

BROKEN DOLL

RUBY WOLFF

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WARNING

Warning

Broken Doll is a Dark Romance novel. This book has extreme situations that may cause distress.

It has severe Trigger Warning; this book contains extreme sexual themes and violence.

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THIS BOOK WAS PERVIOUS PUBLISHED UNDER A DIFFERENT PEN NAME. THE TITLE OF THE BOOK WAS BROKEN GLASS, IN 2019.

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Playlist

Tom Walker - Angel

George Ezra - Saviour

Danny Gokey - Angel

Maddie & Tae - Fly

Passenger - Runaway

Julia Micheals - Issues


Maggie Lindeman - Pretty Girls

James Bay - Us

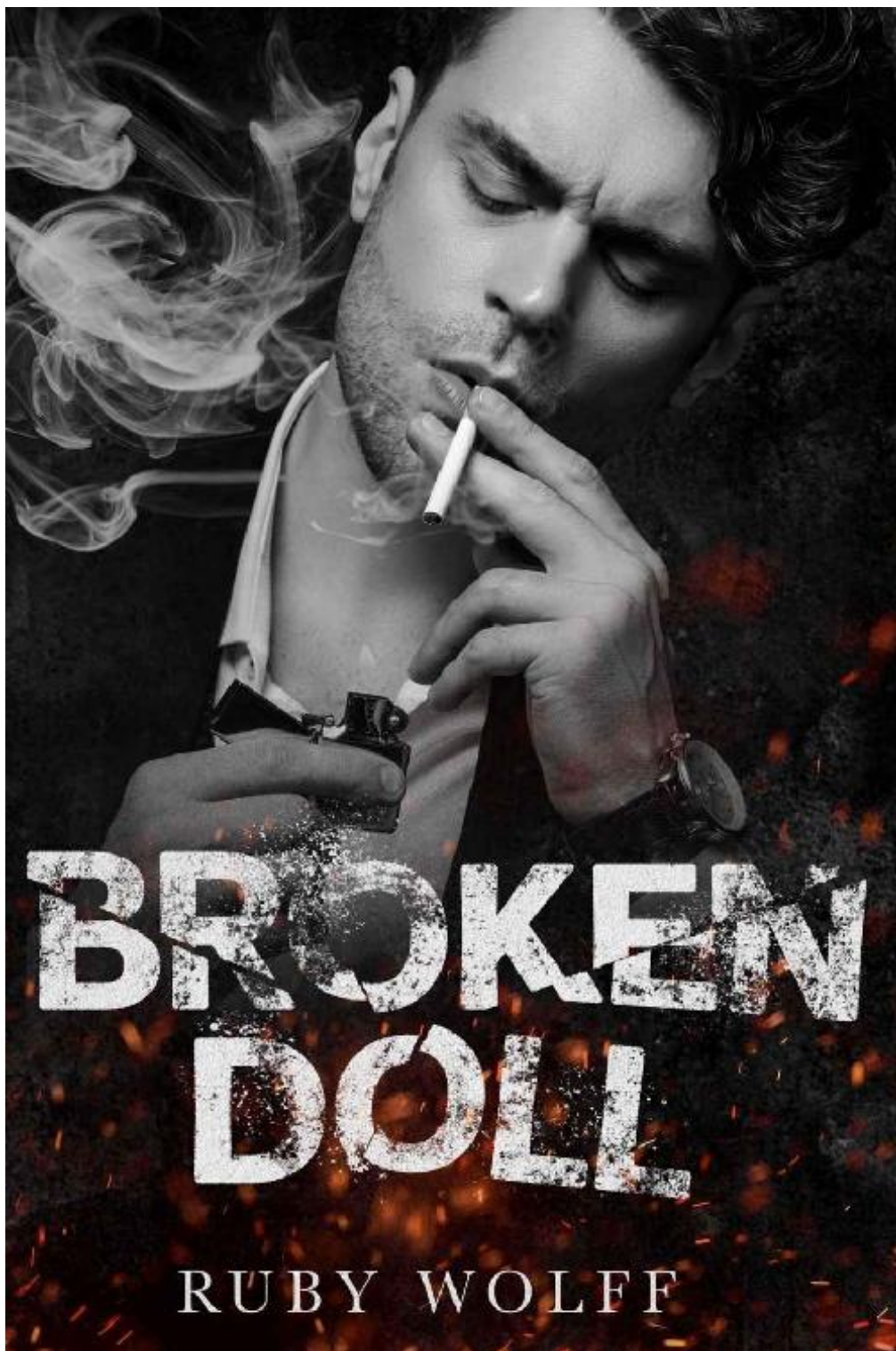
Danny - Tell you heart to beat

The One - That like me

Little Mix - Only You

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CHAPTER 1

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HOPE

10 YEARS *old*

“Someone please help me, ANYONE!” I shout. I have no idea how long I’ve been crying, but my throat is burning. I need water, food, I need something. I know I shouldn’t shout, he will yell at me again, I don’t want him to yell at me, he scares me. But I want someone to save me.

I jump and run to the corner as I hear the creaking on the handle behind me.

“You keep screaming like a little bitch, I’ll have to come back in there and sort you out.” He roars at me, and I fall to the floor, pulling my knees close to me, as I begin to rock back and forth.

I lost my family in a fire; I was at a friend’s house for a sleepover. My very first sleepover, I was the happiest eight-year-old in the world when Dad said I could go. My friend only lived three doors away from us, but I didn’t care, I was about to be a big girl.

My friend’s mom woke me early the next morning, and when we came down the stairs, she held me close. I could feel that something was wrong. How could I tell? I’m not sure, I just knew. Then they told me what had happened. They told me that I would be safe and family was coming to get me. I cried, and I cried to the point my eyes were sore.

Then Uncle Jack got me; Dad's brother. I never saw him before that day, and I wish I never did.

He's a mean man; a man that hurts me; a man that wants me out of his life. But I'm scared of what he's got planned for me.

I don't know how long I've been here now. I've worked out it must be about two years, as I've heard the Happy Birthday song four times now; twice for Adam his son and twice for Claire his daughter, which makes me ten now.

I know the longer I stay, the worse he'll get and the more he shouts. I can sometimes hear the radio if he turns it up loud enough. One night I closed my eyes and heard the words, 'Where there is no vision, there is hope,' and now I sit in my corner and mutter these words to myself, just waiting for my piece of hope.

I lean my head on the wall, wishing to hear something, anything. Some music or even the TV. I long to have some friends my own age. I remembered meeting Uncle Jack's kids when I got here. They looked to be around my age. They seemed nice too.

"Hi, I'm Adam, and this is my little sister Claire. I hope that we can play later," the boy said to me. Uncle Jack had told me in the car that I couldn't look at his kids as my eyes were so red they might get worried. So, I looked at the floor.

Aunt Helen knelt in front of me. "Hope, we have to get going for the weekend, but as soon as I get back we can look at some things to put in your bedroom." I nodded slightly.

I heard the door close behind me, and Uncle Jack said, "When they come back you won't be here." He gestured for me to follow him down the stairs and after wiping away my tears I did as instructed. "This is your room until I find someone to take you." He unlocked a black door and pushed me in. "You make a noise, and you'll be in trouble. If my children think that you're still here, you'll be in trouble, and I'm about to show you what will happen." The door slammed shut behind him as I watched him unfasten his belt.

I screamed, I fought him, I kicked him, but no one heard me. The more I cried the more he hit me with the belt and the harder he hit, the more my tears fell.

Just remembering that first day in here makes me cry. He used to come and hit me if I made too much noise, but as I got older, it got worse. Even if I stayed quiet, he still comes for more.

I start saying the only thing I know to help me forget. "There is hope, there is hope, there is hope, there is..."

Bang, bang, bang.



Present Day

Opening my eyes, I look at the dirty, cream-colored, cracked wall in front of me.

Bang, bang, bang.

Getting up I look over at the door as the banging continues. I grab my oversized sweater which is tearing to the point I'm going to have to find a new one soon; the rough fabric scrapes the skin on my arms. The door doesn't even open a centimeter before I hear his hand slapping the door open and it's removed from my grip.

"Rent!" the landlord shouts. He's a big guy. I stay out of his way and never make eye contact. I couldn't even tell you what he looks like as I've never actually looked at him. I've learned from an early age never to look at any man. The only reason I know he's big is because I can only see his chest when he stands close enough to me.

Taking my pay from last night off the side table, I hand it over to him. I make enough money to pay the rent and a little food, and that's all I need. I don't need the fancy things; fancy things mean you have control and I don't want to control anyone, nor do I want money.

Snatching the cash from my hands, he walks away from me. I slowly close the door and walk over to the window, my bare feet hitting the cold floor. To anyone else, it would be too cold, but to me cold is normal. Cold is the only thing I know.

I sit on the floor, looking out of the window. I never watch the people, why would I? I don't know them, what advantage would I get by watching them? None.

I watch the bright star lights; the multi-colored stop signs, street lights, and cars that cast a warm glow on the road. The lights were all I had for company when I was a child. They would shine through the tiny windows of my basement prison and I would be mesmerized by them. They brought hope to me in that very dark place. Hope that there was something beyond the four walls surrounding me. And that one day the light would fight through the thick cloud of darkness around my soul. But the darkness always seems to win.

And because of that, I came to New York, the city of lights; well that's what I'd heard. I never even knew what New York City was. I lived in a bubble full of darkness, and that darkness was my home until I was finally able to leave.

It wasn't easy getting here by hitchhiking. Sometimes I would walk then sleep on a park bench then walk some more. But the day I finally got here, I regretted it.

There were too many people, too many eyes looking at me. And wherever I looked there would be men, so I would look the other way only to see more men. I had nowhere to look but down at my old beat up trainers; one of which had a big hole on the top of it, but I didn't care, the only thing I cared about at the time was getting out of New York.

I had no money, nowhere to go. I walked around Central Park just because there were fewer people around. I found a small tunnel and spent my nights there, until a woman approached me, said that I looked lost and she could help. She told me about this place where I could make a little money if I cleaned a room. She gave me the address, and I left. The moment I stood outside I knew what it was before I even walked in.

A pimp's house.

I stood outside of there for a long time. It was the last place I wanted to be, but I needed the money so I walked in thinking that I could do this. The moment I stepped through the door I knew something was going to happen; I knew that something was wrong, but I also knew that there was nothing I could do now. The pimp stood in front of me and from the way he looked at me, the way his eyes moved over my body, I knew I was in deep trouble.

I could feel his fingers around my neck as he pushed me onto the bed and held me down. I had learned long before then that there is no point fighting. I had lost the power to fight a long time ago and *that* night was no different for me.

When he was finished with me, he threw some money at me and said he never wanted to see me again. He told me that if I were to come back into the house he would just rape me again, so I took the money and left. I spent a few weeks on the street before I had enough money to find somewhere to live. There were times I thought it would never happen, but walking around the park at night, I often found money. One night I found close to a hundred dollars. Sometimes kind people would give me money when they walked past me. Every penny helped me, and from there I started looking for a job.

My illness got worse living on the street, but I had no choice. I had to live with it until I got more money and if I died, I was okay with that too. I didn't have anything to lose.

Death didn't scare me.

Death might even have saved me.



I know the cracks on the footpath better than I know the buildings on the way to work. I know where each crack is before I even see it. It takes me forty-five minutes to walk, and one day in that time I made ten bucks picking up quarters off the path that people dropped, that was a good day for me as I got myself a cheap jacket from the thrift store.

The weather's getting cold now, it's only a matter of time until the first snow falls. It's the worst time of the year for me as I have to walk to work in the snow and it sucks.

I arrive at work and hang up my coat as Joe, the manager shouts, "The fucking tables aren't going to clean themselves, Hope."

"Sorry," I reply quietly and put on my apron. Picking up my tub I walk out to the front of the restaurant and start cleaning up the tables. I work the morning and evening shifts; it's the only way I can afford to stay where I am. All I do is pick up the empty plates and glasses ready for the other staff to set it up for the next customer. It might not be the best job in the world, but for me it's perfect. I don't have to talk to anyone. I don't have to look at anyone. I clean, take the dirty stuff to the kitchen and repeat.

This is a nice restaurant. It's a traditional American style diner that serves different burgers and fries, oh and pancakes in the morning. I have no idea what the food tastes like as I could never afford anything in this place. The other thing I can't ever understand is how this place is so busy. Yes, it's in all the papers, five stars across the city, but Joe, if he's not happy with you, he'll shout at you in front of any customer in here. He doesn't care, but surely that must be bad for business? I try my best to stay on his good side; I mean there's no way I would even want to get on *half* of his bad side. I looked at his face once, when he gave me this job. He has a hard expression, maybe he never smiles, but I've never looked at him again. I know the rules.

Walking over to the first table, again I know the tiles to the restaurant better than I know the décor. I can tell you that it's very bright in here, the glow of the blue and red lights fill the whole room and the sixties vibe music echoes in my ears.

I kneel to pick up some of the paper napkins on the floor and brush my black hair out of my face. My hair comes down to my waist now, and I always hear people around me saying that my hair is beautiful and shiny. Then there are times I hear customers talking about how I look funny and this restaurant isn't a place someone like me should be working. At first, I

thought it was just people being rude, but then one of the other staff members said it's because I keep to myself, my head down and so my attitude seems rude, even though I had never spoken to them.

I overheard one customer speaking to Joe about me and he simply told them that I do my job, make no trouble, and I don't say anything to anyone. He told them there was nothing wrong with me. It was the first time someone had stuck up for me, someone fought for me, and that day I was happy to work any hours he wanted me to.

One of the staff, Dan, walks past me. "Hope, when you're finished, table six is done," he says as he goes behind the bar. I give him a nod and walk over to table six. I place the tub on the table as I begin to clean up.

I feel eyes on me and bring my arm up as the hairs stand to attention. I pause and stand up straight. My heart starts pumping faster in my chest as the cold chill works its way through my body. I want to look around. I want to see if I can see him, but I'm scared. If I lock eyes with *him* again, I know my life is over.

As quick as they stood up the hairs go down again, and I stop feeling the eyes on me. Taking in a deep breath, I continue with my table, as I mutter to myself, "*There is hope, where there is no vision there is hope.*" The only words I need to know that I'm safe and I can stay safe.



It's one in the morning when my shift finishes, and then I'm back here at eight for the breakfast shift. I grab my coat and make my way home. I look straight ahead knowing at this time of night no one will be around. It took me a few months to finally be able to walk home like this, scared that I would do something wrong, but tonight I look up at the night sky as a chill creeps into the air. It's not the bite of the blustery winter yet, but nippy enough to let me know that the season is about to change. The trees don't have the beautiful colors anymore;

they surround me, naked with only a few leaves left on them, the sidewalks are grey. Wrapping my coat tighter around me I watch as a leaf tumbles from the branch, spinning and rocking as it falls to the ground.

Pulling my hood up on my coat, I look down and quickly walk past a group of men standing outside the nearby bar. I hear one of them trying to talk to me, but I ignore him and continue to walk. Men are the evil in this world; men with money are the most evil, they think they can treat a person horribly like they mean nothing.

Eventually, I walk into my apartment building. I live on the top floor which you would think would be the most expensive, but it's the cheapest in the building. Why? You have to take the stairs for a start all five hundred of them; then there is the fact that this place is a dump, that the windows are broken, and in the winter it's freezing. Although, like I said before, the cold is what I'm used to, so for me this place is fine.

Throwing my coat on the floor, I lie down to sleep, as I have to be up early to make my way back to work. "*There is hope, where there is no vision there is hope,*" I repeat to myself as I slowly fall asleep.

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CHAPTER 2

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RUNNING around the playground with my toy plane, I look back to the house to see if my mommy is finished or not. Mommy always told me that I should never step foot in the house when she is working. If I do, then I will have to learn my lesson the hard way. The hard way hurts; I still have the mark on my collarbone from last time.

“Hello, are you out here alone?” Turning, I see a man standing behind me. As I look up at him, his beard looks like it needs a shave. He doesn’t look like the men I normally see around here.

My eyes move to the house then back to him. “My teacher said never talk to strangers,” I tell him, getting back to my toy plane.

“Your teacher is very smart, my name is Jack. Is your mommy here?”

“She said to never go in the house when she’s working.”

“Well, I’d like to talk to her now. I’ve been watching you for a few days.” The man takes my hand, and I try to fight him, but he’s too strong, as he drags me into the house.

I begin shouting at him to let me go, but he kicks the door open, making my mommy yell at me. “I told you never to come in the fucking house when I’m working.” She slaps my face, and the man pushes her to the floor.

“Now, now, that’s no way to treat your child.” He turns to the man that’s lying on the bed. “Get your shit and get out.”

The man still has a grip on my arm; I watch the other man leaving, and my mommy walks up to the man who is holding me. "I'm sorry if my son did something to you, but I can make it right." I watch my mommy put her hand in his pants.

The man gets angry and pushes her away. "You're really not my type. But I do have something you want, and I'm willing to make you an excellent offer."

My mommy looks at me and smiles. "What's the offer?"

"Half a million dollars."

"For?"

The man turns to me. "I think you should go to the park and play again; your mommy and I have to talk now." He hands me my plane again and softly pushes me out the door.



I shake my head, to get rid of the thoughts of a time that I never want to relive. Watching the women standing in front of me, they think I'm listening, but I don't give a shit about what they're saying. Giving me some fucked up reason why I should be investing in their idea, they want my money, but I won't give it to them. They have to work hard for my money; I didn't make this billion-dollar business, my father did. And I'm not about to throw his money away to some second-class company that thinks they know what they're doing.

My father worked hard for his company; he worked hard to make sure his name means something. Eric Masters means power in this business, but my name, Leo Masters, means power and *fear*.

