to nod. Shit, for a small window in time, I wanted to tell him all about it. I wanted to yell and scream and freak the fuck out, because everything was so out of control. But I didn't.

For some annoying reason, I began to cry. The tears came before I could stop them and then I was swiping at my face and closing my eyes and my chest was heaving. Mitch stayed there by the bed, though. He didn't

pretend he had to hurry off or that he had something to do. He stayed. He was a good guy. He still is.

Too bad I stopped being good a long time ago.

I could feel Carmen's eyes on me as I punched in the garage code to my condo. I'd told her I didn't need her to come inside with me, but she'd insisted on sitting outside in the driveway until I went in the house. I didn't have my keys, so I had to go in through the garage. I don't know why I felt so nervous about it. There were no signs of Elliot in the garage. I'd sold the car that I'd driven to Texas and back a few weeks ago. There was no evidence in the garage, but it was still nerve-wracking to have someone else so close to my condo. I punched the code wrong twice, but the third time was the charm. The door rumbled up, and I pinched the skin on my arm as it raised. But when it opened, it only revealed my car and my bike and an otherwise empty garage.

I waved goodbye to Carmen, trying to hide my relief. She backed down the driveway and the danger went with her. I opened the door that led to the kitchen and pressed the button to close the garage door. I watched it as it slowly shuddered into place, successfully sealing out the outside world.

The condo was oddly silent. The air was still and smelled slightly stale, like no one had been home. I stood on the threshold, listening for a split second before I stepped inside. I hadn't seen Elliot in two days. He hadn't come back to the hospital. I told myself on the drive home that it was for his own good that he didn't come. It was for the best that he stayed out of sight. It was better for both of us. But I knew that something had irrevocably changed between us. We'd both broken our own rules. I'd lied, true, but he'd hurt me. He'd specifically told me that he would never hurt me again. So he'd lied, too. I was still angry with him, I couldn't deny it. I knew it was an accident, but I could've died.

Of course, I still wanted him. I missed him. I wanted him to be there when I got home. I especially wanted him to take care of me, since it was his fault I was injured to begin with. It would be weeks before I was back to normal, but I'd be back to work in a couple of days. If he waited on me hand and foot until I was better, I'd forgive him. I smiled a bit as I crossed the

threshold, thinking of his reaction to that. I wanted to see him crawl on the floor. I wanted to see him grovel. He wanted him to lick my pussy every night and not have one orgasm of his own. It would serve him right.

I pressed my hand to my bandage as the laughter died in my throat. I kept forgetting that my body wasn't working right. It wasn't convenient at all. I opened the fridge and grabbed a bottled water. I sipped at it as I walked into the living room. I couldn't call out for him, but I was surprised he hadn't come down from the bedroom to me yet. I told myself that maybe he still felt guilty and was avoiding me. But as I walked toward the stairs, I noticed something strange.

The apartment was impeccable.

There was nothing out of place. There wasn't a sheen of dust on any surface. The floor had been vacuumed and swept clean. I backtracked into the kitchen and realized the same was true in there as well. The counters were clear and wiped down, every dish was put away, the trash can was empty. I walked back to the living room, pressing my hand to my throat. My purse was on the dining room table, and next to it was my phone and my keys. I turned on my phone. I had several missed calls from my mother and my brother. I set it down, not able to be bothered at that moment.

I had a bad feeling.

I hurried up the stairs and threw open the bedroom door.

There was no sign of what had happened in there. The bed was made. Everything was in its place. The closet doors were closed. There were no loose shoes or clothes or water glasses or anything out in the open. It was like no one lived there. I crouched down and opened the bottom drawer, where he'd been keeping his clothes. My blood flowed cold in my veins when I saw that it was empty. I ran my hand over the bottom of the drawer, like the clothes would magically appear the more that I looked for them. I could hear a faint jagged broken sound and I realized it was me. I couldn't scream – I could only make that sound. I stood and opened all the other drawers, tossing out the perfectly folded clothes, looking for his. They had to be hidden under my stupid sweaters and mixed in with my underwear, I told myself. He couldn't have just disappeared, I told myself. It wasn't possible. It couldn't happen.

And yet, every sign of him was gone.

There was nothing of him in the bathroom, there was nothing of him in the bedroom, there was nothing of him anywhere else. Even the bag under the bed had been cleansed of his ropes, his chains, his assortment of other toys. I shook my head because I couldn't believe it. I swiped at my eyes, trying to clear them of the tears that were blurring them. I was making the broken sound and my throat was throbbing but I couldn't stop myself. Then I remembered something. I remembered the one thing he might've forgotten. I crawled across the bed and threw open my bedside table. I dug under the post-its and the unopened condoms, my fingers searching for the cool metal of the frame. There's no way he would remember it, I told myself. There was no way.

I searched the drawer over and over again, looking for the childhood photo of him. It was one of my most prized possessions. It took me a long time to finally admit to myself that it was gone. He'd taken everything. I had nothing left. It was like he'd never been there. It was like he'd never existed. I slammed the drawer shut so hard that the lamp shook then I pressed my face into the pillow. I wanted to scream but I couldn't. I couldn't do anything at all.

He'd left me.

It took two days to fully sink in.

I only dragged my ass out of bed to go to the bathroom or to drink an occasional glass of water. I slept the days away and stayed awake all night, crying until I had no more tears to give. I didn't give up on him. I told myself that he was just laying low for awhile until I wasn't mad at him anymore. Or he was making sure that the FBI wasn't coming for him anymore. I thought up countless scenarios that ended with him returning to me. It didn't happen, though. Two days passed, then two weeks, then two months. He never came back.

Later, much later, after I'd healed and I'd peeled myself off the proverbial floor and forced myself gradually to come back to life, I found the metal box that was usually hidden in the back corner of my closet was sitting on the middle of the bottom shelf. I set it on the dresser and typed in the code – 0923875, his prisoner number – and opened the lid when the lock clicked open. Most of the money I kept in there was intact. Seven hundred dollars was missing, though. I didn't care about the money; it was just another clue. More importantly, there was a small, folded square of

brightly colored paper. It was one of my post-its that I kept in my bedside table and I knew immediately he'd left it for me.

I unfolded it slowly and carefully, not wanting to rip it. Inside was one word, written in his small concise handwriting.

Forever.

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Chapter Eight

The knife was sharp and the meat was bloody, just like I liked it.

I watched the red liquid pool on the plate underneath the steak, then I dipped my small piece of steak in it and took a bite.

"It's how you like it?" he asked, leaning closer, the candlelight flickering in his eyes. "It's not too rare?"

"No, not too rare," I said, after swallowing demurely. I slipped my hand around the bulb of my wine glass and followed the bite of steak with a sip of pinot noir. The wine was blissfully tart and full and I savored it on my tongue. It was expensive, of course. The whole dinner was expensive. The air in the restaurant around us was posh. I could practically see the old money and the crisp black Amex cards hidden in plain sight. He'd told me to dress up for our date that night, but I hadn't expected this. He was trying to impress me and I wasn't sure exactly why.

The food was very good. The company was good. But he didn't need to spend a mint to get a point across, whatever that point was. I flicked my eyes up to meet his over the rim of my wine glass and he blinked and smiled, his white teeth flashing. He was nervous, I realized. I hadn't noticed it before, when he'd picked me up for the date. I'd been preoccupied, though, truthfully. I didn't even notice the color of his suit jacket before we sat down. It was a rich blue. His silk pocket square was striped gray and white. His shirt was crisp white and opened at the throat. I took a quick inventory, telling myself it was important, for some reason. I needed to pay more attention to the man in front of me. The man in front of me was the one that was important, after all. Any men before him – one in particular – weren't in the picture anymore. They were long gone and didn't deserve more thought than that.

Mitch was my boyfriend after all. He deserved more attention than I was giving him.

That much was undeniable. The restaurant was beautiful too, but I was used to dining at places like this with him. I'd been to all the best restaurants in Seattle and the theater and the orchestra and the ballet. He also liked

going to movies, but only horror movies. He loved cheap slasher films, where the blood always looked too red and there was always one lucky girl left alive at the end. I hated those kinds of movies, but I would watch them if he wanted to. I couldn't help wondering how fucked up the survivors would be after the credits rolled. True, they'd survived, but at what cost? Life would never be normal again. It wasn't much of a happy ending if lifetimes of therapy and sleepless nights would be the character's future. Not that I thought about it that much.

Mitch was good to me. Too good. Better than I deserved. Sometimes I caught him staring at me and I had to look away because it made me uncomfortable how happy he looked. Sometimes I felt sorry for him, but other times I told myself it was his choice. He'd made the choice to fall for me. I was the worst possible choice he could've made, but he was stubborn. If I'd said no, he would've wait patiently for a yes. Whether the yes took a few minutes or a few weeks, he would've waited. He had the patience of a saint. Either that or he was a complete idiot. But I'd been an idiot too once, so I couldn't blame him for that either.

I couldn't help but feel like I'd been here before.

Maybe I was tempting fate on purpose.

"You know I'm from Texas," I said, breaking the silence. "I like it practically still mooing."

"I know," he said, nodding. I stared at him, longer than I probably should've. In that light, his skin looked creamy and white. His skin wasn't rough. His eyes were soft and caressing and trusting. He smelled like a J. Crew store, not daylight and skin and sweat. He used his brain, not his hands. He used his words, not violence. Well, he was learning about the violence. I was teaching him, bit by bit. But it didn't come natural. It didn't come from deep within him. It didn't have any meaning to him. It was like going to church on Sunday and not having any faith. It was hollow. I told myself it didn't matter. In a perfect world, I would leave all that behind me anyway. There was no reason for me to cling to it. And yet I did.

"You're being weird tonight," I said, taking another sip of wine. "Are you tired?"

"I'm always tired," he said with a laugh.

"In that case," I said, dropping my eyes back to my steak. "Tonight, we'll have to make sure you get to bed early." I sliced into the meat again,

ignoring his reaction to my words. He laughed again, but I could still hear the tension in his throat.

“We can go now,” he said. “Do you want to have them wrap that up? We'll get it to go.” I laughed along and I felt some more of the tension fade.

“A few more bites,” I said, taking a bite of haricot vert. I could've eaten the whole plate – the potatoes and the vegetables and the whole steak – but I made sure to keep my intake small. I didn't want the whole plate, I told myself. Only a taste. It took discipline but discipline was important. I was at the thinnest I'd been since high school. Less drinking, less eating, more exercise. Discipline gave me something to focus on in the quiet moments when my mind started to drift back to the past. I wanted to focus on the here and now. At that moment, I was sitting across from a good man. He had a good job and he was smart. He was a goddamned doctor, for heaven's sake. He loved me. I knew that. That was all that was important. I chewed slowly, savoring every bit of the buttery and salty vegetable, knowing that I could work it off the next morning in the pool. The glass of wine alone was worth several laps.

No dessert, I told myself.

“There's no rush,” he said, slicing into his sea bass.

“I know.” I set down my fork and leaned forward, watching him eat. He had slim, capable fingers. Surgeon's fingers. I liked watching him cutting meat. It made me think of him performing surgery. Cutting through flesh and muscle and tendons was his job. It was so strange to think about. Some people did that for no money. Some people cut into people to destroy and maim. Mitch cut into people to heal and to fix. It was admirable, really.

Dinner ended early with no dessert, just as I'd requested. He paid for it with his credit card, no fuss. Every time he did that, I felt like a Texas girl again, letting a big important man take care of little old me. But I didn't fight it. This was our routine. He paid and then we got in his white Audi and drove back to his high rise apartment and fucked. Then he made me breakfast the next morning and we said I loved you before I left in the afternoon. That night, he took a different route back to his apartment, which we never did. He also was oddly quiet, as well. Usually he was full of stories that I loved to hear, stories about surgeries and tumors and other disgusting things that didn't qualify as polite conversation. But that night, we rode in silence.

“Just say it,” I said, staring at his profile and willing him to look at me. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel but still didn't look at me. He seemed nervous. He seemed like he was bursting at the seams to say something. “Are you going to break up with me?” I asked, because I didn't want to assume the *other* thing. The other thing that would make my mother ascend to another plane of existence from utter happiness. The other thing that involved diamonds and white dresses and Catholic churches filled with family you only saw on special occasions. He sighed sharply and I cried out as he put on the brakes and pulled over to the side of the road. The car jerked to a stop on the shoulder and the engine purred, barely distressed by the unexpected detour.

“I'm not going to break up with you,” he announced, putting the car in park. “Are you going to break up with me?”

“Of course not!” I said, smacking his hand. “Why would I do that?”

“I don't know,” he said, running his hand over his thinning hair. “I just messed up, that's all.”

“Messed up?” I asked, confused. He dug in his suit jacket and held out a small box. I stared at it, not quite sure if it was safe to assume what I thought it was.

“I was supposed to give you this in the restaurant. It was supposed to be a grand gesture, a big deal. I was going to put it in a flute of champagne or something,” he said, his voice shaking. He laughed a little, trying to disguise his nervousness. I took the box and opened it. I wasn't nervous at all. I wasn't even all that surprised.

It was a very nice diamond, from what I could tell in the low light of the dark car.

“You want to marry me?” I asked, even though I knew the answer. It was fairly safe to assume at that point.

“Yes, Jo,” he said with a more genuine laugh. “Of course I want to marry you. But that's not the question.”

“What's the question?” Again, I already knew the answer.

“The question is, will you marry me?” he turned in his seat and looked at me. I stared down at the ring and a strange thought passed over me. A question that I had no use in asking myself.

What would Elliot say?

It had been over a year since I'd seen Elliot. He had no bearing on what I was doing with my life. At least, that's what I told myself as I slipped the ring on. That's what I told myself as I smiled up at Mitch and reached out to caress his cheek. "Yes. Yes, I'll marry you," I whispered, ignoring the voice at the back of my mind telling that Elliot wouldn't like it.

He wouldn't like it one bit.

I closed Mitch's bathroom door lightly behind me and turned on the light. I scowled as the light assaulted my eyes and I pressed my hand over them until they adjusted to the brightness. I crossed the room, the marble tile cold under my feet, and sat on the toilet. I peed, setting my hands on my bare thighs. I didn't look down at them until I was finished and it was then that I saw the ring again, in all its glory. I still couldn't really believe it. I had a man's ring on my finger again. I'd actually agreed to marry someone again. I wasn't quite sure how I felt about it because it hadn't had time to sink in yet. I finished and flushed the toilet and went to the sink. I washed my hands quickly. The ring didn't budge, even when I dried my hands on the towel hanging beside the sink.

It was a perfect fit.

I gave myself a hard look in the mirror. In the bright light, I scrutinized every inch of my naked body. Every scar, every mark, every bruise that was on display. Every one of them had a story. I'd never hid them from Mitch. I didn't tell him the whole truth, but I didn't hide the signs of my past. The bite-marks and the faint scars around my wrists and my neck were undeniable. He'd seen it all. Although he'd never gone far enough to give me new scars, some of the bruises belonged to him. The yellowing bruise on my hip from his thumb digging into me. The three red marks on my upper arm from where he grabbed me and threw me on the bed. And my ass was still pink from how he'd spanked me.

Child's play.

When Elliot finished with me, sometimes I couldn't move. Sometimes I'd be bleeding.

I ran my finger around the pale raised scar on my tit, above my nipple. His teeth had made that mark, all those years ago. I carried it still, like a

badge of deviance. I didn't ask him to do that to me; he didn't care if I wanted it or not, at the time. But there were other marks I had asked for. There were times where I had begged for him to hurt me. There were times when I begged for him to make me feel as much as possible, even if the feeling was pain. And he'd given it to me, because pain was what he liked most.

It was crazy to miss that. I knew it was insane to crave it. I tried to forget him everyday. He could've been dead or back in prison for all I cared. He'd betrayed me, used me, left me. He'd almost killed me. Yet, here I was, in Mitch's bathroom in the middle of the night, thinking of him. Remembering all the things he used to do. It was the ring, I knew. The last time I'd worn a man's ring, I'd doomed us both. Loving me was dangerous, in more ways than one. I couldn't deny that when Mitch slid the big beautiful and expensive ring on my finger, my first thought was Elliot. I thought about the look on his face when he found out. I thought about the rage he would feel when he found out that I'd agreed to be someone else's wife. He would be beside himself.

But maybe I was fooling myself. Maybe he didn't care about me at all anymore. As much as I tried to pretend I didn't care about him, that thought knocked the wind out of me. It had been a year since I'd seen or spoken to Elliot, but I still wanted him to think of me. I still wanted him to want me. Nothing could be right in the world if he had given up on me. I acted tough and tried to convince myself that I hated him and part of me did. But the other part longed for him just as much as I always had. The dark and disgusting part of me that I tried to hide and disguise it was still crying out for him every moment of every day. It didn't matter though. I was going to marry Mitch. I'd made my decision.

I was going to be happy.

I turned away from my own nudity and turned off the light again. I didn't bother hiding the marks on my body but I didn't want to see them anymore. I wanted to pretend that I was clean and unblemished, in brain, body and spirit. I wanted to pretend that I was the woman that someone like Mitch deserved. He deserved someone who was normal. He deserved to be enough for someone. I could play that role, I told myself, as I slipped back into the crisp cool sheets next to him. I could feel his warmth seeping toward me and I moved closer to him, putting my head against his shoulder.

He didn't move. He slept so soundly, like he'd never had bad things happen to him at night. He slept like he'd never had to watch his back or be alert at all times. It was comforting. He felt safe, so I felt safe. I felt safe next to him.

That was enough, I told myself.

He was enough.

It was love at first sight.

My mother fell for Mitch the second she met him. On paper, he was a great candidate for their only daughter and in real life, he was even better. He checked all the boxes for her. He had money to take care of me and he had a good job and a good brain and a nice apartment. He didn't like cats. To top it all off, he'd given me a beautiful expensive ring. To the delight of my father, he knew some Spanish, courtesy of several trips to Guatemala to provide people with free medical care. My parents approved of him with no reservations. I can't say I was surprised at how quickly they brought him into the fold.

Mitch was so perfect for them. It was a match made in heaven. I could see the visions of sugar plums and big white wedding dresses dancing behind my mother's eyes as she stared down at the ring. She was planning the entire ceremony in her mind. But when she looked up at me and I saw tears glistening in her eyes, I couldn't help but feel guilty. She thought this was a sign that I'd finally recovered and the nightmare that had taken over all of our lives had ended. She wanted it to be over. I'd moved from Texas to get a fresh start and to get away from that oppressive feeling of being wronged. Whenever they used to look at me, they saw someone who'd been damaged, who'd been changed from the inside out. With Mitch by my side, I was just their daughter again. Their daughter who was finally getting married and living the life that they wanted for her.

"I don't like you being so far away," my mother said in my ear as she hugged me outside of the airport. I watched Mitch and my father awkwardly working together to extract her heavy luggage out of the trunk as my mother clung to me, stroking her hands down my hair. I didn't like

the feeling that fluttered through me at her words. "When are you going to come back home?"

"I don't know," I murmured. "Mitch and I are happy here."

"How can you be happy here? The sun never shines," she said, squeezing me so hard that her chunky gemstone necklace pressed uncomfortably into my skin. I didn't move away though. I let her hug me for as long as she wanted to. I wasn't a very good daughter very often. I figured I owed her that. And I appreciated it even though I would be sad when she and my father were gone.

"I like it," I said blandly because I didn't know what else to say. The truth was that I couldn't leave Seattle. If Elliot was going to come back, he wouldn't know where to find me if I left. And I couldn't go back to Texas. Texas was the last place on Earth I wanted to be.

"Mary, Mary quite contrary," she said, shaking her head, as she repeated the sing-songy little phrase she'd said since my childhood. "Well you know you can always come home. Me and Daddy will be there waiting."

"I know." I felt her grip loosen on me, so I followed suit. I let her pull away and then we both adjusted the purses on our shoulders.

"Did you hear that Mitch?" she said, turning around to address my fiancé. "You can come down to Dallas anytime. You're part of the family now and, despite how this one likes to act, we're a very close family."

"Thank you, Mrs. Vasquez. We'll definitely be taking you up on that offer," Mitch said, glancing at me and then back to my mother. "Soon."

"I hope so." My mother patted my cheek and then held up her hand to get the attention of the airline attendant. Their expensive matching luggage was neatly lined up on the curb, all ready to go. I felt relieved and unsettled at the same time to see them go. It was a childish thing to miss my parents when they left, but I couldn't help it. It never got easier. The attendant came over with a cart and my father and Mitch helped him load it. My mother and I stood there and watched them in silence. When the last piece was going on, I turned to her.

"I want you to help plan the wedding," I blurted out. I didn't know where it came from, but as soon as the words were out of my mouth, it felt like a weight lifted off my shoulders. "If you have time, that is." My mother's eyes widened and I could see the total, complete happiness come

over her. It was her life's dream, after all – to plan her daughter's lavish, long-awaited wedding. I could already see wedding dresses and cakes and veils and churches in her eyes.

“Of course I have time,” she said, waving a perfectly manicure hand and trying to feign nonchalance. She probably thought if she made too big of a deal about it, I would take it away from her. But the real truth was that I wanted her to plan it. I didn't really care what the wedding would be like. I couldn't picture it. I hadn't had wedding dreams in years. I had no real thoughts on it at all, except that I didn't want to look fat in the photos. I would also have to hide my scars, but I would figure that out when the time came. It would make her happy to have most of the control and it would save my sanity. It was a win win.

Of course, the more power I gave her over my wedding, the more power I gave her over me. Even if it was temporary, it could cause problems. But I tried not to think about that as I hugged my dad awkwardly and then Mitch shook his hand. Then Mitch slid his arm around my waist and pulled me to him as we watched my parents disappear inside the tinted glass doors of the terminal. It was good and bad to see them go. I felt hollow again as a cool breeze cut through my thin jacket. For a second, I had an out of body moment, looking at myself from somewhere else. On the outside it looked like a typical scene – a happy couple saying goodbye to loved ones at the airport. And it was completely normal.

It was moments like that that I realized how not normal I was. I was making myself fit into my new life, but sometimes it the holes showed. Sometimes the truth poked through the thin veneer. I wondered if I would ever stop feeling so empty. I wondered if I would ever have real, deep feelings again. I wondered if I'd ever be truly present in my life again, or would I always be somewhere else, searching for something that I'd had once and lost. As we got in the car and drove back to Mitch's apartment, I didn't have the answer.

I still don't.

Chapter Nine

I drove down the street, cursing myself the whole time. I was stupid, I was stubborn, I was obsessing. But I didn't turn around. I could've turned around and headed back to Dallas so many times but I didn't. I was two seconds away from his house and I still didn't know what the hell I was doing. I'd flown in the day before and I knew I had no business in Austin. My bridal shower was the next day and I should be at home with my mother while she called caterers and florists and finalized guest lists. Instead I was driving around in the middle of Austin chasing a ghost. But then it was too late. Then I was driving past his house and tapping the break to slow down and stare and study everything about it. I almost couldn't believe how different it looked. Before, it was slightly overgrown and nondescript, with cracking paint, a faded, slightly sagging roof, and curtains pulled, shielding the inside from the sunlight.

The house was freshly painted a happy, pale yellow. The front door was a bright shade of aqua. The front windows were shiny and clean. There was a big, family-sized SUV in the driveway. The grass in the front yard is green and recently trimmed. There were flowers – fucking flowers! - planted in a circle around the big old oak tree. All of that was bad enough but I barely noticed it. That was a pale confusion in comparison to what else I saw on the lawn.

There were toys scattered in the grass. A soccer ball, a scooter, a few brightly colored plastic trucks and cars. Most importantly, there was a little boy too, running from one end of the yard to the other lost in his own world. I almost swerved the car when I saw him, but I managed to keep control. I forced my eyes forward and kept driving. At the end of the cul de sac, I turned around and headed back. In those few seconds I had to make a quick decision. I had to decide whether I was going to keep going and leave it all behind, or if I was going to give in to my obsessive curiosity and possibly make a huge mistake. Since I live to torture myself, I pulled up to the curb in front of the house and put the car in park. I stare out the passenger window at the boy, watching him play for a few seconds. It was

bizarre, to say the least. I didn't know what I was expecting when I decided to go down memory lane, but it wasn't that. It wasn't a happy kid playing on green grass and flower beds. All the tableau in front of me was missing was a golden retriever and a white picket fence.

Part of me was expecting to find it exactly the same.

If I was completely honest with myself, I was hoping that there would be some clues there, some sign of Elliot and where he'd gone. But instead, he's been erased. He already disappeared from my life, but now it's like he's disappeared off the face of the Earth. It's like he was never here, like he was never born. Like all of the shit that went down in his house and in the years after was just a figment of my imagination. I was stupid to come to Austin, I knew it then. But it didn't stop me from getting out of the car because I couldn't stop myself. I slid my purse into the crook of my arm and smoothed my sweaty hands down the front of my jeans. I looked crisp and well-off, which would help my plight. I hoped it would be easy enough to get what I wanted, even though I wasn't necessarily sure what that was yet. I was just so damn curious.

"Hi," the boy said, looking up at me as I approached him. His cheeks were round and he was missing a front tooth. His eyes were bright and happy and he didn't look the least bit concerned that a complete stranger was standing on his lawn. He had tan skin and curly brown hair and the beautiful innocence in his face was almost instantly painful for me to look at. He didn't know what kind of evil had happened just a few feet from here. He didn't know the history of violence and the debauchery that was just as much a part of this house as the new, cheerful exterior. For a brief moment, as I stared down at him, I hoped he would never know.

"Can I help you?" I glanced up and saw a brown-skinned woman standing at the front door and staring at me intently. She looked friendly enough, just cautious, which was understandable. Seeing a strange woman standing near your son would do that to anyone, I suppose. I put on a smile, not too bright, but just enough and put my hand on my purse like I was nervous and a little flummoxed. It wasn't too far from the truth, but it was also an easy act to put on.

"Hello," I said, glancing around like I'm not sure I'm in the right place. "This is 45 Cherry Hill Drive, right?" I asked, even though I knew it was. The house numbers, all brand new shiny brass, were posted beside the front

door. She nodded slowly, her face still curious but also still friendly. She was just as innocent as her son, I realized. They weren't suspicious of me in the least. At least not yet.

"Yes," she replied.

"I thought so, but I couldn't quite tell," I said, pushing my words out quickly to sound nervous. "It looks so much nicer than the I last time I saw it. I barely recognize it."

"Oh," she said and smiled and I knew I'd reeled her in. "Did you used to live here?"

"Close to here," I said, smiling back, wider this time. "I used to know the people that lived in this house, though." I took a chance and stepped closer to her, moving almost to the porch. I glanced down the block again, like I was feeling nostalgic. Which I was, but not for the reasons she was probably envisioning. "I love the color," I said, glancing back at her. "Do you know what happened? To the last family that lived here?" I hedged, because I'm getting too anxious. I don't want to spook her, but I also want information. I was dying for information.

"I don't know. I'm sorry." She leaned against the doorframe and crossed her arms. She looked past me to her son, who was already ignoring us again and playing with his trucks in the grass. "It was an estate sale," she offered, after a minute. "That's all I know."

"An estate sale," I murmured to myself. An estate sale meant the owner had died. I couldn't imagine Elliot being dead, so I immediately dismissed that possibility. If he were dead, I would know. I would feel it in my bones, somehow. Or, at least that's what I thought at the time. So he must not have owned the house. I remember him saying that it was the house he'd grown up in, though. So whoever owned the house had raised him. I wonder if he knew that the house had been sold off. I wonder if he'd ever come back here, just like I did, looking for answers or signs of the past. I wonder if he'd been just as weirded out by the changes to the house as I'd been.

"It was a real mess when we got it. A fixer-upper, they called it," she continued with a small laugh. "It looked like the seventies had thrown up all over the place. In the kitchen especially."

"Lots of shag carpet," I replied, thinking back to the way I remembered it. The house had always looked like a relic, like a fading time capsule that someone had forgotten to dig up. The last time I'd seen it, it looked the

exact same as when Elliot's family had lived here. For the first time in a long time, I wondered who they were and where they were. I wondered if they were all dead. I wondered why I didn't know more about Elliot and why I'd never really thought to ask. I'd always just assumed that he was alone in the world, adrift in his own asocial tendencies and sadistic fantasies. The thought of someone loving him, of someone kissing his forehead and tucking him into bed at night was incongruous with the way I saw him. I glanced back over my shoulder at the little boy behind me, playing alone in the shadow of the oak tree.

"I have to watch him in the yard," the woman said. "He likes to ride his scooter up and down the sidewalk. It's a quiet neighborhood, but you can never be too careful."

"It was always a nice neighborhood," I said, vaguely. The midcentury subdivision was completely different than the fancy neighborhood I'd grown up in, with its huge new houses and gated entrance. But this was the kind of neighborhood that you saw in movies or what you imagined middle-class American life to be. Ranch matchbox houses set on green lots and shaded by big trees. Maybe that was the kind of life Elliot had wanted for himself. Maybe that was the kind of life he wanted for both of us. "Do you mind if..." I let my words trail off, because I wasn't quite sure if I really wanted what I was about to ask. I wasn't satisfied, though. I hadn't gotten any of the answers I was hoping for. I hadn't gotten any closure.

I still wasn't any closer to Elliot.

"I don't know why I came here," I said, rushing my words and letting my guard down a bit. I let my vulnerabilities show because I couldn't really stop it at that point. My hands were starting to shake, even though I wanted to stop it. "I was just driving around and I couldn't help myself." I hold up my hand, flashing my big diamond ring for emphasis. "I'm about to get married and I guess I'm just..." I trailed off and glanced down at her hand. I can't see if she's wearing a ring or not. "Are you married?"

"I am," the woman said, looking at me with eyebrows raised like I had spouted another head.

"This is a personal question, but did you get cold feet before the wedding?" I asked, rolling my thumb around the cool metal band of the ring. "Did you ever do anything crazy, like go to an old boyfriend's house just because you were freaking out?"

"I can't say I did," the woman replied with a laugh and I could see her eyes softening again, looking at me with compassion. "But I didn't really have any old boyfriends worth remembering anyway."

"Oh," I ran my teeth over my bottom lip. "This one was impossible to forget. Very memorable." I laughed to myself and she laughed with me, but we were laughing for two different reasons. I was laughing because not being able to forget Elliot was the understatement of the century. Elliot was practically tattooed on my skin; I would never be rid of him or his influence over me. No matter if I married Mitch or not, I had a feeling that would always be true. No matter how much I loved Mitch or how long we were together, I had a feeling it would never be enough. I would never be free.

"You want a glass of water?" the woman asked. "It's hot as Hades out here." She opened the screen door and looked at me expectantly. I nodded and gave her as bright of a smile as I could muster.

"Yes, please," I said, my throat suddenly getting tight. I stepped up onto the porch, trying to will my heartbeat to slow as I moved closer to the door. It felt like walking through the gates of hell, if hell had gates. I wanted to go inside, but at the same time I didn't. But I only hesitated for a moment before stepping into the house after her. Cool air conditioned air hit me in the face and the first thing I noticed was that it smelled like home-cooked meals and the walls were white and bright. The dark drapes and wallpaper and carpet were gone. The ancient sofas and chairs and tube television were gone. Again, I could barely believe it was the same house. I glanced at the wall to my left, trying to get my bearings. There was an overstuffed sectional sofa where Elliot's old couch used to sit. If I stared long enough, I could see it there and the room darkened around me, the blue glare of the TV shining against the wall.

Suddenly I was in the past, and I could see it all clear as day. I could see him sitting on the couch, his long legs stretched out and his head cocked to the side. He was naked, of course, his muscular chest highlighted in the blue light. His face was in shadow, but I could see the rope twined around his wrist. As I stared, I could feel my throat close up and it almost felt like the rope was knotted around my neck again, connecting me to him like an animal to its master. I raised my hand and pressed my fingers to the base of my throat, feeling the little scar there. The memories were coming hard and

fast. Memories of pain and pleasure. Memories of the way we fucked on that old couch.

“We probably did the most work on the kitchen,” the woman was saying and I took a deep breath and forced myself out of the clutches of the memory. It was hard; I was sweating and my heart was thudding in my chest. There was a dull ringing in my ears. And I could feel the unmistakable tightening in my stomach that signaled I was turned on. When it came to Elliot, I was like an experiment by Pavlov. Anything that reminded me of him made me turned on.

“I can't believe it's the same place,” I said, the words a bit strained but still normal sounding.

“We ripped up the old carpet and re-did the floors,” she said, the pride in her face unmistakable. “Painted. Put in new windows.”

“It looks great,” I murmured, glancing over at the big picture window at the front of the house. Before, it was covered by dingy gold brocade curtains. I wondered if Elliot had ever opened them and let the light flow in. The honey-oak hardwood floors gleamed in the afternoon sunlight. Brightly colored toys dotted the floor and a colorful rug is planted in front of the TV. I could imagine the boy laying there on his stomach and staring at the TV, watching his favorite cartoons. I could see him playing noisily by himself, keeping himself busy and entertaining himself. I wondered, randomly, if he had any friends in the neighborhood.

I don't know why I thought of that, but I did.

“Where did you say you were from?” the woman asked, bending to toss a few of the toys into a bin, like I cared if the floor was messy.

“Oh, I'm in Dallas now. But I was down here visiting friends today and... I guess I got a little side-tracked,” I said.

“Dallas? You must miss Austin,” she said with another good-natured laugh. I stared down at her, forcing my face into an easy smile. I wondered what it would like, to live like that woman, who had everything. She had a husband she loved, she had a little boy, she had happiness. It didn't seem like she ever questioned her own happiness. It didn't seem like she'd ever had anything bad happen to her. Her life had probably been relatively unremarkable. At that moment, I envied her. I envied her life.

That could've been my life.

“I do, sometimes,” I responded, sliding my hand down the thin leather strap of my purse and trying not to imagine myself in her shoes. There was no point in getting maudlin. I had gone there for a stupid, selfish reason, but I still hadn't gotten what I truly wanted. I needed to see more. I had to see more. She straightened up and brushed her hands on her thighs and motioned for me to follow her.

“In the kitchen, we pulled up all that ugly linoleum and put in new cabinets,” she was saying as I followed her through the dining room and into the kitchen. I ran my eyes over the dining room table they had, remembering the old table that used to sit in its spot. Flashes of being fucked on that table shot through my mind. It was like there was a ghost a few inches away from me. I could still see the pale light from the old hanging chandelier. I could see the way his face looked in the pale light. I could feel him forcing my thighs apart and pulling me to him and being nowhere near gentle.

I hadn't thought of that night in a long time. But it was like no time had passed. Five years meant nothing. Elliot being gone meant nothing. His presence was so heavy in that house. I was like he was standing right behind me. I could practically feel his breath on the back of my neck. I just wanted to close my eyes and let myself fall backwards. I wanted him to catch me. I wanted his arms around me. I wanted him to come back and make everything make sense again.

“New granite countertops, new appliances,” she said, still going on. I could understand why – the kitchen looked completely brand new. The walls were painted the same aqua as the front door. The floor was cool ceramic tile and everything else was completely different as well. But I could still see the faded linoleum in front of the sink. I could still see the spot where he'd thrown me down so roughly. I could still taste my fear in the air. I could feel the way the cracked linoleum scratched against my soft skin. The woman of the house, oblivious to it all, opened a cabinet and pulls out two glasses. I watched as she filled them with filtered water and then held one out to me. I took it, the cool glass a shock to me. I sipped at the water, using the action to calm my nerves. “My name is Shayla, by the way,” she offered, looking at me expectantly.

“I'm Rachel,” I responded automatically, the name rolling off my tongue like second nature. “Thanks for the water, Shayla,” I said, barely

remembering to smile. “It's so crazy to be here. I'm sorry for disrupting your day.”

“Oh no,” she waved her hand. “It's fine. We were just having a boring day anyway.” I nodded and took another sip. She set her glass on the granite countertop and an awkward moment passed between us. I knew I was overstaying my welcome. I was probably giving off strange vibes, too, despite my attempt to seem as normal as possible. Being normal was getting more and more difficult. Especially under the circumstances. “So tell me about this boyfriend,” she said. “What was so special about him?” I chuckled to myself and stared down at the spot on the floor that I couldn't ignore. It was calling to me, begging me to look at it.

“He wasn't good for me,” I admitted. “He had some issues.” I paused because that was another almost laughable understatement. “Problems. And I tried to leave him alone, you know. I tried to stay away from him.” I forced myself to smile again, even though I didn't want to smile. I would much rather cry. I was such a fool for him. The pain I'd suffered at his hands, the anger, the sadness, the depression, the obsession – all of it. And yet I still couldn't let him go. He didn't deserve it and neither did I.

“I know those types,” Shayla said with a knowing smile. “Impossible to stay away from. Until you get old enough to learn to avoid them.” I chuckled again, because she had no idea. But it was cute that she thought she did.

“Exactly,” I agreed, even though I had never learned my lesson. “But it wasn't always bad. Sometimes it was good.” I smoothed my lips together, feeling the thick lipstick on my lips. “Really good,” I said, glancing up to meet her eyes. She raised her eyebrows again, getting exactly what I was saying. “But memories aren't anything to get all hung up on, are they? They're unreliable. Easy to manipulate.”

“Not always easy to forget, though,” she said and I smiled again. That time, my smile felt genuine, as genuine as it could be. I realized that I appreciated her listening to my story, as sugar-coated and half-assed as it was. God knows, I hadn't talked about it to anyone, ever. It almost felt real. For a moment, I could forget that I was in a haunted house. I could forget all the things that had happened in that little nondescript ranch house in the middle of Austin. For a moment, I just felt like a normal person. But it didn't last of course.

“You know, we heard some things,” she said, leaning in closer. “Here and there. From the neighbors.”

“What kinds of things?” I asked, even though I knew. Well, I thought I knew. Maybe I didn't know at all. She pursed her lips and then the screen door creaked in the other room and we both turned toward the sound.

“Mama!” a high-pitched little voice screamed, echoing through the house. “Mama, where are you?”

“Boy, what do you want?” Shayla asked, her tone more indignant than her face. Her face was overflowing with love at that moment. I could see it in her eyes. I could see it in the way they softened and her smile deepened. “That child is gonna drive me crazy,” Shayla said, shaking her head but I could see right through her. She was in love with her child. But it wasn't a conditional love, or a toxic love. It was pure. Innocent. I wondered what that felt like, to love someone like that. It felt like I was intruding on their happy little life and I didn't like it. I set my full glass on the counter, feeling my time in the house coming to an end, and glanced out the kitchen window.