I see people walk into this room confidently, but the moment they see me that all goes away. They say I'm the man with no heart, no soul. That the black in my eyes brings out the fear in them.

I know what I did to get here, what I went through. I will never forget what it took to get to where I am, so if you want

my money, you better show me what the fuck you have planned for it.

E.H. Masters & Co Investment is the business; you need financial help, you come here. I don't need to be in the room, we have workers for this, but I don't trust them. There are only three people in this world I trust; my father and mother and my best friend, Jackson. We have been friends since we were little, and since then we have been inseparable. He is even my lawyer now. If he needed money, I wouldn't even ask why. But these people walking into this room, coming up with some fucked up company, project or new app and wanting my money can fuck off. My father didn't make this company into a billion-dollar business by just giving money freely to someone, he was smart, and I plan on being smarter.

I can't believe that I'm sitting here listening to this garbage. I mean I don't even really know what this woman is talking about, so I stand up to leave.

“Mr...Mr. Masters, what do you—?”

“No,” I cut her off, the fact I lost interest within five minutes tells me a lot.

“If you could—”

“I'm not here to hold your hand and tell you what you need to change or do; this is your work. *You* fix it.” I watch her nervously moving from one foot to the other. “Here is a tip; I lost interest very quickly, and I didn't even listen to most of it,” I tell her as I leave the room and as the door closes I can hear her crying. I've just crushed that woman's dream in less than five seconds, but I know it's a dream that won't work.

Walking back to my office, I look over at the workers as they juggle some of the investments we are linked with. Everyone knows that if they don't work hard, they're out. They aren't here to make friends or talk. They're here to work and make money.

“Mr. Masters, your mom called to remind you about dinner tonight. Also, Jackson called asking for you to call him. And your dad called to say tak—” I shut the door on Katie, my

secretary, and as I walk into my office, I dial Jackson's number. If he calls and wants me to call him back, it's because he has something for me.

As the phone begins to ring, I click it onto speaker. Placing my jacket on my chair, I grab the handset and make my way to the balcony. I place a cigarette between my lips, flick the lighter and inhale as the end catches. As it lights Jackson answers the phone.

"Whose future did you destroy this morning?" I hear the humor in his tone. He's a dick, and if he wasn't my friend I wouldn't give him five minutes of my time, but our friendship is different. We both went through shit, we both know what hell looks like, and we don't plan to go back there.

I sigh heavily. "She thought that I'd be interested in some app that has been out a hundred times already," I tell him, blowing out the smoke as I speak. As I sit down on one of the balcony chairs, I lean back and inhale again letting the smoke settle in my lungs for a moment, before I let the cloud go free. "Have you got something?" I ask. We both have one thing in common; we fight for what we believe in.

"I do, want to see me before dinner at your parents?" Jackson is so close to us that my parents invite him over all the time and he comes because they helped him; helped him become someone.

"Text me the place, and I'll be over." I look up at Katie as she walks through my office. I click off of speaker so she can't hear what Jackson is saying. "I'll see you there," I say as Katie stands near the balcony.

"One moment, Katie." I put my hand out to stop her from talking to me.

"Just fuck her already," Jackson says as I look at Katie's legs while she is standing there. That fucker always knows when I pick the phone up to talk to him. "If you don't want her, I will. I bet she'd be a dirty whore."

"You can have her," I say looking at Katie in the eyes, and she knows I'm talking about her and I know very well that if I

told her to bend over, she'd do it, but I don't fuck where I work. She holds a file out toward me and I put the phone down. I inhale on my cigarette and let it hang in the corner of my mouth as I take the file from her, exhaling the smoke through my nose.

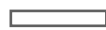
“Mr. Masters, your father called again woul—”

“I'll call him, you may leave now,” I tell her, as I put out my cigarette. I feel her watching me for a brief time before she walks away.

Leaning back in my chair again I close my eyes for a moment, just thinking about what I'm going to do when I see Jackson; there are so many ways to play this game. My father always tells me that I need to show people I have a heart and show them I'm human and I tell him the same thing every time, other people don't matter, you want something you do it yourself, those people won't give it to you.

I've read the articles; one reporter even called me the man that will never have a heart, that even got a small smile from me, but the best one so far is they called me vicious in the boardroom, that one made me laugh because they have no idea. For how vicious I am in the boardroom holds no comparison to how vicious I am in my revenge.

If they knew why I was like this, they wouldn't think about calling me heartless or the devil, but I don't want them to know. I want the world to fear me.



My whole day at work was painfully long. My dad wanted to talk about someone coming with a pitch next week and that he wants me to really listen to what they have to say. He thinks they would be worth our money and I told him that if *he* believes in it, I'll sign the papers without even hearing them out. He didn't build this company by making stupid decisions. After two hours of going back and forth on this pitch, he finally agreed to just let me look at the folder they gave him,

and I can look through it, instead of them coming to me. I won't look at the folder, I trust my dad.

Once I finally got off the phone with him, I was back listening to pointless pitch after pitch. I understand that a lot has been done before they come to us, but they need to give me something exciting. I get that people think they can be the next Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg and come to me with something better than Facebook though.

"Evening, John," I say to my driver as I get into my car having already texted him where I would be going. Taking out my phone I let Jackson know that I'm on my way and to have everything ready. I'm not in the best mood and I want to enjoy this. I want to be smiling when I leave.

It takes twenty minutes to get to where Jackson told me to meet him. John opens the door, and I make my way to the house. I can feel the weather is changing and it's about to get cold early this year. I look behind me as I see some children on their bikes; they ride past laughing about something. I get to the door and walk straight in; Jackson is standing there looking at me with a smile.

"I got you a new toy." Jackson looks over to his right, but I can't see who's there as the wall obstructs my view. I look around the house, and the odor of his cheap whiskey hits me, and there are takeout bags all over the place. I've been to some trashed up homes, but this one is on a new level of disgusting. The bad smell of rotting food makes my stomach churn, and I know there has to be a few dead mice in here. Shaking my head, I walk over to Jackson, not looking at my *toy*; I look out of the window and move the curtain to the side to see the view.

I don't say anything as I look at the school in front of me. I stand there for ten minutes before I turn to face my toy and as I turn, I smile. I stroll to the chair placed in front of my entertainment for the next few hours. I hear Jackson walking around behind me, he's getting everything ready for me.

"You see my friend getting my things ready?" I ask, and they look behind me before their eyes meet mine again.

Lighting a cigarette, I watch them for a moment and I want to see what they do, how they move, what makes them scared. Jackson now stands next to me, and I hand him the lighter, my toy jumps as Jackson lights his cigarette. My toy is scared, and I can't help but smile.

I smoke about half of my cigarette, then stand and walk over to him. "I like the view from the window, what do you do when you look out of it?" I ask, bringing my cigarette close to his right eye, he's shaking. "Are you scared of me?" I take a step back from him.

"There... there are rumors, are they about you?" His eyes move away from me, and he looks down, my eyes follow, and I hear the dripping on the floor. The man's pissed himself.

Jackson starts laughing. "You haven't even done anything to him yet."

I look at the man on the chair in front of me. "I'll ask my question again, what do you do when you look out of the window?"

"Noth...nothing, I just watch, I don't—"

Putting my hand up for him to stop talking, I move closer to him and grab the back of his neck, bringing the last of my lit cigarette close to his eyes. "I can put an end to that." I put the end of my cigarette out on his eye, his scream echoes around the room, but only for a short moment as Jackson silences him with some fabric he jams into his mouth.

Taking a step back, I sit down in front of him, patting my suit to get his spit off it. "This is a new suit, be careful," I tell him. His right eye looks fucked, just the way I want it to look. Jackson takes out the fabric from his mouth and I hear him gasp for air.

I tell the man, "Now you know who I am and what I can do. Should we try the question again? Wh—"

"I touch myself." He's panting. This fuck better not die from shock because I have more planned for him.

"And which hand do you use to touch yourself?" I walk over to the table that Jackson got ready and put my gloves on;

I don't want this shit touching me. Taking a bowl, I place it on the table in front of him, his eye not moving away from me, as I sit back down on the other side of the table. "So, which hand?" I give Jackson a nod, and he unties his right hand, the man is sweating so much. "Go on then."

Jackson puts the fabric back into his mouth because he's going to start yelling and he's going to scream loud. I wait to see what he's going to do; I mean putting your own hand in acid is hard, but they all do it in the end, some do it fast, some take their time, but they all do it. Because the longer they take, the harder it gets and the longer their hand stays in there.

I smile as he puts his hand in and the acrid smell of burning flesh drifts around the room. And I watch as he tries to cry out into the fabric. I can see he won't last out for all my toys, but I won't let him die before I get to do the one thing I enjoy the most.

I take his hand out of the bowl and put it back on the table. Picking up my next item, I walk back to my seat. "Have you ever touched any of the children across the road? Have you ever spoken to them?"

He stays quiet, then looks over at Jackson walking over to me with the man's cheap half broken laptop and turns it to face him. As he hits the play button, I hear a little boy begging to go home, begging for him not to hurt him. I close the screen with my gun, not wanting to hear any more.

"Are you going to beg now?" The pervert's eyes move with the gun.

When Jackson told me everything about this sick bastard, I knew that I was going to kill him; I knew I was going to get rid of another one of these assholes. He has tortured, raped and taken away something from children that I can never give back to them, but I can make sure he never does it to anyone else.

Pointing the gun to his head, I tell him, "I want you to beg me not to hurt you." He doesn't speak. "I can't hear you, but hear this, you touched them, you took something away from them, you hurt them, and it was all with that thing between

your legs.” I don’t even finish my sentence before I shoot his dick.

Leaning back, I watch him in pain; watch how it’s hurting him like he hurt all those children. I watch for a moment longer, and then I stand and shoot him in the head. Jackson takes the gun from me, and I take out a tissue from my jacket pocket.

“These were fucking new shoes.” I wipe the sicko’s blood from them and stand up.

“I’ll get rid of him and see you in an hour,” Jackson says. Giving him a nod I make my way back to the car.

John opens the door for me, “Another one taken care of sir?” I give him a nod as I get into the back of the car. “You saved some children tonight, sir.” John closes the door, and I call my mom to tell her I’m on my way for dinner.

These people think that they can do this and nothing will happen to them. They think that children will forget, but they don’t. How are you meant to forget when a grown man betrays your trust? The police try their best to get them behind bars, but they soon come out and do it all over again. And that’s where I come in. I get rid of them and make sure they never hurt another child again.

CHAPTER 3

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HOPE

11 YEARS *old*

I was lying on the floor, the coldness seeping into my bones. He took my bed from me. He said naughty girls don't get to sleep in a nice bed.

I sit up straight, as I hear the door opening. He has been down a few times when I've begged for food and water. I get a little too loud, and that only gets him mad; the belt marks on my body are a reminder for me to stay quiet and I have. Even when I'm hungry, I don't say anything. I don't want to be hurt anymore.

I don't look up at him; he made it very clear that I can't look at him, so I don't. "Food." He puts a plate on the floor, and I bring it closer to me. Two pieces of ham, this is my meal for the week now. Tearing some of it off, I put it in my mouth, and I look through my eyelashes as he sits down in front of me.

"This will be your last Christmas with me." The cold words hit my skin like ice. "Someone wants you, and they want me to train you." He moves closer to me, his finger lifts the hair away from my face. "He doesn't want to take it from you. He said only a monster can do that to a child." His hand tracing down my neck making my body shiver, as the fear of what is about to happen runs through me, my stomach turning as I feel sick at the thought of him touching me again. "So it looks like Uncle Jack can play with you now." His hand stops on my stomach. He brings his face closer to mine, as his other

hand lifts my chin up and I close my eyes, so I don't have to see anything.

I open my eyes before I go too far into the memory of that day. I don't want to go back there, to the day my life changed; the day my innocence was taken from me. Getting up I walk over to the window as I try to blank the nightmares out.

I've tried to lock them away, but they always seem to want to come out. They push through the doors that I've locked very tight, but I'm too weak to fight them anymore. No matter how much I fight this, Uncle Jack will always be in my blood, my veins and my head.

The joints in my wrists are starting to hurt, telling me that my body is going to start getting painful again. I take out my medication, which reminds me that I have to go pick up more, which in turn makes me think about my pay. I always put money aside because I know that if I don't, I will struggle to get my medication and I need it. If I don't take it, then it will be a very painful winter for me.

I look out of the window towards the building across from me. Looking at the clock on the old building, I see it's time to leave for work. Another long night is in front of me, and all I can think about is how I would love to run away. If I run away, the demons will still be with me. So, how am I meant to live a life, when the past is always there? No matter what, it will *always* be there.

Making my way out of the building, I wrap my jacket around myself a little tighter; the breeze is getting colder now. I enjoy going to work, but I also hate it at the same time. I like that I get to live a little, from my dark world, but I hate being around people. This was the only place that I could find work where I don't have to make eye contact with anyone, and that's what works for me. The staff at the restaurant have tried to talk to me, but I know better to keep to myself because if *he* finds me, there will be no one close to me that he can hurt. I don't trust anyone. They will only betray me in the end, everyone always does.

I stop outside of the restaurant; it was a nice walk tonight. Most nights there's someone on my journey who tries to talk to me but tonight was different. I got here without being bothered by strangers. I look through the window quickly before someone sees. The place is full again, like every night. Making my way around the back and inside, I hang my coat and hear Joe yelling at someone already.

I walk past some of the staff, grab my apron and bucket and go to make my way out to the front.

“About time you got here, tables won't clean themselves,” Joe shouts at me as I walk. Taking a deep breath in, I get ready for my shift.

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CHAPTER 4

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“SEE YOU IN AN HOUR,” I tell John as I walk away from the car. I have breakfast plans with Jackson before I look through the pitch my dad was talking about. Even last night that was all my dad kept talking to me about, and how if we gave it a chance it would be really good. It’s something for women, and as crazy as it is, it’s easier to sell to them; in my opinion, men are wiser with the purchase decisions they make. So I thought fine, he seems to really want me to read it, so I will.

I walk over to where Jackson is sitting and look at the place he’s picked. He assures me this is the best place to get a good American pancake. As I’m standing by Jackson, one of the waitresses catches my attention— and I’m not a man that gets stopped in my tracks *ever*. But this girl... I’ve not even seen her face yet, but there’s something pulling me to her. I even feel my body being drawn towards her.

I watch as she moves around the restaurant not once looking up; she’s moving around like she knows where every table and chair is. She’s hiding her face away by looking at the floor, her long black hair falling over her shoulders to cover her from the outside world. She’s trying to make herself invisible, but I see her.

“Who are you watching?” Jackson asks as I finally sit down in front of him.

I choose not to answer his question.

“How long you been coming here?” I try to stop myself from looking at her again.

“Yesterday was my first time, but the food is amazing.” He hands me a menu. “I’m trying the waffles today.” He says as he peers down at his menu.

I glance down to see what I want, but I turn my head slightly to the left as the girl cleans the table next to us. If she would move some of her hair, I could see her face, but she doesn’t. She’s still hiding and doing a good job of it too. Her body looks thin, and I can see a slight rash on her wrists. She walks away, and I can’t take my eyes off her. I want to see her face. Just as she is about to go into the back, the tray falls to the floor, causing everyone to stare at her. I can see her body tense up a little; she knows that everyone is watching her. Keeping her gaze on the floor, she lets more of her hair fall in front of her face so no one can see her.

I watch a man walking over to her; I can’t hear what he’s saying, but he doesn’t look happy about her accident with the tray. The girl keeps her eyes down and doesn’t look once at the man. What is she hiding from? And why can’t I stop watching her?

A waitress walks over to us. “Hi, can I take your order?”

Jackson tells her he wants a coffee and waffles and then she looks over at me. “I want to know her name.” I nod to the girl behind her as she’s on her knees picking up the broken plates from the floor.

“That’s Hope, keeps to herself really.” The waitress looks over her shoulder at her. “We’ve tried to talk to her, but she doesn’t interact. Just cleans tables, goes home, then comes back for the evening shift.”

“I’ll have the pancakes and some coffee,” I tell the waitress, handing her the menu. When she’s gone, I take my phone out as it beeps. I shake my head. “Dad again, telling me to read the pitch.”

I see Jackson watching me, then glancing over at the girl. “Not like you to be so interested in someone.” He turns back

to me and his eyes narrow. “For someone who can get any girl in New York, you’re watching a girl that you can’t even really see.”

As the girl walks into the back, I glance over at Jackson. “I don’t want *any girl in New York*. In fact, I don’t want any girl. Fuck ‘em and leave, no questions no drama,” I tell him. I’m not a man that craves sex; I don’t need to fuck a girl every day, or every week. When I need to let off some steam I’ll go to the bar, find a girl, fuck her and leave, then I’m good to go until I need it again. “I’m not like you, needing a different girl in bed every night.”

He laughs. “I know that you like to let out your tension in a different way and I’m all for it, you know I am. But maybe a girl...”

“Have you found him?” I ask changing the subject. I don’t want a girl. They would only have questions; questions that are none of their business.

“No. You’ll know as soon as I do.” We give the waitress a nod as she places down our food and pours the coffee. “He’s not the easiest person to find, but I’m looking into another one who got out of prison last week.” Jackson’s phone lights up. I know that he has a meeting this afternoon. He’s my lawyer but has a few other clients.

He knows about the killings so if anything does happen to get fucked up, I have him backing me, and he’ll fix things for me, hell he will cover *both* our arses.

I finish my breakfast. I have to say that it was really good, but I’m not going to tell Jackson he was right. He can do without me inflating his ego any further. I look over to the door and see Hope walking out with her coat on.

“I know that look, don’t,” Jackson tells me. He means the look that shows I want to get answers. Fuck knows what it is about her, but I need to know who she’s hiding from. Maybe it’s because I can feel the fear radiating from her. She is very closed off, whichever angle you look at her, you can’t see her. She knows how to hide in plain sight; one thing I can tell about her is that she has been hiding for a long time.

Throwing some money on the table, I tell him, “Shut up, or come with me.” I grab my jacket from the back of the chair and follow her out.

“Can’t believe...”

“Shut up,” I tell him again to stop him from pissing me off more. We follow Hope to wherever she’s going and again, her head is down, and she’s walking around people. She’s avoiding obstacles and benches like she has done this a thousand times before. “Doesn’t it look like she’s hiding?” I ask Jackson as he lights up a cigarette and hands it over to me.

“The fact that she hasn’t looked up from the ground once? I would say so.”

She walks into CVS, and I watch her through the window as I smoke. I don’t want her to see me, so I stay back. Even though she didn’t look up once at the restaurant, I have a feeling that she takes in all her surroundings. I watch her at the counter, and I feel something is wrong. She looks up at the woman behind the desk for the first time, but I still can’t see her face. She moves to the side as the person behind her says something and then she sits on the floor and starts counting her money. I see her hand move to her face, she’s trying to work it all out.

“What the fuck is she buying, that needs so much money?” Jackson asks the same question that I’m asking myself. Whatever she’s buying, she has just spent all the money she had, as I watch her pulling out money from all the pockets from her ripped up coat.

Once she’s given the money to the woman behind the counter, the assistant passes her the bag which Hope grabs from her hand. It looks as though the bag is full of medication. She exits the pharmacy and continues to walk up the road and instead of following her, I walk into CVS.

“What are you doing?” Jackson hisses, but I ignore him. He really is like the angel *and* devil on my shoulder sometimes.

Walking up to the counter I ask the assistant, “The girl that just left, what did she get?”

The woman looks at me like I’m crazy, creasing her eyebrows together, as she looks between Jackson and I. “I’m sorry, but I can’t answer that, pa—”

“You have three choices, tell me what she bought, tell me what her illness is, or I go back there and find out for myself,” I tell her. She stares at me for a moment; she doesn’t know what to say. She knows if she tells me she breaks a lot of laws and if I go back there they have CCTV everywhere and she can just call the cops on me.

Jackson pushes a piece of paper towards her. “How about we do this different, don’t tell us, but if I was to give this paper to you would you be able to write what medication I would need for a headache?” She nods with a smile and writes something down before she slides it over. But before Jackson can take it, I pick it up and leave.

I look down at the paper. “What the fuck is Lupus?” I ask myself, never heard of it before.

“Have no idea, can you tell me what’s happening?”

“Yeah, we’re going for dinner tonight. Meet me at seven,” I reply, taking out my phone to call John so he can come get me and take me to the office.

Jackson says, “You know, maybe she’s hiding for a reason, and you need to leave her be.” If it was the other way around, I would have said the same thing to him.

I sigh and rub my hand over my face. “I can’t. I know that I should but I just can’t. There’s something about her that draws me to her. There’s something she’s hiding from, and I want to know what it is,” I tell him, and he doesn’t reply. I mean he knows me, he knows the shit about my past and most importantly he knows that I don’t usually give a shit about any woman. So for me to want to know why she’s hiding means something. “Want a lift?” I ask him as John pulls up.

“Yeah, still trying to get over the fact that your ice cold heart might still beat,” Jackson says and gets into the car. I

peer up at the road that Hope took, wondering where she lives; I mean it can't be too far from here.



I was meant to spend my day looking through the pitch my dad told me about, but no, instead I was looking up Lupus and fuck there's a lot of information, so I don't really know exactly what Hope has. But I read up on all of it, just so I have some idea what she's dealing with. I don't have a plan for this evening, talking to her is my main plan, but I don't think that will be so easy.

Once I finally have all the information, I take a quick look at the pitch for Dad, then signed the papers.

I look up as my office door opens. "So did you look at the file?" my dad asks.

"I did, and I signed." I give him the folder; Dad holds his eyes on me for a moment. "Fine, I didn't," I admit, "but you already knew I wouldn't so why have this conversation?" I turn my computer off so I can give Dad my full attention.

He sits down. "I'll pass it on to the team then. Your mother wants to know if you're open to this blind date she mentioned last night?" Last night was a long night with them; Dad and this pitch and my mother talking about some woman she thinks would be perfect for me, and she would like to set it up for me.

"I'm going to pass," I tell him. This is not the first time this conversation has happened, and it won't be the last either.

"Leo, if you're not open to the possibility of meeting someone, how do you know they can see past your inner demons?" Dad asks, and I stare at him for a moment.

"I don't care if they can't get past my demons, I just don't want to talk about it." I take a deep breath, as just the prospect of thinking about it is making me feel horrible. "And I know that they would have questions, what am I meant to tell them? I won't tell them the truth that's for sure." I check my phone

remembering I told Jackson to meet me at the restaurant. He has messaged to say he's booked a table for us, as they can get busy.

“Son, you can't keep running from it. Maybe when you meet the right person, you'll open up. I'll see you tomorrow.” I give him a nod, and he walks out of my office.

There's no way any woman would understand the shit that happened to me; there's no way they would be able to look at me and love me. Although that's not something I crave; love is not something I want *or* need.



I tell John to come back later to pick me up, and then I make my way into the restaurant to Jackson, while looking around for Hope. I place my coat on the back of the chair.

“She's here,” Jackson tells me as I sit down, “and I still haven't seen her face,” he adds.

Looking at the waiter as he places a drink in front of me, I down the whiskey in one go and I tell him I want another. “How was your meeting?” I ask Jackson, checking my phone as it vibrates in my pocket.

“Crap, but clients with money only really have one problem don't they? The wife wants to spend it all.” Jackson laughs as I put my phone away. My mother has messaged me about the girl she was talking about last night.

“Don't worry, that will be you too. I say about three wives for you.” I scan around the restaurant again, to see if I can find her anywhere, but nothing.

“Three? Lucky if there's one. I don't want the hassle of that shit.” I turn my attention back to him, and he tells me, “I ordered food, so we didn't have to wait.” Then he nods his head for me to look behind me and there she is walking out, with her head down.

I watch her moving from one table to the other, but all I want is to see her face, because if this is how I am reacting

now, what the hell am I going to be like when I see her?

I gaze at the couple at the table next to us as they walk away and I glance over at Jackson knowing that she will be over to clean the table.

“Did you find anything about the medication she takes?” he asks.

“There’s so much about Lupus that I couldn’t even pinpoint what she has.” The waiter places our food down.

“Talk to me, what is it about her? You haven’t seen her face, or spoken to her, but...”

“I have no idea. The moment I walked through that door this morning, something inside told me that she needs help and I can’t shake the feeling off,” I tell him and before she even gets to the table I know that she’s behind me. Slowly, I turn around and look over at the table. She has her back to us. “Excuse me, can I get a fork?” I ask her, but I don’t think she’s listening to what I’m saying.

She lifts the tub, but her hands are shaking, so she places it down again.

I walk over to her. “Here let me.” She takes a few steps to the side putting enough space between us that another person could easily stand there. “How about you take a seat?” I say, leaning down a little hoping to get a glimpse of her face, but she has it well hidden. I straighten up again. She’s small. I’m over six feet, and I can only think she’s around five feet, maybe three, four inches.

“Hope!” I look behind me as the manager walks over to her. “What are you doing, getting a customer to...?” I see her jump a little and she hides away some more, didn’t think that was possible.

I tell him, “Her hands got a little shaky, so I was telling her to sit down.” I stop as she goes to take the tub from me, her hand brushes mine and it’s cold to the touch. “She just needs some water.”

“Well, she can get it on her break,” the manager tells me, and it pisses me off. Slamming the tub on the table, I take a

step closer to him, and he takes one back, hitting our table.

“If she needs a moment to get herself together then let her.” My voice comes out hard, making a few diners look over at me. “You don’t own her, you can’t speak to—”

“And what are *you* to her?” He stops me mid-sentence and that’s one thing I hate. Don’t interrupt me; don’t talk when I’m talking.

I see her from the corner of my eye taking a few steps away from us. What the fuck is on the floor that she has to keep her eyes on it?

“None of your business who I am to her, but listen to this,” I stop as I see her running out of the restaurant. “Get her!” I shout to Jackson. She can fucking move. “Sit the fuck down,” I tell the manager as Jackson walks back over to me.

“Can’t find her anywhere.”

“Where does she live? And before you say you can’t tell me, I would think twice, you’ve already pissed me off,” I tell him getting my phone out to tell John to come get me.

With fear in his eyes, he says, “I’ll get the address for you.” He walks away from me.

Jackson grabs his beer. “That girl can fucking run, I mean I was out of the door just seconds after her and puff, like smoke,” he says as he walks to the door with me. The manager hands me the address, and we leave.

I hand the address to John and tell Jackson to get in the car too. If she tries to run again, I need him to help me. I got some words from him about it, but I don’t care. He can shut the fuck up and help.

Pulling up to the building, I look up, and the only thing I wonder is how it hasn’t fallen down yet. John gets out of the car and goes inside to make inquiries. When he gets back to the car, he says, “Sir they said that Hope hasn’t got back yet.” I give him a nod.

“She should have been here by now—” Jackson begins, as he looks out the car window.

“Not if she walked. If she walked, she should be here in about thirty minutes.” I cut him off, and I sit back and wait.

“She walks this route twice a day every day, what the fuck?” I close my eyes as I let Jackson run his mouth.

I know there’s something about her that is pulling me in, is it to help her? Save her? I don’t know but, I can’t let it go. She’s a mystery that I want to solve.

“Hey, she’s here.” Jackson taps my arm.

Opening my eyes, I watch her walking up to the building, ignoring the junkies trying to talk to her.

“Be ready in case she runs,” I tell Jackson as I get out of the car. Making my way toward the building I look around at the people that live here; junkies, hookers. She doesn’t look like a junkie, and she doesn’t have the personality of a hooker—she needs to look at people in the face to do that job.

I walk to the front desk. “Which room does Hope live in?”

He doesn’t even look up from the paper he’s reading. Asshole. “Top floor, room on the left.”

“Where is the elevator?”

“Not working, you know what? I’ll come with you. I need to get her rent anyway.”

I take out my phone to call Jackson and tell him to go to the stairs on the side of the building and get to the top as I get a feeling she’ll try and get out of the window.

When we get to the door, he knocks, and it opens. “Someone’s here to talk to you.” He pushes the door open, and I get the first look at her face.

I feel like I’ve been punched in the gut. Her big blue eyes stare at me for a second, but it’s all I need to be drawn in. One thing’s for sure, she looks lost, and I plan on finding a way to do whatever makes her happy. She goes to close the door, but I stop it and walk into the room. She grabs a small box and tries to get out the window, and I smile as I see Jackson stopping her.

She quickly moves to the corner of the room and looks at the floor.

“Bitch, you pay your rent before you leave,” the landlord shouts out. “So, where is it?”

“How much is it?”

“Ninety bucks.”

I throw a hundred at him and tell him to fuck off. Ninety dollars for this shit place? I look around the room to see there’s no bed, no place to put her clothes, nothing. This place should be free to stay in. I mean the cold breeze outside gushes through the cracks of the window. Is this really the only place that she can afford? She was ready to leave all her medication here, but that small box in her hand she grabbed. That box meant more to her than staying well.

“Is there anything besides your medication that’s worth taking?” I ask. She stays quiet, and I ask again. I look down at her hands as she scratches at her rash. Grabbing the bag, I tell her, “Let’s go.” And for a moment I think she’s going to fight with me about it, but she doesn’t. She tries to walk away, but I stand in front of her, and she takes three quick steps back. I know that I’ve just come down hard on her and I should have said it calmer, but looking around this place got me angry that someone is living like this and I’m not going to just leave her here.

Taking one step closer to her, I gently lift her chin with my finger. Her eyes are open but not looking at me. She’s making sure she doesn’t make eye contact with me, but I can’t stop looking at her. Moving to the side, I let her walk out of the apartment and I look around the room once more before I leave.

CHAPTER 5

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HOPE

“I’M SORRY, please don’t hurt me,” I beg Uncle Jack, but it’s not getting me anywhere. He still hurts me.

“I have to train you so you won’t make a sound,” he whispers in my ear, and I cry. I cry out loud. I want my mom, I want my dad, I want someone to help me.

The knock on the door pulls me out of my thoughts. I open it slightly. It’s the landlord. “Someone is here to talk to you.” He pushes the door wider, and my eyes are met with the guy from the restaurant. Breaking eye contact with him, I quickly try to shut the door, but he stops me. Running to the floor I grab the box and lift the window to climb out, but I’m stopped again by someone, the man that was with him.

I knew *they* would find me and I knew when they did I’d run, but I never thought about where I would run to. Now it’s too late, I have to go back to him.

I have to live in hell again.

I walk over to the corner, and the landlord shouts for this month’s money. He wants his rent. The man asks him how much it is and then he throws some money at him and tells him to leave.

I’m left in the room with him. His friend seems to have gone too. I hold the box tighter; this is one thing I have never left behind, no matter what, I will always go back for this.

“Is there anything besides your medication that’s worth taking?” he asks me and I stay quiet, keeping my head down. Never look at men, that’s what I was told, and now it’s the only thing I know. I start scratching my hands again as I didn’t get time to put lotion on them. “Let’s go.” My heart sinks. This is it. It’s all going to happen to me again, and I can’t do it. I don’t think I can survive this again, but before I can stop myself, I’m walking towards the door, then quickly take steps back when he stops in front of me.

My body heats up when his finger is placed under my chin. It’s not hard like they normally do. He gently lifts my head up. I move my eyes to the side, so I can’t see him. I don’t want to know what he looks like, the short glimpse that I got when the door opened is all I needed to see. I saw the darkness around him. I already know that he’s just as bad as *he* was, but his brown eyes were soft; softer than I normally see. He moves out of the way and letting my head drop I leave.

As I follow him to the car, I wonder how they found me. What did I do wrong? I never looked at anyone. I never spoke to anyone. But the other day, I had a feeling someone was watching me, that should have been the clue for me. I should have run then.

Sitting in the car, with him and his friend, I look down at my hands and start peeling off the skin that has been scratched off. I need to put some lotion on them before they start to bleed, but I don’t know if I can talk yet or not. I look to the side and see my bag of medication next to him. I turn back to my hands, too scared to ask for it.

“Here,” I hear him say, and the bag is pushed to my side.

Not saying anything, I take out the lotion and start rubbing it on my hands. This is going to be a long drive back to hell, and I’m already fighting the tears building up in my eyes.

I hear the two men talking, but I can’t really make out what they’re saying. Something about a man and he’s at it again. Putting the lotion back into the bag, I start rubbing it in further until the car stops; one of the men gets out.

“Call me as soon as you have it set up,” he tells his friend as he leaves. The door closes, and the car is moving again. “When do you have to take your next medication?” he asks, but I don’t answer as I can’t see the time, so at the moment I don’t know. “You dropped the tray this morning, and then your hands were shaking. Are your wrists hurting?” *What is he doing? He’s not meant to be talking to me. Why is he talking to me?*

The car stops and a moment later my door is opened. We can’t be here. I know that it would take a day or more. I mean it took me over a week to get here.

“Let’s go,” the brown-eyed man says, and I get out but stand where I am. I’m in public now. I can run, and he can’t hold me here. *Someone would call the cops, someone would help me right?* As if he’s reading my mind, he leans down and whispers to me, “You have no money. I have all your medication. I’ll find you; wherever you run. I’ll find you again. So, how about you walk into my house?” Giving him a small nod, I start walking up to the front door.

After he opens the door, he walks over to turn off the alarm. I follow, and the door closes behind me. When the alarm is disarmed, he starts to walk up the stairs without saying a word. I follow him. “It’s been a long day. This is your room. I’ll come for you in the morning for breakfast.” He closes the door behind me and leaves, his footsteps getting further away.

I’m looking around this massive room with its huge floor to ceiling windows that look out onto the city below. I mean this is about ten sizes bigger than my apartment. My eyes begin traveling at the walls to see if I can find the camera, they always have cameras. Staring at the bed, I shake my head and lie on the floor. The floor has been my bed for nearly fourteen years. The floor is where I sleep. I know the rules; I know that I can’t break them.

I take my medication and glance at the clock before turning the light off. I look at the lights outside the window.

CHAPTER 6

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LEO

I DIDN'T SLEEP at all last night. I wanted to ask her every question I could think of, but I had to stop myself. She's so scared, and I don't know why. I know bringing her here last night was a big thing to do, but I knew I couldn't walk away from her, the pull she has on me is too strong and I couldn't walk away after seeing how she lives.

I searched for her name on the internet, hoping that I would find something, but Hope is a name that came up a lot. So now I'm thinking about what else I can do to find out something about her. It would help if I had her last name.

Opening the door to her bedroom, I stop and observe her. I'm not usually stopped in my tracks, but again I'm stopped by this girl, never in my life have I felt so angry. Walking over, I kneel beside her.

Why the fuck is she sleeping on the floor and without a cover on her when there's a bed right next to her? Taking in a deep breath to calm myself, I pay attention to her face; she looks so innocent, like sleeping beauty. I reach out to touch her face to wake her up, but she gasps in shock, her nightmare woke her, and she sees my hand and moves away from me quickly, bowing her face so I can't see her again.

"I have breakfast ready," I say standing up and taking a step away from her. Normally I'm a man that knows what I want, but with her, I have no idea what to do. "I'll be in the dining area." Leaving her bedroom, I head down the stairs towards the table in the dining room. I called Jackson to see if

he found the man that I want to talk to tonight and he told me that once he was ready and all set up he would call me.