It was a new window, not the rickety half-broken one I'd shimmied open and climbed through all those years ago. Beyond the bright, clear glass, I could see Elliot's old swing set, rusted and unused at the edge of the lawn. Seeing it made my heart squeeze in my chest. There was still a piece of him here. He wasn't completely erased. But the backyard was a mess. Most of the grass was overturned and big piles of dirt dotted the length of it. “We're putting a pool in,” Shayla said, as if hearing the question in my mind.

“Mama, where are you?” the little boy called out, breaking the silence once again. “Come here!”

“Excuse me? Come here what?”

A pause.

“Come here, *please*. I wanna show you something!” the sweet little voice continued. Shayla shrugged and, just like that, any unpleasantness was forgotten.

“Alright, I'm coming,” she called back and I nodded, letting her know I knew. I'd taken up enough of her time. I followed her out of the kitchen and into the living room, but something caught my eye and I stopped. The hallway ran the length of the house and I couldn't stop myself from looking

down there, even though I knew I shouldn't. His bedroom was down there. The door was open and light shown down the dark hallway like a beacon. It was calling me. I knew it wouldn't be anything like how it was. It wouldn't smell the same or look the same or be the same in the anyway. But I couldn't stop the urge to go see it from rising in me. The hallway was painted a fresh white and family pictures dotted the wall. I felt myself moving toward the hallway, without thinking.

The smiling faces were almost all unfamiliar, but that didn't stop me from looking at each and every one. I saw Shayla and her son, beaming with happiness, posing alongside a white man I assumed was her husband. I lifted my hand and ran a fingertip along the edges of the perfectly arranged frames, remembering the other set of photos that had once hung on that same wall. I remembered the photo I used to have, the one he stole from me when he left. I stopped in front of the spot where it'd once hung. I could almost see it again, although the details were starting to fade. I remembered his little face, the innocent eyes he once had, the most. The rest of it wasn't as important, I guess. But I still felt sad when I thought of it. It wasn't fair of him to take it. It wasn't fair of him to leave me with nothing.

Absolutely fucking nothing.

"Rachel?" I heard her voice and I forced myself to snap out of it. I turned and found Shayla standing in the living room, staring down at me.

"Beautiful family," I said then clamped my roaming hand on my purse strap again. I had to get out of there, I realized. I had to go before I completely lost it.

"Thanks," Shayla said, but I barely heard her.

"I'm going to get back on the road," I said, as brightly as I could without sounding like a robotic Stepford wife. My emotions were getting harder to regulate. I had to go before I broke down. Shayla nodded and I followed her outside, back into the oppressive Texas heat. I didn't look back. There was no point. That house might as well've been any other house on the block. There wasn't anything special about it anymore. There wasn't anything to hold on to.

"You said you were from Dallas?" Shayla asked as she walked me back out to the sidewalk.

"Yes, Dallas," I said regretfully. "At this rate, I'll hit traffic and not be back before dark." I flex and unflex my fist around my purse strap, the

sweat already starting to bead on my forehead.

“Good luck,” she said, holding out her hand for her boy. He stepped into her touch, rolling the back of his head against her open palm. She ran her hand through his curls and the small affectionate moment between them caught my eye. For a long moment I couldn't look away.

“You too,” I murmured as the boy looked up at me, his eyes wide and distracted. I wondered what he was thinking about. He had such small concerns. His world was so small. He gave me a half-wave with his dirty little fingers and I waved back without thinking.

“Bye,” he said, then took off again, running back toward the tree and crouching down next to the flower bed. I cleared my throat and shook my head, forcing myself to stop watching him. Children were children, I told myself. I had a niece and a nephew. I was used to them and I even liked them, most of the time. They were cute. But there was something about that little boy and I didn't know what it was. I didn't like it. I don't like it when my heart gets soft without my permission. And my heart was soft that afternoon in Austin. My guard was down.

“Sorry for taking up so much of your time,” I said, repeating myself because I didn't know what else to say. She waved me off, shaking her head. Then she plopped her hands on her hips and I nodded. I turned toward my car, but then stopped. The big SUV in the driveway caught my attention. But what was most important was what was beyond it. “The garage,” I said without thinking.

“What?” she asked, turning to look at the garage door and then back at me.

“Was there anything in the garage? When you moved in?” I asked, my throat going dry. I knew it was stupid, but I couldn't stop myself from asking. She furrowed her brow and raised a hand to shield her eyes from the sun.

“What do you mean?” she replied, as confused as I would expect her to be. I didn't know quite what I was trying to uncover either. I didn't know what he might've left in there or what, if anything, was left of it. It was a last ditch effort; a last hope. But from her face, I could feel the hope dying. I reminded myself that it was stupid to go there. It was stupid to expect that time would stop because I wanted it to. The world would keep on spinning with or without Elliot. It had, no matter how I'd tried to stop it.

“Never mind,” I said softly. “It doesn't matter.”

“I don't really know,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “My husband cleaned it out.”

“It's just...” I trailed off, forcing my mind to get sharp again. “He and his father used to work on cars. I was just wondering if there were car parts lying around or something. I don't know.” I shook my head and laughed, like I thought I was being stupid. It wasn't too far off the mark. I was being silly, but I had my reasons. I needed *something*. That was my last shot.

“No car parts,” Shayla said. “I would remember that. Mostly just odds and ends.”

“Okay. Thanks,” I nodded trying to smile, but it was taking longer than I wanted for it to sink in. It was impossible to pretend for a moment, but I finally forced myself out of it. I gave her one last smile and then I propelled myself forward, focusing on walking. Focusing on putting one foot in front of the other and getting my ass the hell out of there. I dug around in my purse for my keys, needing the distraction. My eyes were blurry as I fumbled around for them. Luckily, I found my sunglasses first and slid them on with shaking hands. My fingers finally brushed against the cool metal at the bottom of my purse and fished them out, trying not to curse out loud. The frustration was on the tip of my tongue.

“You know, I do remember something,” Shayla called out and I snapped my head up as if she'd slapped my face. “There was a big dog kennel in there. Built out of 2x4s and chainlink fencing. My husband took it apart before we moved in. It was a hazard. And it was huge.” I stared at her as I let her words sink in. “We always wondered about that. Did they breed dogs?” Shayla asked, cocking her head.

“No,” I said. Then I pulled out my keys and unlocked the car as fast as I could with my shaking hands. “Thanks so much!” I called out and then slipped inside the car and slammed the door shut. I forced myself to drive off as slowly as possible even though I wanted to slam my foot on the gas and get away as quickly as I could. In my rearview, I could see Shayla and her son on the lawn, getting smaller and smaller. I slowed at the stop sign, but didn't fully stop. I turned the corner too quickly and the tires squealed in my haste.

I pulled over about a block away because it felt like my heart was going to explode out of my chest. I turned on the air-conditioning full blast

and sat back in my leather seat and lifted my hair off of my neck. I closed my eyes and tried not to focus on what she'd said. I tried to pretend I hadn't heard her. I tried to pretend that I didn't know what he'd built the cage for. Or why. Or who. But as I sat there in the slowly cooling car, I couldn't stop myself from thinking about it. Imagining it. In that dark garage where he'd taken my soul and ruined me for anyone else, including myself. He'd ruined me, but it hadn't been enough. I knew what he'd wanted to do with me all along but to have it confirmed like that was too much. He'd wanted to keep me on a leash and in a cage. He'd wanted me to be his pet, his plaything.

He'd wanted me to be his slave.

I opened my eyes and stared off at the new housing development across the street. Only two of the houses were standing. There were three more in the process of being built. Their lumber skeletons stood out against the fading blue of the sky. It took me a minute to realize that the housing development was located in a familiar place. It used to be a field, I know for a fact. A field where I'd tried to run and hide. A field where he caught me and dragged me back into his clutches. But, like everything else in Austin, the old field had changed. It wasn't like I'd remembered. All of the things that reminded me of him and the bad times were gone. In their place was another feeling. A feeling that hadn't gone away since he'd gone away. A feeling that I'd learned how to bury but it was never far away.

Longing.

Painful, bone-deep *longing*.

I missed him with my whole being. It was embedded in me as much as the fucked-up thoughts and the coldness and the ability to manipulate. It was just a part of me now. But I wasn't willing to accept it. I wasn't willing to give up on him, just yet. I couldn't. Austin was done, but I wasn't done with him. After another minute, I checked my side-view mirror and pulled back into traffic when it was clear. I kept going and didn't look back. No more looking back, I told myself. No more living in the past.

All that was important was the future.

The bridal shower was a grit-your-teeth-and-bear-it kind of situation. My cheeks hurt from smiling and my brain hurt from the aimless chatter.

There were so many happy, familiar faces – all my aunties and cousins and old Dallas friends mixed with old Austin friends. People I hadn't seen in years. I hugged everyone and complimented them on their hair, their shoes, their nails. My mother shed a few tears and everyone fretted over her. But the tears were from pure happiness. Her long strife was officially over. Her only daughter was finally getting married and she would be rewarded with more grandbabies. Stubborn Joan the Rebel had finally made her family proud. The champagne flowed like water in celebration. The white tiered cake was from the best cake shop in Dallas. The gifts were plentiful and brightly wrapped, piled high and waiting for me to open them with much fanfare. My mother had even hired a photographer to document the day.

That was what happened when I gave my mother free reign. The last time I'd done that was my high-school graduation party. It'd been so over the top, you might've thought I'd graduated with a double PhD from Harvard, instead of a run of the mill public high school. My quinceañera was huge as well, but I'd enjoyed it back then. I loved dressing up in a ridiculously expensive and frothy dress and having all the attention on me. I loved dancing with my father in the middle of a ballroom while everyone watched. I'd loved the whole thing. In fact, the pictures were encased in gilt frames and still displayed in the living room. I assumed that my wedding photos would take those hallowed spots on the mantle in a few weeks, and my smiling fifteen-year-old self would be retired to my mother's office or some other less prominent place.

The pool was calm, as always. The water lapped at the sides, softly and it was comforting. It was hot that afternoon, so hot that sweat prickled on my brow as soon as I stepped out onto the patio. I shut the french doors behind me and the heat deterred anyone from following me, just like I knew it would. I kicked off one of my sandals and dipped my toes into the water, holding my arms out to keep my balance. The water was warm, but still cooler than the air. I told myself I would take a swim later, when everything was quiet again. I would do my laps and finally be able to think. Since I'd been in Dallas, I hadn't had a minute to truly think. There was always somewhere to be, something to do. I still hadn't had time to process Austin. I knew there had to be answers there, but I hadn't had time to figure it out.

I needed more time, but time was what I never had.

“Joan?” I heard the small voice call my name and I turned my head slowly, the woozy feeling the champagne had given me finally floating to the surface. The heat was exasperating the effects of the alcohol. I blinked slowly, surprised by who was standing in front of me.

“Janet,” I said, recognizing Trace's mom immediately. Her hair was darker and she'd aged since I'd last seen her, but the mother of my former fiancée was surely standing there in my parents' backyard, mere feet from the patio where her son had bled out. I wondered if she knew how close to the spot she was. She blinked a few times when I said her name then forced a strained smile.

“You look well,” she said, watching as I pulled my foot out of the water and slid it back into my sandal. “Better than well, actually. You look stunning.” I suppressed the urge to wave her off. Around there, if a girl weighed a buck five and put on a designer dress, everyone thought she was a ten. It didn't matter what my mother put on me, I knew how ugly I was on the inside. My outside just hid it well.

“I have an expensive dress to fit into,” I said with a laugh that was lighter than I felt. Janet was the last person I wanted to see, but she was here. I blamed my mother for that pity invitation. Worse, she obviously wanted to talk. I hadn't been very good to Trace. I'd almost gotten him killed and then I'd left him when he needed me most. But I'd had needs too. Being with Trace would've been the worst thing for him. Leaving him was the best thing I ever did. That was all that mattered. “I've been on a hell of a diet.”

“You were always beautiful, Joan,” she said. “From the first time I saw you.” She was staring at me and I didn't like being under the microscope. Especially not under her microscope. “When Trace brought you home, I thought, yup. That's the one. He'd be a fool to let her go.”

“How is he?” I asked, quickly, like ripping off a band-aid. I didn't want to know, but I also had to know. I didn't think about Trace often, but when I did, it was fondly. I wanted nothing but the best for him, even though Elliot had shattered that hope.

“Do you care?” she asked, her eyes piercing through me. I felt a trickle of sweat make its way down the side of my face, but I didn't brush it away. I took a quick drink of the champagne and it was still cool. It soothed my throat, but the feeling didn't last.

“Why would you ask me that,” I said after swallowing. “Of course I care.”

“He still loved you, despite everything,” she said, taking a step closer.

“Despite everything?” I asked and I heard my voice spike with emotion. This was not good, I told myself. But I couldn't stop. “I didn't ask for it to happen, Janet. I didn't ask for any of it to happen.”

“Maybe. But after everything, you only cared about yourself,” she said, her voice shaking. “You didn't ask about him. You didn't call him. You left the goddamn state without telling him.”

“Yes I did,” I agreed. There was no denying it. I'd been completely consumed in my emotions, my vengefulness, my need to make Elliot pay. Trace had been an afterthought, less than an afterthought. He'd been nothing. “But I had to.”

“You don't know how long I've been waiting to see you again,” she said, shaking her head. She clasped her hands in front of her trim waist and I knew she was angry. She had a right to be. It was all my fault, after all. “I've thought about it so many times. I thought about how I would call you a heartless bitch to your face. I thought about how I would make you feel terrible for what you did to my boy.”

“Did you think I would disagree with you?” I said. “Yell at you? Scream?”

“I don't know.” She dropped her hands to her sides.

“I think heartless bitch sums it up pretty well,” I said, finally swiping my hand across my forehead. “But I had to be.” I ran my hand through my hair, wishing I had a way to get it off of my neck. “For my own survival.”

“I don't understand it,” she said but I could see some of the anger leave her face. I didn't care if she understood it. No one ever would, anyway. What had happened to me was something completely out of the realm of a lot of people's understanding. I still don't understand it sometimes and it's been years. “He would've done anything for you.”

“I didn't want him to,” I said. Maybe the heat and the champagne was messing with my head, but I couldn't lie for once. I was being so honest with her, it was strange. I wasn't used to being honest with anybody. But here I was, in the backyard of my parents' house of all places, telling the truth. “Trace gave me enough. I didn't want anything else from him. I had to go be by myself, away from everybody who loved me. I had to get away

from everybody looking at me like I was going to break. I had to heal myself. So I did.”

“Do you think Trace wouldn't understand that? He of all people would understand,” she said, not able to give up her argument yet.

“No,” I shook my head lightly. “He wouldn't.” I tossed back the last of the champagne, savoring the bubbly liquid on my tongue. “Right there,” I said, pointing to the spot on the patio. It had been sandblasted multiple times since the incident, but I swore I could still see the blood darkening the stones. I still swore I could see the blood in the cracks. “That's where he almost died.” She gasped and stared at the spot and I knew that she saw what I was seeing. She could see her son collapsed on the ground, blood covering him and splattered on his face, his eyes open wide and unseeing. I stepped closer to her, setting my hand lightly on her shoulder. “He was better off without me, Janet. Believe me.”

“He would be so angry with me if he knew I was here,” she said, her eyes still glued to the spot. “He doesn't talk about you, ever.”

“Good,” I said, squeezing her shoulder. I hoped he didn't think about me, either. I wanted her to understand that, even if she couldn't. For some reason, it was important. “How is he? Really?”

“He's a lot better. He still can't play sports and run around like he used to, but it's a lot better than it was.” She smoothed her lips together and looked at me again. “He's had a girlfriend for a year or so. A cute girl from Waco. She's black.”

“Oh,” I said, not knowing what, if anything, she wanted me to say to that.

“They live together. Close to downtown. Far enough away that I can't bother them all the time.”

“I'm glad for him. For them,” I said, and it was true. “He deserves someone who loves him like he deserves to be loved.” She glanced back at the spot and then back at me and I could tell she was still shaken up. I didn't blame her. “He deserves to be happy.”

“Are you happy, Joan?” she asked and it took me by surprise. Since I'd been engaged, no one had asked me that. They'd all just assumed. A ring on your finger and a smile on your face was enough proof. I looked at the pool, the longing for a swim rising in me again. The water was still, barely rippling. There was no wind, nothing to disturb the calm surface.

“No,” I said, the word slipping out before I could stop it. “But I’m trying.” Janet looked at me and I wondered what, if anything, she was going to say to that. She didn’t get the chance, though.

“There you are!” My mother’s voice sliced through the oppressive air. She stood in the doorway, a drink in her hand. Her cheeks were rosy and I could tell she was tipsy or on her way there. “It’s almost time for presents, Joanie!” She waved us in, looking twenty years younger in her flowing peach-colored sundress and with her new haircut. Ever since I’d announced the engagement, she seemed to be aging backward. I didn’t know if it was Botox or sheer joy. Either way, it was nice to see her smiling and carefree for once. “Janet, your hand looks empty. I think you need a drink,” she laughed, the tinkling sound echoing across the yard. We couldn’t resist her urging and the beckoning of the air-conditioning, so we did as she asked. Janet and I didn’t finish our conversation, but as I was surrounded later and ripping open present after present, I caught her watching me, her eyes not missing anything.

I’d be lying if I said it didn’t feel nice to have someone in on the secret. Just for once.

Chapter Ten

The heavy, sweet smell of alcohol hung in the air and it was making me sick. The bar was dark and the air was still and I could barely breathe. I rolled the cold empty glass between my hands, the ice clinking around with each pass. I shouldn't have been drinking and I knew that. When I drink, everything starts to get more dangerous. The world takes on a violent tint. But I was tired of being sober. I was tired of sitting in my shitty empty apartment at night, sober, and thinking about all the things I'd lost.

It seemed like forever ago when I had something worth caring about. When I had something soft and warm and beautiful all to myself. She smelled good. She could read my mind, sometimes. And she liked me. Maybe she would've loved me eventually. But at that moment, none of that shit mattered. I'd been trying to forget her and most of the time I succeeded. During the days when I was busy on the fishing boats, there was no time to think of anything but the task at hand. But when I was on land, pissing around in my shitty rented room, there was no escape. When I lay on my hard twin bed, I couldn't help but think about being with her. Fucking her. Sleeping next to her. I had to stop myself from destroying every last piece of furniture in my shitty room when those feelings bombarded my brain.

So I usually ended up at the bar down the block. Life wasn't too different than the way it was in Austin, in that respect. When I was bored or feeling antsy, I would always go down to the Mermaid. Life had been pretty good until the first time I saw her. Then I'd lost myself in bits and pieces. Or maybe this had always been me and she just forced my true self to the surface. Whichever the case, I was doing what came naturally. In Alaska, I found a new bar to frequent and I kept to myself, mostly. Sometimes I played darts with one of the natives that would come in but I wasn't interested in making friends. I was always good at blending in and not sticking out too much.

The problem that night was that I didn't stop drinking.

The bar was relatively crowded that night, because three huge ships were at dock. I saw some familiar faces as I stepped inside the bar and took

my usual seat at the bar. A game was on the tube tv anchored to the corner and I stared at it but wasn't watching. I tossed back drink after drink, spending my meager paycheck, ignoring the others around me. Well, almost all the others.

She had bright, dyed red hair – that was what caught my eye at first. She was loud too, laughing and joking with the group of men she'd walked in with. I didn't notice her much beyond that for the first couple of hours. As the time passed and the bar emptied out and my drinking increased, I started noticing her more and more. I hated her hair, but she was wearing a tight, faded T-shirt and a pair of blue jeans. Her group of friends was down to two men who were being louder than they were when they were five strong. She was making a show of herself, dancing to the Metallica and Bon Jovi that she played on the juke box. I pulled the cap down lower over my face as she got louder and more insistent.

Now, it's not like I haven't looked at a woman since Joanie. Women are women and sometimes they look good and sometimes they don't, but I've been hung up on one evil woman for the last five years. There's no seeing past her, not for me. But that doesn't mean my dick doesn't get hard in the morning. That doesn't mean I don't wish for a warm body on top of me or wet mouth working hard at making me come. When I fall asleep at night with my hand wrapped around my cock, I think of her and only her. I try not to think about the bad times, but sometimes I do. Sometimes I think about the first time I fucked her, in that little bathroom at the Mermaid. I still like to think about her fear and how tight she was, even though I know I shouldn't. She wouldn't want me to think of her like that. But I can't help it.

That cold, lonely night in Portsmouth, I was drunk, no doubt about it. I was trying to force myself to get my ass up off the barstool because my head was hammering. But I didn't want to go home, either. I still had another full day before I had to be back on the boat. The thought of waking up alone again and living that shitty life for another day was starting to fuck with my mind. The need wasn't always that bad. That night, though, the need was unbearable. I told myself to get up and take a piss and walk out the door. I dug in my back pocket and found the crumbled bills. I tossed the two twenties on the bar and then stood. I passed the loud girl and her two

friends on the way the men's room but I didn't look at them. I wasn't thinking about them, except to get away from their loudness.

The pockmarked wooden door to the restroom swung shut behind me and instantly, it's more quiet. The music and laughter was muted and the throbbing in my brain lessened. I stepped the urinal and relieved myself quickly, staring at the wall in front of me. It was painted a dingy, ancient blue but it's also covered with scribbles in markers and etched into the wall with pen knives or keys. My eyes skimmed over the markings, not really reading them or paying attention until my gaze stopped on one. It was a lopsided heart drawn around a hastily scribbled name. *Colleen*. Underneath was a phone number. I stared at the number for a second longer than I should've. Then I went to the sink and washed my hands quickly. I shoved open the door and stepped out into the dark hallway that lead back to the bar, completely intending to get in my car and leave.

But I wasn't alone in the hallway.

The red-haired girl was there too, heading toward me on her way to the ladies', no doubt. Time seemed to slow down. I watched her coming, her hips swinging and her thumb hitched in her belt loop. She has big tits, I realize. They're straining her T-shirt. Even in the shitty lighting, I can see how her body moves. For a split second, she's not a stranger anymore. In this lighting, her hair could be dark. Dark and long. She could be wearing a short jean skirt and blue cowboy boots. She could have long tanned legs and plump pink lips and bright brown eyes. She could be someone completely different. She could be from a different time, a ghost from the past, but live and in the flesh.

I don't mean to do but I also can't stop myself. I push her into the wall, hard enough to surprise her and knock a bit of the wind out of her. I press my forearm against her throat but I don't apply as much pressure as I could. I just want to catch her off guard. Surprise her. But also, let her know who has the upper-hand. I'm taller than her by almost a head and her body feels different as I step into her. She's soft in different places than what I'm used to. She smelled like beer and the tangy scent of artificial apples, which is not what I was used to. I leaned in and sniffed her hair but it wasn't right. The rush that I got from the attack had already faded. My heartbeat was still erratic, but it wasn't out of control. My breathing was fine and controlled. Normally, I would be happy about that. Being in control of my body would

mean that I had conquered my first instincts. My grandpop would've said that I was becoming a better hunter and clap me on the back of the head.

But the reality was that it was all wrong. If it had been the right kind of prey, my need would've taken over everything and it would've been impossible to stop. I would've craved the violence and the control and the pain and the dominance and everything else, like the heartless hunter that I can be. But on that frigid, lonely night in Portsmouth, I'd lost the bloodlust. I'd lost the passion for the hunt. I'd known for months that I'd lost the best prey, the one who was smarter than me and could evade my traps time and time again. The one who forced me to come up with new ways to win. The drunk girl that smelled like apples was a lamb. The one I really wanted was a wolf.

I took a step back, dropping my hands to my sides. She scrambled away from me, coughing and holding her throat. "What the fuck, you fucking piece of shit?" she gasped. "Who do you think you are?" I didn't stick around to answer her. I knew I had to get out of there. So I turned and headed for the door, which is what I should've done in the first place. I don't bother kicking myself for acting out of instinct. There's no use in regretting it. The most important thing is that nothing really happened. Joanie would be proud of me, I think.

I never have gotten used to the sting of the air outside, and that night was no exception. When I left the bar, the cold immediately seeped through my clothes and my skin and settled in my bones. I hunched my shoulders involuntarily and my mood plummeted even more. I hate the cold with every fiber of my being. The cold is a constant distraction and it makes me slow and sluggish. I never would've been blindsided by the punch if it hadn't been for the cold and the wind and the snow that was lightly falling. In Texas, no motherfucker ever would've gotten the heads up on me.

But I wasn't in Texas anymore.

The first punch caught me in the back of my head and I lurched forward, barely catching myself before I fell to the ground. Black spots dot my vision like Morse code and I shook my head to try to clear it. The pain was nothing and I tucked it away because fighting back was more important. I turned around swinging and my fist made purchase against a hard, warm body. I could feel the bones of his ribs against my knuckles and I could hear the distinctive thud of contact. He made a pained noise and I

smiled, knowing that I had surprised him, just as much as he surprised me. Unfortunately, there's two of them. When the second blow meets my cheek, my face is snapped to the side and it slowed me down enough to not be able to fight off the first asshole as he recovered. He comes back with a fist to my gut which makes it hard to breathe. It was already hard enough to suck in the frozen air into my lungs, but after the punch, it was damn near impossible.

“What were you trying to do, huh?” one of the men said, his voice muted by the wind. “You like to attack women for fun?” he asked but doesn't give me time to answer, not that I would've. He punches me again in my side and this time I can't stop myself from falling back on my ass. I know they'll kick me if I fall, and sure enough, they do. I could only try to steel myself against it but it's difficult when you've got a steel-toe boot trying to make a dent in your spine. After taking two painful blows, I was able to roll to the side and throw my arm up to protect my face as I put all of my strength into getting back on my feet. I catch another punch on my bicep, but it's better than another face hit. I was in pain all over but the adrenaline was finally pumping, warm and hot.

The second guy had shown himself to be slower and not as vicious as the first, so I took advantage. I punched him square in the face and dark blood blossomed over his face as his nose crunched against my knuckles. It's always been satisfying to break a nose, especially when it's necessary. I'm not much of a fighter, but if forced into a corner I've been known to hold my own. In prison, I had to do what I had to do. I've fucked people up and been fucked up in return. On that night, it felt good to fuck the guy up, I'll admit. I'm sure that makes me a terrible person, but I can't say that I care too much. Up in Alaska, it was always about survival. And even though I felt like I was dead sometimes, like all my blood and come was drying up and my heart was freezing over, I wasn't going to give up. I'll never give up as long as Joanie is on this Earth. As long as she's out there, I have a reason to exist.

The fight in the parking lot was almost over, I could feel it. They were no match for me and they were realizing it. It didn't matter how many shots they got in, I wasn't down for the count. I was starting to enjoy it a little too much, I'll admit. The snow was still lightly falling and the ground was slippery under our feet. When the first guy lost his footing when I dodged

his next shot, I took advantage. I tripped him and he fell hard to his knees. I locked my arm around his throat, pulling him back against me and squeezing hard. At that point, I didn't give a shit what I did. The violence felt too good. It's so easy to get lost in the violence. Wrestling that dude was more satisfying than the girl. It felt like what I needed. If I couldn't fuck the woman I wanted to fuck in the way that I wanted to fuck, hurting someone real bad – maybe even killing someone – was the best alternative.

I could hear the sound of glass shattering, but it didn't register what it was until I felt the dull blow once against my coat. I didn't loosen my chokehold on the guy, because at that point, I couldn't. It felt too good to squeeze his neck as hard as I could. He's still fighting my hold, so I know he's still alive. But I don't know how much longer. My coat didn't protect me for long though. He was able to angle the broken bottle under my bomber coat and the pain is instantaneous. The asshole dragged the jagged, sharp edges into my skin and I could feel the blood gush, hot and thick, down my side. I released the man I was choking out and grabbed my side. My first thought was for my liver, because I had no fucking idea how deep the gash had gone.

One last punch got me good and I dropped down to one knee, gritting my teeth. I wasn't ready to give up; I would've kept fighting. But they were done. They called out to each other and I can hear the girl's voice, then the slamming of car doors. The parking lot lit up with the blinding headlights as the car roared to life. Then it squealed off, its back end fishtailing on the slippery gravel. I didn't move for the longest time, until the parking lot returned to a quiet, almost eerie calm. For a brief moment, I chided myself. This dive was my favorite bar in the whole town. There's only two others so I figured I'd have to pick a new favorite. My hand was shaking and my knuckles are raw. I was sure one was probably broken as I dug around in my pocket for my car keys. A sharp pain shot up my arm when I moved, but I didn't know where the pain was coming from anymore. My whole body was starting to throb.

I was going to be a real mess in the morning.

It took me over two minutes to get moving and get into the truck. I slumped in the driver's seat of my old rusted out truck and slammed the door shut behind me. The cab lurches with the movement, which rubs my clothes against my wound in a painful way. I gritted my teeth as the pain

began to take over everything. My shirt was sticking to my skin with thick liquid and I knew I was bleeding. Not too much, but enough. I winced as I worked at pulling my shirt out of my jeans. The wound wasn't too deep or too long, I didn't think. Just a flesh wound that hurt like a bitch. I gritted my teeth to keep from making too much noise when I finally dragged the thick cotton up over the wound. I tried to be careful, but it was impossible not to disturb the area. I could feel a thick drop running down my side and even though I couldn't see it, I knew it probably needed a few stitches. I gave myself a minute to collect myself before reaching over and probing the wound with my finger.

“Fuck,” I hissed to myself as the pain throbs through my brain. I felt the ragged edges where the bottle gauged into me. An inch long at least. My finger brushed a sharp glass shard and I blew out a low, slow breath before I pulled it out. I squeezed my eyes shut as the pain rushed through me fast and hot. I deserved it, I know. I was a piece of shit and I deserved whatever pain I got. I was lucky that I didn't get it worse. But that didn't mean it didn't make me want to bash someone's brains in to lessen the pain. I flicked the thick little piece of glass out the window and leaned back in the creaky vinyl seat in the old truck. As the pain ebbed, I couldn't help but think about Austin again. Austin was the last time I was truly happy, I realized. I had my house, I had my nice truck, I had my freedom. Before Joanie, I had everything I thought I wanted. But the second I saw her, none of it was enough.

I rolled my shirt back down over the wound and pressed my hand against it, even though the pressure hurt like a bitch. The windows in the truck were all fogged up from my breathing and I couldn't see out to the frozen ground in front of me. The harsh wind whooshed and whistled outside, making the truck rock slightly with each gust. For the longest time, I just sat there, even though I knew I had to get home and fix myself up.

It was never bleaker than at that moment.

“Joanie,” I whispered, leaning forward and pressing my forehead against the cold, molded steering wheel. “Look what you've done to me.”

Chapter Eleven

I have to admit that I never really thought it would happen.

I never really thought that the day would finally come. I assumed something would happen, some catastrophe or some twist of fate or maybe just Mitch realizing that I wasn't who I was pretending to be. Or maybe I was hoping for someone else to intervene, someone I had never quite given up on. My mother put event announcements in Dallas, Seattle and Austin papers, at my request. I didn't know if he was still paying attention. I didn't know if he still cared. But I tried. I tried to send a message to him, somehow, because I was about to give myself to someone else. I was about to give up on him for good. I didn't know how much clearer it could be.

I was about to become another man's wife.

I sat in a chair in front of the mirror as they poked and prodded me, highlighted my cheekbones and filled in my lips and my brows. I sat as they curled my hair and sprayed it until it was hard to keep it from moving. I stood and let them help me into the heinously expensive but beautifully delicate wedding dress my mother and I had picked out months ago. It was my first time seeing it in over a month, since my last fitting. I hadn't really been paying attention then. I'd been distracted with my mother's questions about the guest list and the flowers and the food and all the other things that filled my brain. But as my mother and my sister-in-law Rosalie buttoned all the tiny pearl buttons up my back, I finally looked at it. Really looked at it.

It wasn't bright white – I'd made sure not to get a white dress. A white dress was further than I was willing to go. I may be a liar, but that just felt disrespectful. It was a soft ivory, and the bodice fit me perfectly and was hand-beaded with seed pearls. The dress was flat in the front and fitted close to my hips and thighs, but the train was yards of billowy silk that was lined with beads that glittered in the light. My arms were left bare and dusted with a lightly shimmering powder. My hair cascaded in perfectly coiled curls down my back. My grandmother's emerald and diamond necklace was around my neck, highlighting the graceful line of my collarbones and my cleavage, perfectly boosted by the bustier my mother

had insisted on. I stared at myself in the mirror as they fidgeted with me, fluffing my train, adjusting my hair.

I didn't look like myself at all. I looked like a bride in a movie – everything was too perfect. That was what my mother had planned of course. She'd hired the best makeup and hair artists and paid for the dress to be tailored within an inch of its life. This was her idea of a wedding. She wanted people to be in awe of me as I walked down the aisle. She wanted to parade me in front of everyone and let them know that I was her daughter. It was my own fault, of course. I'd given her complete freedom. Mitch had only requested that we serve salmon and that he didn't have to wear anything other than black and white. He was wrapped up in the construction of the house, which was almost finished. If everything went according to schedule, we would be able to move in when we got back from the honeymoon.

Everything was changing.

I couldn't deny it anymore. I couldn't pretend that I wasn't going to leave the condo that was filled with so many memories. I couldn't pretend that I wasn't going to be another man's wife. As soon as I walked down the aisle, I was giving up on Elliot. I was giving up my distant hope that he was going to come back for me. I didn't realize that I'd been hoping and praying for him to return until that very moment. I'd been putting it out of my mind, ignoring the longing and shoving it away. Ignoring how much I still wanted him. He wasn't in my dreams every night any more, but he was always there on the edge of sleep. I always was waiting to curl into his arms and wake up beside him.

I was still his slave.

“Countdown. We've got five minutes until aisle,” the wedding planner announced, poking his head into the room. “Bridesmaids, last looks then line up.” My mother checked her watch and I turned to my bridesmaids. My childhood best friends, Laura and Tonya, my cousins, Pilar and Julia, and my brother's wife Rosalie, stood before me, beautiful in rose gold satin knee-length dresses my mother had chosen. I'd been a bad friend to them, distant at times, downright unreachable at other times. But they were here now, on this most strange day of my life. I appreciated it.

“Tonya, your necklace is crooked,” my mother said. “Pilar, adjust your tatas.”

“Her tatas are fine, mamma,” I said. “They all look perfect.” I held out my arms and hugged each of them quickly, trying not to linger too much in the cloud of perfume and makeup and hairspray that we created as we grouped together. I didn't want to cry and I ruin my makeup so I pulled away and waved at them as my mother shooed them out of the room to meet the wedding planner. I could hear the organ music echoing through the church when the door opened. Finally it was my mother and I alone, for the first time all day. I didn't look at her because I didn't want to see her face. I didn't want to see the emotion on her face, the mixture of joy and sadness and the signs of reminiscing about long-past times when I was just her little girl. I expected all of that, but it was still hard to face it head on. I didn't want to have all of those emotions inside of me. I didn't want to explode with feelings. I wanted to control it as much as I could.

If I started crying, I might never stop.

I'd spent too much time building the dam, I didn't want it to burst.

“I feel like sometimes I don't know you anymore,” she said and I couldn't stop myself from looking at her then even though I didn't want to. “Sometimes I look at you and I don't see my daughter. I don't see the little girl that used to play dolls under the kitchen table. I don't see the girl who used to fall asleep at the foot of our bed when she had nightmares.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, even though I knew.

“You're so different,” she said, reaching out and adjusting my curls. Her long nails tickled the skin of my back. It reminded me of when I was a girl and she used to brush my hair before school. I felt the prickle of a tear in my eye and I wanted to pinch myself to make it go away. “I accept it. I accept that you want to live your own life. You may not think so, but I do.”

“I know, mamma,” I said, my throat getting tight.

“I just wanted to thank you for letting me be a part of this,” she said. “I loved every minute of planning this wedding with you.”

“I didn't do anything,” I said. “You did it all.”

“I did not!” she scoffed, smacking me lightly on the arm. “I only helped. But that's not what I was trying to say.”

“One minute,” the wedding planner popped in again, carrying my bouquet. My eyes widened when I saw it. It was a big unwieldy thing, made of roses and lilies and sprigs of greenery. It looked heavy and it was. I held it in front of me, trying to figure out the best way to carry it. The

photographer shot a quick blaze of photos, the shutter clicking around me. And then my father was in the doorway, tall and domineering in his black suit. He held out his arm and I took it, hooking my hand around his bicep. He was warm and solid, like always. He'd trimmed his mustache and shaved. He'd gotten a haircut. He looked ten years younger.

I couldn't let them down, I realized.

My family was expecting so much. I'd been running from their expectations for as long as I could remember and now I was stepping right into them, in an expensive dress and covered in flowers and gold dust. I was the princess that they'd always wanted me to be, getting married in the biggest Catholic church in Dallas, with hundreds of guests. I told myself I had to do it, I had to follow through. There was no other choice. But as the organ played the wedding march and my father accompanied me up the aisle, I could feel the panic rising. I smiled and nodded as I passed my relatives and my parents' friends, and Mitch's family and his colleagues and all the other people that I didn't even recognize.

I saw Mitch at the end of the aisle, standing with my brothers and his friends beside the priest. He was smiling and his eyes widened when he saw me. I knew he liked what he saw. I'd been fluffed and brushed and starved into the best version of myself. It was all fake, an illusion. The whole wedding was one beautiful, expensive illusion. But it felt very real as Mitch held out his hand for mine and I took it. I glanced back over my shoulder at the last moment, my eye settling on the huge double doors at the back of the church. For a long moment, I couldn't look away. I was waiting, even if I didn't want to admit it. I was marrying a dream man and I was given a dream wedding, but my eyes were on the door and I couldn't peel them away. Even as the ceremony started and we held hands and looked each other in the eye as the priest droned on, my attention was to the back of the church. As Mitch declared his undying love to me, I had one eye on the door, waiting for the man I hated the most in the world to come barging in. But Elliot never came.

There was no catastrophe.

There was no act of God.

Nothing stopped me from getting married, not even myself.