Sitting at the table, I wait for Hope to come down the stairs. It's not long before she enters; she's so quiet I didn't even hear the door open or close. She stands until I tell her to take a seat then she pulls out a chair and sits a few seats away from me. I watch as she sits up straight, her eyes on the plate, her hand coming up to the fork shaking the whole time.

"Coffee?" I ask her, and she shakes her head; well I think she did as it was the slightest movement I've ever seen. She looks like she needs to eat, so I made scrambled eggs and toast. She stops for a second then puts some egg on her fork and puts it to her mouth. Happy that she's eating, I start on my own breakfast.

I watch her again as she pushes the plate away and she sits there staring at the table. She's only had one forkful of food. Did I make a mistake by bringing her here? Or has she always been like this?

"What's your last name?" I ask. I looked at her tablets last night and it only had her first name on there, now that got me asking more questions as there was no way you can get any tablets without a surname, and I plan on finding out about that too.

By tonight I want to know more about her; I want to know where her parents are, where she went to school. I want to know as much as I can. "Do you need any more medication? Do you need to see a doctor? I have a friend that works at the children's hospital, she could come see you." Hope shifts a little in her chair, and I know that she doesn't want that. "Can I take your medication to her and see what she says?" Nothing, but this is the only thing I can think of doing that might help me with what's wrong with her and how I can help her. The person who works in the children's hospital isn't actually my friend, it's my mother, and I know she won't say anything to anyone if I asked her not to.

I'm getting no answers from Hope. "I have to go to work, make yourself at home." I pick up her plate and walk out of

the room and into the kitchen where I place everything in the sink. Without saying anything I go to her room and take a picture of all her medication and then leave for work.

I called my mom asking her to come to the office with Dad as I want to talk to her about something. I would've gone there, but I have to read some of the contracts over for the new projects we're taking on.

Grabbing the phone, I dial Jackson's number. "Please tell me you've got a toy for me to play with?" I ask him before he can even say hello to me. I need to let out this tension I'm feeling.

"I do, and this one is a little more of an asshole than we're used to. How are things going with Hope?"

"They're not. She won't talk, she won't look at me and she had one forkful of breakfast this morning. A part of me thinks I did the wrong thing by bringing her to my place," I tell him. If there's anyone that would tell me I fucked up, it would be him.

"I agree that there's something not right. Something happened to her, but it's not your responsibility to look after her. I mean she was doing fine without your help."

"Would you believe me if I said that when her eyes met mine for the shortest second, they told me—"

"Stop with the bullshit," Jackson cuts me off, and his tone has a little more harshness to it. "I don't know what's going on in your head, but listen to me, she looks more broken than you and I put together. So, if this is some fucked up game that you're playing and you want to break what is left of her then, let her go," he shouts down the phone to me.

"I can't." I almost whisper the words.

"Then you have to figure out what you're doing. I'll text you the place to meet." He hangs up.

Leaning back in my chair, I think about Jackson's words; maybe he's right, and I do need to let her go before I do

anything to hurt her more. What am I doing? She won't talk to me or look at me, but the one thing I know is when I'm around her the air is different. It's not the heavy black air I breathe every day. It's clean and calm and I want it to stay.

I hear the door to my office open, and I turn in my chair. "Hello, Mother." I get up and give her a kiss on the cheek. "Thanks for coming. Dad in a meeting?" I ask. Dad has back to back meetings for the next two days with some of the companies we own abroad.

"Yes and you wanted to see me, so I came this morning. You sounded different on the phone. Did you call that girl I was talking about?"

I can't help but smile at my mother's question. "No, and I don't plan on it either." I walk back over to my table to grab my cell. "I want to know what these medications are taken for." I hand over the phone, and she looks at me for a moment before looking at the screen.

I watch my mom flip through the images. "Without seeing the person, I can't say one hundred percent, but it looks like they're for Lupus. Medications to treat a rash, joints, build the immune system and pain medication as they get a lot of pain sometimes." As she passes the phone back to me, I can already see the worry on her face.

"It's not me, it's a friend. Will they survive this? Are there other treatments that they can have?"

"Leo, what's going on?"

"Nothing, I just want to know," I tell her. I was already prepared for the questions, as my mother is one that needs to know everything I'm doing. "I just want to know if I can help them."

"They can live a normal life if they keep taking their medication. Their immune system seems to be the main problem, so making sure they are warm in the winter will be a good start."

"Thanks, I'll let them know." I give her a smile knowing that nothing really goes past her and this is not the last I'll hear

about it either.

“I’ll see you this weekend.” Mom comes around the table and gives me a kiss on the cheek then leaves.

I get started on my work, as I want to try and leave early before I have to meet Jackson.



I didn’t finish as early as I wanted to, but I got a few things that I needed to be done. “John, has Jackson called you?” I ask.

“Yes, would you like to go now?” John opens the door for me. Giving him a nod, I get in the car.

I called Jackson earlier while I was at work to see if he could find Hope’s last name for me. He said he’ll let me know. I thought if I could find her last name I’d be one step closer to finding out why she’s so scared.

It’s an hour drive to where Jackson wants us to meet up, and I told him I wanted it closer. It felt wrong leaving Hope home all day by herself, but I couldn’t get out of work. Tomorrow I can work from home, so I don’t have to leave her.

Pulling up to the warehouse, I have a quick look around before getting out of the car. I button my coat and head over to the entrance. The cold breeze hits me and I smile knowing that out of today, something good is about to happen.

Walking into the room, the man has his back to me, and I see Jackson getting things ready and not looking at the asshole. I walk straight past him.

Jackson looks over at me handing me the photo and knife. “Ready to have some fun?”

I walk to the chair placed in front of my *guest*. “Do you know this man?” I hold the picture in front of him, he looks at it and shakes his head. “Do you know who I am?” I ask.

“Never seen you before.” The man isn’t scared, he’s sitting in front of me like he’s going to live another day.

Bringing the chair closer to him and without letting him think about what my next move is, I take the knife and put it through his hand. He screams and tries to get out of the chair, but he's tied down tight.

I hold the picture up once more. "I'll ask again, have you seen this man?"

He's panting and trying to talk, but he's not getting any words out. "I... I only... got... out... of ... prison few ... days ago," he finally lets out, and I look over at Jackson as I pull the knife out of his hand.

Jackson hands me a bottle, and I lean back into the chair and think about what I want to do with him. At the moment, my head is with Hope. I have questions about her. I want answers.

Jackson tells me, "End this and then we can go talk about what you want to talk about. Your mind is at home." I have to agree with him, my head isn't here, not even a little bit.

"I need to get some of this tension out of me," I tell him. As much as he is right, I need to let off steam. Plus this bastard needs to know that if he hurts children, he will feel some of the pain too. Grabbing the knife off the table, I walk over to him and slowly starting cutting his chest down to his stomach. I smile as he screams and I say, "You know that this is how the kids screamed when you touched them, did you stop?" I ask.

He looks at me and tears escape his eyes. He's trying to say something to me, but the words are stuck, and I push the knife into his stomach very slowly.

"Please, I won't—"

"Now, don't lie. We both know that you'll be out there looking for your next victim." Walking back to the table, I pick up the salt. Now the fucker is going to scream.

Taking a handful of grains, I stand in front of him as he looks at my hand. I rub the salt into his chest, and he tries to kick and move away, but it's no use, he isn't going anywhere. He screams out every name he can at me and I stop for a moment just smiling at him. He won't last much longer, and I

feel a bit better now, knowing that he felt pain before I killed him.

Grabbing the gun from the table next to me, I shoot the man between the eyes, watching his head fall down lifeless.

Jackson takes the gun from me and pulls another chair in front of me. "Talk to me."

"Did you find out anything about her?" I ask. If anyone can find anything on Hope, he can. He's always been able to uncover secrets.

"I was going to bring the file over to the house," Jackson tells me. There is no good news to his tone, it's too quiet. "I went back to her apartment to see what name she had put down on the lease because I couldn't find any Hope in the system."

Nodding my head, I bring my eyes to meet his. "Bring it over as soon as you finish here." Getting off the chair, I make my way back to the car. How did Jackson not find anything in the police system about her? I mean everyone *should* be in there. He even asked a few of his friends that are higher up in the law world than he is to see if they could find something, but nothing.

I tell John to drive me into town so that I can pick up a few things and I text Jackson to tell him to meet me there. Then we can go back to my place. Mom said that anyone with Lupus needs to stay warm and it's starting to get cold now, so I want to buy Hope some decent winter clothes, as she didn't have anything in that shitty apartment of hers. Well, not that I could see.

Jackson was done within the hour which was good. I went into a few shops and bought a coat, sweater, and sweatpants for now, as I wanted to get home to see what Hope has been up to all day or even if she's still there. Jackson gets in the car and hands me the file. Ripping it open, I begin to read as I don't live too far and will be home soon.

I turn to Jackson because this is not good. It raises so many more questions already.

He tells me, “There’s nothing about her after the fire. All it says is that she went to live with her uncle and aunt. I mean I called people to ask. I called even higher people than those that I know through the law firm, they all said the same thing, there’s nothing about her after what happened.”

“How can that information go missing?” I mean that is a big fucking chunk that has gone, it has to be somewhere.

“People with enough money can make anything go away. So, the only person that can tell you anything is the one sitting in your home,” Jackson tells me and as the car pulls up. I stare at the house as I prepare myself for a conversation that I’ve been playing in my head since I woke up this morning.

Walking into the house, I make my way toward the kitchen, and I stop as I walk past the dining table. Hope is sitting in the same seat that she was this morning. I share a glance with Jackson who is looking over at her too. Her head is still bowed, so she’s looking down at the table. I continue my journey to the kitchen.

“You got a new maid?” Jackson asks as he follows me in. I have a maid that comes in twice a week to clean the whole house, but she has *never* cleaned it like this. I mean there is nothing on the counters, the kitchen looks like new it’s so spotless.

“No, I haven’t.” I put the bags down onto the counter. Leaning there, I look through the glass doors leading to the dining room. I look back over at Hope at the table. “That’s where I left her this morning,” I tell him as I walk over to the table, sitting two chairs away from her. Jackson stands behind her, but she knows he’s there. Her body tenses when I sit down, but it tenses, even more, the moment Jackson walked up behind her.

Placing the file on the table, I look over at Hope, but her eyes don’t leave the table. “You didn’t have to clean. I have a maid who comes in to do that.” Nothing, but I’m not expecting her to talk to me just yet anyway. I slide the papers over to her

so that her eyes don't have to move from where they are. "Hope Matthews," I add and I see her flinch. She goes to move her hands from her lap but stops. "Your parents died in a fire with your brother, but it doesn't say what happened to you after that."

She says nothing, and I look behind her as Jackson starts walking toward her and I shake my head. "You can read it if you want." She brings her hand up, takes the document and turns it the other way around so that she is staring at a blank piece of paper. I see Jackson nodding his head towards the kitchen, and I get up to follow him.

He hands me a beer, and I turn back to watch Hope as I lean on the counter. Jackson stands next to me. "Leo, that girl in there looks..." He stops.

"She looks like a broken doll, and it will take a long fucking time to make her whole again," I tell him. I want to help her. I don't know why, but I do. But I can't unless she talks to me.

"I'm going to do some digging around to see if I can find anything. I'll try and get a fire report or something."

Finishing his beer, Jackson leaves, and I stay where I am for a moment longer as I just want to watch her.

Underneath that skin, I know there's a beautiful girl. I can already see it. Her eyes alone are the most beautiful I've ever seen, and I want to help bring out the light that she has hidden behind all that darkness.

Walking over to her I say, "I brought you some clothes today. I was told that you need to stay warm now as the weather is getting cool. So, once you've showered, you can wear some of them." I place the bags on the table. She doesn't move just yet, but I can see her hands moving up from her lap.

Standing, Hope takes the bags and walks over to the stairs and up to her room. Tonight I'm going to make sure that she isn't sleeping on the floor again.

She needs to be sleeping in the bed that's in the room.

CHAPTER 7

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HOPE

“YOU’RE STARTING TO LEARN. *The quieter you are, the better it will be for you. They’ll be coming for you next week, so I only have a week left, so you better learn faster.*” Uncle Jack shuts the door as he leaves my prison after another, what he likes to call a lesson, but I call hell.

Leaning my head on the wall, I close my eyes and think about my parents and what they would have wanted for me. I have no idea who it is I’m going to, but I don’t think it will be anywhere better than here.

I hear the door open, and I keep my head on the window and look out at the night lights. I have no idea why this man is doing this for me. Is he nice to build my trust so then when he hands me over again it won’t hurt as much? What he doesn’t know is that I lost my trust for anyone a very long time ago and the most important thing he doesn’t know is I’ll never trust a man again.

He found out about my parents but that didn’t surprise me, they all know what happened to them, but what did surprise me is that he showed me the papers. That was one rule that had never been broken before now; never show me, my parents, never remind me where I came from. Everyone listened to the rule, so what fucked up game is he playing?

“You haven’t slept in your bed,” he says. I look down at my hands as he continues. “I just remembered that I never told you my name, it’s Leo.”

I start peeling some of the skin off my knuckle. I got the lotion, but it takes time for my skin to get better after I have missed it for a while. Leo sits down in front of me leaving a small space between us. I see his hands moving over to mine and they begin to shake, not a lot because I've learned to control it, but just a small amount that I know what's happening and I think he can see it too. One thing I've picked up about him, he takes in the details around him. He knows what he's going for and he knows how to get it.

"I'm not going to hurt you." He stops my hand from peeling anymore of my skin. "I want to help you." His voice comes out a lot softer this time, but I won't fall into that trap. Pulling my hands away from him, I turn to look out of the window. "Hope, are you hiding from someone?"

I close my eyes as I hear his question again in my head. *Yes, I'm hiding from someone, but he's found me. You have caught me for him.* Then I hear the question again in my head. What am I missing here? Why are all the pieces not fitting in the right places with him? Do I have the wrong pieces to the puzzle?

"Was," I whisper. I don't understand what's going on here. Is he playing some kind of game with me? Toying with me until he releases me into the clutches of my original captor? The strange thing is that he doesn't seem to be playing a game at all. He seems genuinely interested and concerned for me. But maybe that's part of the trick?

"Are you not running from them anymore?"

If you are holding me here for them, then no I'm not running anymore, but if you aren't then, yes, I'm still running. I stay quiet as I look out the window.

"Do you have all the medication you need?"

Now, this is the part I'm most confused about, my wellbeing. No one has cared about it before. I only became ill in the last three years I was with *them*, but they never cared, and because of that I got worse.

“For now,” I answer. He doesn’t sound like a man that gives up. He sounds like a man with power, a lot of it. This man gets what he wants and probably doesn’t care who he hurts along the way.

“Tell me when you need more and I’ll get it for you.” He turns to look out the window. Even though I’m not looking at him, I can sense his movements. I’ve learned how to watch things around me, how people move, so I can tell more from *not* looking at him in the face, what type of man he is.

“Do you want to leave?” he asks without turning to face me. His voice is quiet and tinged with sadness.

“Yes,” I whisper. I was safer out there alone, now I’m scared every time the door opens that he’s come for me. At least when I was out there I could run, here I’m locked away.

“How long have you been here in New York?”

“Year,” I tell him. I have no idea what these questions are for and how they’re going to help him, but he’s not leaving me alone.

“The report I read mentioned that after your parents, you moved in with your uncle.”

My body stiffens just thinking about him. As much as I can control my emotions around people, I shiver with a rush of cold blood moving through my veins because no matter what I do, his will always be inside me.

I can feel his eyes on me. They’re watching me so close, and his breathing has also picked up, it’s faster than before. He saw my body react and he knows that I still fear my uncle and he’ll tell him.

“You should get some sleep; the bed will keep you warm.” I hear Leo leaving the room and as the door closes I let out a long deep breath to relax my body a little. I still haven’t found any cameras in the house. When he was at work, I looked everywhere, but not one was found.

He asked me if I cleaned the kitchen like he didn’t know I would. My rules were to make sure the house was clean, food was ready on the table, and I was in bed when he clicked his

fingers. I know the rules, and I don't think I'll ever forget them. I didn't make food as there was no food in the house. Someone brought food to the house about ten minutes before he came home and that wasn't enough time to make anything so I would have taken the punishment over serving bad food. But tomorrow is another day, and I'll make it right.

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CHAPTER 8

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LEO

AS I WALK into the office, Jackson calls to say that he's going to be there before he has to get to court.

He arrives, and I dive right in. "What do you have?" I ask.

"Morning to you too, had a bad morning?" Jackson sits at the table in front of me.

"She slept on the fucking floor again without a cover and had one forkful of breakfast. So, no, I didn't have a good fucking morning," I tell him. I have no idea what I should be doing to make her feel like I'm not going to hurt her.

Jackson leans back and just peers at me, tapping his fingers on the arm of the chair. I have no idea what he's thinking but I already know I'm going to tell him to fuck off with whatever comes out of his mouth.

"I couldn't find much about Hope after her parents. I found a report about a missing eight-year-old, that girl was Hope." Jackson throws the file on the table and I start reading it. "Her uncle took her home. She was there for two days, then this report was filed."

"When I asked about her uncle, you should have seen her Jackson. Her body changed in ways I've not seen before. Whatever happened to her, he knows." I put the papers in the drawer so that no one else can see them.

"I can't find him. He left the house when his wife died. I'm going to talk to his son later," Jackson says as I look at my phone lighting up. I see my dad calling me. I'll call him back in a minute.

“Have you found *him* yet?” There’s only one man that I want to find, that I want to see the fear in his eyes, the same way he did with me, and I won’t rest until I kill him.

“You and I both know he’s not going to be that easy to find. If he were, he’d be dead by now.”

I know Jackson’s right. Five years we’ve been looking for him. It’s been longer for me, but I wasn’t getting anywhere, so I had to get Jackson in with me. He can find people a lot quicker than me and he knows what the man is. I saved him from there, so he’s happy to help.

Hearing the door open, I glance over and I see Katie walking toward us. She stands by the table, and I see Jackson checking her out.

“You’re a dick. You know that, right?” I turn to him, then back to Katie. “And you’re a fucking tease when he’s here, so if you want to keep your job, I’d think twice about walking in here when this dick is here,” I tell her. Now if he wants to fuck her, he can, but he can do it on his own fucking time, not mine.

Katie gives me a little nod and leaves the office.

Jackson gives me the middle finger. “I’m a dick? You’re a fucking asshole to her. I’m leaving. I have a meeting about Hope.” Jackson gets up and buttons his jacket. “I’ll call when I’m done.”

Not saying anything to him, I grab my phone as my dad rings again. “Leo, you have a meeting with—”

“Yes, Dad I know and I’m on my way.” I have no idea why I have to even sit there and listen to them. I signed the papers, and nothing else matters now.

“*Please* listen to them.”

“I will.” I end the call and grab the file to refresh my memory on their pitch. I can’t even remember if I looked at it in the first place or not.

I’ve been looking for a man I want to kill; now I want to know everything about Hope. So, I don’t even have a second to think about anything else. I close my eyes just to give my

mind a second to rest. But no matter what, I'll always only breathe in the dark air around me and never anything else.



Well, the pitch was longer than it needed to be and I think I took in three words of what they were saying; told the marketing manager to take over the idea and work with them. I never work with any team, that's never been my thing. I sign and leave.

I called the house a few times but Hope never picked up, I didn't think she would, but still there was a chance. Maybe the noise of the ring would annoy her enough to answer, but nothing.

Walking into the house, I take in a deep breath as I smell dinner. After throwing my keys on the table next to the front door, I make my way through the house. She's been cleaning again. Even though I had a cleaner before Hope came here, there's something different about her cleaning. You can really see it. Stopping by the door, I watch her on her hands and knees wiping the floor clean. But she stops; she can feel me close. Keeping her head down, she stands up. I wish I knew what this whole thing about looking down was, because I could look at her face all day if she let me.

"First of all Hope, you don't have to clean the house; second, if you want to that's fine, but we have a mop." I walk over to her. "I also have a maid to clean," I remind her again. I haven't brought her here to clean my house. I've brought her here to help her.

"It...I..." I hear her breathing a little louder. "I'm sorry," she says in the softest voice. I have no idea what she's saying sorry for, but I get a feeling that now is not the time to ask her. Taking a look around the kitchen, I see the oven is on, and I hear the dryer from the utility room. *So, she's even washed my clothes.* What makes her think for a second that this is what I want from her? "I thought you were coming back later, food

will still be an hour,” Hope says taking a step back from me like she’s scared of how I’m going to react about it.

“Thank you for making dinner, it smells amazing,” I say, taking my phone out of my pocket as it starts ringing. “What did you find out?” I ask Jackson as I take my suit jacket off. I turn to Hope as she takes it from my hands and places it on the chair for me.

“Well, Uncle Jack hasn’t been seen by his son in five years. He said once his mom died, his dad just left and if we find him to kill him for leaving him and his sister alone,” he tells me, and I sit on the chair.

“Hold on Jackson.” I bring the phone to my shoulder and look over at Hope. “I’ll keep an eye on dinner. You go have a shower, freshen up.” Her body tightens up, and her fingers tap her thigh like she’s fighting with herself about something. I watch her walk away and as soon as I hear the door close I get back to Jackson. “Did he say why he left?”

“No, he said that he woke up to find a letter saying that he could no longer do this and he had to leave.” Grabbing a cigarette, I light it and inhale deeply. “I asked about Hope,” Jackson adds.

“What did he say?”

“Told me he only saw her once, they had to go on vacation for the weekend. She arrived the day they were going and when they returned she was gone.”

How can someone just go missing that fast? What the fuck did he do to Hope for her to run in two days? “Find me someone for tomorrow,” I tell him and then I end the call and throw my phone on the table.

I can’t help but think about her, what has she been through for her to shut herself off from the world the way she has. I know the world is a fucked up place, I’ve been through it I know, but Hope’s been through so much more, and I want to find out what, so I can help her.

A beeping sound to my left takes me out of my thoughts. Walking over to the oven, I turn the timer off and take out the

oven dish to see what Hope has cooked. Lamb with potatoes and veggies and it smells incredible.

I knock on Hope's door, nothing. Slowly opening it, I walk in and sit on the bed as I hear the bathroom door open. She exits with her head high but then drops the moment she feels me in the room.

“Dinner's ready.”

I see her nod as she leaves the room, I look around the room for a moment, and my focus moves to the bathroom, and I pull my eyebrows together.

Where's the steam? I head into the bathroom; something doesn't fit right with me. Opening the shower, I place my hand on the floor. *She had a fucking cold shower.* I clutch my hands into fists. Why the fuck is she having a cold shower when it's not good for her? I can feel my blood boiling with anger. I'm giving her everything here, and she's not taking it, and I want to know why.

Punching the mirror out of rage, I hear the broken glass pieces scatter into the sink. I hold onto the countertop for support.

I need her to talk to me; I need her to let me help her. Wiping my hand with a towel as the blood starts escaping from my cuts; I make my way to the dining table.

I see Hope plating her food then taking a seat. I look at the two plates placed on the table, mine is full and hers empty with her fork ready to take that one mouthful. I place my hands on the table and close my eyes. If I go hard on her now, she could run, but I can't help it. I need to focus on something else for a moment, or could the toughness work?

I open my eyes when I feel something cold on my knuckles, turning to face Hope wipes my hand when more blood appears. She takes something out of the first aid box. I don't see what as I keep my eyes on her. I might not be able to see her full face, but I can see her right side. I take every little detail. I watch her eye wrinkle on the side as she focuses on my hand. I look down at my hand as she walks away from me,

backing up to put the box away. Then she sits down and I push my plate away.

“If that’s all you’re eating, then that’s all I’m eating,” I tell her. I know that I might act like the big bad wolf and bite what needs to be bitten, but not with her, not with Hope.

I get up and take her plate to the kitchen, I place more food on it, then take it back and place it in front of her again and she just stares. I put the fork to her mouth and she opens for me and takes the first one without fighting. I bring the second forkful and nothing.

I bring my head down a little to try and see her face. “I would like you to eat.” I stop when I feel her hand on mine.

“Can I leave the table please?”

There are so many answers I could give to that question, but I know there is only one she wants to hear. “Yes,” I whisper. She gets up and leaves; I hear her footsteps above me, as she walks to her bedroom.

Throwing the fork on her plate, I lean back and take today as a loss. There has to be someone that can give me some answers about her. I tap my fingers on the table as I think and that’s when it hits me.

I take my phone out. “Jackson, be here at six, don’t be late,” I tell him. I have a feeling I’m going to need my lawyer because there’s a very big chance I’ll break the law.

“And do I get to know why?”

“No.” I end the call, collect the plates, walk into the kitchen and place them in the sink. I turn and walk to the stairs heading for my room, but stop in my tracks and go back to the sink. If she had a shower in cold water, does that mean she’s washing the dishes in cold water? I decide I’m going to wash them and that will help keep her hands warm, I hope.



Leaning on the door frame, I watch Hope sleeping, again on the floor. I hear the front door opening and lean back to see Jackson walking up the stairs toward me.

“What’s so important that I needed to get here at this hour?”

“Shhh.” I point to Hope sleeping.

“Seriously, this is how she sleeps?”

“We’re going to have a chat with her doctor today. Someone gave her the medication, and I want to know what else they know about her.” Pushing myself off the door frame, I walk over to Hope and kneel in front of her. This seems like the only time she lets her guard down, but even when she’s asleep, there’s still that tension flicking through her eyes. She’s dreaming and fighting something. I take a blanket from the bed and place it over her to keep her warm.

I leave the room and go down to the kitchen to make us both some coffee.

“Are you sure you want to do it this way...”

“Jackson, she had a shower in cold water. I need to know what happened to her.” I hand him a mug of coffee. He locks his eyes with me and stares into them. Whatever he’s looking for, he’s looking very hard for it, but even I know that Jackson can’t read me.

“Let me start up my laptop and see if I can find where the doctor is.” Jackson turns to go sit down in the sitting room but stops when we both see Hope running towards us where we are in the kitchen.

She stops dead in her tracks and puts her head down. “I’m sorry,” she says quietly, and I look over at Jackson who’s frowning as if to ask why she is saying sorry, and I mouth the words “*I have no idea.*”

She walks over to the cooker. “I...can bake...”

“Hope, we don’t need anything to...” I stop when I see her hands are shaking. “But I think Jackson might be hungry.” I peer over at him looking for his support in this. There’s

something programmed into her, a need to make me happy or a need to do work around the house and that is what I have to break.

Jackson walks over to the counter and sits on the stool. “I would love something to eat.” Hope walks over to the fridge, and she gets things out.

Walking closer to her I ask, “Would you like some help?” I stop at arm’s length and I take the milk from her. “Did you take your medication?” I can see her hands getting weaker, or they’re getting more painful and if she doesn’t talk to me I don’t know which one it is.

She places everything on the counter and I ask Jackson to go get her medication for me. While he’s gone for a few minutes, I get her a glass of water. She starts mixing eggs and milk together. Jackson walks back in and I take the meds from him. I pass the bag to Hope, and she takes out what she needs before putting the bag back onto the counter.

“I can stand here all day, so you might as well take them,” I tell her, and I see her hand reach out. Her skin has been cracking up again and I think that she needs stronger medication.

She takes them and I walk over to Jackson as he starts his laptop up. Hope gets back to making whatever she’s making.

“Are we still on for tonight?” I ask him, and tonight I’m planning on taking my time. I want to enjoy it; I want to see the fear in his eyes.

“Yeah, seven. I’ll text you the place.”

I look up at Hope walking around the kitchen, again not once looking up from the floor or the stove. I wonder what her face looks like when she smiles, or how she sounds when she laughs.

“I can serve this. Your wrists are hurting.” I get off the stool and help her put everything on the plate. I take out a third plate for her. I need to start getting her to eat.

“What we got planned for the weekend?” Jackson asks, as I sit back down and point to the stool for Hope to sit.

“Well, I thought you were booked up with someone in your bed,” I say in a whisper, as I peer over at Jackson laughing. “More than one I take it.” Turning back over to Hope, I watch her playing with her food; I can see Jackson taking a small glance over at her again.

“This is really good Hope. I might have to come over more for breakfast,” Jackson tells her, and I see her body tense up a little. She takes a forkful of her food then pushes it to the side.

“May I leave?” I think that’s what I hear from her, as I could barely hear her. Nodding my head, I watch her walk away to the stairs and toward her room.

“What are you waiting for? Why don’t you just put your foot down with her?” Jackson shouts at me. Never thought I would see him get this worked up about something.

Dropping my head, I stare at my food. “I don’t want to scare her. I thought I would see how she is, what habits I need to break, so I can make her feel like she can live again,” I say and look up as I hear footsteps. “What the fuck is she doing now?” I ask myself, as I see her walking with some clothes in her hands.

Pushing my plate away, I stand up. This is the first time I do lose my shit with her. “No!” I shout and Hope jumps and walks to the corner of the room. “I can’t sit here and watch you acting like a servant when that’s not why you’re here.” I take her clothes out of the sink, which are in fucking cold water and I throw them in the washing machine. “Some of these still have the tags on them, why?” I glance over to her, and I can see her shaking. Shit, I’ve messed up.

“I need to wash...” I see her scratching her wrist and then it hits me, her skin is getting very sensitive.

“Okay, wash them in the machine,” I tell her. I start putting the powder in, but I stop when I see her flinch and I lock my eyes with hers, hoping that she answers the question I want to ask.

“I can’t...I need to ... sensitive wash,” she whispers and looks at the floor, and I look at the bottle.

“I’ll pick some up today, until then you aren’t washing this by hand.” I walk back out and sit next to Jackson as she walks around looking at the floor, and I observe her and smile as she doesn’t bump into anything.

“Right, we have to leave for this meeting.” Jackson packs everything up. “See you later Hope.” Jackson leaves the house, and I go to grab my jacket, but Hope is already standing there holding it for me.

Today I plan on getting a lot more information about her. I want to know where she was before coming here.

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CHAPTER 9

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HOPE

“YOU’VE LEARNED everything that I can teach you, get your things,” Uncle Jack shouts, and I look over at the little box to the side and grab it. This is the only thing that I need and the only thing that I care about. “Now when we go meet your new owner, you know the rules.”

Giving him a nod I follow him out of the room and I can feel them here. I can feel them watching me.

“She looks beautiful.” I hear tapping. “The payment has gone through,” I hear and my body tenses up. I feel like I’ve just lost a lot more than I thought I would. I’ve lost my whole life.

“Good, then she’s all yours.” Uncle Jack grabs my arm, and I look at his grip, then back to the floor. “Enjoy,” he adds and pushes me over, I bump into the man that now owns me and the cold touch of his hands makes me feel sick.

“Oh, I will.”

We walk out of Uncle Jack’s house, and I wish that I’m already back there in my little cell—at least I knew what to expect there. Who is this man? What is this monster going to do to me?

“I’m talking to you. I won’t tell you again, get in the fucking car before I spank you,” he says. I bring myself out of my thoughts and without thinking I look at him only for a second but he sees, and I drop my head instantly as fear grips me. He stares back at me. I can feel his eyes boring into me. I move to the open door of the car and get in. He closes the door

and walks around to the other side and once in he tells the driver to take the long way home. I sit frozen to the seat. I can hear mumbling. My mind is all over the place. I need to find a happy haven and fast.

“Do you always do this, go off to someplace, daydream?” he asks. “Hello, you in there?” I don’t speak. “I can see we are going to have fun and lots of it especially if you don’t talk.” He starts laughing. I thought I knew what the devil sounded like when he laughed, but he seems worse.

Oh, God what am I going to do? I have to get away and fast.

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CHAPTER 10

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GETTING OUT OF THE CAR, I stare at the place Jackson has brought me to. I thought this was meant to be the doctors. This place doesn't appear like a doctor's surgery. *The old building looks like it's meant to be some sort of homeless shelter or something*, I say to myself as I walk through the door. If I didn't want to know about Hope, I wouldn't be in here for a second.

I don't care what Hope says, or in her case doesn't say, the moment I get home she's going to see *my* doctor.

"I know you want to say something." Jackson looks over at me as we stop by the doctor's door. He knew what this place was before we even got here. He told me he looked into the doctor as well. She is a retired doctor, trying to build a charity to help people that can't afford healthcare.

"I think I need to work on a charity plan," I reply, knocking on the door. I enter as I hear the doctor welcoming us in. I take a look around her office, to see the diploma's she has hanging on the wall. I hear her introducing herself to Jackson I have my back to her.

"We aren't here to know about what you do here. I want to know about Hope Matthews," I say turning around to face her and the doctor runs her eyes up and down me. "And before you say you can't tell me anything because of patient confidentiality shit, I don't care. I'm trying to help her, and I need to know everything about her or I can't do that."

She walks back around her table and takes a seat. “And who *are* you to her?”

I already knew this question was coming and I’m no one to her. “That is not your concern. I’m a man that can see she’s more lost than anyone I’ve ever met and I want to bring her back. I don’t know anything about her, and I’m not family to her, but—”

“There’s something about her that has pulled you in.” The doctor finishes my sentence for me, and she has hit the spot with that answer. Hope *has* pulled me in, and I don’t want her to push me out. “I do think that she needs help, but I’m surprised that—”

“So, you’ve noticed that whole *won’t look at a man* thing?” Jackson interrupts her, and I glance around the office again, wanting to get a better feel for her.

“Not just men, *anyone*. She won’t look at anyone in the face. The floor is the only place she looks.” She stops and starts tapping on the keyboard, then looks me straight in the eyes, holding my gaze. I have no idea what she’s looking for, but she won’t find anything. No one ever finds anything.

There’s silence for a moment, Jackson stays quiet. He didn’t have to come. I brought him with me to make sure that I ask questions that stay within the law and I don’t take a step out of it. For some reason and at the moment I don’t know why, but when it comes to Hope, I don’t care what law I have to break to find out things about her.

The doctor eventually says, “You have darkness around you, but I have a feeling that maybe you will be able to help her *if* she lets you in.”

I hold the smile that I have, my dad always says that I have a way of finding things out. I have this look about me, a look that no woman is able to say no to and a charm that can get me out of trouble. I agree I have no idea why, but women always like a man with some mystery around them, and when I have to, I can bring on a charm that would have anyone liking me.

“What do you know about her?” Jackson asks. He knows that if something happens to go wrong, it can’t come back to me because I never asked the questions, *he* did.

“She came here nearly a year ago now, and I’ve never seen a person look so alone or lost before. She came to me, and her hands looked so sore, the skin was peeling off in places.” She shakes her head. I can see this doctor wanted to help Hope. “I found out she had Lupus and I’ve been treating her since. I haven’t seen her in a while, and if she wasn’t coming to pick up her prescription every month, I would think something bad had happened to her.”

After a year and she still doesn’t trust the doctor. How the hell am I meant to get her to trust me?

“Why do you think something bad would happen to her?” Jackson asks.

“Once I did a test on her, I asked her if she liked the city, trying to get her to talk and open up to me. She sat there for a while just staring into space, then out of nowhere she turned around and told me that someone hurt her when she first got here, and I don’t think she wanted to tell me anything. It felt more like she just wanted to tell someone, to get it out of her system. So, I thought that person was still after her.” The doctor leans back in her chair, and her eyes come back over to me and ignoring Jackson.

“What else can you tell me about her?” I ask, although this is not new information to me. I already knew someone hurt her and when I find out who that is, I’ll take pleasure in watching them die in front of me.