We went to the Mediterranean for our honeymoon. We spent two weeks exploring the coast, taking our time as we travelled from Italy to Greece. In Santorini, we stayed out all night on the beach and watched the sunrise. We made love in the mornings, the afternoons, and the evenings. Whenever we felt like it. We ate good food and drank good wine. It was the best honeymoon I could've hoped for. Mitch was the best husband I could've hoped for. Life was the best I could've hoped for. And for a few months, I thought I could make it work.

When the new house was finished, I packed up my condo and moved across town to be with my husband. I filled out a change of address form with the post office and then I put it up for sale. There was a bidding war for the little bungalow and it sold in less than a week. I never went back there again.

Three months after the wedding, Mitch started bringing up children. He'd mentioned it several times before we got married, here and there, and I would say something to appease him because I wasn't really interested in the topic. I hadn't considered having children in a long time. My capacity for being a mother had fled my body a long time ago, as far as I was concerned. I didn't have enough feeling left for my family and my husband, how would I have enough for a baby? I didn't think I would make a good mother, no matter how much of a good father Mitch would make. He was relentless, though. The topic never went away. When we went to restaurants, there were children. In the new neighborhood where we'd moved into a big new house with a three-car garage and five bedrooms, there were children riding their bikes and scooters up and down the sidewalks. Everywhere I went, from the coffee house to the farmer's market, there was a baby, staring up at me with innocent eyes from an overpriced stroller.

It was a conspiracy.

I dodged the question for as long as I could, but I was getting it on all sides. My mother joined the baby train of course, hinting and asking every chance she got. I learned to give careful answers. Never give an exact timeframe. Always push it off for a little longer. There was always something that had to come first. We had to settle in the house first. Mitch

had to get his new promotion first. We had to pay off the cars first. We should try getting a dog first.

Then suddenly, in the split of a second, none of it seemed to matter anymore.

On a Saturday morning in May, we were at home. He was on the big leather sectional couch in the living room watching his golf game and I was in the kitchen. It's funny now, but I can't remember what I was doing. I just remember us joking with each other. Well, I was joking with him because I didn't want to talk about children for the hundredth time.

"When we have our first boy, I won't be wasting time on the couch. We'll be out in the yard throwing the ball around," I remember him saying.

"You mean when we have our first dog?" I called back. "When we have our first dog you can play with him as much as you want."

"You keep talking about a dog," he replied and I was glad I couldn't see his face. I didn't want to see how affected he was by my change in subject. It was beginning to get harder and harder with him. "You better be careful, one of these days I'm going to bring one home."

"We'll see," I said. "You wouldn't know how to pick a good one. If I let you go by yourself, you'll come home with some little teacup rat who won't even know the meaning of catch."

"Well if I let you go, you'd come back with a pitbull who hated everyone but you," he tossed back.

"As long as he loved me, that's all that's important," I said, smiling at the thought of the hypothetical pitbull. It really did sound delightful.

The doorbell rang and I thought it was the delivery guy, bringing a stray wedding present. For months, we'd been getting stragglers from family and friends who couldn't attend. We were still swimming in our new house and every new gift still fit in the massive kitchen or in one of the half-empty rooms. The living room and dining room and our bedroom were all decorated, but Mitch's office and the sunroom and the bedroom we were turning into a workout room were all still a works in progress. I went to the door with a smile on my face expecting a new thing to find a use for. We still hadn't gotten the custom towels or the expensive wok I'd asked for, for example. I was completely blindsided by who I found instead.

"Joan Vasquez?" he said when I opened the door. "Do you remember me?"

"It's Stevenson," I said automatically, my shock making my muscles freeze and my stomach drop to the floor. "Joan Vasquez Stevenson."

"Oh," the man said, his furry white eyebrows knitting. "You got married. Congratulations." I stared at him, my hand poised on the doorknob. I was absolutely terrified, I know now. But at the time I just felt numb, like I'd been submerged in a pool of freezing water. There was only one reason the man was on my doorstep. He'd come bearing bad news. And I wasn't ready to know.

"Thank you," I whispered, then cleared my throat. "It's been a long time but I remember you, Detective." He looked a lot different than the last time he'd stood on my doorstep, almost three years ago. He looked older, more slumped over. The skin on his face seemed to hang and there were deep grooves around his mouth, like he hadn't smiled in years. He was wearing a rumpled overcoat and there were drops of water in his salt and pepper hair from the misty afternoon air. But I knew him.

"I, uh, I hate to impose, but do you mind if I speak to you a moment?" he asked, eyeing the fancy front entrance. I could understand why; I'd fallen in love with the house the first time I'd seen it, too. It was a brand new house, but Mitch had customized it. It had big windows and a wide door and a nice stone path that lead up from the street. The exterior was clad in cedar shingles that he said reminded him of his childhood summers spent in Maine. It was a nice house, to say the least. It was also a bit far from the small, modern condo I'd lived in the last time the detective and I had met. I'd come up in the world and, from all outer appearances, I was happy. I had gone through hell and come out the other side. I was a success story.

But he was about to shatter that illusion.

"Sure," I said after a moment, even though I would've rather slammed the door in his face. Curiosity was more pervasive than self-preservation, though, and I opened the door wide and stepped out onto the porch. The detective glanced past me into the house, but I pulled the door closed behind me so he couldn't see inside. I didn't want Mitch to be involved, but I had to know what the detective wanted. I knew I probably couldn't keep it hidden, but I wasn't thinking straight.

He jammed his hands in his pockets and hunched his shoulders as a breeze kicked up. I wrapped my arms around my chest even though the chill barely bothered me. I stared at him expectantly, toying with the ring on

my finger with my thumb. I'd lost more weight – the ring was looser. “I got a call from the FBI this morning,” he said. “I told them I would swing by and tell you the news.”

“What news?” I asked, blinking quickly to soothe the prickling sensation that burned in my eyes.

“They got a hit on Elliot Pritchard,” he said and, even though I expected it, it still felt like someone had just punched me in the head. “His fingerprints were run through the system two days ago.”

“Where?” I blurted out, digging my fingernails into my biceps. “Where is he?”

“It's uh... a bit complicated,” he said, clearing his throat and shifting his feet. “Apparently, he was working on a fishing rig out of Alaska.”

“Alaska,” I repeated dumbly. So that's where he'd been. Elliot was far, but not as far as I'd thought. In fact, it was downright close, compared to all of the places I'd imagined him being throughout the years. It was a quick plane ride away but it might as well have been across the world.

“About a week ago, a bad storm hit where his ship was anchored. They got hit pretty hard and the boat was damaged. Five men were lost.”

“What do you mean lost? What does that mean?”

“Their bodies haven't been recovered, but they're presumed dead,” he said, matter-of-factly. I didn't know if I wanted to shake him or thank him for his lack of emotion. I needed his levelheadedness, because at that moment, I felt like I was going to explode. Elliot couldn't be dead. I would know if he was dead, I told myself. I would feel it deep in my soul. For all those years, I'd been absolutely positively sure he was alive. Up until a minute before the detective had started talking, I'd been sure he was alive. But now my world felt like it was tilted askew. Everything I thought I knew was false. There was still hope, I told myself. Elliot was tough. He wouldn't go down without a fight. He would fight until the very last.

“They ran his fingerprints,” I said, grasping for all hope that Elliot wasn't one of the men who went overboard. “So that means they have to have him in custody?”

“Not exactly.” The detective dropped his head and I knew it wasn't good. I knew I had to get control of myself. If I didn't, I might give away something I didn't want to reveal, especially not to member of Seattle's finest. “When the ship was damaged, there were injuries onboard. Some

body parts were recovered. The authorities are working on identifying the men through the remains.” The detective pulled his hands out of his pockets, a pack of gum in one of his hands. “We got a hit on Pritchard right away.”

“Oh God,” I whispered, because I couldn't get ahold of myself in time. I bit down hard on my bottom lip, trying to keep the bile from rising in my throat. I felt my knees going weak, but I forced myself to keep standing as the cold reality hit me. Elliot was lost. There wasn't even a body to mourn over. He was in pieces. As I stood around my expensive house and laughed with my husband over silly things, he was cold and bloated and rotting.

“We never expected the search for Pritchard to take this long,” the detective continued. “We've... I've never stopped thinking about your case. Even all these years later.” I nodded at his words, even though they were barely registering. I could only think of Elliot's cruelly beautiful face and how he looked the last time I saw him, in the hospital. He'd been trying to tell me goodbye and apologize, but he couldn't. He didn't know how. So instead he'd left me. He'd left me all alone.

And now he was dead.

“I'm trying to quit smoking,” he said, holding up the pack. He offered it to me awkwardly, trying to be polite. I stared down at the pack of peppermint gum but I couldn't even think of a response. He shrugged and unwrapped a piece and popped it in his mouth. He slipped the pack back in his pocket. “I know it's kind of a shock,” he said. “I apologize for that. But I figured you'd want to know as soon as possible.”

“A shock, yeah,” I said, forcing myself to nod. “So... what if they find them? What if they're alive?”

“At this point, it's not considered a rescue mission,” the detective said, the scent of the peppermint wafting in my direction. “Apparently, this isn't as uncommon as it would sound. The seas are rough up there. Usually a few deaths every season, according to the guys on the ground.”

“I don't believe it,” I said. Because I couldn't. I couldn't imagine living in a world that didn't have Elliot in it. He'd been such a huge part of my life for so long. He'd been the sun that I'd been orbiting around, even though he was gone. I thought of him every day. Even on my goddamn wedding day, I'd been consumed with thoughts of him. It was always him. Always.

“Believe it,” the detective said, his voice low and comforting. “He's not going to threaten you ever again. He may have gotten away with it for awhile, but fate got the bastard, in the end.” I closed my eyes because it was becoming too hard to keep up the facade. It was becoming too hard to control myself and to not scream and to not destroy something, anything. I wanted to break something and hear it break. I wanted to see the world burn. “Sometimes we get lucky,” he said, eyeing me. “Even though he should've rotted in prison for life.”

“Jo?” Mitch's voice surprised me and I jerked my head to look at him. He was standing in the doorway, looking from me to the detective. “You okay?”

“Can I have a minute?” I asked him, not caring if it's rude or harsh. I couldn't regulate my tone. It was too difficult to hide the emotions when they were taking over. My self-control was gone.

“You're upset,” he said, taking another step out onto the porch. “I'm Mitch Stevensen, her husband,” he said, turning to the detective and holding his hand out. The detective took it and shook it, awkwardly.

“The name's Marshall,” the detective said and then looked at me. “But I've already taken up enough of her time. I think I'll be going.”

“What's this about?” Mitch asked. “What's going on?” He held his hand out and grasped my elbow lightly. I didn't move away from his touch because it felt good to have someone to lean on. I didn't know how much longer I'd be able to stand on my own. But I still didn't have all the answers I needed. I needed to know more and Mitch was standing in the way.

“Go inside,” I said, looking him in the eyes so he would know I was serious. “Please.” He shook his head, being stubborn at the worst time.

“You look like you saw a ghost.”

“I'm fine,” I said, stepping away from him. I steeled my spine and my tone. “I just need a few fucking minutes and then we'll talk.” He sucked in a breath at my tone and I almost regretted it. I almost regretted letting him see a glimpse of the real me. The real me who didn't give a shit about being polite or smoothing over hurt feelings. The real me who didn't give a fuck about doing what other people expected. The real me who only wanted what I wanted and didn't give a shit about the consequences.

The real me who was in love with a dead man.

"Fine," Mitch said and then he turned and went back into the house. I tugged on the ends of my hair until tears sprang in my eyes. When the door closed behind him, I addressed Marshall again because I had to know.

"I just want to know for sure if he's dead," I said the words carefully, slowly. So slowly that I almost choked on them.

"He's dead," Marshall said softly. "His body will be recovered eventually, but these things take time." I nodded, trying again not to think about his body floating in the vast sea, all alone. But that wasn't Elliot anymore. It was just a rotting corpse. "Don't think about it too much," Marshall said, as if that were going to comfort me.

"I won't," I said woodenly. "I haven't thought about him in a long time. I'm happy now and he can't take that away."

"That's right," Marshall said, but he didn't believe it any more than I did. "That's exactly right." He shrugged and I could tell he wanted to go. I didn't blame him. It was supposed to be happy news, news that would make me feel vindicated or something. A victim got justice. But I wasn't playing the role properly. I was being difficult.

"Thank you for coming out here and telling me in person," I said. "I appreciate it."

"Not a problem." He shrugged and his shoulders seemed to slope again. "I'll let you get back to it then." I nodded and then he stepped off the porch and back into the misty afternoon. I watched him and as he walked toward his dark sedan parked on the street, a thought occurred to me.

"Where's Wilson?" I called after him. "Detective Wilson, your partner?" I stepped off the porch, not caring that I was barefoot and in a thin T-shirt. I didn't feel the cold or the wet. "Are you still partners?" I hadn't thought of Wilson in a long time, but suddenly it seemed strange that he wasn't with Marshall. Marshall stopped in his tracks and looked back at me. "He gave me his card," I said lamely. "I think I still have it."

"We're not partners anymore," Marshall said. He reached into his front suit pocket and pulled out a white card. He walked back toward me and I noticed he had a slight limp. "Have my card," he said, holding it out to me.

"Is he still a cop?" I asked, taking the card.

"No," Marshall shook his head.

"That's too bad," I murmured, staring down at Marshall's white card. "He was nice."

“He's dead,” Marshall said, bluntly.

“What?” I said, a tremor of shock running down my spine.

“Three years ago or so,” Marshall said. “He went missing, body turned up in Oregon.”

“Jesus,” I muttered, a crazy thought wriggling its way through my brain. A crazy, ridiculous thought. “I'm so sorry.”

“I'm sorry, too,” Marshall said then continued on his way to the car. I watched him go, telling myself that it couldn't be. There was no way Elliot would've done it. There was no way he would've gotten the opportunity. There was no way Elliot would've risked it. But when I thought about that night in the hospital, the way he looked at me, the way he acted, I didn't know. I didn't know if it seemed too far-fetched. Maybe it was crazy. Maybe it was a coincidence. But I didn't believe in coincidence. Coincidence only looked like coincidence when all the facts weren't present. When all the things that led up to an incident weren't known and it looked like life was a game of chance. Elliot being on that boat was a chance. Wilson being dead for three years was a chance.

But there was a reason. There was a cause and an effect.

It rained today and tomorrow the grass would be green and the trees would be healthy. That was life. Even death was life. Wilson and Elliot were rotting. They were food for worms and flies and fish and whatever else. There was no coincidence.

I stumbled back into the house, tripping over the threshold because my feet felt heavy. I swung the door open and it hit the wall. Mitch was standing there but I barely saw him. I barely saw anything. All of a sudden, it was night. The daylight had faded. And I was on the floor, staring up at my husband as though he was a stranger. He might as well have been.

“Jo!” he said, shaking me, his hands bruising my shoulders. “What's the matter? What's going on?” He kept asking, but eventually I stopped hearing him.

And I didn't answer.

Chapter Twelve

Elliot's death made the local news in Texas and my mother called the day after Detective Marshall paid me a visit. I was in bed and the bedroom was dark even though the sun had already come up. The curtains were still pulled shut. I lay on my side, staring at the corner of the wall. That day was kind of a blur, as were the days after it. I felt like I couldn't get up or move or think. It didn't feel like there was a point. I closed my eyes and I could pretend that I was back in my old bedroom and Elliot was there next to me, his chest bare and the sheet riding low on his hips. I could pretend that nothing had changed and that no time had passed. I stretched my hand out for him, brushing my fingers against the pillow instead of his face. But I wished it was his skin. I wished I could touch him again.

I felt like I had betrayed myself. He was such a close part of me, I was sure I would be able to feel his presence. I would be able to know if he was gone. But I couldn't sense it. He'd died alone and I'd had no idea. I didn't have a clue and I didn't know what it meant. Maybe I didn't love him as much as I thought I had. If I'd really loved him, I should've gone looking for him. I should've gone anywhere to find him. But I'd been so stubborn. I'd been so angry at him that I'd tried to pretend that I didn't love him anymore. I'd tried to pretend that he didn't mean anything to me and I'd let him go. Because of my stubbornness, he'd died in a horrible way without knowing how much he meant to me. Without knowing how important he was.

He died without me.

"Joan," Mitch said, his voice soft and close to my ear. I could feel his weight behind me on the bed. "You need to stop this," he said. "It's not good for you." I didn't answer him because I couldn't. My mouth felt sewn shut. He didn't talk for awhile and I wasn't sure if he'd left or not. I felt the weight of a hand on my hip and I closed my eyes again, pretending it was Elliot. If I slept, I could dream of him. If I kept my eyes closed and the lights dim, I could pretend nothing had changed and no time was passing.

"Blanche is on the phone," Mitch said, his voice cutting through the ether. He patted my hip and then pressed the back of his hand to my cheek.

I could feel the cold metal of his wedding band on my skin. I shook my head because I didn't want to talk to anyone. I wanted them to go away, all of them. I didn't want to talk. I didn't want to think. I didn't want to act or put on a show for someone else's comfort. I didn't have it in me. If Elliot wasn't in the world, I didn't want to be either. "She's worried about you," my husband said, like that meant something. Everybody was worried all the time. It didn't mean anything. "Who's Elliot Pritchard?" he asked and I finally snapped into something. It wasn't life, but it was something.

"Don't say his name," I croaked.

"Will you talk to her? Please talk to her," he said, sweeping my hair off of my forehead. I held up my hand for the phone, wondering what else my mother had told him. I doubt she'd told him the whole story, but I couldn't be sure. Once she started talking, she wouldn't stop, especially if she was worried about me.

"Momma," I said, swallowing to soothe my ragged throat.

"Joan, what is going on?" her voice cut through the haze and I didn't like it. I wanted to be hazy. I wanted to be out of it. I didn't want to be in reality anymore but my mother was a splash of cold reality on my face. "Mitch says you've been in bed for days."

"What did you tell him?" I said, digging my free hand into the pillow, my fingers like claws.

"What did I tell who? Joanie, baby, I saw that that bastard died. Me and daddy saw it on the nightly news," she said. "That bastard died and I didn't want to crowd you, but I'm glad. I'm glad he's dead, baby." I didn't reply, just let her words wash over me. I stared at the curtains and the fabric fluttered, lightly. "Come back to Dallas. Come for a few days. Me and daddy and the boys, we'll all have a good time."

"I can't, momma," I said. I couldn't imagine getting out of that bed. I couldn't imagine going back out into the world, with its harsh sounds and smells and people. "I'm fine."

"You're not fine. Mitch says you're not eating, you're sleeping all day. You're scaring everybody."

"Who's everybody?"

"Everybody that cares about you," she said, her tone so pleading that it hurt. I pulled the phone away from my ear and tossed it away from me. I couldn't handle it anymore. I didn't want to handle her pain or her concern. I

could hear her voice, crackling through the phone, but I ignored it. Mitch reached for it, leaning over me and scooping it up.

“Hang up,” I whispered, but he didn't listen. He got off the bed and I heard him speaking to her in hushed, harried tones, but I couldn't make out the words. I didn't care anymore. “Get out,” I said but he didn't listen. I sat up and pulled my nightgown over my head. It smelled like me, too much. But the bed smelled like me too, now. I couldn't smell Mitch at all. I tossed the thin fabric aside and tossed aside the blankets, too. I sat there, waiting for his reaction as he turned to look at me. He was speaking low into the phone, low enough that I couldn't hear, even in the quiet room. “Hang up,” I repeated. He caught my eyes and dropped them to look at my nakedness.

“I'll call you back, Blanche,” he said quickly. Then he slid his phone into his pocket and stared at me like I'd grown two heads.

“What did she tell you?” I asked.

“Why don't you tell me?” he said, keeping his distance. “I want to know what's going on with you.” I held out my arms and spread open my legs.

“Nothing's going on,” I lied, and I knew he knew I was lying. There was no denying that I wasn't acting myself. I wasn't acting like the woman he'd married. “Do you want to fuck?”

“Jesus, Jo,” he said, scowling. He wasn't happy with me. If he had his way, I would snap out of it and go back to being the woman I was before the doorbell had rung and Detective Marshall had shown up. Maybe I would go back to that woman, I mused. Or maybe I would jump out of the window. He walked to me, but ignored my outstretched arms. He grabbed the blankets and threw them over my nakedness. “Your mother wants to hop on a plane and fly up here. I told her that it wasn't necessary. Was I wrong?”

“I don't care,” I said, laying back on the pillows and throwing my arms above my head.

“Was I wrong, Jo?” he asked, leaning over me, planting his hands on either side of my ribs and looking me right in the face. “Why are you shutting me out like this?” I reached up and slid my hands under his T-shirt. If I closed my eyes I could pretend. Mitch was lean and wiry, not as muscled and chiseled as Elliot, but I could pretend. I just felt a deep need to be with him, I realized, as I raised my knees and tried to pull him down on top of me. I wanted to be filled, to be taken, to be pushed into the mattress

and held down. I needed someone to take control, to force me to submit. That's the only way I would be able to function again, I thought. It had always worked before.

But my husband didn't want to play along.

I clawed and shoved at him, trying to make him react to me in the way I wanted. He grabbed my wrists, tightly and painfully, and shoved them away but I didn't stop. I didn't stop coming for him. "Goddammit," he hissed, when I cupped his bulge through his jeans and squeezed. "What do you want from me?"

"I want you inside me," I said, because I didn't feel like sugar-coating it. I could've finessed it, but I didn't have any finessing left in me. "I want you to be rough. I want to be your whore."

"I don't get this," he said, grabbing my wrists again, harder this time, and flinging them away from him. "I don't know why you're doing this."

"It's not about you," I said, harshly, and I realized my mistake instantly. He pulled away, sliding off the bed and standing. He stared down at me with hurt and angry eyes. He was trying to make it better for me but I wasn't going to let him. I needed to wallow in it. And even though I was wet and aching just from the thought of him, it wasn't him. He wasn't who I needed. No matter how much I tried to make him into the man I needed, he wasn't. He was just a man when I needed a devil. I rolled over and pressed my face against the pillow. I heard him leave the room and I didn't care. I didn't care if he ever came back again. For the first time since I'd heard about Elliot, I felt my eyes tearing up.

I didn't stop it.

I let it out.

I let myself mourn.

It took another two days before the loneliness and the silence got to be too much.

I woke up in the middle of the night. The room was pitch black and there was a chill in the air and I tried to unconsciously move closer to Mitch in bed only to find that he wasn't there. I threw the blankets off and set my feet on the floor. My nipples hardened and goosebumps broke out over my

bare skin as I stood. My hair hung limply over my shoulders as I walked to the door. I grabbed my thin robe off of the hook and slipped it on. I didn't bother belting it as I wandered out into the dark hallway in search of my husband.

I found him on the couch in the living room, the TV still on and bathing the room in a pale blue glow. He was on his back, his hand thrown above his head and his legs crossed at the ankles, like he hadn't planned on falling asleep there. I studied his face. It was familiar but still strange. For the last few days, I'd been so focused on a ghost – trying to remember his touch, his face, his body. Mitch was right in front of me. I had always been a pragmatic sort. I didn't like to wallow in self-pity. If I had, I would've probably offed myself a long time ago. It would've been too much. I was lucky that I had learned how to survive. I'd learned how to make feelings small inside of me and lock them away. I'd done it before; I could do it again.

I wasn't going to go down with the ship.

I slid on top of him, straddling him. I did it as gently as possible, not trying to wake him just yet. He was a heavy sleeper anyway. He barely budged as I pressed my ear to his chest and listened to his heartbeat. It thumped against me, the sound pinning me to the natural world. We were both alive. There was love between us and familiarity. That wasn't a small thing. It could be everything if I wanted it to be.

“Jo,” he whispered, his voice rough with sleep. I felt his hands slid into my hair and I hugged him close, letting his warm seep into me.

“I'm sorry,” I said, even though I wasn't. I had some shit to work through and I'd done it, but I wasn't sorry. I was only relieved that the grief had worked its way out of me. Or that it'd become manageable, anyway. I could move again. I could speak. I would be fine.

“You don't have to tell me what happened,” he said “Not yet. But don't do that to me ever again, Jo. I couldn't stand it.”

“I won't, baby,” I whispered, pressing a kiss to the spot right above his heart. Then I straightened up so that I could look down at him. His face was still in shadow, the flickering blue of the TV making it difficult to see his features. “Do you want to know who he was?” He stared up at me, running his hands up my thighs slowly. I knew he wanted to know. I knew he wanted to know the whole story. I swallowed hard, wondering if I was

going to be able to tell it. It wouldn't be the whole story, of course. Just the talking points, the ones available in the public record. But I forced myself, because I had to. It would be the final test. Elliot was dead now. I didn't have to keep his secrets anymore.

"Who was he?" Mitch asked. I slid my fingers around his wrist and dragged his hand up to my breast, moving aside the fabric of the robe. I ran his fingers across the raised scar there.

"This is him," I said. "And the ones on my legs and my ribs and my wrists. Everywhere." Mitch didn't say anything. He just stared up at me but I saw his face harden as he figured it out. "He was the first one, anyway," I said. "The one who made me like this."

"What does that mean?"

"He kidnapped me. He raped me. He hurt people." I let his hand go and he let it drop to my thigh again. "He was a bad man."

"Blanche told me," Mitch said, swallowing. I saw his Adam's apple jump under his skin. Then he sat up and brought his face close to mine. "She told me what that piece of shit did to you."

"I figured she did." I shrugged lightly and the robe slipped off my shoulder.

"She wants you to go back to a therapist," he said. "Or back to Dallas."

"I'm not going back," I said. "I've dealt with it. It's in the past now."

"It's not, Jo," he shook his head. "Don't you see that?"

"He's dead." It was hard to say it out loud, but I managed. I told myself this was the last time I would ever have to talk about him. I told myself this was the last time anything about him would cross my lips. I'd said all that I was going to say.

"So that's it?" He tightened his hands into fists and I knew it wasn't enough for him. He wanted to go beat someone up, kick someone's ass. He wanted to get revenge for me, to defend my honor. But there was no one to beat. There was no one to get revenge on. I'd robbed him of that. I'd also hoodwinked him into marrying a stranger. He was realizing that he didn't really know who I was. He was thinking of all the other things I'd never told him. He was thinking of all the other men who'd come before him and how they'd fucked me and fucked me up.

"This is why I didn't tell you," I said.

“Goddammit, Joan,” he hissed and I did the only thing I knew how to do. I kissed him. For a second, I was afraid he wouldn't kiss me back. But then he pulled me close and our mouths clashed together, like a fight. He shoved my robe off and I pulled his T-shirt over his head. He pushed me down onto the couch. We'd never fucked on the big, custom, expensive sectional couch my parents had bought us for a wedding present, I realized. There was always a first time for everything. It was soft and the leather was cold against my back. I sucked in a breath through my teeth and arched my back as he lowered himself over me. I needed it, I realized. I needed him inside of me. I needed to be close to someone again.

I moaned as he pushed into me, slowly and gently at first. But I tightened my thighs around his hips and urged him on. He buried his face in my neck, breathing hard with every thrust of his hips. I closed my eyes, digging my fingers into his back and let him have me. I let him have every inch of my skin. I finally gave it to him. For a minute, I could almost pretend it was Elliot. I could pretend that it was his big body on top of mine, his big cock inside of me, and his big love suffocating me in the best way. I remembered the last time we'd made love in my bed. How I'd felt so complete and wrapped up in him. How I couldn't see past him. How I couldn't imagine living without him. I let that feeling take me over and I gasped and moaned and held my lover tight, the tension building and building until it exploded.

As I came, I came with Elliot's name in my mind and Mitch's name on my lips.

I said my last goodbyes.

As I settled on top of my husband and he wrapped his arms around me and held me close, I banished Elliot from my thoughts and I buried him in my heart. I let him go.

Forward, I told myself. Move forward. And I took my own advice.

I played my role. I woke up in the morning. I got dressed. I went to work. I loved my husband. I laughed and kissed him and made love to him. We did the things we'd always done.

We never did get a dog, though.

A few months later, when everything was as close to normal as it had ever been and enough time had passed to make him almost forget the bad things, we lay together in our big bed. It was eleven o'clock on a

Wednesday. The nightly news played on the TV. We were both close to sleep and Mitch lay behind me with his arm draped around my waist and his breath on my neck. I was comfortable in his embrace, not mistaking the comfort anything more than it was, but feeling loved and appreciated all the same. I was making myself happy with the present, making myself happy with what I had and not focusing on what I didn't have. The denial of my true nature was coming easier and easier with each passing day. Or so I liked to tell myself.

“Joanie,” he said in my ear, his voice deep and warm. “I want to try again.”

“You promised me a pitbull,” I whispered in response.

“I mean it,” he said. “Soon. I'm tired of waiting.”

I knew that he'd been patient with me. I knew that I'd been selfish and thought only of myself. The whole marriage had been like walking a tight-rope between his expectations and my hidden self. Trying not to plunge to my death was always the goal. And I was tired. I thought about that little boy playing in Elliot's lawn. I thought about him running around and giggling and screaming. I thought about his mother, smiling and happy and innocent, looking at him like he was her whole life. A lot of thoughts ran through my head, but then all of a sudden, it was like someone had turned the TV off. My brain went static and white noise roared in my ears. I stared ahead at the wall and before I knew it, I was opening my mouth and words were coming out.

“Yes,” I murmured. “Let's have a baby.”

Chapter Thirteen

I'm cursed.

Things are never simple. Not for me, that is. Having a baby seemed like the easiest thing at first. When I decided I wanted to get pregnant, I thought it would be instantaneous. A male and a female fuck and the natural order of things takes over. Teenagers do it. Forty year old divorcees do it. Married and affluent women in their late twenties do it all the time. Every time I talked to my mother on the phone, she told me of another one of my old high school friends she'd seen around town. They always had a baby on their hip or a rambunctious five year old who ran circles around the local Target as their mother chatted with my mother.

I told myself that if I wanted it enough, I would be able to have it.

That was another mistake on my part.

Anything that I ever wanted, I didn't get. Mitch and I made love often enough that it was beginning to feel like a chore, but every month when my period would come, I felt something dissolving in myself a little bit more. A little bit of the wall I'd built up to maintain my sanity would crumble. I started doing yoga, convinced that my daily swimming was too strenuous. I cut out all red meat and wine, convinced I had to be healthier. I was making life harder on myself and I knew it, but I couldn't stop. I became obsessed, I can admit. The baby I had never wanted before suddenly seemed so important and I couldn't understand why. Ultimately, it didn't matter why. I wanted a baby and I would do anything to make it happen.

I finally made an appointment with a doctor to find out if the problem was mine. Mitch seemed too healthy. His cock was always hard for me. He was healthy as a goddamn horse. I somehow knew it was me. But I didn't want him to know. I didn't want him to look at me like I was any more defective. I kept it a secret because I didn't know any other way. I felt like I was coming undone at the seams. I had to know. Having a baby had become so important to me. I didn't know how to explain it then and I don't know how now. It just felt like I had a hole in my soul that needed to be filled. I

wanted my belly to swell with life. I wanted to hold my child to my breast. Love would fill me, I knew it. I would love that baby more than life itself.

“You can put your clothes on the hanger in the closet,” the nurse said, pointing out the mirrored door to the left of the examining table. “You can leave your bra on, okay? There's a smock for you on the counter.” She smiled pleasantly at me and I returned a smile, despite the fact that my stomach was in knots. “The doctor will be with you shortly.” I nodded and she left me alone in the bright room, modern exam room. She closed the door behind her and I pinched my the skin of my arm until tears pricked in my eyes. This doctor was the best. I knew that. I knew I would have an answer soon, for better or worse.

I undressed quickly and put on the cotton smock they'd provided. I hopped up on the tall table, my legs swinging like I was a kid again. I pinched myself again and again, trying to force myself to think of mergers and acquisitions and all the minutia of my job. I had taken the rest of the day off, but the thought of having to go home to my big empty house after getting potentially bad news was making me nervous. I didn't have anyone to share with, no confidant. I only had myself and I wasn't always the best company. Sometimes I was destructive. Too destructive. “Mrs. Vasquez?” A bright voice cut through my thoughts. I glanced up at the doctor and sucked in a deep breath.

I wasn't ready but I had to be.

The doctor was calm, cool and efficient and I instantly felt at ease. She didn't bother with a lot of niceties. She got right down to business. She poked, pressed and prodded. She gave me an ultrasound. The exam wasn't anything out of the usual and I tried to force myself to relax. I lay there with my feet in the stirrups and stared up at the rounded light fixture until the brightness hurt my eyes. Then I counted the ceiling tiles and tried to focus on everything else but what the doctor was doing. She made a little noise, a little noise of concern, and my attention was instantly focused on her.

“What? What is it?” I asked, digging my manicured nails into my palms.

“Just something out of the ordinary,” the doctor said, glancing up at me over the purple frames of her glasses. “Nothing to concern yourself about.” I blinked and set my head back against the vinyl of the table, but I didn't

feel comfort. Instead my stomach twisted again. I pressed my palms against my flat stomach, wondering what she was feeling. I wondered what wasn't ordinary about me. I wondered what was different about me. It was hidden deep inside, but maybe she could see it. Maybe the ugliness was making its way out.

Finally, she sighed and pushed back on her wheeled stool. She patted my knee and stood. "You can sit up now, Joan," she said. I did as she requested, pressing my knees together and setting my hands on top of them because I didn't know what else to do with them.

"What is it?" I asked, because I could see there was something bothering her. I could see it on her face. She pulled off her gloves and tossed them in the bin beside the sink. Then she took off her glasses and folded them up. She slid them in her pocket and then, finally, looked at me.

"I'm going to ask a sensitive question, but I want you to know that everything in here is privileged." Her eyes softened and I could've sworn there was pity behind them. I didn't like that look. I didn't like it at all. "No one is going to know."

"Of course," I said, impatient. I knew it wasn't good. I had known it all along.

"Have you ever been raped, Joan?" she said, matter-of-factly. I let out the breath I'd been holding and it felt like my whole body deflated.

"Why," I asked.

"Scar tissue," she said. "You have a build up of scar tissue on your cervix and uterus. Most likely from trauma."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that getting pregnant is going to be extremely difficult." She set her hand on the countertop. "Everything else seems to be fine. Your ovaries are fine. You're producing eggs regularly, just like you should be. This is definitely a setback, but this isn't the end of your journey. Pregnancy's not impossible but a natural pregnancy is unlikely. We could come up with a plan for you, for procedures and hormones. A surrogate might also be an option." With every word she said, I was feeling more and more cold. It started in my chest first and spread down my legs. I knew she was just trying to make me feel better. She was trying to make me feel like there was hope. But it was artificial.

I was ruined.

He'd finally succeeded in doing what he'd started all those years ago.

He was still haunting me, no matter how much I'd tried to forget him and leave him behind. He was inside of me now, clawing his way out. He was still intent on destroying anything I could build with another man. He didn't want me to be with anyone else. He didn't want me to live. He didn't want me to have any baby that wasn't his.

I was still his slave, whether I wanted to be or not.

There was no cure for that. There was no injection or shot or diet that would change it. I was his. I always had been and I always was. There was no use pretending otherwise. There was no use denying it. There was nothing else.

Just me and him, a dead man.

That night, as my husband lay sleeping in bed, I went in the bathroom and shut the door. I didn't cry; I couldn't. Crying was pointless. It wouldn't change anything. But something had to be done to get the evil out. I had to take action or else it would consume me. I could feel him inside of me. I could hear his voice in my ear. I could feel his fingers on my neck. I pulled myself up on the stone counter beside the sink, facing away from the mirror. I found one of Mitch's replacement razors and the bottle of rubbing alcohol. I disinfected the blade and then the spot on the inside of my thigh. It was a clean spot, a smooth spot. A spot that had never been damaged before. I felt the need to ruin it, to slice it open. To make a new scar, a new reminder.

And so I did.

Chapter Fourteen

So that's it. That's my story.

Three years, two dead men, one wedding, and no baby.

For someone who's not even thirty yet, I'm tired. I can't sleep at night. I lay awake and stare at the windows, looking for an exit. I have a big house to get lost in but I spend time driving around the city. I love my car, but it's a one-sided affair. When I'm home, I feel like a robot. I smile on command, laugh on command, fuck on command. My body gains a new scar every other day, but the pain and the blood doesn't bring me any closer to enlightenment. It doesn't bring me any closer to ending it, either. The time came for more drastic action.

It took me a long time, but I've finally come looking for him.

It's colder than I imagined it would be, maybe because I couldn't have imagined cold this pervasive. I'm chilled all the way down to the marrow of my bones. I haven't been this cold ever in my life. But I don't stop. I make my way across the rocky cliff toward the overlook, taking my time so I don't trip on the jagged stones with my heeled boots. The sea stretches out in front of me, darkening to black at the edges of the horizon. It's so vast I can barely comprehend it. I can see the fishing ships, so far out that they're only little black figures, no bigger than a fingernail. There's a thin railing that runs the length of the cliff and I grab ahold of it, clutching it like a lifeline.

This is where Elliot spent his last days.

This little town in Alaska, on the edge of the world and in the middle of nowhere, was where he'd lived. I'd driven past the shitty apartment building where he'd lived. It was rented out to someone else now, another man who worked on the ships, so I didn't even get to go inside and see where he'd slept and showered and eaten. This is all I get. The vast sea where he died is all that's left of him. It's the only grave I have to visit.

I have no doubt that he hated it here. The thought gives me some comfort as I stare down below at frothy waves crashing against the rocks. I came here to be with him but the joke is on him, really. He would've hated

to be stuck here. He was a southern boy from the top of his head to the tip of his boots. He lived and breathed the dry heat. He hated Seattle and I know for a fact he hated this piece of shit town, with its two bars and one main road. The work on the fishing boat was probably the only thing that kept him sane. His idle hands were most definitely devil's play things. It was better for him to keep his mind focused on work.

No one in town seems to know him, beyond his picture. They don't know who his friends were or if he was fucking somebody or whether or not he liked football or hockey. The only thing they could tell was that he preferred Miller lite over Coors, and I could've told them that. He was smart about it, I'll grant him that. He kept to himself and didn't make trouble. He'd evaded capture for so long, it was almost commendable. I don't think either of us thought he would make it that long. I was starry-eyed and foolish when it came to him, but I wasn't a complete idiot. I knew it was going to end badly, I just didn't want to accept it because I was too obsessed with him.