“She could never come to see me on a Saturday; she said that was a no as she had to visit someone important, never told me a name.”

Now that’s something that I can work with. Tomorrow is Saturday, and I’m going to tell her that she has to go see this person. If they’re important to her, then she needs to keep them important. Maybe they can give me something, or I can hear something that she tells this person.

“Thank you.” Standing up, I button my jacket. “Before we go... her treatment, is there anything else that we can do?”

“I’d like to give her something stronger for the pain and if you can give it to her daily rather than monthly—”

I cut her off. “Why is it monthly now?” Why isn’t she taking her medication weekly if that’s better for her?

“Her medication is due weekly, which has her daily dose, but she can’t afford to buy it every week, that’s why she collects monthly. I mean it’s not cheap, so she tries to go a month with a week’s worth.”

“She’ll have them weekly. I’ll pay for them and if you can put them in my name somehow so that I can get them for her,” I tell her. No wonder Hope’s wrists are always hurting her so much. She never has enough medication in her to help her body heal.

Jackson hands the doctor his business card. “This is the number you can contact me on if you have any questions about Hope and if you want to know anything more about Mr. Masters.” He tells her that all notes and prescriptions will come to the office from now on.

“There is one more thing that has been bugging me,” I turn to her, “her pills only have her first name, how was she getting them without a surname on there?”

“That was one thing she said, begged me. She said they would find her, and the fear that I could see in her eyes, I never said anything about it. I was scared for her, and I wanted to help any way I could,” she answers and I stand there for a moment wondering who she was this scared of.

Leaving the office, I get in the car and look over at Jackson. He says, “Before you say anything, I already know. I’ll see what I can find, but I have a feeling the only person who will say anything about being physically and mentally abused is Hope herself.” He’s right, but I can’t just ask her straight, can I?

“Are we set for tonight? I need a good night.” Never have I needed to let off some steam as much as I do today. I need

someone that I can torture; someone that has done so much evil in his life that I plan on bleeding it out of him.

“Yeah, I get a feeling that this is going to be a long one. So, I’ll set it up and just let me know when you’re finished,” Jackson looks at his phone as it beeps.

I take my phone out of my pocket to check my work schedule. Before tonight, I want to go home to see if Hope is doing okay.

Leaning my head back, I close my eyes. How can I find out what’s so important about tomorrow? Every Saturday she goes somewhere to meet someone, but who? How can I get her to go without it sounding like I’m pushing her too much?

“I have to be in court. I’ll text you the place and time.” Before I can answer Jackson, the car door closes, and John starts driving to the office.



My day was full of work, but the whole time my mind was on Hope. What’s she doing? Did she eat? I ended up canceling my last two meetings as Jackson texted me with the time and place and if I stayed at work, then I wouldn’t have time to go home.

Entering the house, I look around for her, but I don’t see her anywhere. I walk up the stairs and look through the small part of the door that is open, and I see her sitting on the floor reading the newspaper article about her family. She picks up the box; the only thing that she cares about. What’s in that box? As I take a step closer, the floorboards creak and Hope quickly puts the box and newspaper away and puts her head down.

Walking into the room, I sit down next to her, and she moves a little further away from me. I look towards the window. “You know that you don’t have to look at the floor every time I come close to you,” I tell her. I want to make her feel comfortable here. I want her to finally look at me like I’m not about to hurt her. “I went and spoke to your doctor today;

I'll be getting your medication for you, so you don't have to worry about that anymore. She told me that you like to go out on a Saturday and that you meet with someone." I stop as I see her body shiver from the corner of my eye.

I turn to face her. "If you don't want to be here, why have you not tried to run?" There's nothing from her. But it's the question I keep asking myself. I haven't locked her in the room or the house. She can walk out whenever she wants, but every day I come back, and she's still here, why?

"Tomorrow I thought we could go out and I could take you to wherever it is you need to be." Hope's body tenses for a moment. "Is there anywhere you'd like to go? As I said, I'd be quite happy to take you."

I look at her massaging her wrists knowing they wouldn't hurt so much if she just had a hot shower. Every day this week she has showered with cold water, and I'm going to stop that. She can hate me for it, I don't care, but she's going to have a warm shower.

She stays quiet, so I tell her, "I have to get going to a meeting, so make yourself some dinner, and I'll see you in the morning." I get up and look down at her as she keeps her head bowed. I want to hug her and tell her that everything will be fine and I'm here to help her and protect her if needed.



Jackson sends me a message to say that he has everything ready for me. We've been doing this long enough for him to know what type of mood I'm in and what I like to do when I have a certain mood like tonight. Tonight, I want it to go slow; I want to watch my victim taking his last breath.

When I arrive, I take a seat and look around the big empty warehouse until my eyes reach my toy for the night, and my lips curl up into a smile; I'm aware this man has done things he knows he shouldn't. Things that one day would get him in trouble and that trouble now is with me.

Lighting up a cigarette, I lean back and just watch him for a moment. His feet are tied together, and he's hanging upside down from a hook on the ceiling. His mouth taped. It's people like him that made me the way I am. And she might not have told me yet, but I can feel it inside me that it's also people like him that made Hope the way she is and I do this to find one particular man; one man that I plan on hurting in ways that I've never hurt anyone ever before. But Hope is the person I want to help first and I'm going to find every man that hurt her and then I'm going to kill them.

Inhaling the smoke, I walk over to the man, I exhale the grey cloud into his face.

I rip the tape off his mouth, and he yells, "What do you want? I've never seen you before." I smile as I take the small knife out of my pocket and slice his throat by his jugular, just a little, making him scream out. I've always loved the sound of my victims screaming. It's payback for the way the children cried when they begged to be set free, and the sick bastards never let them go. So, I never let my victims go; I make sure that they hurt even more.

I tape his mouth again as his voice is fucking annoying me now and I sit back in my chair smoking the rest of my cigarette. I watch the blood dripping slowly from his neck. Locking my eyes with his, I smile at him. I want to make sure that he knows I'm enjoying this, that I'm the last person he sees.

Lighting another cigarette from the end of the one I'm smoking, I watch as crimson liquid drips from the wound into a pool on the floor.

"Have you heard the name, Jack?" I ask my victim.

Jackson is working hard on finding Hope's uncle, but he's like a fucking ghost. There's a part of me that has to laugh at that. These sick fuckers out there, I've heard what they say. They call me the ghost that kills, so now it's a ghost hunting the ghost.



I spent two hours at the warehouse last night, it didn't take him long to bleed out, but I just wanted to stay there longer. I wanted to watch him take his last breath. I wanted to see how he felt knowing that he was about to die.

The other reason was that I didn't want to come home. I didn't want to come to my own home because I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep. I would have stood in the doorway of Hope's room and watched her sleep on the floor and that would have made me angrier. For the first time since I've met her, last night watching that man die, I felt relaxed.

Sitting at the dining room table with my coffee, I watch Hope in front of me playing with her food. I light up a cigarette, and I can't take my eyes off her. I know that there's a beautiful girl before me, who is hiding away and I can't wait for her to show herself. I don't even know her, she has spoken very few words to me, and I already want to know everything about her. I want to see her smile, I want to touch her, I want to...

"You'd think married rich men would learn their lesson," I hear Jackson say as he's walking over to me. He pulls me out of my thoughts. "I mean stop getting married to the twenty-something and marry someone that will stay with you." He takes my cigarette and sits on the chair next to me.

Hope walks over to the kitchen counter, and I look over at Jackson. "It's Saturday, why are you here?"

Hope places a coffee mug in front of him and then sits back down. Lighting up another cigarette, I focus back on Jackson.

"I wanted to give you this," he says sliding an envelope over to me. "I still can't find him for you, but—"

"Who killed him?" I read through the file. The guy who we're looking for had a nephew, but he's dead.

“The cops. There was an arrest warrant for him for murder. He went down fighting, and before you ask, that’s where the line of inquiry goes dead. Fuck knows where he is.” Jackson drinks his coffee while I continue to read the file.

His nephew was in Vegas, the police got a tip on where he was, and things went wrong. He was declared dead at the scene. “He’s not in Vegas then?”

“No, but I get the feeling he’s changed his name. I mean there’s no trace of him anywhere.”

I throw the file on the table and rub my forehead. I won’t be able to rest until I know that this man is dead. I look at Hope as she looks at the clock for the fourth time. Whoever she wants to meet, the time is coming. It would be better if she’d tell me who and where so that I can take her.

“Hope and I are going to Central Park, and we were about to leave,” I say. Her body relaxes, and she goes to look up at me, but quickly stops herself. So that means someone is at the park. “Would you like to get ready?” She gives me a little nod before she leaves.

Jackson whispers, “About to find out who this someone is then?” I give him a nod. “Leo can I ask—”

“The answer is yes,” I say cutting him off. I know that once she opens up to me, I don’t think I can stay away from her. The only reason I haven’t touched her yet is because I know that it will scare her. The moment I stand a few inches away from her she tenses up, the fear radiating from her.

Jackson doesn’t say anything to me, but we both know what it’s like for us. We both know how we feel about getting close to others. We both have scars that we don’t want to talk about. When Jackson is with girls, he tells them some fucked up story about how he got them while fighting, whereas I tell them right away if they mention my scars they can fuck off.

“If this is what you want then I have your back.” Jackson pats my back as he leaves the house.

Walking up the stairs to Hope’s room I see her sitting on the floor, playing with some money. I enter the room, and she

freezes. I kneel and gather the money together and place it on top of the box.

“Whatever you need to buy, I’ll buy it. I know that you meet someone today and that’s where I’m taking you.”

With shaking hands, she picks up her money and box and puts them under the bed.

Putting her coat on, she turns to face me.

I smile. “You know that I’ve only seen your eyes once, but I want to tell you that they’re beautiful and I hope that one day you walk around showing people just how beautiful you are.”

The moment I finish the sentence, she leaves the room, and again I feel like I’ve just lost yet another conversation with her.

Walking towards Central Park, I see Hope looking at my wrist. “Would you like to know the time?” I put out my wrist for her to see, she stops in her tracks, and I stop with her. Stepping around me, she goes into the coffee shop.

“Hey, Hope. The usual?” the man behind the counter says. As he is getting everything ready, Hope stands like she always does with her head down. “You know Hope, one day you’re going to walk in here, and I’m going to look you right in the face, and I won’t know it’s you,” he says and starts laughing.

Giving the man the money, Hope takes the bag off the counter. “Thanks, Adam,” she says leaving the coffee shop.

I look at the man. “How long has she been coming here?”

“About a year.”

Giving the man a nod, I meet Hope outside and see where she wants to go next. “Where are we going?” I put my hands into my pockets as it’s starting to get cold outside now. Hope hands me the bag, as her hands start shaking. She holds her hands together, and I move in closer to her which makes her walk away from me.

I follow her to the park, and she goes under one of the bridges. She looks around, and I do the same at all the people living here.

“Hope.” I look at the woman walking over to her. She hugs her. “Look at you, when was the last time you had food?”

“Cathy, I...I got you this.” Hope looks over at me, and I hand her the bag. She pulls out a sandwich and coffee for her.

I watch Cathy walk over to the side of the tunnel and sit on the floor. Hope follows her, and I stay back, but not too far where I can't see or hear her.

Cathy looks at me and then back to Hope. “Have they found you? But if they didn't, you wouldn't be here, Hope.” Cathy moves closer to her and whispers something in her ear, all the while looking over at me.

“I don't know,” I hear Hope say. She starts taking her jacket off and wraps it around Cathy. “It's getting cold now; I want you to stay warm.” I fight with myself not to take the jacket off Cathy and give it back to Hope, but Cathy is the only one she will talk to.

Walking over to Hope, I take my jacket off and wrap it around her. She doesn't fight with me but puts her arms in and wraps it around her body. Cathy looks at me, and I give her a smile, and to my surprise, she returns one. Maybe I might have someone else that is willing to help me.

I sit on the ground just to the side of the two of them as they talk. They don't really talk about anything that I don't already know about Hope. I was hoping to learn something new.

I stand up the moment Hope does. I go to follow her, but Cathy grabs my leg to stop me, and so I watch Hope to make sure that I can still see her.

“Give her this time; it's the only time she can do it.”

I look down at Cathy, then back to Hope as I want to know what she wants to do that someone has stopped her from doing.

I put my hands in my pockets, not able to take my eyes off Hope, but she has her back to me. Then I see it, the first time I've seen her do this. She's not looking at the floor, she's looking high up at the sky, and I smile.

“So, what is it that you want?” Cathy stands up next to me. “That girl has been through some bad stuff, and I won't let it happen to her again.”

I turn to face her. “Do you know what happened?” I ask. Am I about to find out who hurt her?

“I don't, never asked her. But just looking at her you know that some fucked up shit happened to her.” Cathy sounds upset. “So again, what is your plan with her?”

“I don't have a plan; I want to help her...” I stop and turn to her, as she starts laughing out loud.

“She won't even look at you, never mind *trust* you. You have a hard mission in front of you.” Cathy walks back to where she was sitting, and I gaze back over at Hope, as she stares up at the sky.

CHAPTER 11

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HOPE

I SAID bye to Cathy and told her I would be back next week to see her. She was the first person that helped me when I got here. I had a group of guys following me every night and she noticed it. Told them if she ever saw them again she would kill them. After that, she kept me close to her. Never asked questions about what happened to me, or told me that I was weird. She was looking out for me, and I will never forget that.

“Shall we have some lunch?” Leo asks as we walk along the sidewalk. Even though I know I’m not going to eat anything, *he* still has to eat. I give him a nod and he stops. “Hope, you can look up when you walk.”

I stand in front of him, still trying to work out his plan. Is this a new game that they want to play with me? Get me to break the rules and then punish me in ways that break me more than I already am. I don’t think that’s even possible at the moment.

“I fancy a burger,” Leo tells me as he starts walking again and I follow him. I wonder how long it will be before he loses his temper with me. The other man lasted two days, but Leo has gone a week and isn’t pushing for answers to any of his questions.

Walking into the restaurant, I hear Leo talking to the front of house man as he leads us to our table. I look up a little as I don’t know where everything is in here, and I don’t want to hit anything.

Leo pulls out the chair for me, and I sit down. He sits opposite me and I look at the tablecloth.

“I’d like you to look at me; otherwise the people around us will think that I’m forcing you to sit here and I’m not. You can get up and leave whenever you like,” Leo tells me. And that’s true. He’s not making me stay here. He has taken me out of the house, and I could run; he leaves to go to work and I could leave then as the doors aren’t locked. I know this because I checked. I ran back to my room the first day I opened the door, worried I had failed and he would come back to punish me. But it wasn’t a one-day thing, every day this week the house has never been locked and I could run. So, why haven’t I? I have no idea.

Slowly I lift my head, not fully so that he can see my whole face, but enough to make it look like we’re here together.

“What would you like to drink?” A male waiter stands next to the table, and I move to the right a little so that I’m not too close to him and I know Leo sees that.

“We’re not ready yet,” Leo tells him and the waiter walks away. I let out the breath that I was holding in. Leo asks, “Is there anything that you would like to drink?”

“Water, please.” I hear Leo tut, and I look up a little more. “I’ve only ever been given water, so I never ask for anything else.”

“How about food?”

I stay quiet and look over to the side a little where a group of girls are laughing at something. They look over at Leo and talk to each other; I already know what they’re talking about. What is someone so good looking doing sitting at this table with me? Well, that’s something that I would like to know too.

“Are you ready, or would you like a few more minutes?”

“Can we have two cokes, the double burger, and the pasta please,” I hear Leo tell the waiter, and I sit up straight.

That was one of the first lessons I had with Uncle Jack. *Never, I repeat never sit at the table without a straight back,*

you sit straight, and you stay quiet unless spoken to.

I hear the girls at the table next to us laughing again, and I hear Leo's chair move.

"How are..."

I hear the girls at the table talking, but there's a pause for a moment, and I look at him through my eyelashes. He's looking over at their table.

"You like something over here?" I hear one of them say. "I'm sure I can make you smile more than *she* can."

"No, I don't like anything over there. And she makes me smile enough thank you," I hear Leo say and the girls go quiet.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't..." The waiter puts our drinks on the table, cutting off the girl from talking.

"Can you make our order to go? The company around us is not to my liking. And can you send the manager out please." I see Leo put his hand up so that the waiter can't say anything to him.

He turns to me. "How are your hands? I see you're scratching them a little more."

I peer at my hands, and I can see where the skin is starting to peel again. I don't think that the lotion is strong enough for me and I know that I should go to the doctors again, but I just don't want to go. She'll ask questions, and I don't want to answer them.

"Hurt," I whisper and I move to the side a little as I feel someone new next to the table.

"Well, well, well, look who it is, big man Masters. About time you came here again, how you doing?" The man's voice is filled with excitement; they know each other. "You know my waiter is shitting himself thinking I'm about to fire him when I told him who you are." He laughs and goes to pull out the chair next to me.

"Not there, next to me," Leo tells him, and I can feel his eyes on me. "Or you can stand."

“You know I own this place,” I hear the manager say, and I let out a breath when he sits next to Leo, but his eyes are still on me. “So, why are you not eating here?”

“Need to get back home to do a few things.” They start to talk quieter so that I can’t hear them and I sit there thinking about what I should be doing.

I don’t know what to do. There’s something different about Leo. He hasn’t once tried to touch me, but is that because he’s been told not to touch me until *he* gets here? But it’s been over a week, and he’s not here, so how long is he keeping me here? Then I think about him telling me that I can leave whenever I want to. He’s asking about my health, he helps me clean up after dinner when he gets home, that’s when I feel like there’s something different about him.

I don’t know what to do.

“Hope, are you ready to go?”