I'm still obsessed.

The waves below are so loud I can barely focus on anything else. It's like they're calling me. It's not until that moment that I realize what I really came here for. The wind whips my hair around and it's almost like I can hear him whisper to me. The voice taunts me. It urges me forward. The salt-rusted metal rail isn't a deterrent. There's nothing stopping me. I could climb over it easily and walk to the edge. I could jump and let the wind carry me to him and then my body would break on the rocks below. At least then it would all be over. The universe is angry with me for disturbing the flow of things. It's punishing me. He's punishing me. I know I've made mistakes and fucked up and I know that Elliot deserved what he got, but that doesn't make it easier. I want to know what I deserve. I want to hear him say it. I want to know how much more I have to suffer.

Jump, the voice whispers again.

The bastard is insistent.

“How was the trip?” he asked, not even bothering to glance up from his iPad. His bare feet are propped up on the coffee table in the living room.

There's a dirty plate beside his crossed ankles and a half-empty coffee cup.
He looks comfortable.

“Lovely,” I say, not bothering to stop on my way up to the bedroom.
No kiss hello. No hug. Not even a look exchanged.

I tell myself I'll be better tomorrow.

Turns out I've just gotten better at lying to myself.

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Chapter Fifteen

I hate how time passes without my permission.

I wished it could've stopped a long time ago, but I haven't pinpointed the exact time in which I want to be suspended. I used to wish that I'd never met him, so I dreamed of being back at that last blissfully ignorant moment in the Blue Mermaid right before he ruined everything. I was having such a good night with friends. I felt sexy and young and like the world was at my fingertips. I was free. That used to seem like the perfect moment in time, forever golden in my memory.

Now I wasn't so sure when was I truly happiest. Now it felt suspiciously like the stolen moments in my old condo, where we lay in bed all day in each other's arms and staring into each other's eyes and rarely speaking, were the best times in my life. I know that's crazy and my brain and my heart fight are at war all the time. But I can't help it. I hate him and love him and miss him more than anyone else that I've ever met. There's only one person who can inspire such conflicting feelings in me, even from beyond the grave. And I can't let the memory of him go.

I should've jumped. I should've let the sea have me.

I think about it everyday and there's been many days since I got back from Alaska. Forty-eight to be exact.

I pull into the garage and watch the automated door slowly close behind me in the rearview, the darkness of the night being shut out inch by inch. I sit there for a minute in the running car, my hands on the leather steering wheel. Part of me wants to pull back out again and leave but I force myself to sit still until the desire passes. This is my struggle every night. Every night I come home from work and question myself. I question the routine every morning too, when I wake up. Why am I still here? Why am I still going through the motions? Since I got back from Alaska, I've been feeling directionless. Despite the temptation, I have no idea where I'd go. I thought Alaska would've been the answer, but it wasn't. I'm still alive and I'm not sure why, but Alaska still looms heavy in my memory. I've been cold ever since. I can't get warm.

Part of me knows I should've done it. I was a coward, though. If I'd been strong, I wouldn't be here, right now, rehashing a million old thoughts in my mind. I should've known that I'll never be free. But what's done is done. Now, I just have to learn how to manage myself. If I can't kill myself, I have to figure out how to cope with this life. I know I have to start acting normal again. Mitch deserves that much at least. He deserves the woman he married to come back. I don't know if I can keep up the act though. Everyday, the facade cracks more and more. I feel like all the death and darkness inside of me is starting to spill out. Pretty soon, it'll take over everything, like a big black ocean that is too powerful and too vast to contain.

I turn the key in the ignition, and the low, comforting purr of the engine cuts off abruptly. I catch my eyes in the rearview mirror and lift an eyebrow. A challenge, I tell myself. I'm going to go inside my beautiful home. I'm going to make my husband a perfect meal. I'm going to serve him a full plate as I nibble on vegetables in order to maintain my perfect waistline. Then I'm going to fuck him in the middle of our big bed, good enough that he'll know that I'm not going anywhere. Good enough that he'll know I'm back to normal and I love him just as much as I ever did. And then we'll go to sleep and do it all over again tomorrow. Someday it won't be work. Someday it will just be normal. And I will love it.

This is my nightly pep talk.

Someday I won't need it, I tell myself as I grab my purse and briefcase off the passenger seat. Someday it'll be as natural again as it was in the beginning. And the quiet, never-ending ache at the pit of my soul will go away. Or, at the very least, I'll get better at ignoring it. I slide out of the car, my heels clicking loudly in the vast emptiness of the garage. Mitch's SUV is parked next to my coupe, but there's still room for a third car in the big garage. Maybe this weekend we'll go looking for that sports car he's been wanting. I'll even go on a test ride with him and let him put the top down, despite the fact it'll ruin my hair. As I slam the car door shut, I make a mental note to mention it during dinner. I've long since given up my restrictive diet and there's two steaks in the fridge, I remind myself. And enough vegetables for a good salad. There should be a lot of red wine as well. That's the most important part.

I make my steaks bloody, so it shouldn't take too long. I turn my wrist to check my watch. It's eight. We should be in bed by ten. Blowjob by 10:15, pussy by 10:20. He'll be asleep by eleven. He'll drift off to sleep with a smile on his face and he'll have good dreams, I bet. I jingle my keys in my hand as I walk to the door that leads to the hallway off the kitchen. I feel calmer already, knowing that I have a game plan. I'm going to be a good wife tonight, I tell myself. I'll be the wife my mother always wanted me to be.

The house is quiet and dark, which is odd. I can't hear the television and the hall light isn't on. He might be back in his office, I tell myself, as I hang my keys and bag on the hooks against the wall. I kick off my shoes on the mat and shrug off my blazer. I toss it on one of the brown leather bar stools that surround the massive granite kitchen island. I flick on lights as I go, turning on the hall light and then the kitchen light. I see Mitch's keys on top of the microwave, along with his wallet. Without thinking, I grab it and open the slim leather billfold, checking the pocket. He has fifty in cash, a receipt for gas, and a lottery ticket, folded in half. I can't help but chuckle. The man still buys a lottery ticket every time he goes to fill up. He's richer than my father, and yet, he still can't help himself. He still has to play the odds. I think it's a waste of money, but I suppose it could be worse. Spending five bucks on a lottery ticket is low on the list of offenses a husband could commit.

There's an open bottle of red on the counter and it's calling my name. I don't bother finding a glass. I take a swig directly from the bottle and close my eyes as the sweet but sour liquid hits my tongue. I needed the drink more than I thought. I swallow and drink more, being sloppy about it. I feel the drop as it escapes out of the corner of my mouth, but I can't stop it before it drips onto my cream silk blouse, right above my left tit. "Fuck," I murmur, setting the bottle back on the counter. That's what I get, I tell myself, as I stare down at the crimson stain as it seeps into the expensive fabric like it's laughing at me. I grab a paper towel and dab at it, but I know it's useless. It's an easy fix; I could send it to the cleaners and they'd deal with it. But I'm pissed about it. I run my fingertip over the round stain, like that will make it magically appear. I eye the knives in the chopping block beside the stove. Part of me wants to rip the blouse off and slice it up into a

million jagged strips of fabric. I could throw it away – ball it up and shove it to the bottom of the trash bin – before Mitch ever saw it.

It's been one of those days.

A thumping sound from upstairs draws my attention away from the knives. I glance up at the ceiling, wondering what Mitch is up to. Our master bedroom is directly over the kitchen and breakfast nook, so I know he's in there. Maybe he's changing his clothes. He sometimes goes to the gym after work and likes to shower when he gets home. Another thump and the blown glass pendant lights over the kitchen island sway slightly, back and forth. I step out into the foyer in my stockinged feet and glance up the staircase. The foyer is dark and I reach over and search for the light switch on the wall. The chandelier above me sparks to life, showering me and the staircase with light.

“Baby?” I call up the stairs. “I'm home.” I glance in the big gilded mirror on the opposite wall. I run my hand through my hair and arrange it prettily on my shoulder. I curled it this morning, and some of the curls are still springy. Mitch likes it when I curl my hair. It reminds him of our wedding day, when I let my hair hang down my back in a dark cascade of glossy ringlets. That was when I was the most beautiful girl in the world to him because I was all his. He likes that fantastical version of me. I can't blame him. I like her, too. She's prettier than me, she's simpler than me, and she doesn't have the disgusting and violent thoughts that I have. She's an empty shell, but she's pleasant and lovable. She's a good wife. I can be that for him. The more I try, the easier it'll be. It'll be like slipping on an old dress, like the ones that still hang in my old bedroom closet in my parents' house.

“I'll make you dinner,” I call out, my eyes still on myself in the mirror. I cover the stain in my blouse with my hair. It's always so easy to cover up flaws. Too easy. “Does that sound good?” I run my thumb over my lower lip, wondering if I should reapply my lipstick. It's faded a bit but still visible. After a moment of studying myself, I realize that Mitch hasn't answered. I set my hand on the polished wood of the bannister and place my foot on the bottom step, ready to go up and find him. But then I freeze as our bedroom door opens and light spills out onto the top step. I raise my head to catch his eyes, a smile already forming on my lips without me even having to think about it.

But it's not my husband.

A dark figure walks out of the bedroom, his heavy boots clomping loudly, even on the thick, expensive carpet. My heart and my lungs go still between my ribs as the information gets translated by my brain, a few seconds too late. The man isn't Mitch. It's someone else, someone bigger and shirtless and wearing loose black pants. He's lean and cut with muscle and he's wearing black gloves. Bright red is painted across his chest and his face and his arms. He has black gloves on his hands and in he's carrying something. It isn't until the light catches the blade that I realize it's a knife. He has a knife in his hand and he's covered in blood.

I hear a loud, shrill sound and it spurs me to action. It's only when I'm turning and running that I realize that I screamed. My throat is raw and I can barely breathe, but I don't stop. I run back into the kitchen, grabbing ahold of the edges of the countertops as I slip and slide on the slick wood floor. I wish I had taken off my shoes, but it's too late now. I run into the breakfast nook and go for the french doors that lead to the backyard. We keep a key in the deadbolt and I turn it quickly, as fast as I can with my shaking hands. It seems like it takes forever for the door to open. I can barely hear anything but I can feel the vibration of him behind me. He's catching up.

The grass is wet under my feet but I don't care. I run across the lawn, as fast as I can, even though I slip a bit here and there. The important thing is that I keep moving. We live in a quiet subdivision, with plenty of room between each plot of land. But I can see my closest neighbor's house in the distance. The windows are lit up golden in the darkness, like a fucking Christmas tree. A fence and a mile of field is all that separates me from help. I haven't been this afraid in a long time, but it's like an old friend. I can think straight through the fear. I'm not hysterical. Not yet, anyway. As long as I get over the fence, I'll be okay. At least that's what I tell myself.

I don't know how it happens until I'm already on the ground, with flashes of lights and stars going off behind my eyes. I gasp and gulp, trying to force air into my deflated lungs. He grabbed me and slammed me to the ground like a ragdoll, I realize, and every bone in my body aches. There's a thick arm around my waist, right under my ribs, which constricts my breathing. I dig my nails into the flesh of his forearm because I'm not strong enough to shove him off. I kick my legs as much as I can, even though my

skirt is twisted and tight around my thighs. We struggle on the ground, even though it's nowhere near a fair fight. I don't know how much longer I can fight but I can't stop. I throw my hands out, grabbing at the grass as he tries to roll me on to my back. My fingers brush against something hard. It's the handle of the knife. He must've dropped it when he crashed into me. I strain every muscle trying to reach for it, even though I know it's getting hopeless. I can't breathe, my heart is beating loud in my ears, and my clothes are soaked through.

He grabs my arm in an iron grip and flips me over like I weigh nothing. Then he's on top of me, his big thighs squeezing my legs together and his big arms boxing me in. I finally take a deep breath and scream, my hands slapping and scratching at his face and his shoulders and his chest. I smell the iron tinge of blood and the mossy scent of the grass and the rain. I smell him, a mixture of sweat and salt and something else, something that's familiar but different. But I'm hysterical now. I can't stop making a sound between a scream and a pathetic whine. I can hear myself and feel myself moving, but I have no control over my actions.

When he slaps me, it's like all the lights go out. There's a ringing in my ears that's louder than anything else and my limbs go numb. I can't do anything as he leans over and grabs the knife from the grass. I blink to clear my eyes and I can see the a flash of light off of the blade as he lifts it above me. I can almost hear the whoosh of the air around the sharp blade. It's my butcher knife, I realize. It was missing from the cutting block earlier when I was in the kitchen. I didn't think anything of it. It's sharp. It's a beautiful Japanese blade. The knife set was one of our wedding presents. I asked specifically for a good set of knives. I'd wanted to be a better cook, back then. All of these stupid thoughts bombard my brain as the knife hovers above my chest, like he's trying to figure out the best place to stick it.

"I should cut your heart out," he says and I know. Maybe part of me knew it before, but I definitely know it now.

I've gone insane.

"Who are you?" I ask but it comes out like a jagged whisper, barely audible.

"I'm going to cut it out and eat it raw," he says, squeezing his thighs around mine until I have to scream and squirm to relieve the pressure. He leans down and presses the tip of the blade under my chin. "But first I'm

going to cut off little pieces of you.” I scream again even though I wish I could get calm. If I was calm, I could figure out what the hell to do. I could figure out how to get out of it. But I'm not even sure if it's happening. I'm not sure if this is reality or a nightmare. It feels real though. My body hurts like hell and I'm wet and dirty and so terrified I can't think straight. And it's Elliot. Most definitely Elliot. Elliot's dead, and yet here he is, his heavy body on top of me. He's going to kill me. If this is reality, I'm about to be nothing but a memory but it still doesn't feel completely real. Am I dreaming? Am I stuck in a nightmare? “I'm going to slice off your nose first,” he says, his voice so dead and yet so alive with anger. “Then your ears.”

“But you're dead,” I say and it so weird to say it out loud. Of course he's dead. He's been dead for a year. He presses the tip of the knife harder into my skin and I push the back of my head hard into the ground, trying to get away. But there's no escape. I grab his wrist with both of my hands and try to pull the knife away, but I can barely budge him. He's too strong and every muscle in his body is poised, ready to attack. His body is humming with violence.

“No,” he says, shaking his head, a drop of sweat or blood dropping from his mask onto my chest. In the darkness, I can't tell what it is. He drops the knife to my chest, right above my heart. “I'm going to cut your tits off.” I tighten my grip on his wrist even though I can't stop him. He yanks his wrist, pulling free of my fingers, and then grabs my blouse and yanks on it. I can feel the fabric rip at the seams but that's not enough for him. I reach for the ski mask he's wear, trying to pull it off of him. He shoves at my hands and we struggle. He grabs my wrists in one of his big hands and drags the knife up the front of my blouse with the other, slicing right through the rich fabric as if it were paper. Then he cuts through the camisole underneath as well. When he flings aside the tattered remains of my clothes, the cool air hits the exposed skin of my stomach and I can't help but shudder.

“Elliot,” I try, even though it's hard to say his name. I've banished that name from my thoughts and my lips for so long. It feels so strange to break my steadfast rule. “Let me go.” I try to yank my wrists out of his grasp, to no avail. He ignores my struggles and instead drags the tip of the knife down the valley between my breasts, catching it on my bra.

“Shut the fuck up,” he says, his tone flat but tight with anger. “Before I cut your tongue out, too.” I whine in distress and I can feel the hot tears spilling out of my eyes before I even realize I'm crying. I know he'll do it. He's going to kill me. Maybe I'm out of my mind and it isn't him after all. It's a demon come from hell to make me pay for all of my sins. He shoves my hands down on the ground hard and then slices through my expensive bra like it's butter. The lace cups falls away and he sweeps his hands across my tits, the soft, wet leather of his gloves dragging across my skin roughly. Instantly, I'm bared to his eyes. My nipples pebble in the cool air and goosebumps rise on my skin. He stares down at me, his breathing increasingly ragged. He raises the knife and I throw my arms over my chest, like that will stop him.

“Please, no,” I whisper. “Please.” I know it's stupid but I don't know what else to say. He's like a machine right now, a robot programmed to kill, and I don't want to die tonight. My sense of self-preservation has always been strong. Even when I wanted to die, I still couldn't do it to myself. “Elliot, please.” I repeat because it's all I can say in that moment. I'll beg him if that's what it takes. He makes an animalistic growl and flings my arms off of my chest. Then he presses the tip of the knife right in the center of my chest, hard enough to pierce the skin. Everything gets very quiet. I can't hear the wind in the trees or his breathing or my heart pounding. I can't hear anything at all. He cups my right breast in his hand and runs his thumb over my nipple as he digs the knife into my chest. Air catches in my throat. It's like a hand clamps over my neck. It's the fear, I tell myself. I'm not really choking.

“Right tit or left tit?” he says, his evil voice cutting through the void. “Which one goes first?” He squeezes my sensitive flesh in his hand and it takes everything in me not to scream again. “Did he like these tits, huh? Did he suck them and lick them and kiss them when he fucked you?” He flicks his thumb over the nipple again, cruelly. I dig my heels into the ground, trying to push away, but he's too heavy. He's slowly crushing me. “They're nothing special, are they?” he whispers. “Just like you.”

“Their yours,” I say, forcing the words out of my mouth. They sound foreign to me. “I'm yours.” His hand freezes on my tit and I feel his whole body go stiff.

“What did you just say?” the masked man asks, cocking his head. My whole body goes numb then, because I know I've made a misstep. I've said the exact wrong words. I clamp my mouth shut, not wanting to make it worse and not knowing how to make it better. He grabs my left hand and holds it up to his face. The diamond setting of my ring catches the moonlight and I know what he's looking at. For the first time it occurs to me that the blood that covers him belongs to Mitch. I know deep down in the pit of my dark soul that he's hurt Mitch. “Did you just lie to me?” He twists my fingers in his. “Are you trying to fuck with me?”

“No,” I whisper, lamely. Even I don't believe myself.

“You think I'm stupid?” he asks. “You think I can't see what you're doing?” He shoves my hand away and leans over me, the knife slicing against my skin lightly. “You're nothing. Your tits and your hair and your face and your pussy. It's nothing. It's dirt. It's dust.” He makes a strange noise then, somewhere between a laugh and a pained howl. “All this time I thought you were something special. But you're not.” Then he moves so fast that I can't even react. He lifts the knife above my chest so fast that I can barely see it in the darkness.

I scream as he brings down his hand again and again, stabbing over and over. I squeeze my eyes shut, not wanting to see. I don't want to see what happens to my body. I don't want to see what will be left of it when he's done. I'm not ready to die but it feels like I don't have a choice. I've done some terrible things in my life. I've had terrible thoughts so I suppose I deserve what's coming to me. I should've killed myself in Alaska. I should've protected Mitch. I knew I shouldn't have gotten married. When I was walking down the aisle, I knew it. I was selfish then, wanting to hurt Elliot in the only way I knew how. But now I know what I should've done. I should've walled myself up in a tomb when he left. To protect myself and everyone else around me.

And then it's over. He drops to his elbows on either side of me, his bare chest crushing against mine. He buries his face in my neck and screams, the sound muffled against my flesh. I can feel all the power in his muscles and all of the anger in him. I don't move because I can't. I'm not quite sure if I'm alive or dead. But when I finally open my eyes, I realize that I'm very much alive. I can feel his heartbeat and I can feel the cool air on my cheeks. I glance to my left and my sharp Japanese butcher knife is stuck in the soft

grassy ground, less than a foot from my face. I suppress a sob as relief floods through me, even though I'm nowhere near in the clear. I still have a madman on top of me, a madman who's probably covered in the blood of my husband.

But it's a madman who I once loved.

He digs his hands in the grass and in my hair and growls against my neck like a crazed animal. I force my hands into action, my fingers finding the edge of his mask. I pull at it, gingerly, not wanting to incur more of his wrath but needing to see his face. It still doesn't feel real. He doesn't stop me from pushing the mask back; in fact, he lifts his head so that I can roll the black knit up over his chin. As soon as I see his mouth, I know. That cruel, angry mouth hasn't changed one bit. I shove it up over his eyes and onto his forehead and, sure enough, Elliot John Pritchard stares down at me, his newly revealed eyes coal black in the darkness.

"You fucking cunt," he hisses, the words dripping venom. "Why can't I kill you?"

"They told me you were dead," I whisper, still not believing my own eyes. But I know it's him. His body feels the same on top of mine. His voice still sends shivers up and down my spine. And his face – his beautiful face. I thought I would never see it again. I used to love him, but now I can't feel anything except relief.

"Fuck you," he shakes his head and then drops his forehead to my shoulder. His whole body shudders on top of mine.

"They came to me and told me you died on a fishing boat in Alaska." The words are tumbling out freely now. I can't stop them. "They said they identified you by fingerprints. They said-"

"Who fucking said?"

"The police!" I heard my voice raise and I can hear the hysteria that I can feel welling up in my belly. The words spill out faster and faster. "They came here and said they knew for sure you were dead. What was I supposed to do? I didn't know what to do."

"The police came here?" he asked, his voice getting lower and deeper. "To this house?"

"That detective. From the first night we were together in Seattle." I feel him go stiff and then he grabs my chin, hard.

"What detective?"

“There were two, remember? It was the older one. The older one came to see me and he told me you were dead.” He stares down at me for what seems like a long time, his thumb still digging into my chin. “Why did they think you were dead?”

“If you lived here, then you were already married,” he says, ignoring my last question. “You married that asshole before they told you I was dead.” I open my mouth to reply, but no sound comes out. I don't know what he wants to say. I don't know what I should say. I wonder what he's done to Mitch, even though I know. My mind won't fully wrap itself around the truth, though. I've seen him do terrible things. I've seen him kill. It feels like another life, a life that I never asked for but lived anyway. It almost feels like it never happened, but all of the blood and violence and pain definitely happened. And now it's happening again. He couldn't kill me – or, at least, he hasn't yet – but he's a murderer through and through.

“What did you do to him?”

“What did I do to who?”

“My husband,” I whisper, not able to say Mitch's name out loud. It feels wrong to say it in front of Elliot. It feels like a betrayal. I've already betrayed my marriage a million times, but I can't do it in front of Elliot. It's like speaking ill of the dead. My short-lived marriage is over. My short-lived attempt to live a normal life is over. In the blink of an eye, my life is no longer my own anymore.

I belong to Elliot all over again.

“Your husband?” he repeats my words, his tone going cold as ice again. “Well. I don't know. Let's go see.” He pushes up off of me and I wonder where he gets his strength from. I feel like I have no strength left. The fear has exhausted me and the adrenaline has drained out of me into the wet ground beneath me. He grabs the knife out of the dirt and shoves it in his belt. Then he stands. For a brief moment, I consider trying to crawl away but I know it would be foolish. So I just lay there staring up at the stars until he hauls me up. My legs are like jelly and I stumble into him, but it doesn't matter. He wraps his arms around my waist and picks me up off my feet. He carries me across the yard and I try and think of ways to get out of this. I don't want to go back in that house. I don't want to know. I don't want to see.

“What do you want?” I ask him. “You can take whatever you want.” But he doesn't answer. He kicks open the french door and pulls me back inside. I snap back to life and reach out and grab the door frame. I dig my nails into the wood and try to hold on. “I don't want to.” I say, even though I know he doesn't care. He wants me to see. He wants me to see exactly what he can do. He wants me to bask in the glory of his violence. Or maybe he just wants me to suffer. “You want money?” I ask. “I can give you whatever you need.”

“I don't want your goddamn money,” he growls in my ear. Then he pulls me back, nearly yanking my arms out of their sockets. I grit my teeth but I can't help but let go. I lose three of my acrylic nails before I let go, though. I hear them ping on the wood floor as he tightens his arms around me. “Fuck you smell good,” he says, his breath warm against the side of my face. “Like you always did.”

“You want me?” I ask. “You can have me. We'll get in my car and drive far away.”

“Shut up,” he says and drags me through the kitchen. We trail a mixture of mud, blood and water on the gleaming wood floors as we go and I try not to stare at it too much. But I can't help it. I grab the smooth, cold granite edges of the countertop as we pass through. He tosses me back and forth like a rag doll and I lose my grip. He's determined and I'm terrified. But there's nothing I can do. He's too strong. He drags me up the stairs and I wonder briefly if mud and blood can be steamed-cleaned out of cream-colored carpet. My parents are supposed to fly up in less than a month. I briefly wonder what my mother would do to get the stain out. The thought of my mother makes my chest go cold, though and I squeeze my eyes shut because I can't look at the morbid mess anymore. It's too much.

My knees bang against the doorframe as he pulls me into the bedroom and I bite my lip hard to keep from calling out. He slides his fingers around my throat and I feel my whole body stiffen because the sensation brings back too many feelings. Feelings I've pushed away and tried to forget for years. Feelings of fear and helplessness and anger. It's a tidal wave of emotion and I don't want to deal with it. But he wants me to feel it. He wants me to feel every second of it.

“Open your eyes,” he whispers roughly into my ear. “See what you made me do.” I shake my head even though I know I don't really have a

choice. He tightens his fingers around my throat and I can't help it – I open my eyes. At first it doesn't register what I'm looking at. The horror doesn't quite sink in. My Egyptian cotton sheets aren't white anymore. Neither are the walls. Everything is splashed pink and red and brown. There's a thick dark pool on the carpet, gleaming in the light of the bedside lamp. It almost looks black, it's so dark. A pair of legs hang over the side of the mattress, the toes barely grazing the floor. And his arms are thrown out wide-eagle, blood pooled in his palms.

His arms and his legs are all that are recognizable.

I can see the tattoo on his bicep and a thatch of blond hair on top of his head that's not completely soaked. My lips mouth his name, but it doesn't look like him at all. It looks like a mannequin or a doll that's been tossed in the middle of my bed and carved out until it's hollow. Blood and pulp and chunky bits of flesh and muscle are all that's left. I want to look away but I can't. This isn't real life, I tell myself. This is something else. Somewhere else. Then it dawns on me.

All this time, I've thought I was alive. I thought I was living this boring, monotonous life for a reason. I thought that I made a choice not to jump off that bridge in Alaska. I thought I pulled myself back from the brink. I gave myself too much credit, I guess. I've been dead for a long time. This isn't life. This is some weird in-between place. I try to tell myself that it's not real, that my husband hasn't been murdered and that the devil isn't breathing down the back of my neck. But Elliot's fingers dig into my flesh and I can smell the death in the room. I'm a master of denial, but it's hard to deny what's right in front of my face.

"I have another surprise," he says. I don't fight him as he drags me over to the walk-in closet. I have no more strength left. I feel just as gutted as Mitch, like my insides are missing and my chest has filled up with air. I wonder vaguely if he's going to kill me now. He couldn't do it out on the lawn but maybe he's gotten his bloodlust back. "Open the door," he tells me and I hesitate. The vintage glass knob that I spent so much time looking for in the shops in downtown Seattle are already mottled with dried blood, like rust. I don't want to touch it. "You'll like it," he says a hint of something akin to a smile in his voice. He sounds proud, almost, like a child bringing home a good report card. Somehow, that's more terrifying to me than his anger.

“What is it?” I ask, a low whisper all I'm able to manage from my dry and tight throat.

“Shh,” he hushes, his breath like a light fingertip around the shell of my ear. Then he takes his hand away from my throat and sets it on the doorknob. “We don't want to scare her,” he says, then opens the door.

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Chapter Sixteen

I'm so fucking weak.

I've spent years in the harsh wilderness. It should've made me hard and unyielding and it has, to a point. It's been hard adjusting to being back in a big city. It's too noisy and there's too many people, but it's easy to blend in and hide amongst the homeless under the bridges and in the alleys. Around every corner is a memory and I've grown to hate Seattle with every fiber of my being in the past few days. But I'm here for one reason only; besides I couldn't stay away. I'm a Southern boy through and through and I miss the heat and the blistering sun and the dust and the smell, even. I haven't stepped foot in Texas in a long fucking time. When I left Alaska, my secondary goal was to get back to the heat. But first things first. I only came back for her, after all.

I didn't realize how much it would hurt. I didn't think I could hurt anymore, but I was wrong. I've been weak for her since the first time I ever saw her and nothing's changed. It doesn't matter what she's done or how much she's betrayed me. Watching her from afar for the past few weeks is nothing compared to being in her physical presence. When I watched her walk to and from her car or through the windows of this ugly, overpriced piece of shit that she calls home, it was easier. She was like an image on a TV screen. Untouchable and perfect and two-dimensional. It was easy to plot her death as I watched her kiss a man that wasn't me or smile and laugh with strangers like she didn't miss me at all. Touching her was a mistake, though. The knife was too up close and personal. It felt good to slice her asshole of a husband into ribbons, to feel his hot blood splash my face and see his skin split open and his eyes go glassy and lifeless as I played around with his insides. But as soon as I touched her, there was nothing to be done. I was back under her spell, just like no time had passed.

I should've brought a gun. Then I could've shot her from a fair distance. But what's done is done and I'm reworking my plan on the spot. There's already been a lot of adjustments I've had to make. I was never really good at implementing a fool-proof plan when it came to her. I always fuck up

somehow. I let my temper get the best of me when I should stay calm. I know that about myself, but there's nothing I can do about it. When I'm in action, there's no stopping me. I'm like gasoline waiting for a spark.

It's been years since she last saw me and I know I look like shit. I can't sleep these days and I don't eat much either. I'm scarred up and missing pieces and my bones are sharp as blades under my skin. But she still looks like an angel sent down from heaven just for me. Her hair is thick and glossy and long. Her skin is smooth and unblemished. Her clothes look like they cost a lot of money and they fit her well. She looks nothing like the girl that I first spied in that dirty dive bar back in Austin, wearing a tight skirt and blue cowboy boots and a come-fuck-me expression on her face. But I can still see my Joanie beneath all the fake polish. My Joanie who is stronger and more dangerous than I'll ever be. I could feel her power over me the second I saw her at the bottom of the stairs, looking at me like she'd just seen a ghost.

I can't blame her. I've been a ghost for a long time.

It took me a few days to find her after I arrived back in the city. First, I went to the old condo and staked it out. It didn't take me long to realize she didn't live there anymore. A young couple with a baby had a minivan in the driveway and a dog in the backyard. Next, I tried her old office. She still worked for the same company, so it was relatively easy for a criminal like me to trace her that way. Then I found her new house and found out that she lived with a tall, skinny blond man whom I hated on sight. It took all of my strength not to burst through the window and murder both of them the first time I watched them.

They don't do anything special. They eat dinner together sometimes. He watches TV or works out on his treadmill when she's not there. They kiss each other on the mouth in the mornings before work. They either fuck in the dark or not at all, because the windows go dark in their bedroom ten minutes after they go upstairs at night like clockwork. I quickly discovered that on Thursdays, he played golf. Thursdays were the only night he arrived home before she did. So I didn't act too quickly. I took my time to plan it out. I decided it had to be a Thursday.

But the bastard surprised me.

“What is it?” she asks, her voice light but still piercing. She sounds different than she used to. Her voice is deeper, rougher around the edges,

like she's permanently hoarse. As soon as she spoke to me, I heard the change and I knew it was because of me. The accident right before I had to leave Seattle fucked her up more than I realized. It makes me feel something I'm not used to feeling – guilt. But I think what I have for her will make up for it. She's freaking out now, but when she knows what kind of a man he was, she'll get over it. I've done many things, but I've never betrayed her like he did. When I was at my lowest point, when I wanted her so bad, I still couldn't. The bastard had her and he still fucked someone else, right under her nose.

“Shh,” I whisper, not wanting my little surprise to know that we have a guest. I still haven't figured out my new endgame. One part of my plan has been executed but I've changed my mind about the other part and been saddled with a whole new problem at the same time. I decide I'll ask Joanie what I should do. She always knows what to do. Besides, it's as much her problem as it is mine, now. “We don't want to scare her,” I say, pressing my mouth to her ear. She has grass in her hair and it's damp and smells like rain and earth. But underneath that, I can smell her perfume. She used to dab it behind her ears before work. I remember watching her get ready for work in the mornings. I used to be angry and jealous then, because I didn't want her to leave me. I didn't realize how good I had it back then. I didn't appreciate her when I had her. That's why she gave up on me. That's why she traded up for the dead bastard who played golf and bought her a big pretty house.

I grit my teeth as my heart starts to pump hot blood through my veins and I tell myself not to get mad again. Now is not the time. She won't open the closet door so I do it for her, ready to get everything out in the open. Her biggest secret is me and here I am. Later, maybe I'll share my secrets, but for now, I want her to know her husband's.

“Oh my God,” Joanie breathes as I open the door. My mysterious captive is on the floor, naked except for her bra. She's got her panties in her mouth and one of Joanie's expensive pillowcases over her head. She was screaming too much, so I had to shut her up while I got rid of the ball and chain. I immobilized her quickly with duct tape and it seems to be holding, thankfully. I wasn't thinking much about her at the time when I tossed her in the closet, I'll admit. I wasn't in my right mind. When it comes down to it, she's lucky to still be alive. Whether she'll stay that way has yet to be decided. The woman on the floor wiggles around and screams over and

over again, her sounds of distress muffled. She's hysterical and I can't really blame her. But it's annoying as hell.

Joanie jerks against me, her fingernails digging into my forearms. Then she swings an elbow back into my gut and catches me by surprise. I loosen my grip for half a second and she slips out of my grasp, pivoting on her heel so fast that her wet hair slaps me in the face. She kicks me in the shin and shoves my chest and then runs. I feel the familiar spike of adrenaline flair up my spine and it reminds me of old times. It almost feels good, despite the fact that my shin hurts like a bitch. I grab for her but my hands catch nothing but air. She runs for the door but I'm not going to let her get very far. I just got her back, after all. I'm not ready to let her go.

I grab her arm with my good hand and throw her against the wall with a little too much force but I want her to know that I'm in charge. The back of her head bounces off the wall and she makes an odd little sound. I press my body against hers, flattening her to the wall and grab her face in my hands and force her to look at me. She doesn't look too good. Her face is pale. Her eyes are wide and her pupils are dilated. There's streaks of dirt on her cheeks. Her destroyed blouse gapes open and her bare chest is warm against mine and suddenly, all I want is for her to be naked underneath me. I want her legs around my waist and my lips against hers and my cock deep inside of her. I want to hear her whine as I fuck her until she can't control herself anymore. I want to fuck her until I forget all about her betrayal and she forgets all about the bloody messes I've made and all the years of shit between us.

I want to fuck her until she loves me again.

"Stop," I say, when I can get control of myself enough to speak. If she keeps moving and fighting me, I might not be in control of what I do. I've been living too long without her. I've been living the life of a monk, practically. When I was on the boat, I didn't have a choice and it was what was best. But now, she's with me again and it's hard to control myself. The black hole in the center of my chest has stopped sucking everything in and the rage has cooled and now I just want her. The wanting is what always ruins everything. It's ruined me. As I stare down into her eyes, I can't remember a time when I didn't want her. She's taken over my whole life. How dare she think she could live a life without me? How dare she think that she could pretend that I never existed? She's can't.

“Who is that?” she says and the roughness on the edge of her voice reminds me of ripping a piece of paper, slowly.

“I don't know,” I say, honestly. I don't know and I don't care. The woman in the closet is just collateral. A trump card.

“Did you...” she trails off, her eyes going even wider.

“Did I what?” I ask.

“Where are her clothes?” she asked, wrapping her fingers around my wrists. She squeezes, and I can feel her bones against mine. “Why's she naked?” I can't help but snort out a laugh at her words as the realization comes over me of what she's accusing me of. Her husband was fucking someone else underneath her goddamn nose and she's accusing me? What a fucking joke.

“That's how I found her,” I say.

“What do you mean?” she asks, blinking like she's gone dumb all of a sudden.

“She was on top of him,” I say, spelling it out for Joanie. “Screaming her head off. They were so busy they didn't even see me coming.” I glance over my shoulder at the mess that I made in the middle of Joanie's bed. When I walked in the door and saw Joanie's husband fucking someone else, everything kind of went black. The rage took over. I was planning on killing him anyway, but seeing him like that made it even easier. Joanie squeezes my wrists again and I look back at her. She's staring past me to the bed. I know she's seeing past all the blood and guts and she's seeing what I saw. “Do you want me to do her? 'Cause I will. I'll fuck her up really good, if it'll make you happy,” I say and she flicks her eyes back to meet mine. I see the gears turning in her brain, finally. She's snapped out of the stupor she was in and I feel a little prick of something sharp under my ribcage.

“No,” she says, jerking her head in my grasp. I drop my hands to her shoulders and run my thumbs across her collarbones because I can't help myself. She's being selfless. She's not vengeful like me. She doesn't hate anyone on this Earth, except for maybe me. I've earned her hatred and then some. But so has the woman in the closet. That woman doesn't deserve mercy and yet I can tell that Joanie won't let me kill her. Maybe she's had her fill of blood and death already. It's too bad, really, because I have a feeling this is just the beginning. “What are you going to do?” she asks finally. I stare down at her, wondering the same thing. The room is starting

to stink – the smell of death is unmistakable. It reminds me of when I used to go hunting as a kid and cleaned the carcasses with my grandfather. It's making me anxious. I don't like the memory.

The woman in the closet won't shut the fuck up. My skin is tight and sticky from the blood and the mud. Joanie's clothes are filthy and ruined and her beautiful hair is hanging in clumps around her face. I feel like things are already spiraling out of my control. The longer we stay in the house the worse off we'll be. The longer the other woman stays alive, the worse off we'll be. The more she'll hear or see. The better witness she'll become. And evidence is mounting with every passing second – footprints, hairs, fibers, DNA. It was supposed to be a quick thing. I was supposed to slit both of their throats and then leave just as quietly as I'd come, leaving next to nothing behind. Then my ass was going to be on the road and heading south, away from gray skies and chilly air and rain. When I'm back down south, I know I'll be able to breathe again. Get my head on straight.

But I have to go soon. We have to go soon.

“Tell me what to do, Joanie. I'll do it,” I say.

And I'm serious.

Chapter Seventeen

The water is hot on my back and it feels good, vaguely. I watch the muddy bloody water swirling around my feet and I know I'm finally getting clean. I just want to be clean. I wish I could cleanse my eyes and my brain from seeing everything that I saw tonight. I still can't quite believe that I'm alive. Mitch is dead. I saw his dead body. I'm a widow. The ring on my finger is already a relic of a different time. I wonder how many times I'll be forced to relieve this moment. Maybe this is my own personal hell.

I go stiff when he returns to the bathroom. I can see him through the glass shower door, kicking off his pants and shoes and tossing his ski mask on top. I stand there, with my hands covering my tits and my thighs pressed together, wondering what he's going to do when he joins me in the shower. I'm paralyzed because it's too much to deal with. My body is so numb, I can't imagine feeling anything ever again. He could touch me, kiss me, fuck me and I probably wouldn't feel a thing. He leaves his gloves on and opens the shower door, letting the steam stream out into the bathroom. He stands on the threshold of the shower, his big body completely blocking the exit. I know there's no way around him. The shower, which is big enough to fit four people, suddenly feels so small and closed in.

His chest is stained rusty brown and there are streaks and splotches of dried blood running down his thighs and on his knees. I don't want him to come close to me. I don't know if I can stand it. He's a ghost, a ghoul, a demon that doesn't really exist. He shouldn't be here, and yet he is. He's been dead for so long and yet here he is, an angel of death bringing destruction and pain to me like a punishment. But underneath the blood and dirty, he doesn't look like a demon. He still looks like Elliot. His chest and shoulders are broad and his hips are slim. His legs are long and muscled. His toes still look the same. His dick looks the same, long and thick even when it's soft.

"I made sure she was secure in there," he says, stepping into the shower. "Tied her up real good." I don't respond because I can't. My whole body is focused on his naked body moving close to mine. He pressed

himself against me in the bedroom and outside in the grass, but it's nothing like this. There's nothing between us now, except for blood and filth. There's nothing to stop him from doing whatever he wants to me. I steel myself as he pushes into the shower. He steps past me, his arm brushing my elbow, and stands under stream of water of one of the three working shower-heads. I feel myself start to shake and I can't stop myself. But I'm not cold. I just can't control my own muscles when he's near. "You should let me kill her," he says, turning his face to look at me as the water starts to break up the stains on his chest. "We should get rid of her."

"I don't even know who she is," I say, the words coming out before I can stop them.

"She's the one fucking your husband," he says, but his voice is flat. He doesn't sound like he's gloating or happy about it. He doesn't sound excited anymore, like he's full of bloodlust. I sneak a look at his face but he's not looking at me. His eyes are closed as he steps fully under the water.

"I don't blame him," I say. I'm not sure why I feel the need to say it, but I feel like I have to excuse Mitch. He died for me, after all. I'm not going to be angry at a dead man. He already paid too great a cost despite being completely innocent. It was my fault after all. Mitch is dead because I lead a psychopath like Elliot to his doorstep. That's something I'll have to live with it, until Elliot kills me, too. But I won't have another innocent life on my hands. I wouldn't be able to take that. But it wouldn't phase Elliot in the least. "I was a shitty wife," I continue, saying the words out loud that I've felt for so long. I didn't love Mitch. I can't love anyone anymore. I'm a barren shell of a person. Underneath the skin and muscles and bones, there's nothing left. I know that now more than ever. Denial is kind of pointless, at this point.

"You don't care that he was fucking someone else?" Elliot says with a low chuckle. "Has this big house and all his money made you soft, Joanie?" He turns to me. "It doesn't matter if you were the shittiest wife who ever lived. Dead men tell no tales."

"Please don't kill her," I say and it sounds so pathetic but I don't know what else to do. Maybe I should fight him, make him angry enough to kill me. Then it'll be over and done with. We're standing here in my master bathroom having a casual conversation about ending someone's life while a dead body lays in the next room. It's surreal but not completely foreign. As

much as I've tried to forget and pretend like it never happened, I've seen him kill and maim right in front of my eyes before. It feels like a million years ago, but we've buried a body together before. I remember Lassiter's face as we carried him to his shallow grave. His skin was mottled blue and his eyes were open and unfocused as we shoveled dirt over him. And I remember Trace's face after Elliot stabbed him on my parents' patio all those years ago. All of a sudden, it was like it was yesterday. I can see him clearly, how his skin went pale and mouth gaped open and blood trickled down over his lips. And now Mitch, which is the worst of all.

Elliot grabs me by the upper arms and my brain blanks out and my muscles freeze. All of the old thoughts flee my brain as he pulls me under the shower-head. I'm suddenly painfully aware of the exact moment I'm living. He's still wearing his leather gloves, for some reason, but I don't bother asking him why. He runs his hands down the front of me, over my tits and stomach. Then he turns me around to face the water and shoves my hair over my shoulder. He works me over, cleaning me off quickly. His hands are rough and strong on my back and I close my eyes involuntarily, letting him do it. I wonder what he's going to do. I wonder what he has planned for me. His fingers linger against the small of my back and for a painfully long moment, I wonder if he's going to try to fuck me.

"Good enough," he says. "Go. Dry off." He shoves me out of the way and steps under the stream of water, squinting his eyes closed as the water hits him in the face. I leave him in the shower and grab a clean towel off the rack. I wrap it around myself quickly, liking that I don't feel as exposed anymore. My hair is heavy and I twist it and squeeze the water out. It splashes on the tile floor. The door is open and beckoning. I know I should try to escape. I know that I should make a run for the garage and get in the car and drive away and never look back. But I can only stand there and stare at the door.

I can't leave him.

No matter how much I know I should, I can't. I can't move much at all. My muscles have gone sluggish and I feel weak. I wonder if it's the heat from the shower. The steam in the bathroom is making it hard to see. When he shuts off the water and steps out behind me, I don't budge. He wraps his arm around my waist and pushes me to the vanity. He pulls off my towel and I don't fight him even as my heart squeezes in my chest. He drags it

down his face and over his head. His hair is shorn close to his head, I notice, like he recently shaved it. I study him in the mirror, wondering what else I missed. He has a pale ragged scar on his cheek and his eyes are sunken. His skin is stretched over his bones and his muscles are prominent. He's not as big as he's been in the past, but he's still huge. I wonder vaguely if he's been eating. His cheeks are hollowed out and his forearms are veiny. His skin is pale, like he hasn't spent much time in the sun. He used to be tanned from the Texas sunlight. He used to be able to pass as a normal human. As I look at him, I can see the years etched on his flesh. I can see the manic flare behind his eyes. He can't hide his psychosis and propensity for violence anymore. It's written all over him. He's absolutely and completely dangerous from head to toe.

But he's still Elliot. That'll never change. There's invisible chains between us and I'm bound so tight there's no way I'll ever be free. As I study him, he dries his chest and arms quickly, sloppily, then runs it over my shoulders and down my back as well. He doesn't look at me in the mirror as he does it. There's nothing sexual about it but when he touches me my body responds. My nipples get hard and the hair on my arms stands up. I'm not in control, I tell myself. He's being nice now, but how long until he gets mean again? I know it's only a matter of time. Right now, he's in a rush and I wonder again what he's planning to do. He said he would follow what I said, but I don't believe him. Besides, I have no idea what to do. At the moment, I can't think that far ahead.

He tosses the towel on the counter in between the sinks and sighs. I force myself to bring my eyes up to meet his in the mirror. He stares back at me and I wonder what the hell he's thinking. His breathing quickens and then before I know it, he snakes his left arm around my waist and he drags his right hand up my body, his fingers rudely roaming up over my tits. He pulls me back against his chest and drops his mouth to the curve between my neck and shoulder, sucking hard on the moist skin. He pinches my nipple in between his thumb and forefinger as he licks and sucks at my neck. I shiver, my knees knocking together as I press my thighs together, like that will stop him. Nothing can stop him.

“Joanie,” he hisses in my ear, tightening his arm around my waist and forcing the air out of my lungs. I gasp, dropping my head back on his shoulder and he takes advantage, wrapping his hand around my throat and

pressing his thumb against my windpipe. "Touch yourself," he says, his voice rough like sandpaper in my ear. I shake my head even though I know it's foolish to try and resist. He has all the power and I have none. "Do it. I want that pussy wet. Now." He squeezes against my throat and I know he's serious. I slid my hand down between my thighs and run my middle finger over my clit. The combination of the sensation along with his pressure on my throat instantly reminds me how he used to fuck me, how he used to try to destroy me in the quest to quench his endless thirst. But I wanted him to do it. I wanted to be destroyed. I let him do whatever he wanted, even if it hurt.

Especially if it hurt.

"How could you?" he asks, the words rushed and out of control. I can feel his cock, hard and hot against the crack of my ass. "How could you let anyone else touch you? How could you fuck him?"

"I don't know," I whisper because it's true - I don't. Mitch liked me and I let him like me. He fell in love and I let the relationship spiral into a marriage. I married him because I wanted to take revenge on Elliot. I wanted to hurt him and renounce him and pretend that I didn't care about him anymore. I did it the only way I knew how, with my body. I fucked Mitch like it would fix me. I fucked Mitch like it would make me forget all about Elliot. But it didn't. And now here we are.

I'm starting to get light-headed but I don't stop rubbing my clit because I know he's watching. He's watching every movement of my hand and he can feel the rise of my blood pressure instantly with his hand on my throat. I wonder when he's going to spread my legs and thrust inside of me. I can't think about anything else. I wonder how much it will hurt. I wonder how rough he'll be. Sex might take the edge off or it might make him crave blood even more. My pussy clenches at the thought. It's wrong and it's disgusting, but I don't care. I can't. I can't think anymore. Just feel.

"Fuck," he whispers and then he releases me from his grasp. Air rushes into my lungs and it's a few seconds before I can focus on anything else but breathing. My brain buzzes as the oxygen floods back in and I squeeze my thighs around my hand. I know from experience that an orgasm is near, but it stays frustratingly out of my grasp. The feeling is just as addicting as it always was. But I need more. I need him. "We don't have time for this," he says, his words muffled in my ear. He takes a step back and grabs my arm.

“Come on,” he says, turning toward the door. I don't move because I can't. My muscles feel weak and my heart is pounding. I'm lightheaded and my neck is throbbing, mostly phantom pain from a bad memory from a long time ago. My throat seizes and for a second, it feels like I'm going to throw up.

Then he's guiding me out of the bathroom, half-carrying me as I stumble into the bedroom. We leave the bloody clothes and the wet towel in the bathroom and I vaguely wonder what we're going to do about them. We can't just leave them there for the police to find. He's completely naked and I wonder what he's going to wear. His dick is half-hard and it's distracting. My bare skin is pressed against his bare skin and it's painful. I hate his skin. I hate his face and his body and his hair and his strong hands. I hate everything about him. But he doesn't care. He's mumbling to me but talking mostly to himself since I keep missing things. I can't focus.

“I know what to do,” he says, the words floating up through the ether. “Don't worry, baby. I know.” I don't believe him, but I'm not in any position to argue. He leads me to the dresser and wraps his arm around my waist to steady me as he opens the top drawer. He grabs a pair of black panties and one of the over-priced tank tops I wear when I go to yoga. Then he finds a pair of my yoga pants. He helps me dress because my fingers aren't working. He pushes me down into the arm chair by the window and tells me to stay put. I don't move because I'm putting all my focus on not looking at the bed. I can't see it anymore. There's bloody footprints on the carpet, so I don't look there. There's blood on the walls and ceiling, so I don't look there. Instead I turn my head to the window and focus on the pattern of the curtains. I want to memorize it because I have a feeling it's the last time I'll ever see these curtains. It's the last time I'll ever see this room.

I'm about to disappear.

When Elliot returns to me, he's wearing one of Mitch's T-shirts and a pair of his loose jogging pants. The shirt is too tight on his chest, but he doesn't seem to care. He's still wearing the gloves as he holds out his hand to me. He wore those gloves to kill my husband. He wore those gloves when he almost killed me. I don't like the sight of those gloves. But he doesn't wait for me to take his hand. He grabs it and hauls me out of the chair.

“What are you...” I say, feeling like cotton balls are in my mouth. I fight through it, licking my dry lips. “What are you going to do with her?”

“I’ll take care of it,” he says and then we’re leaving the disgusting room. I finally feel like I can breathe as I make our way down the stairs, clinging to the bannister so I don’t fall. I ignore the mess on the stairs because I don’t want to look at it. There’s so much I don’t want to see. He follows closely behind, his footfalls heavy. His whole presence is heavy. The house feels like him now. All the violence has seeped into the walls. Luckily, he knows we need to get out of here. He knows the only option is to get as far away as quickly as possible. He grabs my keys off the hook and we go into the garage. Like he knows exactly what car I drive, he bypasses Mitch’s SUV and presses the key fob to unlock the doors of my car. The lights flash and he opens the passenger door for me. “Get in,” he orders and I obey without thought, slumping onto the cool leather seat.

“What are you going to do?” I ask again, rolling my head on the headrest and feeling like my muscles are going to melt into the seat. I couldn’t get up now if I tried. I just want him to drive me far away.

“Shh,” he says, putting his finger up to his lips. Then he leans in and brushes his mouth against my temple. “Don’t move.” He runs his finger down my cheek and then leaves me alone, slamming the car door shut. I watch him as he goes back into the house and I wonder if I should follow him. I dig my fingers into the soft leather panel on the door, wondering what he’s doing in there. Part of me wants to know and part of me doesn’t. I don’t think I could handle seeing him killing that faceless woman. I don’t even know who she is. I wonder if I should care who she is. She was fucking Mitch so I probably know her. She’s probably been to my house numerous times. She’s probably been in my bed numerous times. All I know for sure is that I don’t want him to kill her. I don’t want Elliot to kill anyone else, ever again. But that might be wishful thinking.

He’s a born killer and we’re about to be all out of options.

My breath catches in my throat and I press my palm to the cool glass of the window as he returns, carrying the limp figure of the woman. She’s small, probably no more than 5’5” and she’s still half naked. She has my towel wrapped around her waist and my pillowcase still covering her head. Strands of dark hair hang out from under the pillowcase. Her feet are bare. I can see that her toenails are painted a bright shade of red as he carries her

past my window. There's a few specks of blood on her legs, but not much more. She's still whole, so that's something, I think. But she's not moving, either. The trunk pops open and I turn in my seat to watch him what he does. There's a dull thud as he rolls her into my trunk, amongst the plastic shopping bags I keep there for my weekly trip to the organic market and the loose high heels I drop in there sometimes after work when I'm tired of my feet aching. I always forget to clean the shoes out at the end of the week. I wonder what else is in there.

He slams the trunk shut and catches my eye through the back window. He leans forward, his shoulders straining in the tight shirt. It's strange to see him in Mitch's clothes. I don't like it. But that's the least of my problems, since I now have a dead woman in my trunk. After a moment, the blank page of his face changes and he smiles at me and winks. I wonder if he meant the gesture to be reassuring; it's anything but.

After a moment he jerks to attention and walks around the side of Mitch's SUV and out of my sight. I know exactly what he's headed for. Mitch always insisted on doing his own yard work, even though I used to argue that we should get a service. We have an extensive collection of garden tools along that wall. Saws, shears, hoes and shovels. I wonder what Elliot's looking for. My hand finds the door handle, but something stops me from pulling it. I turn again in my seat and watch through the windows of the SUV as he strolls back to the door like he doesn't have a care in the world. As he steps up into the house, I can tell he's carrying something, but my view is blocked by the front of the SUV. He leaves the door open and I stare inside the void until my eyes go blurry, wondering what he's doing. My imagination is running wild and I tighten my hand on the door handle as images of him hacking Mitch's body to pieces assault my brain.

A muffled thump breaks my concentration and I jump in my seat. Behind me, in the trunk, another noise - louder this time – wakes me up out of my stupor. The woman is alive, apparently. That's a good thing. But it's still creepy as hell to hear her moving around in my trunk. I can hear her muffled moans as her predicament sets in. Then she starts to scream and I can't take it anymore. I shove open the car door and run back into the house.

“Elliot!” I call out, because I don't know what else to do. I can smell the fire before I see it, the gasoline and smoke pungent in the air. The smoke isn't heavy but I can see it rolling down the stairs like a mist. I stand

there in the hallway like an idiot, frozen as the realization dawns on me that the house is on fire. I want to snap out of it, but I can't. My body won't move and my brain is taking too long to fire the necessary synapses to make me move. Elliot jogs down the stairs, carrying a small trash bag and the gas can. I recognize the red gas-can as the one that normally sits beside Mitch's lawnmower. He grabs my wrist and shakes his head at me.

"I told you to stay in the car," he says, chastising me like a child. I stare up at him, the words of rebuttal forming on my tongue. He has no right to act offended when he didn't bother asking me if I would mind if he set my house on fire. He turns and leaves me standing there as he walks into the living room. As I watch him as he walks to the curtains on the big double paned windows. He dips the edge of my expensive, custom ordered curtains into the gasoline. Then, as I watch, he lights a match. Smoke is already hanging in the air as he steps back to observe his work. The fire spreads faster than I would've imagined, shooting up the curtains to the ceiling.

After that, everything moves fast. In a moment of clarity, I grab my purse off of the table by the door and then he pulls me from the house as the smoke is getting too thick to breathe. I trip and almost fall down the stairs that lead into the garage, but he catches me around my waist and pulls me to his chest. He smells like smoke and gasoline and, yet still somehow like fresh fabric softener. But there's no time to waste. "I'll drive," he says and I nod. He lets me go and I hurry away from him. My bare feet slap against the concrete floor as I run to the car and slide in. He sets the gas can back by the lawnmower and then jogs around to my car. He bangs his fist on the trunk as he passes and then he gets in the driver's side.

The garage door rumbles open as we pull out and I try to ignore the sounds of the woman's muffled screams over the purr of the engine. I crane my neck to watch the house as we pass. The windows in our bedroom are lit up and I can see the flicker of flames behind the curtains. He stops at the corner and flicks off the headlights and I turn in my seat to look at the house where I've lived for the past two years. All I have left are the clothes on my body and the car that we're sitting in. All I have left is the man who's sitting beside me.

"I turned on the gas in the kitchen," he says, calmly, obviously nowhere near as affected as I am by the sight of the flames slowly consuming my house. "It'll blow eventually. We don't have to sit and watch." I don't

respond, just stare back at the house. The glass has blown out of the bedroom windows and flames lick at the roof. It's dark and the night is cloudy, but I can still see the thick gray smoke rising to the sky. I can't look away and I can't cry even though I want to. When the windows burst in the living room and the flames from the roof reach toward the sky, he leans over me and clicks my seatbelt. Then he turns back on the headlights and drives away, away from the approaching sirens and away from my old life.

The bright sun is hot on my face. I feel it before I'm even fully conscious and that's the only way I know I'm alive. Slowly the light is breaching my brain, shining through the darkness in red and pinks and oranges through my eyelids. My brain is mushy but I'm not completely out of it. I can hear the hum of the road in my ears, so I know I'm in a car. I hurt all over. The pain isn't just physical, though. It's a light throbbing in my head that's slowly pounding harder and harder with each passing moment.

The shock hasn't worn off.

I have a feeling it isn't going to wear off anytime soon.

I open my eyes a crack and it feels like a knife stabbing through my forehead. The sun is too bright and the car is moving too fast. The road is too bumpy. I feel like I'm going to die. In fact, I almost wish I was dead. Then maybe all the visions running through my mind – the blood, the fire, the body – would disappear. I don't want to think about them ever again. I want to forget. God, all I want is to forget.

My hands are curled on my lap and they're the first things I see. They're clean. I remember the shower. I can smell my freshly shampooed hair that hangs in my face. But I didn't clean away all the remnants of the night before. There's blood under my fingernails. Dark brown crescent moons. Impossible to ignore. I hold them out in front of me before I can stop myself. I feel a scream welling up in my throat like vomit. Or maybe it is vomit. I can't really be sure. My stomach clenches when the car swerves off the road and comes to an abrupt stop. I grip the door handle so hard my nails dig into my palm. But I don't look at him. I can't. I stare straight ahead, finally looking at my surroundings. We're in the middle of an endless road, surrounded by flat fields. The long weeds sway in the breeze. The

wildflowers catch the hazy light and it's almost beautiful. But the world is dark now, changed. Beauty shouldn't exist, and yet, it does.

“Joanie,” he says and my whole body stiffens. Before last night, I hadn't heard his voice in so long. I thought I was never going to hear it again. Yet, here we are, in the middle of nowhere in our own bizarre purgatory. “Joanie,” he repeats, his voice lower this time. I don't answer; I don't even look at him. I can't. I stare out at the road, listening to the whine of the crickets outside and the low purr of the good German engine in my car.

We have to ditch the car, I realize. We have to ditch the plates. There has to be a plan. I have to come up with a plan, or else we're fucked. He did all of this without a plan. He showed up in Seattle without a plan. He killed Mitch and burned down my house because he didn't have a plan. There's a woman in the trunk, bound up and gagged, for Chrissakes. He was always a bull in a China shop, banging around and destroying everything because he was angry or scared or horny and he didn't give a shit what happened to anyone else. He hasn't changed. I'm the one that changed, but he never did.

I wonder how much I've really changed since he's been gone.

“Joanie, say something,” he says, dropping one of his big hands on to my thigh. I can feel his heat seeping through the thin fabric of my leggings. I dart my eyes down to his hand because I can't help myself. It's almost too much to see his hand. It's so familiar but strange at the same time. His hands don't look anything like Mitch's. His skin is darker, rougher. He's had a hard life since he's been away. He's been working with his hands, laboring and sweating in the hot sun and in the blistering cold. His knuckles are scratched and calloused. There's blood under his fingernails, too.

“I know you're pissed at me,” he says and I blink at his words. Pissed doesn't begin to cover it and he knows it. Actually, I don't know what the hell I feel. I haven't felt this strange in a long time. The last time was probably after I first met Elliot. When I was on the bus after I'd escaped. The feeling was similar, surely. After the rapes and brutality and abduction. I pushed it down so small in myself that I could barely remember it. It was like a broken bone. The pain is sharp and all-encompassing when the bone is first broken, but after it heals you almost can't remember how it felt. You can't remember what being in that much pain feels like. It feels like a bad

dream. It feels like something that happened to someone else, like some quick blurb you read or some maudlin story on the evening news.

That's what my whole past feels like. My whole life as Joan Martinez feels like a story written by someone else. We're sitting in the middle of an empty road. There's no one else around. No cars, no nothing. I don't even see a house on the horizon, but, then again, the sun is shining in my eyes. I can't make out any signs of other human life. I wonder if this is what death feels like. When I thought Elliot was dead, sometimes I would have dreams like this. I would dream of us being alone in the world, just the two of us. I would dream of his voice, and his touch, and his smell. And now he's here with me.

It's so fucking bizarre.

He flexes his fingers on my thigh, pressing hard into my flesh. I know he wants me to smile at him and tell him everything's okay, but I can't. I just can't. My mouth won't move. My body won't move. I can barely breathe the same air as him. He opens his car door suddenly, like he can read my mind. I watch as he removes his hand from my thigh. I listen as he gets gets out of the car. He slams the door shut behind him and the car rocks gently from the force of it. Now he's pissed, I suppose. I don't care. He lives in a constant state of madness. It's been two years, but he hasn't changed, not one bit.

He's just as crazy as he always was, just as unstable. More, even.

I notice he's left the keys in the ignition. I could slide over into the driver's seat and take off. I could drive away and leave him all alone in the middle of nowhere. The key fob swings lightly, like it's calling my name. I know what it's like to be left in the middle of nowhere, stranded without him. He left me and then he died and now he's come back to life. Now I'm dead. Or I might as well be. I hope he's feeling exactly what I felt right now. All of the shit that's happened is his fault. He knows this, deep down. He knows what he's done. He may not be sorry for it, but he knows. He knows he's a fiend and a coward. He's a murderer and a rapist. Nothing has changed.

I don't know how long I sit there, listening to the engine and the crickets until I could move. There's no choice for me really. The air outside is a perfect temperature as I step out of the car, and smells like fresh hay and the car exhaust. The sun is low in the sky so I guess that it's early in the

morning. We must have been driving all night. I don't know how I slept through it. It must've been the shock. I'm barefoot, I realize, as gravel and dirt from the road presses into the soles of my feet. My hair is a tangled mass around my face. I'm a mess, in every sense of the word. There's a light breeze and I lean against the car door and close my eyes because it feels good. The air in the car was stifling. As I take a deep breath, my hair sweeps into my face and I brush it away. I can feel his eyes on me. Sure enough, when I turn around, he's looking at me.

He's standing by the trunk of the car, his hands jammed in his pants pockets. He's wearing black pants and a plain white T-shirt. They're tight on him and I know instantly he's wearing my dead husband's clothes. The shirt is stretched across his chest and it's stuck to him with sweat. His face is dotted with a dark shadow of stubble and his eyes are lit up with that familiar manic flicker. He presses the tip of his tongue to the corner of his mouth and for a minute, I can only stare at him. In the bright sunlight, he looks like a normal person. It occurs to me how easily I could have never met him. If I'd stayed home from the bar that night eight years ago, the whole thing never would have happened. Eight years ago, if I'd swerved left instead of right, I never would've ended up here, in the middle of nowhere with him. The thought is as terrifying as it is maddening. After so many years of obsession and yearning and mourning, I can't imagine a life without him.

I don't have a life without him.

He's made sure of that. Every day since the very first time we met, I've woken up thinking about him. Every night, I've gone to sleep thinking of him. I'm stuck in a loop and it doesn't stop. I know now it'll never stop. I accept my fate. I might as well. I step gingerly around the car and he doesn't move. He stands stock-still, like he doesn't want to scare me off. Like any slight movement will send me running off down the road.

"You don't have any fucking shoes on," he says when I'm closer to him. He says it like it never dawned on him that he forgot something as basic as shoes when he carried me out of the house. Before I know it, his arms are around my waist, lifting me off the ground. He plops me on the trunk of the car and swipes his hand across the bottoms of my feet, brushing off the debris. My heart starts drumming in my chest when he's close to me. Flashes of the night before keep popping off in my brain. How we fought

and fucked like animals. The tension was still there, thick between us. I could feel it and I knew he could, too.

Then I notice it.

His left hand.

This is the first time I've seen it without the leather gloves. In the bright light it looks like he's missing part of his hand. His middle finger and part of his ring finger and pinky are gone. There's a mess of dark scars on his palm and the back of his hand. It's an ugly wound and I gasp because I can't help myself.

"What happened to you?" I ask but he doesn't respond. He just shoves his hand back in the pocket of his pants and out of my sight. I crane my neck to look up at him. Up close, he's breathtaking. Shit, far away, he's breathtaking, too, but being so close to him is doing things to my heart. It's making me feel shaky and giddy. Maybe it's the hunger and the lingering effects of shock, I tell myself. "Let me see it," I say, holding out my hand for his. To my surprise, he doesn't fight me. He steps closer and pulls it out of his pocket again and holds it out for me to see. I'm almost afraid to touch it at first, afraid of what it may feel like, but I'm too curious. I study it, take in all the grotesque details. It all makes sense now, what the detective told me so long ago. It makes sense why they would've thought he was dead. An injury like that could've been fatal without care.

"Why didn't you wait for me?" he asks suddenly and it takes me off guard. I jerk my head up to look at him, to see if he's serious. He's staring down at me intensely, his green eyes darker than usual and I know he is. I can't believe he would ask me that, after everything I've been through. He doesn't know how long I waited for him. How many nights I wished for him and longed for him. How many times I went searching for any clues of him but got none. I open my mouth, ready to give him a piece of my mind when the *whoop whoop* of a police siren catches us both by surprise.

I can see the violence flash behind his eyes and suddenly, he looks wild again. Backed into a corner like this and there's no way to know how he'll react. I wonder if he's got a weapon. I didn't see one in the car, but I wasn't really looking for one, either. I don't have my gun; it's surely been destroyed in the funeral pyre of a house that I left behind. I shake my head slightly, letting him know to keep calm. I know it's impossible, but I also know he

trusts me. At least, I think he trusts me. I, however, don't trust him as far as I can throw him. He's burned me too many times.

"Let me handle it," I say, my voice steelier than I would've thought possible a minute before. The cop pulls over behind him, the gravel crunching under the front tires as the car rolls to a stop. It's a local cop, not a state trooper. I cock my head, trying to read the county name surely emblazoned on the side of the car. I have no idea where we are, I realize. I smooth my hair and catch his eyes again. He's staring at me, unblinking and unwavering, and I have a feeling I know what he's thinking. I don't like it, not one bit.

"Hey folks," the cop calls out, unfolding himself from his car. He's in a navy blue uniform, has a dark mustache stretched across his top lip, and wears aviator sunglasses. He looks like Joe Law's settled into married life and has had a couple kids. He's got a slight gut and his face is round and red, but he looks friendly enough. He smiles a bit, but I can tell he's observant. I can't see his eyes, but I know he's taking in the scene. Elliot is leaning over me and I don't have any shoes and I look like a mess. I'm sure he's wondering what our story is. So I quickly make one up.

"Hi," I say, making my voice shake. I sniffle and swipe my hand across my nose. I decide that false cheerfulness or showing my true anger might be a red flag. So I choose to go a riskier route.

"You okay, ma'am?" he says, tilting his head back to get a good look. Elliot takes a step to the side, his eyes never leaving the cop.

"No, not really Officer," I say. The cop's eyes shoot to Elliot, who doesn't look away. I'm sure he's wondering what the hell I'm doing, but he doesn't show it. I drag my hand across my face and take a deep, jagged breath.

"What exactly is the problem?" the cop stops a few feet from us, his hand resting on his belt, inches away from his gun. He's friendly, but not dumb.

"Well we were heading home," I say weakly, "and I get a call that my mother's in the hospital." I sniffle again, trying to be subtle but convincing. I wish he would take off his sunglasses so I can read his face better, but he doesn't budge. "Heart attack," I add, glancing off to the horizon.

"I'm sorry to hear that," the cop says, his voice still annoyingly neutral.

"I just needed a minute to process it all," I continue, turning my gaze to Elliot. "So we pulled over." Elliot finally looks away from the cop and turns his head to me. He drops his hand to my knee and squeezes, lightly. I smile up at him, only slightly, like I'm shy.

"She's real fucked up over it," Elliot says, an unmistakeable edge to his voice.

"What's y'all relationship, exactly?" the cop asks.

"John's my boyfriend," I say as soon as the words pop in my brain. Any hesitation would seem like I'm lying. I pat myself on the back for throwing out Elliot's middle name that quickly, but the smugness turns to dread a second later when I realize I made a tactical error, a mistake. I called him my boyfriend, but I'm still wearing my wedding ring. The cop has surely noticed it, because that's the kind of thing cops are paid to notice.

"Mmmhmm," he murmurs and I can tell he's not convinced. "And what's your name, sweetie?"

"Daisy," I say.

"Where did you say you two were headed?"

"Home," I respond, swiping my right hand across my nose again. I keep my left hand firmly planted beside my thigh on the trunk. That's when I feel it. A little thump from inside the trunk. I bite down hard on my lip, trying to keep myself calm. The woman is in the trunk and she's moving, I realize. I shift my hips, trying to cover the sound.

"Twin Falls," Elliot says. His good hand is still on my knee. I realize then that we must be in Idaho.

"You still got quite a ways to go," the cop says. "Where y'all coming from?" Elliot narrows his eyes a bit and my stomach clenches. I'm nervous, I realize.

"Visiting some friends outside of Boise," Elliot answers a second later, smoothly. Maybe I haven't given him much credit, I realize. He has been existing on his own as an escaped criminal all this time. Maybe he's learned how to plan better. He's always been a shit liar though. Well, I can always tell when he's lying at least. The cop eyes both of us, his hand still hanging on his belt. I'm sure the silence only lasts a second, but it feels like forever. I keep waiting for another noise from within the trunk, another sign that something's not normal with us. That would be all the cop would need to cause trouble. Just as I'm starting to wonder what Elliot would do to the cop

if he had to, a red truck whizzes by us on the highway, kicking gravel up against the car and blowing my hair around my face. The cop frowns as it roars down the otherwise deserted road.

“You're not supposed to stop on the shoulder unless it's for emergencies,” he says. “It's dangerous.”

“Oh,” I murmur, glancing at Elliot.

Thump.

“I apologize,” Elliot says and I can hear the flatness in his voice. He doesn't like to apologize for anything. “I didn't see any signs that said that.”

Thump.

The cop stares at me for a long moment. Then he looks at Elliot.

“Ignorance of the law is no excuse, of course,” he finally says. “But since this appears to be an emergency, I suppose we can let it slide.” I don't say anything and Elliot doesn't either. I'm sure that he's heard the thumping, but he doesn't give any indication. After a moment, I nod slightly. “You go on, now. Wouldn't want to keep your mother waiting,” the cop says. Feeling his eyes on me, I know we have to make a show of doing what he wants.

I slide down off the trunk, taking my time and hoping that there's no more noise from within. The gravel bites into my feet as Elliot walks around to the driver's side to appease the cop. My door is still standing open but I don't walk towards it. First I have to check something. I glance down at the license plate. My legs were covering it from view before and now, thankfully. If we're supposedly from Idaho, a Washington plate will be suspicious.

An Idaho plate has taken the place of my old plate.

Something squeezes in my chest. I look up and Elliot is staring at me. As the cop gets back in his car, I stand there, ignoring the feel of the sharp rocks digging into my feet. I can ignore a lot of pain when it comes to him, I realize. I wonder when he changed the license plate. I wonder if he read my mind, somehow, even before I thought of it. It's strange, but I suddenly feel closer to him. It's like he's here again, even though he never truly left. Even when I thought he was dead, I still felt him there, lodged in between my ribs like the blade of a knife. Or, better yet, a bullet. Scar tissue has been building up around it, but it's still there. Always there, throbbing and vibrating and coming to life like a transplanted organ. This is what it's

going to be, I realize. This is how he wants me. He wants me to be his partner in crime, his Daisy. He wants me to be his woman again.

The license plate isn't just a license plate. Somehow, it means everything might possibly be okay. We're on the run and we're a long way from being safe. We have a hostage in our trunk and a cop on our heels, but I can't help think that it might be okay, maybe, as long as we work together. As long as we're a team, maybe it all won't go to shit. A car horn honks, and I roll my head to the side to look at the road. The cop pulls up alongside us in his car, staring across the passenger seat at us.

"Go on," he calls through the open window. "Get home." I nod, breaking eye contact with Elliot. I lift my arm robotically and I wave at the officer.

"Okay, we're going," I call back. "Thank you."

"Drive safe," he says, then pulls forward and continues down the road, slowly. I know he's still watching us so I climb in the passenger seat and Elliot follows me in, sliding into the driver's seat and slamming the door. I slam my door shut as well. The car is still running and he puts his hand on the gear shift, but doesn't put the car in drive. We watch the cop drive off down the road in silence.

"Tell me what to do, Joanie," Elliot says, his eyes not leaving the road ahead. "I'll do whatever you want."

"What if I told you to go away? To drop me off in the next town and leave me there?" I ask, running my eyes down the familiar line of his profile. "Would you do that?"

"No," he says. Then he cracks his knuckles, the sound loud and sharp. "That's the one thing I won't do. I'm done with that. You're mine and you'll never stop being mine." I don't know what to say to that, so I don't say anything. I just settle back in my seat and pull my knees up to my chin. We're stuck together, him and I, that's for sure. There's no doubt about it.

"When did you change the license plate?" I ask softly.

"At the state line," he answers, gruffly, like he's still pissed.

"We need a plan," I finally say. "We need to know where we're going." I turn my head to look at him because I can't resist any longer. "So just drive for now until we figure it out."

He nods and then puts the car in drive and pulls out onto the road so fast that the wheels spin and I can hear the gravel flying outside the car. I

shoot my hand out and grab his thigh in warning. We have to be normal. Well, we have to act normal, at least. We have to drive like normal people and smile like normal people and lie like normal people. It all sounds so tiring, but there's no other option. He takes his foot off the gas and the car gradually slows to within the speed limit. I relax back into my seat, but he grabs my hand before I can take it away. He wraps his rough fingers around mine and holds my hand against his thigh. I glare at him for a moment, but I don't fight him. I just let him have it.

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Chapter Eighteen

I convince Elliot to drop the woman outside of Twin Falls. The longer we have her, the more of a problem she'll be. We have enough problems as it is, I don't want to add a living breathing one to the mix for any longer than I have to. Surprisingly, he doesn't argue with me and after awhile, we find a wooded area off the highway and pull in. It's desolate enough that it gives us the cover that we need, but it's not too desolate. She'll be able to find her way to the road with no problem, eventually. I want her to live, but I don't want her to be a problem for us. I stay in the car as Elliot pulls her out of the trunk. She's limp in his arms, probably too dehydrated and hungry to do much. She stopped screaming a long time ago. I watch in the rearview mirror as he sets her down on the grass. She wiggles on the ground but he says something to her and she goes still. Then he turns and runs back to the car and we peel out. I watch her in the side mirror until I can't see her anymore. I realize then that I never saw her face. But it doesn't matter.

She's just lucky that she got out alive.

After that, we don't stop until Dallas.

He's sleeping next to me, his head propped against the window as I pull up down the street from my parents' house. I know it's stupid, but I can't stop myself from wanting to see it one last time. Their cars aren't in the driveway and I wonder where they've gone. Did they go to Seattle? Are they looking for me there? Do they think I'm dead? I have no answers for those questions. I feel like I can't leave without saying goodbye, though. I've been a shitty daughter and a terrible person. I don't want to leave them with so many horrible questions on top of all of that. I don't really want to leave them at all, but I know I have to.

I turn off the car and take the keys with me, making the decision quickly. I shut the door lightly behind me, hoping he won't wake. I only plan on being gone for a few minutes anyway. It's mid-afternoon, most of the houses on the block are empty. The kids are in school and the parents are at work. I use it to my advantage, running up their lawn quickly and

hoping no one will be the wiser. I unlock the door, using the key that I've had my whole life. I pause for a second to raise my head and show my face to the security cameras. I can't help it – I want them to see me one last time.

I don't spend very much time in the house. I have a very specific wishlist. First, I go for the safe in my parents' closet. I almost get distracted by their bedroom, by the scent of my mother's perfume and my father's aftershave and the familiar signs of them that are all over the room. Their bed isn't made and my mother's house shoes are askew on the floor. My father's leather belts are slung over the chair in the corner. The picture of my father and I dancing at my *quinceañera* hangs on the wall beside the bathroom door. I tell myself that I don't have much time and I get to work.