I stand up and follow Leo out of the restaurant, and we make our way down the street. I quickly jump close to Leo as a huge group of men walk out of a building, but the moment I grab Leo, I let go of him.

“Sorry,” I whisper to him and move out of the way. But I feel surrounded, and I don’t have a way out. I don’t know this part of the city. I never came here. I only went from my apartment to work and to CVS. I never went anywhere else, and if I did, it was at night to give me the time to get used to the surroundings. So now I feel trapped and there’s no way out for me.

I feel Leo grab my arm and pull me to the side with him, into a small alley.

“Breathe, I’m here and won’t let anything happen to you. You need to hold my arm until we get to a quieter place, you hold it, but don’t say sorry.”

I take a deep breath and follow him out, and with a shaking hand, I grab his arm as the sidewalks are getting busier. I can feel a panic attack coming; this is not me, this isn’t part of the rules. I’ve lived with rules for over ten years. I know them, I

live by them. This is new and I can't, I *don't* know how to live like this.

“Taxi!” Leo shouts. The moment one pulls up, he opens the door for me. “I shouldn't have taken you to the restaurant. I know how you feel about too many people.”

I sit next to him and start peeling the skin off my hands. My body tenses up when Leo takes my hand in his.

“Please, can I get my doctor to look at you? The doctor is my mother, someone I trust, someone I know that won't hurt you and I'll be in the room with you.” Leo rubs my hand with his thumb.

I pull my hand from his. “It'll be fine,” I say and lean my head on the window and close my eyes for a moment.

Leo doesn't say anything to me for the rest of the way back to his house, and I'm happy about that too.



The moment we get back to Leo's house we have our lunch. I have my usual forkful. Leo made me sit with him the whole time. I know what he was doing; he was thinking staring at my food would make me want to eat more, but it didn't.

Lying on the floor, I stare at the blank wall in front of me. Thinking about things that I shouldn't be thinking about; things that still make my skin crawl, that still make me sick to the stomach.

I feel my eyes getting tired; not sleeping is getting to be too much. It's not the nightmares keeping me awake, it's the pain of my joints, the pain of my skin peeling and the cold is making it worse.

I sit up quickly, feeling Leo close. “I didn't even make a noise; how did you know I was here?” I move closer to the window to look at the lights outside. Leo sits down next to me. “Jackson is coming over for dinner, and then after, I have to go out...” I go to stand up to get started on dinner, but Leo stops me. “Hey, sit down, you're not making dinner. Jackson will be

bringing something. I want you to have a shower and enjoy your dinner.”

Giving him a nod, I take in a deep breath and look out the window again, as I get myself ready to have a very painful shower.

Where there is no vision, there is hope.

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CHAPTER 12

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“I DON’T UNDERSTAND how the fuck someone can just go missing.” Jackson lets off steam; he’s been in a fucked-up mood all day. I know that it’s all because we can’t find *him* and it’s starting to really get to him now. But some of this anger has to do with work; it looks like he might lose his first court battle and that had him working a lot harder too.

“We will,” I say, exhaling the smoke from my cigarette. Jackson lets out a small laugh when I tell him, “You need to find yourself a girl.” Someone needs to let out some tension otherwise he won’t be able to focus on anything.

I’m a lot better than last night. I got a little information from the sick asshole. He told me that there’s a network, but he doesn’t know the name. If they have a website, all he said was that a person needs money to join.

So, today I spent my workday looking up this network but got nothing. I haven’t even told Jackson about what I found out last night. He has enough on his plate right now, but I will tell him when this court mess is handled.

He says, “I’ll find one. Am I not invited to dinner?”

I’ve invited my parents over for dinner tonight. I asked them both to come over to the office at lunchtime as I wanted to talk to them about something and that’s when I explained about Hope.

My dad didn’t have anything to say to me, he will though once he sees Hope. My mom, on the other hand, she had a few things to say.

She's not your responsibility.

Maybe she's hiding for a reason.

What if those she's hiding from, come to get her?

I asked my mom the same questions; when they found me I wasn't their responsibility, but they still took me in. I was twelve, and I was hiding for a reason, but they still took me, and they weren't scared of who I was hiding from. I told my mom that, and she started crying. I still remember the day they found me. I took one look in her eyes and I could see that she was hurting just looking at me.

I escaped my hell, six years I lived with him, six years I lived with the devil.

Jackson was there for about two years, and when I found a way to run, I took him with me. I told him to hide in this old warehouse and not to leave until I came to get him. Two days he waited there for me; two days with no food or water, all because I told him that I'd be back.

They might not be my blood, but every day I'm thankful that they are my parents. They took Jackson in too and since that day we've had each other's back to the very end.

"Yeah, if Mom finds out I told you to fuck off, she'll have my head." We both start laughing.

"That's because she likes me more."

I look over at him, he has a stupid smirk on his face. Now, we both know that's a lie.

The car pulls up, and I tell John that I'll see him in the morning. I left Hope at the dining table after she had some cereal, no words or eye contact from her at all.

As soon as I open the door, I'm hit with the smell of food. I have no idea what Hope has made, but it smells amazing.

"Am I drooling? It feels like I am." I turn to Jackson with a smile. "My mouth's watering just from the smell. But the moment I see it—"

“Someone’s hungry,” I tell him, as I put my bag on the floor by the door and we make our way to the kitchen. I look around for Hope, but I can’t see her anywhere.

Jackson taps my arm, and I look over as he shows me a piece of paper. *I’m sorry that I left the house today. I was cleaning, but the bleach was really hurting my hands, so I went to get some gloves. While I was out, I saw some things for the dining table for tonight, and I also got a rail to put your suits on once I have ironed them.*

I have put the receipt in the envelope of money that you left me.

Looking over at the table, I see that she got things to put on it to make it look more like a dinner party. As I walk around the island in the kitchen, I see the rail with a few of my suits there.

For the first time she has been in this house, I smile. She walks out of the laundry room with her head up. She doesn’t know I’m back home.

She stops just as she gets to the rail, puts her head down and takes a step to the side. I look over at Jackson making a lot of noise.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I know I should wait, but my stomach needs to know what smells so good.” He opens the oven door and peeks inside. “Hope, this looks amazing.”

I turn to face her as she slowly puts my suit on the rail, then stands against the wall.

“My parents will be here in about an hour. Why don’t you go have a shower and get dressed?” I tell her and with the smallest nod she walks out of the kitchen.

“And you think she will show Mom her hands? Good luck with that,” Jackson says as he looks at the other things that Hope has made. “Oh my God Leo, she’s made cheesecake.” He takes it out of the fridge to show me.

“What type of cheesecake is it?” I ask walking over to him to have a look.

“Have no idea, do you think she’ll notice if I take a little?”

“She *will* notice, she just won’t say anything, but I will so put it back. Be right back,” I tell him as I grab the small bag that I brought today.

“Where you going?”

“Going to get her to take a warm shower,” I shout back at him as I walk up the stairs. Today she’s using hot water, and I’m not leaving until she does.

Walking into her room, I knock on the bathroom door and take a step back as she opens it for me. Hope moves to the side as I take a step in. I walk over to the shower, turning it to a warmer setting and I look over at her.

“I’m just going outside. I want you to put this on.” I hand her the bag. “I’ll be back in one minute.” I leave the bathroom and wait for a moment.

I know that she won’t have a warm shower even if I put it on for her. She’ll change it. So, I bought her a bikini so that I can be in the room with her.

I walk back into the bathroom where she’s standing with her robe on. “Now you can have a shower, and I’ll be right here.” I lean on the counter, and she stands there for a moment. I see her hands begin to shake as she goes to take off her robe.

Am I pushing this with her?

As the robe hits the floor, my hands tighten around the counter as I look at the scars, and how all you can see is bones. When she walks to the shower, I see the scars on her back. My blood is boiling to the point that I’ll find and kill the person that did this to her.

Hope takes a step into the shower but doesn’t walk under the water. I see her hand moving to and then away from the handle to change the temperature.

Pushing myself off the counter, I take my suit off; she's not having the same cold fucking shower over and over again, not happening.

Standing behind her, I put my hand on her arm and move her forward so that she's under the water and she gasps a few times. I keep my hand on her as she tries to move away a few times.

"You need to start taking warmer showers," I whisper to her, turning her around toward me. Her face is focused on the floor. "I'm not going to ask you to look at me, but just look at my body, I have scars too, I have a history," I tell her.

I hear her sobbing, and I don't know why, but she slowly lifts her gaze and looks at my chest. Hope's head rests on my chest, and she starts crying. Bringing my arms around her, I give her head a kiss. I choose not to say anything more to her. This is a good day for me; I don't want to ruin it by making her talk.



I didn't leave Hope in the shower for long. I saw her skin getting red. I think that was because it was the first time in a long time that she had a hot shower and her body couldn't handle it. Once she had got dressed, I told her that from now on she's to take a warm shower. If I find out that she had a cold shower, then I will just have to go in there with her again.

I sit outside in the yard as Hope gets the table ready; my mom wanted to help her, but I stopped her. In the short time I've spent with her, I know that she needs to do things by herself. She hasn't looked at my parents. The moment they walked into my house, she went straight into the kitchen and got them a drink.

I turn around as I hear a tap on the glass door leading to the yard and see Hope standing there in a large sweater so that no one can see her arms or hands.

"Food is ready."

I look over at Jackson, as he moves quickly, he been waiting long enough, and I have to admit even I'm looking forward to it myself.

"Hope, this looks amazing," Jackson tells her and sits at the table. I watch Hope moving towards the kitchen and bringing over the plates of food.

I see my mom looking at Hope's hands as she puts the plates down. She tries to get a closer look, but the sleeves to her sweater are too long.

My dad gives me a smile, as he looks at his food and Jackson. Well, he's just acting like a kid waiting to take a bite of his Happy Meal.

I slam my cutlery on the table as I see what Hope has on her plate. "Go put some more fucking food on your plate," I snap at her. I can't do this anymore. I've been patient. I've been giving her time to know that I'm not stopping her with anything, but she needs to eat.

Pushing my chair away from the table, I grab her plate and take it to the kitchen. I hear my mom following behind me. "Leo." She rubs my back. "She's broken. She's been taught to be a certain way and by the looks of it, for a very long time too. She needs to break out of whatever brainwashing she's been through."

I put more food on Hope's plate and head back to the table and place it in front of her.

"More than a forkful," I say as I sit back down. I look over at everyone staring at me. "I'm sorry I snapped." I start eating but glance out of the corner of my left eye to see what Hope's doing.

"Hope, this is so good," Jackson tells her with a mouthful of food. My dad starts laughing, as I shake my head at him.

"You can at least swallow before you talk." I get up and fill everyone's glass with wine. "Hope?" I ask.

"Water," she whispers.



Dinner was amazing. I have to be honest I don't think I've ever eaten lamb so tasty before.

"Hope, it's okay honey, the guys will take them," my mom tells her as she stands to take the dishes away. She stops, and her hands begin to shake.

Dad and Jackson stand up and begin to collect the dishes together. Hope goes to stand up again but stops herself; she's trying very hard not to move. As they both walk away from the table, she falls on to the chair holding on to her plate with a tight grip.

I go to take her plate, but she won't let go. "I followed the rules, please don't," she sobs in the quietest whisper.

"Don't what?" I ask as I turn her chair around and kneel in front of her. "I won't do anything that you don't want me to, and I don't have rules. I don't want you to live here with rules. I've told you before, and I'll tell you again, I'm not *holding* you here, Hope. You're free to go whenever you wish." Holding on to the arms of the chair I try to look at her face.

"I followed the rules; please don't leave me with her." Hope wipes her tears and then starts playing with the end of her sweater sleeve.

I look over at my mom, I'm not playing along with this, and I need to break her out of this.

"My mother won't hurt you. I promise she won't hurt you." I take her hands in mine. "She wouldn't hurt anyone."

She pulls her hands from mine. "Scars, yours." She begins to scratch. She thinks my mom abused me, but she *would* think that as I haven't given her a reason to believe otherwise.

Shaking my head, I take a deep breath in. "Hope, my mom never did anything to me, she adopted me." I retake hold of her hands. "All she wants to do is look at your hands, to see if she can give you some stronger lotion to help with the pain, I just—"

“Okay,” she whispers.

“I’m going to be right in there,” I tell her, pointing to the kitchen. Giving my mom a nod, I get up and walk over to the kitchen.

I lean on the counter as I watch my mom pulling a chair closer to Hope. I take the cigarette from Jackson.

“Leo, I know your heart is in the right place, but are you sure that you’re the right person to help her?” my dad asks as he stands next to me.

I look at Hope’s hands shaking as she shows one of them to my mom. Blowing out the smoke, I shrug. “Maybe I’m not, but I’m going to try.” I do agree with my dad about helping her. I mean I’m on a manhunt to kill the man who did *this* to *me*. I spend my evenings torturing evil men, and I enjoy watching them in pain. So, maybe I’m not the right person to help her, but I’m going to try to make her smile again.

I push myself off the counter as Hope walks over to the kitchen. She walks straight past me and to the fridge, taking out the cheesecake.

“Leo.” I turn to my mom, she gives me a nod, and I follow her out to the yard. “I’m going to talk to my friend, explain the situation and hope that she’ll be able to give me some medication lotion for her.” She stops and fixes me with a concerned gaze for a moment.

“You think that I’m crazy to help her, don’t you?”

“No, I think you’re doing the right thing. Some advice, you want her to open up a little? Maybe you need to open up with her about *your* past.” Leaning closer, she gives me a kiss on the cheek. “There’s something different about her. Whatever her past is, it’s not going to be easy for her to break away from the barriers that are holding her.”

I look inside at Hope walking around the kitchen as she plates up the cheesecake. “Do you think—”

“Leo, give her time,” my mom says as she pats my arm.

I wrap my arm over her shoulder, and we make our way back to the house. “I will,” I say quietly to her, but more to myself.

Jackson lifts his plate up. “White chocolate cheesecake, Leo, my second piece,” I make my way over to the kitchen to see what Hope is doing.

Leaning on the counter, I watch her cleaning, her hair falling over the sides of her face, so I can’t see it. I’ve still got to see her face again. I mean fully for longer than a second.

“Are you not having any, I mean I would get a slice before Jackson eats it all,” I let out a small laugh. “Shall I cut us a piece? Or if you don’t want too much, we can share some, and that will leave Jackson with more.”

Turning off the tap, she walks over to the cheesecake. She cuts a slice and places it in front of me. I give her a moment as she looks at the forks. Inside I’m begging that she picks them both up; I can only hope that she gives me a little hope to hold on to.

Hope slides me over a fork, softly tapping her finger on the counter. She takes her fork, and on the inside, I’m smiling; smiling that after two weeks I might finally be getting somewhere with her.

Today is a win for me, and I’m going to be smiling when I go to bed.

CHAPTER 13

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HOPE

THE RED NUMBERS on the timepiece show 02:13 and I sit on the kitchen floor looking at one tile that has been annoying me since the first day I saw it. I look at the computer screen to see if there is any way I can take off the tile piece without ruining the whole floor.

Leo was different today; there was something that changed in me when I saw his scars and the way he held my hands at the dining table, making me feel safe with his mom.

I feel Leo walking over to me. Keeping my head down, I see him sit on the floor pulling the laptop closer to him. “You planning on tiling the floor?”

“No.” I point to the tile that I’m looking at, “Just that tile. It needs to be turned once around.”

I hear Leo laughing. “You know, I’ve had this kitchen for about five years now, and no one has ever mentioned that tile to me.” He leans closer and takes a good look. “Looks like I’m getting some new kitchen tiles.”

“White?” I ask.

“White,” he replies. “I’ll bring a book home and we can have a look together, or you can come with me?” He moves a little closer to me, and I look over at him; not his face and not so my face is lifted but I see his hands moving over his thigh.

I bring my hand closer to his, and I point to the scar on his left hand. “D-does that hurt?”

“It did, not anymore. Now it’s a reminder of what I survived,” he tells me. I suppose that’s a good way to look at your scars; shame I can’t do that. Shame I can remember every word that was told to me, every rule is drilled in my head, every scar I remember how it was given.

“You want to hear my story?”

Do I want to hear his story? I mean I can still see all the dark clouds around him; he has the type of darkness surrounding him that I ran away from.

“My mother was a drug addict whore. Just to get her next hit she would sleep with one man after another, but then one day this man came over and offered her a lot of money for me, and he didn’t even have to finish his sentence before my mother said yes.” Leo gets up and walks away, and after a small moment away he comes back, placing a coffee mug in front of me.

“So, I was taken, I was abused, I was punished. I was there for six years. In four years they broke me. Broke me to the point where I didn’t think there was hope of getting out. I was there for four years before someone made me want to fight. It took two years after that to finally escape; to finally run away from the house of hell.”

Leo stops, and I start spinning the coffee mug on the floor, as I think about Leo’s past. “Who?” I ask.

“Who, what?”

“Made you fight?”

There’s silence for a moment and I think maybe I shouldn’t be asking him questions when I can’t even answer his.

“Jackson. They threw Jackson in my room and told me to tell him what would happen. I said no. So to protect him, if he did something wrong, I took the blame. If they wanted him, I took his place.” He lets out a small cough. “I wasn’t going to let them hurt him the way they did me. Yes, there were days that I let him down, and I’ll never be able to forgive myself for

that. I promised myself that if I found a way out, I'd take him with me. So, I did."

I gaze up at him. For the first time since I've been here my eyes lock with his.

"Now, those are the beautiful blue eyes that I've wanted to see again." Leo gives me a wink. I move my head to look outside to the yard.

For the first time in a long time, I feel like I'm safe. But then why do I still feel like something is wrong?

I feel Leo sitting next to me, looking out to the yard with me. "Hope, can you look at me please?" I put my head down and look at my hands. "Please." Leo moves in front of me.