I don't take much – five thousand in fifties, an amount that I can roll up and stick under my tits in my bra, and one of the handguns that my father keeps lying around. In return, I slide off my wedding ring and place it inside. I won't need it anymore. My mother will probably want it, I reason. I close the safe behind me and I try not to feel guilty about stealing from my parents. I doubt they'll notice it missing, but that's not the point. At least the ring is a bit of payment. I just know that I'm better off with the money and the gun than without and the ring is useless now. I don't think they'll be angry with me; I think they'd want me to do whatever I have to do to survive.

That's exactly what I'm planning to do.

Before I go, I write a quick note on the pink pad that my mother keeps by the telephone in the kitchen. I leave it on the counter, where I know they'll see it. I don't know what else to do. There's no going back for me now. I can't stop myself from hurting them, but I can try to make it better. I can try to ease some of their suffering. I don't write much, but I hope it will be enough. I don't know how long I spend in the house, but it's not long enough. Part of me doesn't want to leave. Part of me wants to go back upstairs to my bedroom and get into bed and pull the covers up over my head. I know it's silly and childish, but I can't help but think about it as I lock the door behind me. When I get back to the car, Elliot is in the driver's seat. He doesn't question me as I get in and I'm thankful. I don't want to talk about it. I can't. So I toss him the keys and then we get back on the road. We drive all night and I don't think we say two words to each other the entire time.

At sunrise, we cross the border into Juarez, Mexico.

The bathroom air is thick with steam when I finally turn off the the shower. The stream was weak and the water was too hot at times and too cold at others, but I finally feel like I'm clean. I hold my hands up to my face and check my nails. No more blood is hiding in the crevices, I hope. I can't see it anymore, but I'm sure that some of Mitch's DNA is still there, at the microscopic level. I press my hair to my nose and take a deep breath. It smells like artificial apple scent, bright and green, but there's still a hint of ash deep in the strands. I wonder how long it'll take, how many showers, until I don't smell like I was burned at the stake. We're here, we've escaped, and yet, we haven't gotten away.

I step out of the tub slowly, carefully, not wanting to slip on the slick tiles. I grab one of the scratchy motel towels from the rack above the old toilet, reminding myself to find a store at some point and stock up on essentials. Decent towels that haven't been used a million times. Decent sheets that aren't covered in someone else's cum stains. I grabbed a hairbrush and a few other necessities at the poor excuse for a drug store down the street as we drove in, but it's not enough. I didn't need that big house back in Seattle, full of fine and expensive things. I didn't need all the crap that went with my old lives. Most of it was baggage anyways. But a decent set of sheets and towels? Any self-respecting adult woman would need that to feel normal.

Normality is the goal.

I dry off as best as I can with the thin towel, then toss it back on the rack. It smells musty and moldy, so I do a half-assed job. I doubt it matters if I hang it up or not, but I figure it's better to keep things tidy. I swipe my hand across the cracked, misted mirror over the sink, clearing away some of the condensation so that I can see myself. I look like shit. My hair is thick and a mess and I force my plastic-toothed brush through it, starting at the ends. I run my hands across the rough strands. I've kept my hair long for the last two years, like it would bring me closer to Elliot. Now that he's in the next room, it feels superfluous, like a luxury I can't afford anymore. I left all of my luxuries back in the States. As much as I hate to admit it, when I look

in the mirror, I can almost see that girl from eight years ago, with her long braid and her innocent stupidity, staring back at me. I haven't seen her for a long time, but here she is again, reminding me how my life could have been so different. Of all the places I envisioned myself, I can honestly say I never saw myself here, in Mexico, in a shitty motel with nothing to my name but a gun and a couple grand in stolen money.

Shaking my head, I grab the plastic bag from the drug store off the toilet. It has a few other things left in it – a stick of deodorant, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and nail clippers. But what I'm searching for is at the bottom. A sturdy pair of metal scissors, similar to the kind my grandma used to have in her sewing basket. They're not very big, but they'll get the job done. I part my hair down the middle and sling the heavy, wet length over my shoulders. My hair lays over my tits, as wavy and black as it always was. I figure I'll hack it off at the collarbone. Anything shorter might require more finesse than I'm able and willing to give this haircut. I lift the scissors and grab a chunk of hair, telling myself to do it. It's just hair, it doesn't matter.

At that moment, a loud bang on the door causes it to echo loudly in the small room. I jump and make a snip and a dark strand of hair falls and curls in the bowl of the sink. “Joanie,” Elliot growls on the other side of the thin wood. “You've been in there long enough.” I turn back to the mirror, my hand shaking by the shock of the noise. I return to my mission at hand and snip another chunk of hair. The first cut was the hardest, but now I'm impatient to cut it all off. I can hear him turn the knob, but I locked the door before my shower. I know he's not going to like that. “Open the door,” he says, and it's a demand, not a request. He bangs again, and the thin hollow door vibrates with the power of his disapproval. I keep chopping away, not even bothering to make it pretty. I can make it pretty later. For now, I just want to get it off. With every chunk of dark hair that falls, I feel lighter. I feel less like the old me.

The splinter of the wood catches me off-guard, but by the time he kicks the door open, the damage is done. All of the pretty dark hair that he loves so much covers the floor and the sink. “Fuck Joanie!” he hisses as I run my hand through the chopped strands, tugging on the blunt edges because they feel weird. Before I can dodge him, he grabs my shoulders and whirls me around. The scissors fly out of my hands and hit the floor as he throws me against the wall. I gasp as the air is pushed out of my lungs by the force, but

he doesn't care if he hurts me. He's pissed and that's all that matters. "What the hell did you do?" he says, his face inches from mine. He's crowding me and my heart jumps in my throat. My pussy clenches too, because I'm still weak when it comes to him. I hate that I'm naked and he's completely dressed. It gives him some kind of advantage.

"We're going to have to pay for that door," I say, as calmly as I can manage.

"Why did you you do it?" he asks, bringing a hand up to run it through my hair. He's not gentle. I keep my mouth shut, trying not to moan at the rough feel of his fingers against my scalp. But then he grabs a fistful of my hair when I don't answer, forcing me to cock my head to the side. It's an awkward angle and my neck cries out in protest. "You think I won't want you now? You think I'll love you less?" he says, his mouth so close to mine I can feel his breath caress my lips.

"It wasn't about you," I say, knowing that that's only half of the truth. It was about me, but it was about him as well. After all, there's no differentiating between us. When something affects me, it affects him as well. Anytime I do anything, he's right there in my brain. "I'm not Joan anymore," I announce, tilting my chin so my lips are even closer to his. I can't help it; I hate him but it's a force of habit.

"Then who are you?" he asks, tightening his fist in my hair. I whimper as the pain shoots through my scalp. I raise my hand and grab his wrist. I squeeze, digging my nails into his skin. He doesn't loosen his grip. Neither do I.

"I haven't decided yet," I say through gritted teeth. He shakes his head in disagreement.

"You're still the same fucking person," he says. "I see you and you're still her."

"No I'm not," I whisper, because although it's true, but it's hard to say somehow. I am a completely different person than I was eight years ago. I'm a completely different person than I was eight days ago. Eight days ago, I was a married woman who drove a BMW and kissed her husband before work and went to parties and cried in the shower about not being able to have a baby. Eight days ago, I was almost happy. I could've been happy with Mitch, eventually. It doesn't matter now, but I think I could have been. Now I don't know if I'll ever know what happiness is again.

That's a fucking dark thought, but it is what it is.

I think I should be allowed to have some fucking dark thoughts when it's after midnight and I'm in a shitty Mexican motel with a dead man breathing down my neck.

I shove at his chest with my free hand, needing space all of a sudden. It's sticky and humid in the bathroom and my skin is getting itchy. I just want to breathe fresh air and escape the smell of the smoke. Elliot still smells like ash; I can smell it on his clothes. I can smell him underneath though, and the familiarity is hard to deny. I used to crave his smell and his touch, now I feel like running from it because it's just too much. His presence is too powerful now. He's killed at least three men. He's also killed me, in a metaphorical sense. I'm standing before him, dead, just as he stands before me, a dead man come back to life.

He grabs my hip and pulls me against him and then he's kissing me and I swear, it's so hard to form a cohesive thought after his lips hit mine. He's not gentle, of course, never gentle. He forces his tongue inside my mouth and I moan against him, my fingers balling into a fist against his chest. His fingers dig into my hip and I know there will be bruises there tomorrow. My scalp stings as well, but all the pain swirls around in my brain, getting mixed up with the pleasure of his lips on mine. He sucks my lower lip into his mouth and tugs on it and I slam my eyes closed as lust hits me in the gut. No matter how much I hate him, he always knows how to touch me and make me forget. He knows all of the ways to push and shove and bully his way past my defenses.

But it doesn't feel the same as it used to.

Before, the lust would be like drowning. He would be like a weight, pulling me under until I succumbed. When he reached for me, my body would swell and rise up meet his touch on command. My body was his because he'd conquered it. He'd fought hard and dirty and he'd won the war. But now, it's not working. My body is responding, but I'm not his slave. I'm wet, but I'm not melting into him and my brain isn't focused on fucking. Like he can sense my hesitation, he pulls away abruptly. I suck in a deep breath and open my eyes and he's looking at me with a dangerous look on his face.

"I have to finish up in here," I say blandly. He stares down at me and his nostrils flare and I know he's angry. I don't know if I care, honestly. I'm

tired and I want to sleep. I want to wake up tomorrow and forget the events of the last forty-eight hours. I tell myself that in the morning, we'll figure out what where we're going to go and what we're going to do. Right now, however, my brain throbs and my heartbeat feels jagged in my chest. Fast and then slow, like it's beating to a rhythm I can't hear. I don't want to talk anymore. I don't want him to touch me, either. I shove at his shoulder again, but he doesn't let me go. He lets my hair go and I sigh in relief as the pain abruptly ends. But he drags his hand down my cheek and to my throat and I automatically move away from his touch. My neck is a sensitive place and the old injury is the main reason, but it's not the only reason.

I'm not scared of him, but I don't want him to touch me there, either.

He freezes, his fingertips grazing the skin below my jaw. His eyes go dark and blank. I see the change come over his face like a dark cloud passing over the sky. My wet hair is dripping onto my shoulders and down my breasts and back. The air is sticky, but still. Through the thin walls of the motel, I can hear loud music being played somewhere down on the street. For a minute, he doesn't move, but his body is vibrating with tension. I wonder if he's going to leave, storm out of the room and slam the door behind him. He's horny and wants to fuck, so I wonder if he'll find someone else. I wonder how many other women there's been since me. I wonder how many he's hurt and how many he's fucked. He thinks he loves me, but he's also an animal, a predator. He's been out of his cage for a long time now. Maybe I won't satisfy him anymore. Maybe I won't be enough.

But that's all wishful thinking, of course.

He grabs my arm and yanks me toward the bathroom door so fast, I lose my balance and almost fall to my knees. He throws an arm around my waist and hauls me up, carrying me out into the main room and tossing me on the bed. I realize I screamed only after the sound is echoing in the corners of the room. Instinctually, I roll onto my side, trying to scramble off the bed and get on my feet, but he doesn't allow me to. He shoves me onto my back and although my brain is telling me to run, I go limp, trying to calm myself down. He likes taking me off guard. He likes when I try to escape. I don't want to play his game. My chest heaves and it's hard to breathe in the hot, stifling room, but I lay still and flat. He throws open my legs, trying to get a reaction, but I don't give it to him.

“Fuck!” he screams, pounding his fists into the mattress on either side of my hips. “Why are you doing this, Joanie?” I take a breath before I answer, trying to ease the lump in my throat.

“What do you want?” I ask, lightly. I open my legs wider, lifting my knees on either side of his ribs, but purposefully not touching him. I don't know what will happen if I touch him. At this point, he's so angry he might finish what he started and strangle me to death. “If you want to fuck, do it. Get it over with.”

“Stop it,” he says, his voice dropping to a dangerous low.

“I can be whoever you want me to be,” I say, and I don't know why I just don't shut up. But I can't. “I can be Daisy. Or I can be someone else. Whoever you want.”

“Stop,” he repeats, a flicker of fire flaring up behind his eyes.

“I can scream and cry and beg you to stop if that's what you want,” I say, softly. “Then after you're done, you can leave me the fuck alone.” Another flare of fire shoots up behind his stare. He's beyond being angry now. His anger has turned to something deeper, something more bizarre. I can't look away from him as the realization comes over me.

He's terrified.

After everything this man has put me through, seeing the look of fear come over his face is almost a triumph. He thinks he loves me and it's been his excuse to wreak havoc on my life. But his love also makes him weak. The thought hits me right in my heart, annoyingly. After all these years, all the pain he's put me through, he still has a hold on me. I hate him, but in that moment, I can see that picture of him as a boy that I stole all those years ago. As hard as it is to believe, he was once a smiling boy on a bicycle. A boy who wasn't depraved or perverted or sick. A boy who was capable of love and compassion and caring. A boy who wasn't yet a psychopath.

“All I want,” he says, the veins in his neck tight, “is for you to stop acting like this.” Then he shoves me over onto my stomach and flattens himself on top of me. I can hardly breathe with the weight of him pressing down on me, but I don't fight him. I just lay still under him, wondering what he has in store for me. “I'm going to make you love me again,” he says, his lips brushing against my ear.

"I never loved you," I murmur into the rough sheets, but he's already moving, running his hands lightly down my ribs. I clench my stomach and gasp, fighting the urge to scream.

"I know every inch of you," he says and I know he's right. He knows every scar, every sensitive spot, every ticklish place on my body. He presses his mouth the spot in between my shoulder blades, flicking his hot tongue out to taste my skin. I can feel like it like a needle prick, sharp and slightly painful. He run his hands down the swell of my hips and then over my ass, digging his fingers into my soft flesh. "Everywhere you like to be touched." His words are just as sharp as his tongue, slicing through my brain even though his tone is light. I squeeze my eyes shut as he runs his fingers between my ass cheeks, spreading me open to his gaze. He presses another kiss to the small of my back and I gasp and squirm, but I can't escape him. "Everywhere you pretend you don't like to be touched," he whispers and then he drags his teeth across the swell of my ass. I have to bite my lip to keep from moaning when he licks a path across my skin and dips his tongue in between. He opens me up and swirls his tongue around the sensitive spot. I buck my hips, trying to get away, but I know I can't. I don't really want to, either. It feels too good.

He knows exactly what I like.

He slaps my ass with a loud smack and I can't stop myself from letting out a moan at the surprising pain. As he sucks and licks at me, his hands don't stop. They smack and pinch and caress me until my fingers are balled up in the sheets above my head and I can taste the coppery tinge of blood in my mouth from biting my lip too hard. My stomach is clenched hard and my body is begging to come, but I know he's not done torturing me yet. He's not done trying to prove his point. I squirm against my body's natural inclination to move into him, but I can't stop myself. I arch my back, raising my hips off the mattress, wanting him more and more and deeper and deeper. I want him inside of me, fucking me, however painful it may be. I'm his slave, time and time again. That's the role he's forced me into. Some things never change, apparently.

He doesn't appease me though. He pulls his mouth away instead, his hands still kneading the back of my thighs. He pinches the skin right below my ass and my whole body clenches tight. If his cock had been inside of me, I would've come. But since he's torturing me, it's frustrating instead of

blissful. I scream into the mattress, pissed at myself for letting him do it to me. A few minutes ago, I was cold to his touch but now he has me all screwed up. I don't want him, but I do. Same old story of my life. I keep trying to leave weak, stupid Joan behind but he won't let me.

He tickles the back of my knee with his fingers, lifting my leg and rolling me onto my side. I don't fight him – my body is useless against him. He drags his teeth across my knee and I shiver. He's hitting all of my spots and I can't do anything to stop him. My nipples are hard and begging for attention. I'm wet, but he ignores that too. Instead he rears back and brings my foot up to his mouth. His fingers cut into my ankle as he lightly bites my heel.

“Look at me,” he commands and I don't think – I open my eyes and find his. I didn't even realize I'd had them closed, but black spots dance in front of my vision and I know I must've had them squeezed shut. He licks a slow line up the arch of my foot and I jerk forward. I want to touch myself, but if I do, he'll win. So I keep my hands above my head even though my pussy is throbbing. I want him to force his big fingers inside of me. Or better yet, his cock. I want him to fuck me into oblivion. But I don't know what will happen if he does. I might just split apart at the seams and lose my mind for good. I feel like I'm on the brink already.

“How the fuck do you look better than I remember?” he says, sliding down my leg with a hungry look on his face. “You think you can make yourself ugly to me?” He kisses a spot on my thigh and my breath catches in my throat as he runs his eyes over the thin scars that mark it. My body is full of scars; most of them, he's given me. These are new scars though, scars that I've given myself. He studies them quietly, his nostrils flaring and his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows hard. He runs his thumb across the raised skin and I bite my tongue. I want to explain, but I don't owe him one. He's the reason I started cutting myself. He's the reason I needed a disgusting release like that. Like everything else that's wrong in my life, he's the culprit.

When he drops his head and presses his lips to the spot, I try to steel myself for what's coming next. I want his rough mouth on my clit more than anything. But he doesn't move closer. He swirls his tongue over the raised scars and then lifts his eyes to meet mine again. Then I gasp when he bites down on the skin, hard. I throw my head back and a strangled cry rips

from my throat as he breaks skin. I don't think I've made a noise like that since the last time he fucked me. I can't stop myself from dropping my hands to his face and gripping his hair and his ear, whatever I can grab ahold of. He holds my leg to his mouth even when I jerk against him. I watch as a drop of thick red blood rolls down my inner thigh until I can't see it anymore. I know the sheets are going to be stained in the morning. He rolls his tongue around, licking up some of my blood. His saliva stings against my fresh wound and I moan loudly again. I don't even care what sounds I'm making anymore. The pain feels too good.

I liked sleeping with my husband. Sleeping with him made me feel safe and loved and soft and normal. Fucking Elliot is nothing like that. I liked sleeping with my husband, but I missed fucking. It's messy and painful and it's left me scarred and injured, but there's nothing else in the world like it. He molded me and trained me to be the kind of lover he wanted. The strange thing is, while he was molding me to fit him, he was adapting to me as well. He found every sensitive spot on me, explored every inch of me, claimed every spot of my skin as his own. Now he's giving me a new scar to match my old healed ones. I arch my back again as he sucks on the bite mark, letting go of his ear and sliding two fingers inside of myself. I'm dripping wet and my fingers aren't enough, but I don't care. I need something. I pump my fingers inside of myself, adding a third because I need more, but he pulls away from my thigh with a light popping sound and grabs my wrist.

"Don't," he says, the word clipped. He's just as turned on as I am, but he's going to keep drawing it out. He wants to make me scream and beg. The screaming is what turns him on the most. He drags my fingers to his mouth and sucks them clean. Then he dips his face close to my clit and I shiver with anticipation. But he doesn't suck and lick on me like I want. Instead he blows out a slow stream of air that cools as it hits my hot skin and I jerk against the torturous feeling. His face is still blank, too calm, but I'm not fooled. He's about to lose control.

He pushes himself up on his knees and pulls his shirt over his head. Then he unfastens his jeans and shoves them down his hips, his cock bobbing in front of him, stretching up all the way to his stomach. He doesn't even bother to pull his jeans all the way off before he's shoving my legs open wide and positioning himself in between them. He grabs my wrists

and shoves them into the mattress on other side of my face. He's grown impatient, apparently. He's done taking his time. I turn my head away, not knowing if I can look at him when he does it. I'm disgusting and I'm weak and I hate myself, almost as much as I hate him.

"Do you want me?" he asks, his breath tickling my ear. "I want to know." His fingers are digging into my wrists and his body is heavy on top of mine. I can barely breath. The sweat and heat from our bodies mingles together. It's stifling. But I raise my knees and open my legs as wide as I can, waiting for him to invade me. The anticipation makes the milliseconds tick by like hours. "I want to hear you say it," he says, his lips grazing my earlobe.

"Tell me what you want to hear and I'll say it," I whisper, even though I'm close enough to begging for his cock on my own. I want him to know I'm still in control, no matter if it's the truth or not. I don't want him to have this effect on me, but I have no choice in the matter. I'm just as much his sex doll as I ever was. I was his slave from the first moment he saw me eight years ago, in that bar in the middle of Austin. He knows it and I know it and we're the only ones in on the secret because everyone else who knows it is dead.

"Goddammit Joanie," he growls, his tone sending an uncontrollable shiver down my spine. Then he thrusts into me, hard, and I try not to scream in surprise and pain, but I can't help it. My throat is dry and the scream is ragged and hoarse. He wraps one arm around my waist and slides his free hand into my hair. "Always so stubborn," he says, his lips pressed to my cheek. Then he tightens his arm around me, so tight that I couldn't get free even if I wanted to. He's so strong. He cups my skull, his fingertips digging into my scalp. "You're still my Joanie, whether you want to admit it or not."

"Just do it," I say, my voice cracked and broken. My throat burns and I'm so overwhelmed that I feel like everything is going to burst out of me. The grief. The panic. The rage. The pain. But I force it down and keep it inside because if I let it go, I don't know what will happen. I might explode from it all. I might break something deep inside of me and never be the same again. So I push it down, everything except the anger. "Get it over with," I hiss, gritting my teeth and steeling myself against whatever he's

planning to do. I squirm a bit underneath him because I can't help myself. He's deep inside of me and he's not moving.

I want him to move.

"You want me," he replies, the words strained like it's taking all of his energy to stay still. "That's all I need. Say that you want me." He tangles his hand in my hair and ducks his head and presses his nose to my throat. He shivers, his muscles going stiff. I gasp, his jarring movement against me driving me mad. I want him to fuck me so badly, my whole body is crying out for it. "It's all I need."

"You don't know what you need," I say through clenched teeth. He bites the sensitive skin on my neck and I toss my head to the side, trying not to call out. It hurts, but everything hurts. "You think you do, but you don't," I force the words out. "You don't love me."

"No," he says, running his teeth across my jaw, promising more pain, later. "I do love you." He rears back and then thrusts into me hard. I squeeze my eyes closed, the pleasure and pain mingling into an intoxicating mixture in my blood. It's like getting high on heroin, or what I imagine getting high on heroin would feel like. It's a little bit like when I used to cut myself, but ten times as potent. This is the real thing, not a cheap imitation. "I've always loved you." He thrust again and again and I dig the heels of my palms into his big shoulders, because I don't want to hold him but I have to brace myself. I try not to moan, I try not to give him anything, but it's so hard.

It feels too good.

"But you don't care," he says, swerving his hips and plundering me deeper and deeper. "You don't care." He drags his hand out of my hair and grabs my jaw, forcing me to face him. I don't open my eyes, because I don't want to. If I look at him, I don't know what will happen. He presses his fingers to my mouth, forcing my lips apart. Then he slides his fingers in, opening my mouth wide. I try to throw my head to the side, but he won't let me. I press my hand into his neck and my nails into his wrist, but it doesn't deter him. He bucks into me, filling my pussy with his cock at the same time he fills my mouth with his fingers. Saliva drips down my chin and I moan, wanting relief. I want to come, I want him to come and I want it to be over but I never want it to end. It's a fight I can't win.

He pulls his fingers out of my mouth and my eyes snap open as I gasp for breath. I barely get a second before his hand claps around my neck and squeezes. I arch my back and slap at his face, not wanting him to touch me there. For the first time, I feel real fear run its gnarled fingertip down my spine. I don't want to be afraid of him, but I know what he's capable of. I know what he can do. I know what he's done to me. For the first time since I saw Mitch's body and the house burning, I want to live.

"I do love you," I whisper, willing to say whatever he wants. "I do want you."

"No, you don't," he says then smashes his mouth against mine, effectively shutting me up. He doesn't stop squeezing my neck and I feel my lungs start to burn. I squirm and fight him, but he doesn't stop. He moans into me, fucking me harder and harder. It feels like he's punishing me. The rest of my life, he's going to be punishing me, I realize. For marrying Mitch, for letting him go, for never loving him the way he wanted me to love him. But he doesn't realize that I never let him go. I never forgot him. How could I, when my body belongs to him? Every inch of me belongs to him because despite everything he's done, all the terrible things, I'm still his. I cut my hair because it was the only thing I could do to rebel against him. It was the one last little thing I had to fight with. Now, I'm powerless.

He fucks me until I feel like I'm going to go mad. I can barely breathe and I can barely move. I press my knees to his ribs, trying to push him off, weakly trying to protect myself against him, but it's all in vain. It's mostly for show, anyway. I know I should fight, but I can't. I'm too weak. I've always been weak where he's concerned and he knows it. He knows he can take whatever he wants from me. He can take my body. He could take my soul if he wanted. He could kill me. We both know he could. He's had many chances.

"Come," he demands, his lips against mine. I squeeze him, deep inside, wanting him to lose control first. He throws his head back and clenches his jaw, trying to stop himself. But he can't. I swerve and roll my hips, moaning with each movement because it's painful and heavenly at the same time. His muscles go tight and I know he's close. I arch my back as much as I can, my hard nipples dragging across his chest. I shudder at the exquisite torture of it all. Then, finally, with a strangled cry, he jerks and slams his hips into

mine. He rears back and then thrusts again and I know he's filling me up with evidence of how much he wants me. I can feel it. I can feel it oozing out of me.

He collapses into me and releases his grip on my neck. The blood rushes to my head immediately. My vision goes blurry and my brain goes hazy. For a second, the room tilts on its axis and I feel the orgasm blossom in my belly. I shake my head, trying to deny it, but there's no helping it. I gasp as the pleasure overtakes me. Stars burst in my eyes and I clench my thighs around him, loving how his big cock is still inside of me as I come. It's sick and I hate myself, but I can't stop it from happening. I can't stop my reaction to him. So I just succumb to it. I press my hands into his neck as hard as I can, but he forces them to the mattress. He tangles his fingers with mine and holds me down as I come down from the high.

When it's over, my senses return in an uncomfortable a rush. The hard, bumpiness of the mattress beneath me. The scratchiness of the over-bleached sheets. The sneaky scent of mildew and fried food that permeates the small room. The bumping music from the street below, barely muffled by the thin walls. We're still in a shitty hotel room in Mexico. We're still fugitives and criminals and murderers. The orgasm dissipates and my body goes numb. I'm hot and sticky and sweaty and I hurt. I struggle against him with the last of my strength and he finally lets me go. He releases my hands and unlocks his arm from around my waist. Once I'm free, I shove at him and dig my heels into the mattress, trying to push him off of me. He doesn't fight me and I'm able to get away from him, dragging myself to the end of the mattress.

I roll over onto my side, breathing heavy. The air in the room is thick and sticky and I have to force it into my lungs. My body feels thick too, my muscles moving slow like molasses. It's hard to do anything in the heat of the room except lay there. The ancient ceiling fan above turns slowly and I can hear it creaking with each rotation. I can't feel any breeze on my overheated skin, though. My pussy throbs, as do the bruises and bite-marks he's given me. But I'm still in the afterglow of the orgasm and I don't really want to move even if I could.

I haven't been fucked like that in a long time. I haven't been abused and degraded like that in a long time, either. I feel disgusting, like I need to take another shower even though my hair's still wet from the first one. It's fanned

across my face, stuck to my cheek, but I don't bother pushing it off. I just don't have the strength. I feel him move behind me but I keep my back to him. I don't want to look at him. I don't know if I can.

He kisses my shoulder and I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to steel myself against him. I don't know if I can take more. He's already taken all that I can give. I don't know what will happen if he wants more. His fingers caress my side, rising up my ribs and over my shoulder and down the curve of my throat. I let out a slow breath, my whole body on edge. Then he smooths my hair back and out of my face, softly. He's barely touching me now, but his hand still lingers over my face.

Then he moves away. The shitty mattress shakes as he pushes himself off the bed. I hear him fumble with his belt, but I don't turn around to look at him. I'm exhausted, I realize, and it's too hard to open my eyes. I just want to sleep. Tomorrow, I'll deal with all the shit. I'll figure out how we're going to make the money stretch and where we're going to go. I'll figure out all the shit I don't want to deal with. I'm too tired to think about it now.

I hear him moving around the room, but he doesn't come back to bed. He doesn't say anything either. I open my eyes in time to see him pulling on his boots. I stay silent as he grabs his T-shirt off the floor and pulls the sweat-damp garment over his head. He's getting dressed and I want to ask him what he's doing but I don't bother. I don't know if I really want to know. When he throws open the door, I jerk with surprise. He's leaving, I realize, a second before he walks out the door. He glances over his shoulder as he goes, but I quickly turn my eyes to the wall. I study the cracked, faded plaster instead of looking at him. My body jerks involuntarily when he closes the door lightly behind him. I have no idea where he went or when he's coming back.

"Asshole," I mumble to no one. I shiver, despite the heat in the room. He's gone.

I study the crack in the wall until it starts to seem like a gaping chasm. Then my eyes droop closed, the traumatic events of the past days finally taking their toll. I'm too tired to move, too tired to think about where he's gone and when he's coming back. With my eyes closed, I can almost pretend like I'm back home in my big master bedroom and my soft bed, with my man asleep beside me. But it's not Mitch that I dream about lying next to me. It's Elliot, but a different Elliot. Not the one that was just in the

room with me. It's an Elliot that maybe never existed. He's the Elliot that I've kept with me for all these years, the Elliot that I lived with me for a few weeks in my little cottage in Seattle. We slept together and fucked and did everything together, but even then, the cracks had widened. Eventually, we couldn't ignore them anymore.

He's a ghost, no doubt about it.

But I fall asleep with the memory of that ghost and the memory of a life I no longer live. I fall asleep next to the Elliot that doesn't exist, because it's a hell of a lot better than sleeping alone.

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Chapter Nineteen

When I wake up, it's bright outside and the room is stifling. Sunlight streams through the threadbare curtains. I can hear the rumble of traffic outside the open window. It's hard to move, but I force myself to sit up. My hair is still wet, soaked with my sweat now. It sticks to my cheeks and neck. I wince as my thighs rub together. My body is still throbbing. I check out my injuries. The bite-mark on my inner thigh is red and scabbed over. I press my fingertip to the edge and suck in a breath through my teeth. It's painful, but it's already started to heal. The evidence of what he did to me is all over my body. It's all over the bed. There's blood and dried come and sweat and tears all over the sheets, I can see it and feel it. Strands of my hair are tangled there as well. I get the odd urge to just burn the whole room down to the studs.

It occurs to me then that he's not there.

He hasn't returned.

I stand on shaky legs and walk to the window. I lift the curtain and glance out. The street below is busy, full of moving bodies, speeding motorbikes and cars jammed bumper to bumper in traffic. A cacophony of horns blares as the line of cars starts to move. Drivers yell and curse at each other through open windows. I'm in Juarez, Mexico, a few miles from the United States border, but I could be oceans away. I'm just one person in the middle of the stream. Life is going on like nothing happened in Seattle. The death of one person and the destruction of another doesn't matter to the people below me. They don't give a shit about me. In this new life that I'm suddenly living, no one does.

I drop the curtain and take a step back. The invasive mix of smells from the street below—car exhaust, fried dough, grilled meat, rotting garbage—is giving me a headache. And I have an audience. There's eyes on me, two men sitting on wooden crates in front of storefront. They're looking up at me and I don't like it. My purse is still sitting on top of the old tube TV. I hurry over to it and rifle through, looking for the Glock I have hidden at the bottom. It's still there, along with the box of bullets I brought with it.

I carry the purse to the bed and quickly load the gun with bullets, loving the satisfying clink as I load the clip. I still don't feel completely safe though. How could I? I'm all alone in one of the most dangerous cities in the world. I don't have a lot of money and I only know just enough Spanish to get by, but that's the least of my problems.

I have no idea where Elliot is.

He could be fucking someone else or killing someone or robbing a bank or be a hundred miles away by now and I'd be none the wiser. I don't think he would leave me, but then again, he's been gone for hours. I check that the door is locked and then I carry my purse and my gun into the bathroom. My hair is still all over the floor and sink. I grab the hand towel from the bar and drape it over the toilet. I set my purse down and then the gun beside it. If I need it, I know exactly where it is. I crouch down and sweep up the hair with my hands, getting as much of it as I can. I stuff the long brown tresses into the plastic bag from the drug store, telling myself I'll throw it in the nearest dumpster I see when I leave the hotel room. I don't want to leave any more of myself in the room than possible.

Not that I have any plans of leaving the hotel room until Elliot gets back. There's no way in hell I'm venturing out onto the streets of Juarez alone. I practically have a sign on my back that says 'Stupid American Girl. Please Do Bad Things To Me'. I'm only half-Mexican and anyone here could spot that a mile away. My heritage is only a slight advantage to me, especially since I'm not as fluent in the language as I was as a child. I'm very keenly aware of the danger I'm in. Juarez was only supposed to be a pit stop, a cesspool that we could disappear into for a day or two and then move on. I'm not sure where is next, but I have no intentions of staying in Juarez a minute longer than I have to.

After I clean up the hair, I hop in the shower. I only allow myself ten minutes this time. I'm too jumpy to spend too much time in such a vulnerable position. The bathroom door is off the hinges and I'm not able to lock myself in. I'm naked and my hand isn't on the trigger of my Glock. If someone were to barge in, I'd be easy prey. It sounds paranoid, but I don't care. I'm not taking any chances. The second I relax or let down my guard is the second that I fuck myself and I've already been fucked enough lately. I get out and towel off quickly with the last clean towel. I feel better, but I know it won't last. I'll be covered in sweat in no time.

I put back on my clothes from the day before, because I don't have anything else to wear. Then I shove my destroyed hair into a bun on top of my head and tell myself I'll try and fix the choppy cut later. I have other things to worry about now. My stomach is grumbling but there's no food. I'm afraid to drink the tap water so I don't bother with that either. I just grab my gun and position the faded striped armchair to face the door. I sit, the sweat already dripping down my face and between my shoulder-blades, keeping my feet flat on the floor and my back straight. I want to be ready.

Now, you might think I'm being paranoid.

But I know that I let myself get soft. I let myself get lulled into complacency by Mitch's comfortable life and his money and his niceness. I stopped going to the gun range every other day. I gave up swimming for yoga. I got used to laying in expensive beds and making love in the dark,, slowly and softly. Eventually, I got rid of all my bad habits and I let myself get weak. So I wasn't ready when he came for me. I was completely taken by surprise. Now, there's something different in me. I can feel it. I want steel in my bones. I want ice water in my veins.

So I sit and wait.

I wait in this rundown hotel room for the evil outside to seep in. Elliot's gone. I have no idea where he is or when he's coming back, but he's not the only evil thing walking these streets. There's devils outside my door. Drug traffickers, murderers, rapists – very bad people. Juarez is teeming with devils. I can't rely on anyone else to protect me. Elliot's left me all alone, run off to do whatever he thinks he needs to do. Maybe he's punishing me. But it's only a matter of time before others know I'm in here. Like those men out on the street, others will sniff me out like a fresh cut at the meat market.

I know I can't sit here forever. Eventually I'll need food and water. But for now, I try not to think about that. As the time passes, the light changes outside the window. I know hours have gone by. I try to keep my mind as blank as possible, my only focus on my trigger finger. I force all the shitty thoughts out, all the thoughts that bring me back to my old life. This my life now and I have to get used to it.

I have to get used to it.

Heavy footsteps on the metal stairs leading to the second floor of the hotel make my muscles jump. My body is sore from sitting for so long, but

the second I hear the sound, I'm at attention. I dig the butt of my gun into my thigh, aiming the barrel at the little pinprick of light beaming from the peephole. I hear a man talking loudly in Spanish and I can make out a few words. He's talking nonsense, his voice loud and booming. Then he starts to sing, slightly off-key and slurring his words, and I hear a woman as well, laughing and joining in the chorus. They make a lot of noise, stumbling up the stairs and grabbing the railing. I can hear the metal promenade creak under their weight. It seems as though they're drunk, but I don't relax my stance. My eyes flick to the window as they pass, their figures silhouetted against the dirty glass and the patchy curtains.

I listen as they crash and bang their way down the promenade and open and slam the door at the end of the building. I sit there and listen through the walls as they laugh and sing in their room. Then it goes quiet for awhile, and then a different set of noises assault my ears. I can hear unmistakable sounds, the bumping of the furniture and their exaggerated moans. I stare ahead at the door as I listen to them fuck, my mind wandering back to last night. I wonder if that's how Elliot and I sounded for the whole world to hear. I wonder if I sounded like the drunk woman, like I'm halfway between death and absolute bliss. I wonder if Elliot sounded like the drunk man, desperate and slightly angry, even as he gets what he wants.

After awhile, they finally tire themselves out and all is quiet again. I feel my shoulders slump and my toes uncurl. I didn't realize how tense I was until it was all over. I run my tongue across my dry lips and I realize how thirsty I am. My throat is scratchy. My skin is slick with sweat. Stray hairs stick to my forehead and cheeks. I feel my eyes drooping closed and I catch myself before I start to lose the battle with the heat and thirst. As the sunlight shifts outside, the room starts to tilt and swim in my vision. But I still don't move. I keep on waiting, even as my body fights it harder and harder.

It's not until I hear another set of footsteps that I jolt in my seat and realize that I'd dozed off. The light is amber outside and I make a quick guess that it's late afternoon. It's hard to move; my muscles are like slowly hardening glue. It takes me too long to point the gun at the door, but I force myself to focus. The footsteps aren't as heavy as the drunk man's, but they're still too heavy to be a woman or child. I know it's a man. He jogs up

the stairs and takes his time walking towards my room, his boots clicking on the metal.

He stops in front of my door.

The pinprick of light that beams through the peephole goes dark and I can see his shadow in the crack under the door. I lean forward, taking a deep breath and letting it out slow. My senses are suddenly at full alert. My eyesight is sharp, and I hope my reflexes are as well. I know I'm half-crazy from lack of sleep and lack of food and lack of everything, but it doesn't matter. I'm going to be ready. The knob rattles and I tense my finger on the trigger. A drop of sweat rolls down the bridge of my nose and rolls over the tip. It lands on my thigh.

"Daisy," he says, his voice muffled like his mouth is almost pressed against the thin pine of the door. I don't loosen my stance as he fumbles with the key in the lock and turns the knob. The door opens, the sunlight blinding me almost immediately. I can't help it – I turn my face and squint away from the bright light. But I only take a second and then I push myself out of the chair and on to my feet. My thighs feel like jelly and my knees hurt and creak.

"Where were you?" I hear myself ask before he can even close the door. I can't even see his face around the bright light, but I know it's him. I can feel the little zaps of electricity going off at the base of my skull that I usually feel when he's close. The hairs on my arms stand up and I get goosebumps, even in the sweltering heat of the room. I lift the gun and point it at him, aiming for his chest. I have a feeling he won't answer my question to my satisfaction and I'm too pissed at him to let it slide. He stares at me for what feels like a long time, but is probably only as slight as a minute.

"That thing loaded?" he asks finally, as he turns and closes the door behind him lightly. He locks it as black dots dance in front of my vision and everything goes blurry in the newly darkened room. I sway on my feet and all of a sudden my head feels light as air.

"Where were you?" I repeat, my teeth clenched as I blink rapidly, trying to force my eyes to focus. "I should shoot you." I say, but there's no bite behind it. I can barely keep myself standing. It's like all the fight went right out of me the second he walked in the door. I'm relieved, even if I don't want to admit it to myself. It's so difficult to want him and hate him at

the same time. The dichotomy is making my head hurt. Besides, it's getting hard to think anyway.

"You could," he says, tossing a big brown shopping bag on the chair behind me. Suddenly, he's so close. I can feel the heat of his skin close to mine. "But you won't." He closes his hand around the barrel of the gun and I let it slip out of my grasp. He takes it from me like it weighs nothing, even though it's felt so heavy in my hands for the last few hours. He tucks it in the waistband of his jeans, slowly, like he's afraid any quick movements will spook me. I just stand there, my hands dropping lifelessly to my sides. I want to punch him, slap him, kick him – anything, really. But I can't.

I don't have the strength.

"Are you going to be a good girl, Daisy?" he asks, softly, and instantly his words transport me back eight years, to the first night we ever spent together. The night I've tried to forget so many times. But I can't. He can't either. I wonder if he's tried to forget as many times as I have. I bet he spent all of his time in Alaska trying to forget. And look at where we are now. Right back in the same place. Time is a circle, after all.

The world tilts and I feel air rushing past my ears. The world goes blurry and then dark. I feel his arms sliding around me, the hard muscles flexing over his bones. He holds me so tight that I can't breathe. The room disappears around me and the only thing I can feel is his body. The only thing I can hear is his heartbeat. Then it all goes black.

When I open my eyes again, I can feel the hard mattress beneath me. I can smell the slight hint of bleach and cheap laundry detergent that lingers on the sheets. But I can smell him too, all over me. He's back, I remember. He came back for me. I gasp in a breath and then he's there, hovering over me, his hands running down my chest and up to my cheeks.

"Fuck," he says, his voice tight and angry. My mouth feels like it's full of cotton and I run my tongue across my lips, trying to wet them. He goes away for a second and then comes back. He presses something hard to my lips, and I realize it's the mouth of a plastic bottle. "Drink," he orders me but he didn't have to. As soon as I feel the cool water against my lips, I lift my head and gulp down the water. I feel some of it escape and trickle down my chin, but I don't care. It tastes too good to stop. When he pulls the bottle away, I grunt in frustration, my whole body crying out for more. He stares

down at me, not caring that I want more. He runs his thumb up my neck to my cheek, catching the drop of water.

“More,” I whisper.

“You’ll choke,” he says, but his voice is softer. “You passed out,” he continues. “And you’re burning up.”

“It’s Mexico,” I say, trying to push up on my elbows but flopping back on the mattress like a rag doll when my arms won’t cooperate. “It’s hot.”

“Christ, I know it’s hot,” he hisses, then presses the bottle back to my lips. I drink greedily again, trying to make sure to swallow fully so I don’t choke but it’s hard when I’m so damn thirsty. “Is this what happens when I leave you alone? You don’t take care of yourself?” His thumb is still pressing against my throat, but it’s not unpleasant. It’s light, almost caressing, like he’s still checking to make sure I have a pulse. I still want to punch him, right in the mouth. But it’ll have to wait until I get my strength back. The heat in the room is still stifling. My clothes are sticking to my skin. I can’t move, so I just lay there and let him feed me water until I suck down the last drop.

He absentmindedly tosses the empty bottle on the floor and presses the back of his hand to my forehead. Then he smooths my hair back and I have to stop myself from closing my eyes at the subtle pleasure of it. I shouldn’t let him touch me like this because, when he does, things get so complicated in my brain. I’m too tired to even try to think straight.

“You’ll be okay,” he says and I drag my eyes up to meet his, because he sounds different. Not angry anymore. He stares down at me with an unreadable gaze, his lips a straight-line. He’s got dark stubble on his cheeks and dark circles under his eyes. He looks terrible – well, as terrible as a man that looks like him can look. He’s aged in the time we’ve been apart, but so have I. The difference is that he only looks more handsome and more dangerous than ever. I’ve been obsessed with him for so long that it’s hard to not see him for what he is. A wounded, insane, anti-social animal with a pretty face and a deadly body. “I shouldn’t have left you alone,” he says, working his jaw around the words like they’re hard to say. He drops his head to my chest, balling up his hands in the sheet on either side of my shoulders. “Why do you always make it so hard, Joanie?” he murmurs, his deep voice working its way under my skin.

I don't answer him, because there's no point. I have no answers to offer him and he doesn't have any for me either. I want to get out of this room, out of this city. Shit, out of this country. I don't know where we're going to go, but I just want to get gone. I want to feel the wind in my hair as we gun it out of town. He moans lightly, rolling his head and pressing his nose against my sternum. Then he pushes up off of me and sits upright on the edge of the mattress.

"I have a surprise for you," he says, a sudden tremor of manic excitement passing under his skin. I can feel his change in mood just like that, like the air in the room has shifted.

"Unless it's something to eat, I don't want it," I mumble because I've regained enough energy enough to be angry again. And I'm also starving.

"I'll get you food," he says. "But first I have something else for you. Something better."

She's scaring me.

She's too pale and her eyes are red and puffy like she hasn't slept. Her lips are cracked and dry and her hair is chopped to hell and she's already starting to look too skinny. I was only gone for a few hours and she looks like she's coming undone. I shouldn't have fucked her like that last night, I know. I got too angry, I got too out of control. Only she can do that to me. Only she can make me act like that. Her body was just like I remembered, her pussy just as magical as the first time we fucked. When I was inside of her, I knew. I knew that coming back for her was the right thing to do. I fucked up a lot, but I know it was right. She thinks that I don't love her when all I've done for the past eight years is love her. She thinks that I don't care about her, even though everything I've done in the last eight years has been for her.

But I'm about to prove to her how much I care.

I run my hand down her soft thigh, because I can't resist. Her thigh belongs to me, I realize as I flex my fingers against her. Her whole body does. Last night was the last time I'll ever leave her. She doesn't know it yet, though. That's why she's angry. That's why she's trying to hurt me. But we

have the rest of our lives ahead of us, however long that will be. I'm not giving up on her no matter how much she may want me to, not now or ever.

I stand and make my way back to the bag I brought in. The air in the room is stifling and I'm already sweating through my shirt. But we can stand it for a little while longer, until we decide what we're going to do. Honestly, I'm mostly waiting for her to decide. I'll go along with whatever she wants to do, because she's better at this shit than I am. I'm not smart like she is. I can't remember all the details like she can and I usually fuck shit up whether I'm trying to or not. I never planned to kill her dipshit husband, after all. I don't know what happened, but I never planned to do that. I lost my head and shit got bloody, but it was never in my plan.

This is why I'm waiting for her to decide what to do next.

But there was one thing that was always in the cards and I'm tired of waiting for it. When I was alone on the fishing ship in the middle of the sea, staring up at the bottom of the bunk above me, shivering under my thin wool blanket, I would think about it. The details weren't important. I didn't care if it was in a church or in the middle of a field somewhere. I didn't care what we wore or when it happened, or how. All I could think of was her face. Her shiny brown eyes on me, her lips pink and thick as she formed them around the words that would change everything.

Now it's time.

When I slipped into that huge house that she lived in with her husband, I saw her wedding photo. It was hanging in a fancy gold frame above the marble fireplace in the living room. I stared at it for a long time, my emotions ranging between wanting to smash it to pieces and wanting to stare at it forever. She was wearing a long, shimmering dress and her hair was curled down her back and she looked like a queen. Her skin was golden, like she was glowing from the inside out. And she was smiling, but it was a fake smile. I know her well enough to know when she's faking. She's gotten so good at it, she fools everyone. She probably even fools herself sometimes, but not me. Never me.

I'm not going to let her fool me. I know she didn't love her husband, no matter how many times she pretended that she did. She may have even started to believe it, but I know the truth. She's happy he's out of the picture. His end was too bloody and horrific and she's traumatized. I take responsibility for that, but I know she's happy she doesn't have to pretend

anymore. As happy as I am, because now we can finally be together. I fucked up things so much, did unforgivable things, but it will end up okay. We're still together. That's all that matters. Besides, those pictures don't exist anymore, just like her marriage. They were all burned in the fire. They're ashes.

"I don't care what you brought me," she says, her voice pitifully small but still cold. She's probably dying of curiosity, but she'd rather lie and say she wasn't. I grab the bag and open it quickly, pulling out the dress I spent all morning trying to find. I want it to be as perfect as possible, only because I know I have to make it up to her. The only thing that really matters is vows, but I know what her last wedding was like. Her last wedding was done right, with flowers and a white dress and a church and a big cake.

I want to do it right.

I have to do it right.

After everything that's gone wrong, I want to do something right for a change. I never should have left her the first time. I should have told her about the cop. I should've been selfish and taken her with me when I ran. It's fucking stupid to keep looking back on the past, but it's hard to forget. What's done is done, but it's not forgotten. I regret becoming a murderer. I regret the blood on my hands, but I don't regret that I'm here now, in a room where she is. I don't regret that we've gotten this second chance. I don't regret it at all.

"Open it," I say, plopping the bag beside her on the bed. I want to see her face when she figures it out. She looks at the bag, like she's trying to decide if she's going to open it, but she makes no move to do so. Impatiently, I lean in, sliding my hands under her arms and hauling her up to sitting, even though she fights me. She pushes my shoulders weakly, but she can't budge me. I want her to open what I've brought her. I smooth her hair off of her face because the dark strands keep sticking to her sweaty skin. Her skin is still so hot. I'll give her a cold bath, I decide, before the ceremony. First I'll feed her and then I'll take off her clothes and give her a bath. Then after it's done, I'll bring her home and fuck her until we both pass out from exhaustion.

"What is it?" she says, moving away from my touch. I don't answer her, because she's being difficult on purpose. She's trying to make me angry,

but I'm not going to let her. So I take a step back and cross my arms, ignoring her attempts to piss me off. She shoves the bag off the bed and it falls to the ground and tips over on its side. The dress that I've spent the whole day looking for spills out onto the dusty tile floor. She leans over and peers over the edge of the bed. "What is it?" she repeats, but this time she doesn't sound angry. This time she sounds almost... shocked.

Definitely surprised.

I bend over and grab the dress off the floor. I don't want the white fabric to get dirty. She has to wear it today and it has to look nice. This is one more thing I can't allow to be ruined, no matter how difficult she wants to be. This is the one thing I need, more than anything else on the planet. We both need it, whether she knows it or not.

"It's not as nice as what you had before," I say, even though I probably should just keep my mouth shut. I shouldn't draw attention to how imperfect the circumstances are. She's used to perfection; I can't offer her that. I can't offer her everything that rich prick could. But I have everything she really wants. This is what life should've been. This is what we could've had, all those years ago, if I hadn't been such a fucking idiot. So I can't let it get ruined.

"That's why you were gone?" she asks, still staring at the long dress with wide eyes. "You spent the day looking for that?" I nod, spreading the dress out on the bed. I'm not too good with this kind of shit. In the three years since we've been together, I've thought so many times about this moment, but I never actually thought it was going to happen. But now it is happening. In a few hours, Joan will actually be my wife.

"I went to some bar last night," I say, keeping my eyes on the dress. I can't look at her yet. I'm feeling oddly nervous. It's fucking stupid, but I am. I haven't slept and barely ate and I'm jittery as hell. But if I'm honest with myself, I'm also worried she's going to say that she doesn't want to marry me. More, I'm worried she'll actually believe it. At this point, it's not an option to not get married. We're tied together in so many ways. If I can't have her, I don't know what will happen. I don't know if I'll be able to let her go again.

In fact, I know I won't.

"I didn't know where you went," she says, her voice small and close.

“You wanted to be alone,” I respond, smoothing my hand down the front of the dress, clearing the fabric of wrinkles. “I was shitty, I’m sorry for that.” She breathes in a short little breath and I finally force myself to look at her. She’s staring at me, her brown eyes red-rimmed. Her face looks pale and there’s a sheen of sweat on her forehead. “At about five this morning I figured it out.” I watch her face, watch for any little twitches or blinks that will convey how she feels. Right now, she’s giving me nothing. Her face is a blank slate. “When I saw this dress, I knew it was the right one.”

“It’s white,” she says, her eyes flitting from my face to the dress and back again.

“It has to be white,” I reply, because it’s true. No other color will do. White is a rebirth, white is a new beginning. White is the color of baptism and the color of peace. The color of surrender.

We’re getting married in two hours and my bride is going to wear white.

For a minute, I don’t quite get it. I stare at the cheap white dress and it doesn’t hit me.

Then it all sinks in.

It’s a deep V-cut dress, polyester, and so long that it drapes on the floor. There’s rhinestones around the neckline and they sparkle in the light from the window. It looks like nothing I would ever pick out for myself. Maybe once, I would’ve worn a dress like this. Once when I was innocent and foolish and liked when men gave me their attention. But I haven’t been that girl for a long time. I don’t want anyone to look at me anymore. I want to blend in as much as possible.

But he bought this for me. He wants me to wear it and I have to decide if I’m going to give him what he wants. I’m still angry at him, of course. But now the anger has faded to a dull roar because another feeling is pushing in. I’m sweating on the outside, but my insides have gone cold. I’m in shock, I think, because he can’t possibly be planning what I think he’s planning. He couldn’t possibly think that I’m in any position to do that. I don’t know how I could possibly put on this dress and walk down an aisle and promise the rest of my life to him. I don’t have any life left in me. He took it all.

“Come here,” he says, holding out his hand. I stare up at him because I don't know how to tell him that he's fucking nuts. Not that I'm probably much saner than he is, but at that moment, I feel like I'm the only one in the room that hasn't completely gone off the deep end. He leans forward and grabs my hand, pulling me to my feet. I don't fight him only because I can't. My head swims as he steadies me against his chest. I stare at the thin, scabbed over scratches at the base of his throat. The jagged marks look like the work of fingernails. I can't remember if I scratched him or not back in Seattle. Maybe it wasn't me at all. “Put your arms up,” he says and I can smell the tangy sweetness of tequila on his breath.

“Why?” I ask, because I've got my wits back around me. Sort of. It's so hard to breathe in the motel room. It's hard to breathe around him as well. It feels like my chest is crushing in on itself. He huffs out an annoyed breath and tugs at the hem of my shirt. He forces it up and I don't fight him too much. I'm too weak to fight anyway. Eventually he gets it over my head and tosses it on the bed. My tits are bare but I don't move to cover them. He doesn't even look at them. He grabs the dress off the bed and puts it on me, his hands rough and gentle at the same time as he pulls the bodice down over my chest. I just stand there and let him do it.

It fits. It's a bit snug in the chest, but it fits.

The fabric slides down over my hips, getting caught for a second on the waistband of my pants. I push my pants down off my hips and let them slide down my legs. I kick them off, even though the dress clings around my thighs. The room is so humid. The fabric doesn't breathe and immediately I feel a drop of sweat snaking its way down my neck to my collarbone. He steps behind me and his fingers graze my shoulders. Then he softly ties the dress at my neck, knotting it below my hair line.

I can't help but laugh when I see myself in the little cracked mirror in the bathroom. My face is dewy with sweat and reddened with the heat, my hair is wild and the dress is bright white against my tanned skin. I can't believe how strange I look. I barely recognize myself. Behind me, he pulls off his shirt and tosses it on the floor. Then he slips his arms around my waist and presses his chin to my shoulder. His muscles ripple menacingly as he pulls me close.

“Marry me,” he says. He's not asking. And he's certainly not joking.

“We don't have time,” I say, trying to talk some sense into him. We can't get married in Mexico. We have to get the hell out of here. We have to keep moving or they're going to find us.

“One more night,” he says, completely ignoring my concern. He presses a kiss to the spot right beneath my ear. “We'll go in the morning.”

“I want to go now,” I say, my body starting to shake again. “I have a bad feeling.”

“This is what's in the cards for us, Joanie,” he whispers in my ear. “This is what we should've done at the start.”

“Do I have a choice in it?” I ask. He loosens his arms and pulls away from me. I steel myself for his anger, for his violence, something.

“You already made your choice,” he says, fumbling with his pants. He shoves them down and kicks them off. “You're here with me. That's your choice.”

“Only because you decided to come back.” I turn my eyes back to the mirror, not wanting to look at his body. “Two hours ago I was about to leave without you.”

“Why didn't you?” His voice dips low and I suppress the shiver that tried to force its way down my spine.

“You know why.” I tug at the dress, trying to adjust my tits.

“Same reason I came back,” he says, pushing open the shower curtain and turning on the water. The pipes squeal and clank as a stream of water forces its way out. “We're no good without each other.” I watch him in the mirror, even though I don't want to look at him. His words are true, but I don't want to admit it, especially when he treated me like shit and then decided to put a cherry on top. He steps into the shower and pulls the curtain closed behind him, but I can still see him. My eyes run the length of him, without my permission, as he drops his head under the weak spray of water. He's right; without him I'm not half as strong as I am with him. I need him.

But he needs me, too.

I turn on the faucet and splash water on my face. Then I run my wet fingers through my hair, forcing it back. There's nothing to do but to pull it back into a low ponytail and get it off my face. I tie it back with band and then I take a step back and study myself, not that it matters. My hair is back and my face is bare. The dress fits me awkwardly. I don't have proper shoes,

just flip-flops. I don't have jewelry or perfume or flowers or anything to make this feel more real. There's no photographer or crowds of guests. There's nothing and no one but us.

It's not real anyway, I tell myself. So it doesn't matter.

He takes my hand and leads me through the colorful, loud crowded streets. He doesn't seem to care about being noticed, but it's hard not to dip my head every time I feel someone's eyes on me. We're still too close to Texas for my comfort. I feel like any second, someone could recognize us. Someone could know who we are. It's an afternoon on a weekday and the city is buzzing with activity. Deliveries and street cafes and children leaving school. Everyone is busy with their own lives. No one cares about us. At least that's what I tell myself.

I follow him blindly, not trying to figure out the way we're going. I've already lost track. We've woven through alleys and skinny side streets, but he knows the way. He's nothing if not determined. I have no idea how he's even found someone willing to perform such a ceremony, especially on such short notice. Weddings in Mexico are huge affairs, like everywhere. But there's also a waiting period, there has to be. Just like in the States. There's no way he's gotten the paperwork together, unless he's bribed someone. I have so many questions, but I don't bother asking. I don't think he would answer me anyway.

He's having too much fun. He's too excited.

We turn down a windy side-street lined with colorful buildings and as soon as I see the small, stucco church at the end of the street, I know that's our final destination. It's white washed and the sun shines down on it, making it practically glow with light. As we get closer, I can see that it's crumbling in places. The paint is peeling and the stone stairs that lead to the arched doorway are sloping. The handmade clay tiles in the floor are cracked and broken in places. But it's cool and dark and quiet inside, the feeling of reverence thick in the air as soon as we walk in the door. You could've heard a pin drop, despite the fact that we were just out in the loud city.

There's one big main room, with high, beamed, cathedral ceilings. Rough wood benches sit in for pews and crudely cut stained glass windows line the walls. The church is ancient and it feels like it. It was here way before us and it'll be here a long time after we leave.

"There's no one here," I whisper and he squeezes my hand. At that exact moment, a tiny woman in all white steps out of the shadows. Her hair is covered and her face is sagging with age. She has a heavy-looking wood cross hanging from her neck. She stands there silently and stares at us, her dark eyes taking us in.

"El padre," Elliot says, simply. She blinks and then nods slightly. She turns and walks under a sloped doorway. Elliot follows her and pulls me along with him, ducking as we go through the small doorway. The air is still and calm and our footsteps echo as we file behind her down the narrow hallway. She shuffles slowly in front of us and I try to force my heart to slow its beating as well. I don't know why I'm nervous. I tell myself it isn't real, even though it feels real. My first wedding was real and this is just make-believe. We're not even real people anymore. Our names don't even exist, not in this new life. The nun knocks lightly on a thick wood door and then she opens it. Then she nods her head toward the door.

I glance at her as I pass and she stares calmly back. The lines in her face seem to deepen in the low light of the hallway. I don't know why, but her demeanor makes me relax a bit. She seems like she's seen a lot of shit and been through a lot. Maybe she could understand what I've been through. Or maybe not. We step into a smaller room, one that's not as big and airy as the main portion of the church. The walls are stained white and there's similar stained glass windows along the walls that cast jagged reflected color all over the room. There's nothing much in the room but a few wooden chairs, an altar, and a man in black. The priest stands from the wooden chair at the back wall and closes the bible he was reading with a thump. He swipes a white cloth across the back of his neck and looks from me to Elliot.

"A lovely bride," he says, his voice heavily accented and gravelly, like he smokes a pack a day. It reminds me of my late-grandfather's voice.

"She is," Elliot responds, glancing down at me. The priest holds up his hand and motions for the nun. She closes the door behind us and I clench

my hand around Elliot's. It suddenly feels very real as the priest flips to the middle of this thick bible.

"I make it fast," he says with a smile. The nun is suddenly right beside me, pressing a white lily into my hand. I stare at her as she lightly nudges me until I'm facing Elliot. I obey and don't fight her, because the whole thing is so strange. I have no idea what to expect. The priest smiles down at me, showing his teeth. The nun pats my arm silently. Elliot pulls me closer to him and then nods at the priest. I run my tongue across my lips because my mouth has gone dry.

This is it.

The priest begins to speak in Spanish and I can only make out bits and pieces, some phrases and some words. Eventually I give up trying to understand what he's saying. I stare down at the lily in my hand. It's a bit wilted, but I can still smell the strong scent of the pollen. I can smell the smoke that lingers on the priest's clothes and thick scent of incense. I can smell the dust and the clay of the tile floor. I can smell the soap and the tangy hint of tequila that still clings to Elliot's skin. I feel tears stinging in my eyes and I don't bother stopping the one that rolls down my cheek. For the first time in a long time, everything seems alive around me.

"No," Elliot says, stopping the priest suddenly. All three of us look at him in confusion, but he only has eyes for me. I don't look away as he stares into my eyes. I can't. "Not until death. I'll love her even after death. *Despues de muerto.*"

"*Despues de muerto,*" the priest repeats after a moment, his voice somber.

"Forever," Elliot says, the manic fire flickering in his eyes. I know he's telling the truth. It's both of our truth now. There's no other possibility for us. I'll live and die with this man. We've been linked for so long he's become another part of me, the part that I hate and love in equal measure. When I thought he was dead, I was dead, too, on the inside. I still feel like I'm walking amongst the dead but maybe it won't always be like that. As I stare into his eyes, I feel like maybe there might be a future after all, somehow. So when the priest stops speaking and looks at me expectantly, I know it's time to accept my fate once and for all. It's like I'm on the edge of the cliff again in Alaska, staring down at the jagged rocks and violent sea below. Except there's no going back this time. There's no warm home and

safety and security somewhere else. There's only here and now. There's only one way this ends. So I give in.

I jump.

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Chapter Twenty

A clap of thunder is the only warning we get.

A block away from the church, the heavens open up and the rain begins to fall. It only takes seconds before we're both drenched. Elliot runs for shelter, dragging me behind him. I drop the lily from my hand, but I don't stop him. I leave it behind. We dodge other unfortunate souls on the street, looking for a place duck under. I see an abandoned store stall set back from the street and I point to it. He slides his arm around my waist and lifts me up onto the landing and I step back into the half-crumbling stall, under the tin roof. He pushes me against the concrete block wall behind us, shielding me with his body.

The rain pounds on the tin above our heads and slaps and splashes on the ground. It doesn't take long before streams of water run down the road and puddles push onto the concrete floor at our feet. I stare out at the people running for cover, balling up my hands in the heavy wet fabric of my skirt. I can't look at him, even though he's right in front of me. It's easier to look at other people. Thunder rumbles overhead ominously and a car alarm goes off close-by, making me jump. A drop of water rolls down my neck and makes me shiver.

"Joanie," he says, his voice low and close to my ear. But I just watch as the sheets of rain beat down on the street relentlessly. I know the rain won't be able to keep up like this for long. It's only a matter of time before it passes. And then we can go back to the hotel room and pack our shit and get the fuck out of Mexico. But he's not content on waiting in silence. "Don't fucking ignore me," he says through gritted teeth. I scowl at him, finally looking at him for the first time since he slid a ring on my finger during our wedding. His white shirt is plastered to his chest and his face is tight. I don't know what he wants from me, but I don't have anything left to give. "You're my wife now." He towers over me and his face is in shadow, so I can't read his eyes.

"How much did you pay him?" I ask, ignoring the thrill that runs up my spine as his body presses against mine. "How much did you pay him to

do that? It's not legal. There was no paperwork. Nothing legally binding. We didn't even use our real names.”

“It is real, Joanie,” he hisses, slapping his palm against the wall beside my face. “Goddammit, it was us and we said 'I do'. You vowed to be my wife and I vowed to be your husband.”

“I didn't have a choice,” I say, even though that's not the whole truth. It would be a lie to pretend I didn't feel anything when he said he would love me even after death. As the words came out of his mouth, I had never felt more sure about anything. I know for a fact he will love me for the rest of my life. The only problem is I can't figure out for the life of me what to do with all that love. It's so intense and unwieldy and violent and wholly unconditional. His love is terrifying. I can't offer him the same love in return. Not now. Maybe not ever. All I can offer is myself.

“You're fucking lying,” he says, pressing his forehead against my temple and dropping his hands to my hips. “You think I don't know when you're lying?”

“How much did you pay him?” I ask, my knees already starting to shake. The rain isn't letting up and it's drumming so hard on the thin metal roof above us that every other sound but our voices seems to fade away.

“I didn't pay him,” he said. “I told him you were pregnant and didn't want the baby to be born out of wedlock.” I stare at him, trying to figure out if he's telling the truth or not. “I met him in the bar and I bought him a bottle of tequila and a pack of cigarettes.”

“You met a priest in a bar? Are you serious?”

“I wouldn't lie about that,” he says. I shake my head, frustrated at him for a reason I can't put into words. For many reasons. But we're stuck together now. He grabs my hand lightly with his, holding it up to see my ring. It's completely different from the ring that used to be in its place. It's plain and cheap and there's nothing particularly special about it. “The only thing that matters is this,” he says but I don't hear him say the words. I hear it in my mind. His voice is back in the center of my brain, where it used to be. It used to torture me when he was gone, but now a tremor of relief passes through me. It's a good sign, I think. I hate him, but it's comforting to have him inside of me again. I miss the way we used to be connected, like our bodies and brains were on the same wavelength. I haven't felt him in that way in a long time.

He slides his fingers into the bodice of my dress and cups my right tit and I tilt my hips toward him without thinking. My nipples are hard and the wet white fabric isn't leaving anything to the imagination. I know I should tell him to stop but I don't. When he shoves the fabric aside and sucks the tight bud into his mouth, I dig my nails into his shoulders but I don't push him away. He moans against my skin; I can feel the vibration through to my soul. He sucks hard on my nipple and flicks it with his hot tongue and I feel the arousal unfurling like petals inside me. I don't fight it but I don't welcome it either. He doesn't give a shit either way. He's already grabbing my skirt in his hands, bunching it up and pulling it up to expose my legs. I drop my head back to the wall behind me, not able to fight even if I wanted to.

He drops to his knees in front of me, not caring about the wet concrete or the rain dripping around us from the rusted out holes in the roof. He pushes my legs open and nudges his chin against the soft skin of my inner thighs, the roughness of his scruff sending a shiver through me. The hair on his head is too short to grab, so I tighten my fingers in the collar of his shirt, trying to steel myself against what he's going to do to me. But nothing can prepare me for the first time he thrusts his hot tongue between my lips and drags it over my clit, fast and mean. He's playing dirty and it's not fair, but I still gasp and bite the inside of my cheeks to keep from screaming. It's not fair, but it still feels fucking incredible.

And he knows it.

He slides his hands around to grip my ass, holding me in place for him as he buries his face in my pussy, his tongue thrusting and insistent. The bunched up fabric of my skirt hides his face from me, but I know he's probably smiling. I bet he's smiling as he tortures me, because it's what he lives for. He runs his teeth across my clit and my knees almost buckle. I lean back against the wall for support and he takes advantage, hooking my left knee over his shoulder and steadying me against his body. Then he sucks my clit back into his mouth, the new angle giving him more access to me. And it also gives him access to the back of my thigh. He massages and then pinches the spot beneath my ass as he flicks his tongue against me and I yank hard at his shirt to keep from screaming. I want to slap him, to hurt him, to push him away, but I can't. I still want answers but I feel like I'm never going to get them. It's not fucking fair that he knows my body so

well. He has too many advantages over me and I crumble each and every time.

He slides two fingers easily into me. My thighs are wet with my arousal and his saliva and he knows what he's doing to me. He's making me want more of him. He's making me want his tongue and his cock and his hands and his lips. He's making me want all that he has to offer, all over again. And I do. I roll my hips into his hand as he thrusts hard against me. I can feel how ready I am and he can, too. I know he's thinking about fucking me, just as much as I'm thinking about it. It's the middle of the day and we're in the middle of the city, hidden from onlookers by only a crumbling wall and driving rain and yet I still want him to throw my skirt over my head and choke me and fuck me like a whore. I'm his whore, after all. He wants to dress up and pretend that I'm his wife, but it's all the same. We still ended up down in the dirt like the animals that we are.

He teases my clit with his thumb as he runs his tongue up my inner thigh, over the sensitive spot where he bit me the night before. It stings and I squeeze my eyes shut as he sucks at the wound. Then he presses his mouth back to my pussy again and I tilt my hips to meet his demanding tongue. My orgasm is close and I couldn't stop it even if it wanted to. I deserve this; after everything that's happened I deserve to feel something. I've been too numb for too long. It doesn't mean anything but I want it. I open my eyes and the light is too bright. I blink slowly, waiting for my eyes to adjust, my whole body is focused in on his tongue. He is moaning into me, thrusting his fingers and sucking like he knows that I'm close.

That's when I see her.

She's a tall girl with long black hair that hangs down her back. She steps into my field of vision as she hops over the river of water that's overspilling the gutter so her white Keds don't get soaked. She's wearing a short blue dress and carrying a cheap yellow umbrella. She's laughing to herself, despite the fact that the weather isn't cooperating with her day. Her lips are pink and her eyes are innocent. She steps under the cafe awning a few hundred feet away and glances up at the sky, watching the rain which is stubbornly showing no signs of slowing down.

I slap a hand to my mouth to suppress another moan, not that she'd be able to hear me from across the street. But I don't want her to look over and see me like this, with my tits out and my skirt shoved up and panting with

pleasure. I don't know why I care, but I do. Maybe I don't want her to be as debased as I am. Who knows the things the girl has seen, but I doubt she's anywhere near my level. I'd probably get on my knees in the street if Elliot asked me to. I'd crawl around in the mud on all fours if it meant that he would make me feel like this. If it meant he would fuck me and treat me like I was the only one on Earth who he wanted. At that moment, I would do anything.

The orgasm catches up with me then, unfurling like a fist in the middle of my body. My knees go weak and I lean against the wall. It feels as if his hands are all over me, touching me everywhere and in the best ways. But his tongue never leaves my clit and I feel my come dripping down my thighs. I roll my head against the concrete, moaning into my hand as the orgasm takes over. I haven't come like this in a long time. I've been used to soft and safe and easy. Making love in that big house in Seattle was never hard. It was never uncomfortable or painful or dangerous. It wasn't like this. It wasn't Elliot, it wasn't his rough fingers or his dirty mouth or his sadistic proclivities. Last night he fucked me like he was trying to conquer me and make me surrender. Today, he fucks me like he wants to make me weak for him and it's working.

The girl across the street still hasn't seen us. She's not paying us any attention; she's wringing out her hair and checking her dress to see how it fared in the rain. I drop my hand to the top of Elliot's head and drag it across the bristly strands. I miss his longer hair. I miss having something to hold onto. In response, he slaps my ass and then grabs it, his fingers digging into my soft flesh painfully. He's not giving in yet, even though my orgasm is ebbing. He still licks and swirls his tongue against me, drawing out the pleasure as long as possible. I roll my head to rest it on my shoulder and I sigh and hold myself as tight as I can, not quite ready to let my climax end. It's only then, that my guard is down and I feel like an open book full of obscenities, that she turns her face and her eyes meet mine.

At first she doesn't react and I know she hasn't fully figured out what she's looking at. But then she does. Her eyes go wide and her mouth drops open a bit. I want to look away but I can't. It's humiliating but I don't bother trying to cover up or pretend that we're doing anything other than what we're doing. At that moment, I'm too caught up in the things he's doing to me and the way he's making me feel. It seems like a long time before the

girl looks away and then flips open her umbrella and hops off the step and back into the rain. I stare at the place where she was standing as the orgasm ebbs and flows and finally pulls away like a wave on the shore.

Elliot pushes back on his haunches and swipes his arm across his face. Then he stands and pulls me close, cradling my skull with one hand and circling my waist with the other. He hovers his mouth over mine and I can smell me on his skin. "You like when I eat your pussy," he says and he's not asking. There's no question about it, anyway. I do like it; more than that, I love it. Even when I hate him the most, I still want him to fuck me. I want him to want to fuck me. I want him to want to make me come. "I'm the only one that can make you come like that," he says and I can hear the unevenness in his voice. He's going off the rails and I can't stop him.

He's already kissing me before I can say anything. He's shoving his devilish tongue in between my teeth and forcing my mouth open wider to accommodate him. He moans into me and presses me back against the wall. The concrete is damp and soaked with rain and it's cool against my overheated skin. The steam is rising between us, from underneath our soaked clothes. I fumble with his shirt, trying to get it open. I want to touch him. When I finally get it unbuttoned, I slide my hands under the white cotton, pressing my palms to the skin of his chest. He moans into me and tightens his hold on me.

It's getting easier to let go. Easier to let him do whatever he wants and to take it. Last night was hard and today was hard, but maybe tomorrow will be a little easier. And then the day after that and the day after that. For the first time, it feels like it won't always be this way between us. Someday, maybe it'll actually be real again. Maybe someday I'll really be his wife and he'll really be my husband. I don't know if the afterglow of the orgasm is shading my perception, but I know that I can't go on like this forever. The anger will have to go somewhere. The grief will fade as well. For the first time since I saw Elliot at the top of the stairs and covered in my husband's blood, it feels different.

I'm already starting to forget.

It still doesn't feel right.

I've been trying to make it right since we got to Mexico, but I keep fucking it up.

She's my wife now, I tell myself. I married her in a white dress, in a church, in front of a priest like I was supposed to. I did everything right. I bought her a ring and I put it on her finger in front of God and whoever else. I killed for her and took what was mine. I lost my mind over her. I've lost everything over her, in fact. We've both suffered. I know that when she looks at me she sees blood and gore and murder. She doesn't know the whole truth, though. She doesn't know why I left in the first place. She doesn't know how much I've truly fucked up. I want her to know. I don't want to keep things from her because when I do, everything goes to shit.

Now, she's looking at me differently. She's looking at me like she sees me again. Last night, she was being stubborn. We were both angry and we did and said shit that we didn't mean. She's not ready to forget yet, but time is on my side. I know she'll come around, she always does. Which is why I have to do it now. I don't want to, but I have to. I have to pull off the scab even if it makes me bleed. It'll be worth it tomorrow and the day after and the day after that.

"Joanie," I say. She furrows her brow and I know she can feel the change in me. I'm ready to stop fucking around. Maybe this isn't the right time or place for it. My dick is hard and her beautiful tits still call me. I want to taste her mouth as I thrust inside of her. I can wait, though. This is more important. She adjusts her dress, pulling it back over her tits. She smooths her hand over her hair, trying to hide her shaking hands. She looks so beautiful like this. This is the real her and I'm going to remember her just this way. It's not like that painted up, artificial version of her that used to hang in her husband's house. This is the real Joanie.

Although, soon enough, her name won't be Joan anymore.

"We should get back," she says, turning away from me and surveying the street. "It'll stop raining soon." I hold out my hand and run my fingers over the curve of her shoulder. Her skin is moist and hot and I want to taste it again. If I tell her what I have to tell her, who knows when I'll get to touch her again. She'll be angry, I know she will. Maybe it's a mistake, but I can't stop myself.

"I killed that cop," I finally say, forcing the words out before I can rethink it.. Blunt and to the point. There's no reason to do it any other way.

There's no better way to tell the woman that you love that you killed someone. I see her muscles stiffen but she doesn't say anything. "That cop that was sniffing around in Seattle. I killed him." She still doesn't answer, and she doesn't look at me either. The words hang in the air between us, but I can't stop until I've told her the whole story. He came to your old place and I lured him in. I killed him in your living room."

"When?" she says finally, her voice so low it's almost lost under the loud rhythm of the rain.

"The first day you were in the hospital." I don't like to reminisce about that day, for many reasons. Killing the cop is one. But thinking of her lying helpless in that hospital bed because of me is another. She's fine now, apart from a slight deeper tone in her voice, but things could've turned out differently. Much differently. Maybe if I'd done the right thing and stayed away from her, it would've been better. Not that it matters now. "He was going to keep coming. He was going to keep pushing until he figured it out." I say. It sounds like an excuse, but it's true. I know types like that cop; they never stop digging. Especially when what he really wanted was Joan. I couldn't blame him for that, but I also couldn't forgive him.

"So you killed him?" she asks, her voice flat. "How did you do it? There wasn't any blood."

"I strangled him," I say.

"Like Lassiter."

"Yeah," I clench and unclench the fingers of my fucked up hand. The pain is spiking, but I know it'll pass, eventually. "Like Lassiter."

"What did you do with the body?" She smooths her hand over her hair again. Her hand is still shaking.

"Took his car and drove him out of state. Went up into the mountains and dumped him." I say. I don't want to sugar-coat any of the details. I just want her to know the facts. It's so important. "Then I dumped the car and kept heading north. I didn't stop."

"But you came to see me in the hospital," she whispers. "Was that before or after?"

"After." I want her to look at me. I want to see her eyes. I know she's upset and I don't blame her. I knew she would be. "I couldn't leave without seeing you. I grabbed my shit and loaded up the car and then I came to the hospital."

“Where was he?” Her voice rises and I can hear the hysteria on the edge of her voice. I know it's hard for her to hear but the truth keeps pouring out of me.

“The trunk,” I admit.

“You brought his body with you to the hospital?” Finally she turns to look at me. Her eyes are wide and I can see that she's not taking it well. “Do you know how fucked up that is?”

“I'm sorry, Joanie,” I say, because it seems like the right thing to say.

“Sorry for what?” she scoffs. “You're not capable of being sorry.” The rain is finally tapering off. The banging on the roof above us has muted to a soft, rhythmic pit-pat. The streams of water in the street are seeping away. The sounds of the city around us are returning to normal. I know we shouldn't keep talking about this here, where anyone could be listening. Maybe I shouldn't have told her at all, but I couldn't lie anymore.

“I didn't want to hurt you,” I say because it's true. She's right after all; I'm not really sorry about killing the man. I'm only sorry that it meant I had to leave her when I never should have. I'm only sorry for all the time we spent apart, all the years we couldn't be together. It was selfish of me.

“Do you know how easy it is to hate you?” she asks. “It's easier to hate you than try and forgive you. Not that you're really asking for forgiveness, anyway.” She sighs, her breathing ragged and full of contempt. I can feel her disgust. I don't respond, because she's always known me better than I know myself. She's right; I don't want forgiveness. I'm not sorry for what I've done, except for leaving her. Letting her go was my biggest mistake and I'm still suffering for it, even though we're together again.

Without another word, she turns and steps down onto the street. She pushes through the people on the sidewalk and into the street, running in front of a truck and barely avoiding getting hit by a biker. Cursing under my breath I hop down and follow her, blinking in the bright light out on the street. The sun is starting to push through the gray clouds in the sky. The storm is passing. Cool drops of water hit my face but I ignore them as I run after her. She doesn't know where she's going; she's moving in the wrong direction from the hotel. I don't know why she's bothering to run; there's no escaping me. I know it's my fault. Everything that has happened, everything that will happen, is all my fault. We can create new names for ourselves and pretend to erase our dark shared history, but I'm still me and she's still her.

I'm never going to change. She, however, has done nothing but change. She's nothing like the girl she was the first time I met her. She's changed because of me. She's becoming more and more like me with every passing day. She's trying to fight it, but it's inevitable.

We're too similar already.

"Stop running," I hiss in her ear as I catch up to her. I slide my arm around her waist and pull her close to me. "There's no point."

"Let me go," she hisses back, swinging her elbows and hitting me in the ribs.

"It's not safe here," I say, tightening my arm to make her more uncomfortable.

"Safe?" she scoffs. "You just left me alone all night in a hotel room and now you want to worry about my safety?" I bite my tongue to stop myself from telling her that she was fine in the hotel room because she doesn't want to hear it and it's not entirely true. She's right; I shouldn't have left her alone. The truth is that there's nowhere safe for us yet, but being with me is the safest she could be, especially in Tijuana.

"You're never going to forgive me for anything are you?" I ask, pressing my mouth against her hair. She smells like sweat and rain and sex. She smells delicious. I want her to soften towards me again, but I don't know how long it will take. The devil doesn't get forgiveness, though. I know she'll never forgive. But hopefully soon she'll start to forget again. At least now I've told her everything there is to know. There's nothing hanging over us anymore.

Finally.

I'm angry.

I'm not sure why. I'm not sure what I'm more angry about. I'm not sure if it's the killing or the way that he left me or or all of it. I don't know if angry at myself for letting this happen. If I hadn't told him about Wilson, or had lunch with Wilson or any of it, maybe Wilson would still be alive. Maybe none of the things that have happened would've happened. I can't help but think of all the things that could've been prevented. The problem is with Elliot, though. He doesn't think twice about killing. He kills first and

thinks later. He can't control himself. He's a ticking time bomb. I've known that as long as I've known him. And I don't forgive him for it. I never will.

I think I'm starting to understand it, though.

Elliot's is insane, but I can see how it made sense to him on some level. He killed Wilson to protect us. He also killed Wilson out of jealousy and anger and frustration, though. He killed because he's a murderer. He doesn't need an excuse to kill. He uses me as an excuse to lose control, but he would do it with or without me as a reason. As we pass through the streets in silence on the way back to the hotel, it dawns on me. We're stuck with each other. We're going to have to figure out how to make it work or kill each other in the process. I have no idea which will happen first, but I have to try.

I have to help him. I have to save him from himself.

For both of our sakes.

We reach the hotel and he pulls me up the rickety wooden stairs to the room and then shoves me up against the wall beside our door. He towers over me, blocking out the light. The heat has risen again and the rain is evaporating from my skin, but I still feel wet all over. I stare up at him defiantly, daring him to say something. He doesn't. He just digs in his pocket and then leans over and unlocks the door. He nudges it open with the toe of his boot and the door creaks open lazily.

Then he surprises me again.

He bends and slides an arm behind my knees and another behind my waist. I don't even have time to fight him before he's hoisting me off my feet and carrying me over the threshold into the hotel room. I have to suppress a smile as he kicks the door closed behind us and twirls me around in a circle. I squeal and loop my arms around his neck to steady myself as an unwanted feeling rushes through me. I'm taken off guard by his change in demeanor and the way he's been acting all day. I don't like when he surprises me but he has. I never would've guessed he would be so traditional.

"What are you doing?" I hiss, trying to still be angry at him.

"I'm treating you like my wife, 'cause that's what you are," he says and suddenly his Texas drawl hits me square in the chest. I haven't heard it in awhile. He's been suppressing it, I realize. He slips here and there, but I haven't heard him sound so thoroughly Southern in a long time. I hate to

admit it, but it feels like home. Living in Seattle almost knocked all the Texas girl right out of me. Almost. He sets me on my feet and I quickly put space between us, because I need it. He cocks his head, his eyes flashing in a threatening way. "Are you going to keep fighting me?" he asks, bringing his hands up to finish unbuttoning his shirt. I watch his hands work, his ruined hand and his unblemished hand working awkwardly together. "Cause I'll fight you, if that's what you want." He slips his wet shirt off and tosses it on the threadbare chair. I don't look away, because I can't. His body is impossible to ignore anyway.

I'm so weak for him. He's already given me a taste of what he wants to do to me. I would be lying if I said that I didn't want the rest of it, especially when he unbuckles his pants and slides his hand down his pants and cups his erection. It doesn't take long before he's completely naked, sitting on the edge of the bed and staring at me like he knows I want him just as much as he wants me. "You don't have to forgive me," he says, leaning back on his arms. All the ridges of muscle in his chest ripple beautifully and between his lean thighs, his cock is hard and begging for attention. He's presenting his body to me like a piece of filet on a golden platter. It doesn't matter that we're in this shitty hotel room in the middle of Tijuana. We could be in a rich mansion somewhere with the best bedding and the most perfect circumstances because that's how it feels when I look at him. And I'm starving, I realize.

I tug at the straps until the knot releases and then I let the dress pool at my feet. I step out of the clingy wet fabric, relieved to have it off. The hot air in the room caresses me. His eyes roam all over my body, taking in every inch of exposed skin. I don't bother trying to cover up. I keep my arms loose at my sides, wanting him to see every bit of me. I want him to want me, just as I am now. Not as I was five years ago. "Come here," he says, crooking a finger in my direction. I obey because I want to, not because I have to. At least that's what I tell myself as I cross the room and straddle his lap. He grabs me immediately, pulling me to his chest. He kisses me first, before I can react. His hand finds my throat and I stiffen against him, even though I tell myself not to. It's a natural reaction to an unnatural memory.

"Don't flinch when I touch you here," he whispers, running his thumb over the scar at the base of my throat. "I won't go that far ever again." I

swallow hard because it's difficult to push past that fear and discomfort. It's not just the fear of being hurt, it's also a reminder of the dark days after he left me, the days when I was so numb I might as well've been dead. "If I do, you can cut off my balls with a rusty steak knife," he says, flicking his eyes up to meet mine. "I swear." I see he's trying to make light of the situation and can't stop the small smile from crossing my lips at the image.

"I want that in writing," I say, forcing myself to relax the tense muscles in my shoulders. He rubs the scar with his thumb, softly, and it reminds me of all the times he's wrapped his hands around my throat when he's fucking me and made me feel good. All the times I wanted him to do it. My skin there is so sensitive; his touch sends little shots of electricity down my spine. He leans in and presses his mouth to the side of my neck, running his tongue all over the skin and making me arch my back at the force of the arousal that he unleashes in me. He hasn't even touched my most sensitive spots and I'm already wet and aching for him.

His ruined hand is lightly moving as well – up my thigh and to my hip. That hand feels strange on my skin, not in a bad way but in a different way. I don't stop him from moving up my thigh, even though I haven't let anyone touch me there in the past year. I didn't want him to feel the scars. I didn't want him to see what I was doing to myself in the name of pleasure. I didn't want him to see how weak and disgusting I really am. It was embarrassing, but it wasn't embarrassing enough to stop. And now I'm just as scarred and ugly on the outside, just like I am on the inside. "Don't do this anymore," he says, like he can hear my inner thoughts. He covers my scars with the palm of his hand and I wince, because the bite mark he gave me there is still sensitive. "If you want to bleed, I'll do it for you. All you have to do is ask."

My whole body shudders at his words, because that was what I always wanted all along. I want him to hurt me. I want him to make me bleed. But he's the only one who can do it right. Now that I'm back in his presence, I know without a doubt it's true. I hate it though. I hate feeling like I need him so much. So I wrap my fingers around his hand, feeling the bumpy scars and the oddness of its shape. "What happened?" I ask, because we both need a distraction. I need to find some control over myself. I can't let him win this easily. I can't. He groans, nipping at my neck like he doesn't want to answer.

“On the boat,” he says, his voice hoarse in a beautiful way. “I grabbed a rope I shouldn't have grabbed. It was stupid, but it was instinct. It happened so quickly I didn't know what hit me.”

“Does it still hurt?”

“Yes,” he hisses. “Every fucking day.”

“Good,” I whisper. He clenches his jaw and the muscles in his chest jump, like he's holding himself tight. I wonder why he doesn't just push me over onto my back and fuck me like he wants to do. He's being cautious, trying not to scare me away. I won't break this time, though. I'm trying to control myself too, but I don't know how much longer I'll be able to. I don't even know if I want to anymore. I've already lost myself. I've already given up. This is just the preliminary arguments before a lengthy trial. But we're both guilty and the only question is how long the sentence will be. Last time we were together, we got a few weeks before it all went to shit. So much has happened since then, so many terrible things, that I can't help but feel that we're cursed. Maybe this time we'll destroy each other instead of destroying everything around us. That's the only thing I can hope for.

I run my hands up his arms, feeling his rough skin against mine. He's had a hard life; he's worked with his hands out in the sun. His skin is freckled and scarred and damaged. He's got pain etched on his flesh. He can't hide it anymore like he used to be able to. He lets out a slow, measured breath as I run my fingertips over his collarbone, feeling the familiar bump on the right side where he broke it once and it didn't heal right. I remember that bump. I remember the way his Adam's apple juts out and the way his jaw feels against mine. I remember how his hips fit against mine and how his fingers fit in my mouth. It's all coming back now, that I'm letting myself remember. I wonder if he tried to forget me as much as I tried to forget him.

He jerks his hips and drops his head back as I continue exploring him. I drag my nails down his chest and over his flat nipples, watching as they pebble and harden under my attentions. His cock jumps between us, like it's trying to remind me of its existence. Like I could forget it. I reach between us and roll my palm over the head of him. He's hot to the touch and I almost pull my hand away because it's too much. We just fucked last night, but it might as well have been ages ago for how long it feels. Besides, last night didn't count. Last night was two animals attacking each other in a back alley and fighting for the upper hand.

The difference is night and day.

I lift myself up and roll my hips over him, steering his cock toward me. I bite down hard on my lip as I slide the head of him against me. I'm wet and it feels good. It feels more than good, it feels heavenly. My stomach cramps up as I think about him thrusting into me because I want it so badly. But we both can wait a bit longer. It'll be better that way.

"I love you," he breathes as I run my thumb over the head of his cock. "I always have and I always will." I nod, because I know he's telling the truth. He loves me in the only way he knows how. He lives in the only way he knows how. I tell myself that it doesn't mean I forgive him as I line him up against my pussy and lower myself onto him. I'm just living the only way I can. The only way I can survive is like this. So I do it. I survive.

His whole body goes stiff as my body stretches to fit him. It feels like it takes forever until he's deep inside of me. I can hardly breathe but I don't move on top of him. I just savor the feeling. All the years of not having it and suddenly I have it again. It's not perfect. It's not sane. But it is what it is. I dig my fingers into his shoulders, trying to steady myself against him. The sensation is on the cusp of pain, but the pleasure is there, too, lurking in the corners of my brain. It wants to be let out of its cage. It wants me to fully embrace it again.

He runs his hands up the curve of my waist and over my ribs. He's trying so hard not to ruin it by being too rough. He's trying and that's something. It's getting impossible for me to think so I put both of us out of our misery. I slam down on his cock, calling out as he fills me up in the way that I crave. He finally loses a bit of control and grabs my ass as I move against him, rolling my hips to take him deeper. I fuck him slowly at first and he doesn't fight me, even though I can tell it's not going to last. For a few minutes, he stares into my eyes as I ride him and I can see how he's spiraling into the dark space where only we exist. The people outside don't matter; nobody else can get inside. When we're together, only we're important. Only the way our bodies collide and fit together and fight each other is important.

He drops back against the bed and arches his body, holding me in place with his steel-like grip. He thrusts so hard into me that my vision blanks out and I call out again because I can't help it. My tits crave his mouth and every other inch of my skin craves his hands. I want him in my ass, in my

mouth, and deep in my pussy. I want all of him, everywhere. I clench around his cock and lean over him, pressing my hands to the mattress on either side of his face. For a few seconds, we moan in tandem as he thrusts in and out of me. A chunk of my hair falls forward and he reaches up and pushes it away from my cheek. I lean into his touch, the striations of his scars surprising me again. I'm still not used to it, but I will be. He roughly caresses my thigh with his other hand, his touch insistent. He's not happy with just fucking me like this. He wants more.

“Do you promise to cherish me?” I ask him, slapping a hand against his neck and pressing down lightly, enough to get his attention. “And honor me?” His eyes come back to life, flashing with a wicked light. He bares his teeth and presses his tongue to the corner of his mouth. Then he grinds his hips into mine and I have to grit my teeth to keep from screaming. For a second, my mind jumps back to the noisy couple who was fucking in the room next door earlier that afternoon. I wonder how loud we're going to be tonight. I don't necessarily care, but I also don't want to draw too much attention to our room.

He catches me off guard because I'd let my mind wander. He shoves me off of him and I land on my side. I barely have time to react before he's got me on my back and pinned under him, his knees forcing my thighs open wide and his hands forcing my wrists into the mattress. He lowers himself over me, his mouth sneering over mine. I stare at his lips, wondering what he's planning to do with that evil mouth of his. He smiles a bit before he answers my questions, even though I wasn't expecting him to. “I'll cherish you if you'll let me,” he says. “I'll honor you until my dying day. And I'll love you forever, whether you want me to or not.” He angles his erection against me and I shiver in anticipation. My body is throbbing with need for him. I want to come but I also want to put off the inevitable orgasm for as long as possible. The longer it takes, the harder he'll try and the more painful and desperate it will be.

I'm aching for the pain.

“No more killing,” I say, because I can't help myself. I want to say it before I can't. He drags his gaze slowly up over my stomach and my breasts until he meets my eyes. He studies me for a moment, then a teasing smile crosses his lips. But on him, a teasing smile looks just as menacing as it does teasing.

“Do you promise to obey me?” he asks. He digs his knees into the mattress and thrust into me. I'm so wet that he slides inside of me easily but the friction is still heavenly. I lift my head off the mattress to see where our bodies meet. I want to watch him pump in and out of me. He drives hard into me, giving me a good show and making me scream at the same time. He wants me to answer his questions, but he's crazy if he thinks I'm going to agree to that. He drops his body on top of mine, pinning me to the hard mattress and making it hard for me to breathe. “Promise to love me,” he growls in my ear and the sound is the sexiest thing I've heard in a long time. Lust swirls through my brain like steam and my thighs clamp around his waist. “Promise me,” he nudges, his voice husky and resonant. I can hear how much he needs me to say it in his voice. I can feel it with every movement, every flex of his strong muscles.

We're sweating together, our bodies slippery and loose. It's hot as Hades in the room, but I'm getting used to the heat again. It feels good to be against him like this, to be so completely close to him that it's hard to tell where my body ends and his begins. This is something like love, I think. I used to believe that I loved him, but now I think it was closer to obsession. I let myself become obsessed with him. The strength of those feelings haven't gone away. They were just buried, deep inside my chest. The more time I spend around him the more I know that I couldn't leave him even if I wanted to. We're stuck together, but I don't think I would have it any other way. I should've never let anyone come between us. I won't make that mistake ever again.

“I promise to love you,” I say, my voice as strong as I can make it.

“You'll be my wife,” he continues. “You'll love me above all others.” He's not really asking anymore. He's announcing it; he's declaring it. It's my own fault, I suppose. I was too out of it at the wedding. I made him feel uncertain. He hates to feel uncertain when it comes to me. It makes him lash out. Or in the case of earlier, drop to his knees. When I'm unpredictable, it makes him unpredictable in turn. So I have to be steady. I have to be strong, for both of us. And I have to love him. So I will.

“I will,” I respond, fighting against his hold on my wrists because I know he'll like it if I fight. Shit, I'll like it more, too.

“You say it like it's a challenge,” he says, stilling on top of me. “Is loving me so difficult?” I grit my teeth, wanting him to move. I lift my

knees, trying to force him deeper inside of me.

“Loving you is impossible,” I say, trying to shift my hips under his heavy weight. His forehead creases in a scowl and I know that's not what he wanted to hear but it's true. Loving him *is* impossible, at least in the normal sense. Loving him isn't like loving anyone else. Loving my parents or my brothers used to be easy. Loving my friends and my high school boyfriends came easily, too. I used to have so much love to give. Love always seemed infinite before. But now it starts and ends with Elliot.

Love is strange when it comes to him and me. Undefinable and always on the verge of collapsing in on itself, but never going away. It always lingers under the surface, even if there's a build-up of layers of dark hatred on top. I don't even know how or when I started to love him, but I suppose I do now. Besides, I might as well. “Take it back,” he whispers and I feel the air in the room shift. I'm being cruel to him, but I can't resist being honest. There's no use lying to him anyway, because he can sense that as well.

“I'm your wife,” I respond, because for all intents and purposes, I am. It doesn't matter if the rushed little ceremony at the church today was legal or not. For him and for me, it's binding. This is how it should've been anyway. When I walked down the aisle toward Mitch, I knew deep down in my soul that it should've been Elliot standing at the other end. But I married Mitch anyway because Elliot wasn't there. All the men in my life since I met Elliot were placeholders. Now I have the real thing again and it's going to last. Until we kill each other or live happily ever after. Either one.

“And?” The word is sharp.

“So I love you,” I say. “No matter how impossible.” I fight him again, arching my back and pressing my chest harder into his. “Now fuck me or get off,” I say, because I know he'll like it. It'll make him fight harder. He sucks in a breath between his teeth and then pushes off of me, which surprises me. I try to hold him place with my legs, but he easily evades me. My pussy clenches, wanting him back inside. He rolls over onto his side and then comes for me again, trying to shove me over onto my back. I dodge him but he grabs me again, his fingers digging into the soft skin of my upper arms. His cock bobs up toward his stomach, stiff and calling for me as we fight. Our scuffle ends with bedsheets being ripped off the ends of the mattress and blankets pushed to the floor and me flat on my stomach

and him on top of me, holding me down. He runs his mouth down my spine and smacks my ass until I cry out from the perfect, sharp pain.

“I don't think you're taking me seriously,” he says as he pinches the magical spot on the back of my left thigh, right beneath the swell of ass. Then he spanks me again with his open palm and I press my fist to my mouth to muffle my pathetic moans. I try to wriggle out of his grasp, but I can't. I don't really want to either, even though what he's doing to me is exquisite torture. “I think you like fucking with me.” Another blow rains down and the lasting sting makes my thighs clench. I feel a trickle of saliva drip out of the corner of my mouth and I know I'm about to lose it.

“I am,” I admit, out of breath and barely able to speak. My heart is beating so fast that it's hard get the words out.

“Why?” he asks, the word curling in my ear and making goosebumps rise on my skin even though it's so hot. “Because you love to torture me, don't you?” Another smack, harder this time. My body jerks at the pain and I see red as my eyeballs roll back into my head. I'm losing it. Completely losing it. When he reaches a hand around and tweaks my nipple, I almost come. If he'd had mercy on me and put his cock in me, I would've. It's frustrating, so frustrating. My stomach is in knots. I'm in pain and I'm covered in sweat.

I haven't felt this alive in so long.

“I...” I start, but I can't finish. I lift my hips as much as I can, begging for more. He pinches my nipple again, roughly enough to bruise and then he finally gives in. He must've been just as turned on as I am, because he doesn't waste any more time. He lifts off of me and grabs my hips. He pulls me up on all fours and then shoves my thighs open. I can hear how wet I am and maybe I should be embarrassed, but I'm not. I'm way past caring about things like that. I only want the pleasure. I only want him.

He shoves inside of me, not resisting the urge to slap my ass once more as he breaches me. I shudder and push back against him, forcing him balls deep. It hurts. Oh God, it hurts. I love how much it hurts. I shiver from head to toe as he wraps his hand in my hair. He pulls my head back as he rears his hips away. I know what's coming next and I can't fucking wait.

“This is what you want, isn't it?” he asks and I make a noise half-way between a moan and a resounding 'yes'. My brain is too overheated to speak anymore. “This is what you love.” He shallowly thrusts, teasing me. He

leans forward and cups my tits with his scarred hand, one after the other, his thumb running over the sensitive nipples. Then he runs it down my stomach, claiming every inch of skin that he touches. When his thumb brushes my clit, I cease thinking. My brain shuts down and I become a creature of lust. He finally gives me what I want, yanking my hair roughly as he rubs my clit.

Then he starts to fuck me again, thrusting long and hard, pulling out almost every inch and then slamming back in again. Then he rears back and swirls his hard cock around my wet slit as he continues circling my clit with his thumb. "This is where we belong," I think I hear him say, but I can't be sure. "This is home." I open my eyes but my vision's blurry. I realize the words he's saying, if he's saying them at all, are true. I have nothing else in life – a gun, a few items of clothing, a cheap wedding band – but I'm home. I once had everything I could've wanted in life, except for the one thing that I've been programmed to need the most. Elliot's trained me so well. It's sick and disgusting and perverted, this relationship I've found myself in.

But it's home.

When I come a few seconds later, it's the best orgasm I've ever had in my life. It goes on and on, wave after wave, and he fucks me through it, pinching my thighs until I cry and collapse limply in a heap beneath him. Then he fills me with his come, thrusting into me until his thick seed slowly drips down my thighs. It's messy and it's disgusting and it's perfect. It's both of us, mixed together until there's no separation. Our bodies are tangled together and even our DNA is combined. Our history is just as tangled up and complicated and it'll never make sense but it's us. And that's all I need.

It's dark outside the windows but I can't sleep.

Elliot sleeps beside me, his chin on my shoulder and his heavy arm locked around my ribs. He's not a deep sleeper so I'm careful not to make any quick movements. The lightest nudge will cause him to sit up sharply and be ready for violence. He's spent too much time in prison. He doesn't like being surprised.

We lay on top of the sheets, naked and covered in our own sweat and come and maybe even some blood and I feel disgusting but too tired to even

consider getting up to take a shower. I stare up at the dusty ceiling fan above us as it rotates in its lazy circle, trying to force my brain to shut off. Tomorrow, we have to figure out where the hell we're going to go and what the hell we're going to do and I know need sleep in order to deal with that. But knowing that I need to sleep doesn't help my anxiety. A gunshot rings out on the street below us and I jump in surprise. Elliot sucks in a sharp breath and jerks against me. His eyes pop open, but his pupils are dilated and I don't think he's completely awake. He sits up, his hands immediately searching for something, probably my gun.

"Who?" he asks, his voice thick.

"It's outside," I murmur. "Go back to sleep." He blinks and looks at me, like he needs reassurance. Then he nods and closes his eyes, laying beside me again. He tightens his arms around me even more, pulling me against his slick chest. I don't bother fighting him. For the last few years, I've been used to a big bed and falling asleep alone on some nights. A quick kiss on the lips and then roll over as I drift off to sleep on most nights. It's strange now to sleep with someone so closely, so intimately, after so long. But it's also familiar. I'll get used to it again.

"Joanie," he mumbles against my neck and a small but sharp pain hits me in the center of my chest like a pinprick. "It's okay?" he asks. I bite my lip to keep myself from snorting out a small, disbelieving laugh. After the way he just ravaged me, he has no right to sound so little and in need of reassurance. But the laughter would just be a way to hide the way he's making me feel, warm and soft over him even though he doesn't deserve it.

"Mmhmm," I hum lightly. "It's fine." He sighs heavily and his muscles relax again and I'm sure then that he's gone back to sleep. My eyes drift over to our clothes, tossed around the room. My makeshift wedding dress is in a wrinkled heap beside the TV stand. I remember my first wedding dress – it was so expensive and one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen. It was perfectly tailored and fit me like a glove. I looked like a queen in it for a day and took pictures for austerity. Then for the next two years, I kept it in a bag at the back of my closet, like a relic. It's gone now, along with everything else. I'm not going to keep this second wedding dress, I decide. I'm going to throw it away before we leave Tijuana. I don't want to carry it around with us on our journey. It feels like bad luck, like an omen, even if that doesn't make sense. I've been engaged three times and married twice

now, but the planning and the weddings are only memories and that's how they should stay. The weddings aren't what's important, after all. It's what happens after that's important.

Eventually the sun will rise and I know Elliot will be looking to me to guide him in the right way. I know that I have to make the right choice for us because if I don't, it could be disastrous. Who am I kidding? It'll probably be disastrous either way. There's no way that this will end up happily for us. We don't deserve it. But I'm still going to fight for it. I'm going to fight for us for as long as I can. Next to me, Elliot moans and flexes his arm. His hand shakes and then goes still. I stare at his hand, wondering what the pain feels like. He says it hurts all the time and it looks bad. The scars are purple and red and pink against his skin. I haven't gotten used to his disfigured fingers. But I will. I'll suck them and lick the scars, I decided. Tomorrow or the day after. When he's looking at me with heavy eyes and dirty intentions. Then I'll surprise him.

And then out of nowhere it comes to me. A name.

A place to go. A possibility. I mull it over in my head. I've never been to Central America before but it seems like as good of a place as any. *Belize*, I whisper. I don't know why, but it feels good. Out of all the countries we could go, it just seems to stand out above the rest. I wonder why, but suddenly I'm tired and the rhythm of his breathing and the hum of the city outside is lulling me to sleep. I don't know where we'll live or what we'll do when we get there, but we have a possible destination. A goal. Something to move towards. That sounds so good right about now.

So I close my eyes. It doesn't take long for me to drift off, away from this dingy room in a scary place. Tomorrow will be better, I tell myself. Tomorrow, we'll be on our way toward the future.

I go to sleep.

Epilogue

Some mornings, he'll let me sleep in, even though there's tons of work to do. Too much for both of us to handle ourselves. I can hear the crack of the hammers echoing in the thick morning air and the drone of the concrete-pourer, and I know he's already gone into town without me. He usually takes the truck and brings back a few men to help. I can hear them out there, yelling over the noise of the construction. It's hot already, a thick all-encompassing heat that many would find oppressive. But I've gotten used to it, all over again. Having sweat running down my back feels normal. Heat feels like home and even though this isn't home yet, soon it will be. Someday we won't have to work as hard. Someday we'll be able to lay out on our porch in a hammock all day and drink rum and Cokes like royalty.

Lily and John Prior could be royalty. Shit, they could be anything.

I still slip and call him Elliot sometimes. But he never calls me Joanie unless we're alone in bed at night. To anyone else who asks, we're Lily and John. Two perfectly boring and ordinary names for two people who don't want to stand out at all. We're doing a good job of blending in, so far, if I do say so myself.

I get out of bed and dress quickly in a pair of his old jeans and a tight, bright pink tank top that I got the last time I went to town. I pull his thick leather belt tight around my waist, clasping the big Texas-sized buckle. I run my fingers across the faded, worn engraving in the metal. It used to be a bronco, but these days it's looking a bit more like a calf. I like the heavy feel of it around my waist. It's like his arms are around me, holding me tight, even when he's not there.

I braid my hair quickly and toss the heavy plait over my shoulder when I'm done. My hair has gotten long again, and it's tangled and unruly since I have no choice but to let it air-dry after my nightly shower. We'll have electricity all the time in the new house. For now, we have to deal with the generator. A hair dryer isn't high on the list of priorities, unfortunately. Cooking dinner is more important. And sometimes, if we cock the antennae just right, we can get a real, American football game on the radio.

It's the little things that matter most, these days.

I see the white paper cup on the table on my way out the door and I stop and stare at it. He's already been to town and he's brought me back my morning coffee. It's a warm caramel color and I know he's put just enough milk in it. Not almond milk, but it's good fresh milk and it tastes better than anything else I was used to before. I slide my fingers around the cup and bring it up to my face. I take a deep breath, inhaling the wonderful scent. It smells like love. I take a sip. It tastes like love, too.

I step out of the little tin shack we're currently calling home and plop down on the steps that he hastily fashioned out of loose pine the first week we were on the property. I set down my cup and pull my black rubber boots on. I let my eyes wander over to the far side of our land, where we broke ground on the new house almost three months ago. It's been slow going, just like everything else. But I can see it now. When he first showed me his hastily scribbled drawings, I couldn't envision it at first. Now, the foundation's been laid and the framing is going up and I can finally see it. It's exciting. This is our house and we're building it from the ground up. We're building it with our own hands.

It's special.

When we first came to Belize, I'll admit I was impatient. I was tired of running, of moving from one town to the next. From one country to the next. I wanted to buy a casita and fix it up but we didn't have the money. He was the one who insisted on this scrubby little plot of land with only an ancient shack attached to it. I wanted the house and the property to be easy. I didn't want to get my hands dirty. But I should've put more faith in him.

I watch him work, carrying stacks of lumber from the back of the truck to the woodpile. It's still early, but his T-shirt is already soaked in sweat and clings to every defined muscle of his back and shoulders. His hair has gotten long too, so long that he has to tie it back into a little ponytail at the nape of his neck with one of my rubber bands. He's gotten back to his former splendor. He's not gaunt and haunted looking anymore. He's healthy and broad and his skin has darkened under the unwavering sun. I'm proud of him, I realize, as I watch him work. Ever since we've settled here, he's done everything he could to make it work. He's worked from sunup to sundown on his dream. On our dream. And even when he falls into bed at night, half-dead with exhaustion, he still fucks me like he can't sleep

without it. He's a good husband, better than I could've ever imagined. Probably better than I deserve.

He catches me watching him as I finish pulling on my second boot. His expression softens a bit but he doesn't smile. I stand and grab my wide straw hat off of the hook by the door. Then I grab my coffee and hop down off the step and blow him a kiss. He lifts his chin in response. I know what that means. He'll kiss me later, when we take our nightly shower in the makeshift stall beside the house. When everyone's gone and it's just us again, that's when we can touch. During the day, he has his job and I have mine. If we kissed now, we wouldn't get any work done. We would devolve into our dirty, violent little games. Someday we'll be able to do that, to be complete slaves to our kinks all day, everyday. But today is not that day.

The dog trots up beside me as I stroll toward the perimeter of our lot. It's a stray that wandered onto our property a month or so after we arrived. I haven't named him yet, because I don't want to get too attached. He's a speckled black and brown and white thing, with legs slightly too long for his body. The mutt's put on a little bit of weight since I started feeding him, but his ribs still show under his dusty coat. He sleeps under the house most nights and I don't mind having him there. Someday he'll probably run out in front of a car or something, I think to myself, as I stare down into his black beady eyes. But he's been smart enough to stick around this long. So maybe he's not a total dummy.

"Toffee, maybe," I murmur. "Or Cappuccino." Neither of those names seem right though. Those are names from another time, a time when I used to pay five dollars for designer coffee and wore white pants and stilettos and jewelry that cost more than our used truck. "Shoo," I say, waving my hand. The dog yips but stays at my side, not getting the hint. I shake my head but I can't resist a smile. It's an ugly little thing, but it seems to like me, so I can't help but like it in return.

When I reach my destination, I sip my coffee and study my work from the day before. This is my first big project and I'll admit, I've kind of been winging it. I've never done anything like this before, but I think I'm doing okay so far. Elliot already set all the posts for the fence in concrete. They stick up out of the flat scrubby grass like leafless trees. He's put them up around the whole perimeter, but I've only gotten about halfway through, filling the empty spaces between with mismatched boards. We've salvaged a

lot of the wood, some painted and some raw stock, from the abandoned properties around town. He also tosses me the warped pieces they can't use for construction. He wanted me to agree to cinderblock, but I thought that would be too cold and ugly. Too much like a prison. But this place is supposed to be the opposite of a prison. It's supposed to be our sanctuary. So I want it to look warm and interesting. I don't care how long it takes, I will finish this fence.

I set my coffee down on a flat stone and grab my leather work gloves off the pile of scrap lumber and slide them on. Then I get to work, digging through the pile for the right pieces to fit together. It's like a puzzle that I have to work out, bit by bit. It's relaxing to work like this, I think. I can see why Elliot likes working with his hands. It keeps my mind and my body busy. I'm not sitting idly around. I have time to think, but I don't let my mind drift too much. Mostly I think about the future. I think about what the house will be like when it's done. I think about taking a shower inside in an actual bathroom and cooking on a real stove. I think about what kind of furniture we'll have and what colors I'll paint the walls.

I've already decided to dig up the flower bushes from around the yard and planting them along the fence when it's done. I think about how beautiful it will be when everything's overgrown and in bloom. My mother's yard always used to be so manicured and perfect and still. I want this yard to be alive and wild. But first, I have to finish the fence. Honestly, I can't wait until it's up, so I can take a true sigh of relief. When we're all walled in, then and only then will I truly be able to relax. It's not because I'm afraid of the outside. Quite the opposite. The fence isn't to protect us from the people out there.

It's to protect them from us.

I work until I hear the familiar sounds of the neighborhood kids getting off the school bus. I hear them screaming and laughing before I see them, but I know school's letting out. I guess that it's already around three in the afternoon. I don't bother with watches or clocks anymore. The normal routine and rhythm of the day is enough. I jam the handle of the hammer under my belt and lean against the nearest fencepost, deciding it's as good of a time for a break as any. I watch them walking up the road in their school uniforms. They're not paying me any mind. When we first bought the place, they would stare at me but now I'm too boring to pay attention to.

I'm not new and foreign anymore, I'm just as boring as any of the other adults around.

They pass and I give them a wave, even though they're not paying me any mind. There's a kid near the back that catches my eye, a little boy with a big gap-toothed smile. He has a big red backpack on his back and blue uniform shorts on. He instantly reminds me of a boy I've seen before, a long time ago. For a second I let myself get transported back to that day, when I stood on the front lawn at Elliot's old house back in Austin. I thought Elliot was dead then and I thought I was going crazy. Now, that all seems like it happened to someone else. It seems like another life.

The dog bumps my leg with his nose, taking my attention off the kids. I scratch him behind the ears and turn back to the woodpile. I'm halfway down this section of fence and I want to get as much done as I can before dinner. But as I stand there staring at the pile of mismatched lumber, I can only think about how there's something else I'm avoiding, something else that's been nagging at me all day. But I have to keep it to myself until I know for sure. I let my eyes roam back to where Elliot and the other men are working. I watch him for longer than I intend, but I can't help it. He's so powerful like this. He's so strong. He's in his element and it's mesmerizing. That's the problem, really. I can't resist him. No matter what he's done or what he's done to me, I'm stuck in his trap. And now he might've given me the one thing I want the most, purely by accident.

My period is late.

It's only been a few days and I know it doesn't mean anything yet. But I can't help thinking about what life will be like if my belly swells with his child. Maybe our bond isn't as cursed as I thought it was. He's ruined me for everyone else, but maybe he's also blessed me in the one way that still matters. It's stupid to be hopeful. Even now, as we build our house, our one shelter, from the ground up, there's still broken glass under my feet. One wrong step and I'll cut myself to shreds. Since we've been here, we've both been so consumed with work that there's no time to talk about all the things that've been left unsaid between us. I know I shouldn't dare to think about it because I'll just jinx it but I can't help myself.

Across the yard, Elliot glances up and catches my eye again. I look away quickly because I know it will provoke him, but I also can't chance that he'll see something in my face that'll make him suspicious. This is a

secret I have to keep to myself for now. I pull my hammer out of my belt and grab a piece of wood. I turn back to the fence and position the board between the posts. I lay it flush against the board directly beneath it and then reach into my pocket for the nails to secure it in place.

Smiling a smile that he can't see, I get back to work.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

My name is Whitney Bianca and I'm a new dark erotica writer. My debut book, *I Know What Love Is*, arrived 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. Shoot me an email: bia.whitney@gmail.com Thanks for reading!