Slowly lifting my head, I look at Leo's eyes, and for the first time I see the color of them; the brown-woody shade pulls me in to look deeper, to see if I can see his soul and to see if it's as black as I see now.

"I promise you that I won't let anyone come near you again and I'll hunt the man that did this to you, and I'll make sure that he dies in a lot of pain. But you don't need to fear me." His hand moves to my cheek and softly moves my hair away from my face. "I won't hurt you." His palm rests on my cheek, and his face moves closer to mine. "You walk around this house with your head held high. You have a warm shower. You sleep on the bed. And I have a maid to clean, so you don't have to."

"I like cleaning and cooking," I whisper. It's the truth. I enjoy it, it lets me come out of my dark cloud for a moment, it might be for a short while, but I get out of it.

"Then you keep doing it, for two reasons. One, Jackson loves your food and two, it's because you *want* to do it. I'm not *making* you, okay?"

Nodding my head, I pick up both mugs and take them to the sink. I know that Leo is standing behind me.

I turn off the tap. "Goodnight," I say walking away from him.

“Goodnight Hope.”



I didn't sleep at all last night; I lay by the window and looked out at the street lights thinking about everything Leo told me last night. I know that he said to do all those things, but I don't feel comfortable. I still don't want to break the rules, and I don't want to get punished. Leo said he won't, and deep down I don't think he would, but in the back of my mind and inside my body, I feel like if I don't, I *will* be punished and that starts to make me feel panic inside.

I go to make breakfast. I've learned now that Jackson is over for breakfast and dinner most days, so I always make extra just in case he comes over.

“Morning, Hope.” I turn my head to the right a little to see Leo standing next to me. “Breakfast smells nice.” Placing a mug of coffee next to me, he looks over my head toward the door as we hear it closing.

“What's for breakfast, Hope?” I hear Jackson behind me.

“Do you ever eat at home, or do you think my house is a free for all?” Leo walks away from me, and I hear them both talking about some court thing that Jackson is going to.

“Hope, we can eat at the breakfast bar,” I hear Leo say. I give him a nod and plate up the eggs before I place the plates in front of them both.

“This is yours, so where is mine?” Leo says. I look at him through my eyelashes. Then I turn around and get another plate and put it in front of him. “Would you like to leave the house today?” he asks.

“No.” If I don't have to go out in the day, I won't. There are too many people out there in the daytime.

“How about in the evening? There'll be fewer people out.” It seems like Leo is finally getting that I don't like being around people.

“Ma...maybe.” It’s not that I don’t want to go out, but if I walk somewhere new, I like to go at two or three in the morning so that I can plan my route; so I know I won’t have to look up at anyone. I’m still always scared that one day I will see *him* again; the man from the pimp house. He said if he ever sees me he’ll hurt me and I don’t want to go through all that.

“Are you scared of something?”

Turning my face away from him for a moment, I try to get the night out of my head. I need to get that night out of my head.

“I didn’t hear an answer,” Leo says. I start playing with my food on the plate. “Someone here hurt you, and I’d like to know who.”

“No one,” I whisper, taking my plate to the sink.

Leo doesn’t say anything else to me, but I hear them both leaving the kitchen. “Can you bring us coffee to my office please?”

I close my eyes for a moment just to get my thoughts back together. He told me about his past, and I can’t even tell him about that night. I need to tell him *something*.

Making them both a coffee, I walk upstairs to his office. The door is open a little, and I go to walk in but stop as I hear them talking.

“Leo, the only person that’s going to tell you who hurt her is Hope.”

“I know, I told her about what happened to me. I thought maybe she would see me for more than the monster I am,” I hear Leo say. My heart starts to race; he’s trying, and I’m pushing him away. He’s trying to help me, maybe it’s time I let him?

“Leo, do you like Hope?” Jackson asks. His tone is sincere. He even sounds like he’s asking with some joy in his voice.

“Last night, she looked me in the eyes. That look was different; I saw hopefulness there. Not just for her, but for *me*. From the moment I walked into the restaurant, something about her has pulled me to her and—”

“For you and because I know you, I’m happy. I didn’t think there was any chance of getting that heart to beat.”

The coffee mug slips out of my grip and hits the floor, and the broken pieces shatter as the hot coffee splashes around my feet. Leo can’t like someone like me, he doesn’t even know me. I have too much darkness around me; darkness that he needs to stay away from.

Kneeling I start picking up the pieces, and I feel Leo’s hand on mine. “Sorry,” I tell him.

“It’s only a mug.”

“I need to believe that everything broken can one day be fixed,” I whisper. Leo’s hand stops in its track to pick up the pieces. “When I came to New York, this man raped me, so I don’t like going out in the day, if I don’t have to,” I whisper.

I look up at him, as he sighs deeply, his eyes watching me, but all I see in them is a cold darkness. He looks angry. Leo stands up, and I finish picking up the rest of the mug. Then I get up and stare down at the pool of coffee on the floor.

“I want a name!” There is a pain in his voice. For the first time, someone seems angry for what I went through, and it throws me.

“I don’t...have one,” I whisper.

“A location, a face, a house, anything?” He sounds desperate. He takes a step closer to me. “Can you take me there?”

Nodding, I take a step back from him for a moment. I don’t want to go back there; I don’t want to see *him* again.

“We’ll go tonight.” Leo turns to face Jackson. “I need my lawyer to make sure I don’t break any rules.”

I hear Jackson laughing. “Like I was going to miss that show, but are you sure you want...”

“Hope won’t be there. She’ll take us then I’ll bring her back home and meet you where you say.” Leo turns back around, but before he can say anything to me, I walk away to get something to mop the coffee off the floor.

Looks like I don’t get a say in this, but I want to know what Leo will do when I do show him who it was and the fact that he needs his lawyer there? That worries me a little more.

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CHAPTER 14

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“HOPE!” I shout her name as I walk into the house. My head was not in work today. I wanted the day to go faster just so I could get home.

“Yes,” I hear her soft voice behind me, turning around I watch her scratching her arms over the sleeve of the sweatshirt.

“My mom got you some stronger lotion, so hopefully it won’t be as painful for you.” I hand her the bag, and for a moment I just stand there waiting for her to take it from me.

“Thank you.” Her voice comes out in the smallest whisper.

“I also got you your medication. So, instead of making your week-long supply last a month, how about we take it every day?” Placing the bag on the table, I watch her for a moment. “I want you to get better; I want you to feel like you can walk around here and not be scared.” I must sound like a fucking broken record with her, but I just wish she would at least walk around the house with her head held high.

“Thank you, I’ll get dinner ready.” She scratches again. Before she can walk away from me, I grab her arm to stop her.

“Is your rash getting worse?”

“No, just the clothes are a little tight, and the fabric is making them itchy.” She looks down at my hand on her arm and waits until I loosen the grip before she pulls it from me.

I watch her walk to the kitchen, and I lean on the chair for a moment. Jackson should be here soon for dinner then I have

my whole night planned. I walk up the stairs to my bedroom to grab a sweater for Hope; mine will be a little looser on her. I walk back down to the kitchen and see she's cutting up some lettuce.

Placing my hand on hers I tell her, "Wear mine, it will be more comfortable for you." I turn her to face me and I pull her off.

I have no idea what's going on, but I must be fucking crazy because Hope is doing something to me that I don't know how to control. She doesn't even look at me, but when her eyes meet mine, I'm sunk into the blue heaven that I see in them. They have this magic to them that casts a spell on me, and I never want it to go away.

I take a step back from her before I do something that I know I won't be able to recover from. I need her to trust me; I need her to know that I won't hurt her physically or emotionally.

She puts on my sweater, and I turn to see Jackson walking over to us. "What's for dinner, Hope?" he asks as he looks over to me and holds his eyes on me for a moment. He knows me well enough to see that there's something different with me and it happened the moment I walked in that restaurant and saw Hope.

"She's making some pasta and salad," I tell him, our eyes still locked with each other.

"Sounds nice, what time do you want to leave today?"

I watch Jackson walk over to the table, and I turn to follow but stop when I feel Hope's hand on top of mine. She's never done that before. "You okay?" is the only thing I ask.

"What's happening tonight?" Her voice is tinged with worry, and I can feel the fear radiating from her.

"You're going to take me to the place, show me who hurt you and I'm going to bring you home where no one will ever hurt you again. I'll take care of everything else," I tell her, my thumb stroking the side of her hand softly.

Hope's hand rests on mine for a little moment longer, and all I can wonder is- what is she thinking? Is she scared of what I'll do? Will she be happy with what I'll do today? I wanted to say something, anything that would reassure her that her pain was almost over, but in that moment her hands leave mine.

I walk over to Jackson knowing that there is no more of that conversation happening. "Are you ready for tonight?" I ask him, pulling out a chair at the table.

"Yes, are you?" I give him one look that silently tells him to fuck off. Tonight, for the first time, I'm about to kill someone that isn't in my plan. Someone that has no link to finding the other man I want. I'm killing him because he hurt Hope and that doesn't sit right with me. "I have a place don't worry, and I take it you don't want any other toys?" Jackson taps on the table for me to look at him again.

"No, I don't want anything else there; this one is going to be a little more—"

"Personal." Jackson finishes the sentence for me, and I give my answer to him without even looking over at Hope. "We all see it, well fuck *I* see it, Leo. There's something different about you, and it all started the moment you saw *her*." He glances at Hope, then slowly back to me. "But don't you think she's broken enough without you fucking with her more?"

Now, that's not what I thought he was going to say. Jackson knows me better than anyone else; he knows that I don't fuck about with girls. I can't even remember the last girl I fucked.

"I know she's broken Jackson, but you know me. I don't want to hurt her; I want to slowly put all the pieces together," I tell him as I look behind me at Hope walking around the kitchen with her head down. She looks a little more tense than usual, and I have a feeling that has to do with showing me the place.

Jackson hisses in a whisper, "How about you fix *your* fucking broken pieces before you try and fix hers? Because at the moment, there's more chance of you breaking her more."

Wow, he really isn't holding anything back today about my feelings for Hope.

“Why the fuck do you think I'll break her more? I'm the one that wants to fix her,” I tell him, and he knows.

He softens a little. “Then fix yourself.”

“Maybe *she's* the one that can fix my broken pieces,” I bite back. I never thought of it like that before, but maybe we *are* good for each other. I just have to get her to feel the same way about me.



I wrap Hope tighter in her coat. It seems to have gotten colder out tonight. Jackson told me the location that he would have everything ready for me once we knew who the asshole was.

“Ready?” I ask her. She has been more distant than usual, and I know it's to do with this situation. She did ask if we could go a little later when there would be less people out there. I agreed just to make her feel more comfortable about taking me.

She gives me a nod and the moment we get out of the car she has her head down. She asked to go to Central Park as she knew the way by walking from there. I had to stop myself from smiling. How would she know where the roads are? She would have to look up to know that.

I glance over at Jackson as Hope starts walking with her head down. It's interesting watching her walking around people without even seeing where they are coming from.

We walk for about thirty minutes before she stops in front of a few houses and she points to a house on the left.

Jackson leans in and whispers, “So, how are you going to find out which one it was?” Now that's a question I don't have the answer for.

Standing there for a moment as I work on a plan, I light up a cigarette and inhale, letting the smoke settle in my lungs. I

have two choices. Wait out here until the bastard comes out, or walk straight in with Hope and get her to point him out to me. But the moment they find out he's dead, the finger will be pointed at me.

"I'll go in and play the lawyer card," Jackson tells me walking away. I look down at Hope as she puts her hands into her pockets. Standing in front of her I pull her closer to me, wrapping my left arm around her so that she can have some of the warmth from my body. Feeling her hot breath hitting my chest, I want to smile, but I don't. I need to focus on what I have planned for the night; I need to have a clear mind for it.

Jackson returns and hands his phone to me. "So, I have a picture of all the men in there, just have to get Hope to point him out. I told them that I'd go to the police about what they're doing there if anyone refused to have their picture taken. He laughed. "Most of them were high and didn't even know I was taking photos. Two of them said no, but I took them anyway."

"And after tonight then what?" I ask him. The reason that I have him with me is because if anything goes wrong, he knows the law and would be able to get us out of trouble. But showing his face like that isn't exactly going to help.

Jackson doesn't seem worried. "Before they even know the asshole is dead, I'll have something to blackmail them with to make sure that their mouths stay shut about me being here."

"Can you flick through and see which one he is?" I ask Hope, and she takes the phone from my hand. I see her finger moving the picture as she points to the culprit.

She hands the phone back to me, and I take one look then turn to Jackson. "I'm taking Hope home; I'll be there in an hour. You take John, I'll bring the other car," I tell him and without a word Jackson gives me a nod as I walk away from him.

I told Hope to go to sleep once we left the bastard's house. She mentally locked herself away when we were heading back home; she didn't even lift her head up once, not even for a second but I chose not to ask her what was wrong. Pointing the asshole out was enough for me.

It took over an hour to get to the warehouse and as I walk in Jackson tells me, "I think I'm going to enjoy watching you kill him. I know that we go after certain people, but this is one fucked up man," he says as I take his cigarette from him.

Slowly walking over and sitting on the chair in front of the bastard, I glare at him. He looks like one of these pimps that will mess up a girl if she doesn't do as she's told. The fucker stares back at me as though he has so much to say and I don't think any of it will be nice.

There's a stupid smirk on his face, and I want to beat it off him. "You know if you just tell me the girl's name that fucked up your day, I'm more than happy to—"

"Shut the fuck up!" I want this man to feel pain; I want him to know that he messed with the wrong girl and I'm going to make sure that this fucker never touches anyone ever again. Standing up, I grab the baseball bat from against the wall and give it a big swing then hit his knee and he screams as I hear the bone break.

"You fucking asshole!" he yells.

He opens his mouth to say a few more things to me, but I punch him over and over and over again. I can feel his blood on my hands, and as I take a step back from him, I can't help but smile as I see the red dripping from his mouth.

Standing over him, I hear him trying to catch his breath. "What the fuck did I do to you?"

I shrug. "Nothing," I tell him and watch him trying to sit back up.

"Then why are you doing this?"

"Because assholes like you think that you can touch a girl and no one will protect her." I kick him in the face and his blood splats on the bottom of my pants. His hands are flat on

the ground as he tries to get back up only this time I kick him in the stomach. Then, sitting on top of him, I begin punching him over and over again. His blood splashes all over my skin and clothing. Jackson places his hand on my shoulder. “Leo, he’s done,” he tells me as we peer down at him lying lifeless on the floor. “John’s here to take you home. Put everything in a bag, and I’ll get this all cleaned up.”

Standing up, I stare down at him for a final time. I’ve killed a man that was never on my list; a man that had no information for me. I did it all for Hope, and I will kill every man that ever hurt her. I’ll hunt them down, kill them all slowly.



“Sir, Jackson said to have the clothes in a bag, and he will be over to pick them up.”

Giving John a nod, I make my way to the couch. I lean back and close my eyes. I take in a deep breath as I remember the sound of the bastard’s bones breaking. I feel something cold on my hand, and I slowly open my eyes to see Hope putting a wet towel on my knuckles.

She starts unfastening my shoes, and when she has pulled them off, she throws them into the bag on the floor. She must have heard John at the door. Sitting up, she wipes the towel over my hand and puts it back in the water she’s brought to clean it before placing it on my skin again.

Hope moves between my legs and pulls my shirt out of my pants then she starts unbuttoning it from the bottom. This is the first time that my clothes have been covered in so much blood after a night. I’m usually more put together in these situations but something overtook my body tonight, and I just kept hitting the bastard over and over again.

I stay in my position as I watch Hope, cleaning me up. She stops with my buttons after two, then takes the towel off my hand and gives the other a clean. I quickly use my free hand to grab my cigarette box from the side table and light one up.

She picks up a fresh towel, and I watch her put it in the water, then she gets back to my buttons. I feel the feather-light touch of her fingertips move across my stomach as she continues to unfasten my shirt. When she reaches the last button, she holds her hands there for a moment, before letting the shirt fall open. Her eyes lock on my chest for a moment, she's looking at my scars, my history.

Hope's hand starts to shake as she brings it closer to my chest. Her finger softly traces over one of the scars. Her touch is overtaking my body, and as I close my eyes, she moves to the next scar. I don't let women touch my scars. I don't even show them if I don't have to as their questions are usually stupid, but with Hope, it's not a pain or a reminder of what happened to me. Her touch is making me feel calm, making me forget about what happened. I feel her other hand on my chest, and I inhale deeply.

I take another drag of my cigarette as Hope's touch is soothing to my body and the thrill running through me is a new feeling. I've never let a woman touch me the way Hope is right now. I open my eyes the second I don't feel Hope's hands on me anymore. Why has it affected me?

"You need to take this off." Her voice is quiet, as her hands move to my shoulders. She leans forward so she can take my shirt and jacket off together. My face is so near to hers that it's taking all my willpower not to close the remaining space between us.

"You won't have to worry about him ever again," I tell her.

I lean back into the couch as Hope puts the clothes into the bag. I watch as she rinses the towel again and takes it out of the water. She slowly turns to face me, twisting the towel in her fingers for a moment. My eyes are locked on her face as I wait to see what she does next. Her head moves up slowly, her gaze stops at my face, but she's not looking into my eyes. Instead, she brings the towel up to wipe off the blood from my cheek.

I stop her hand and move closer to her. "Look at me Hope," I say in a whisper. With my other hand I place my

finger under her chin and tilt it, so she looks at me, it takes a few seconds before her eyes meet mine.

The sound of her rapid breathing is filling me with a fierce desire to touch her more. “Hope...” All the power in my body is being pulled towards her. “I want to kiss you.” I move my thumb slowly across her cheek. “Can I kiss you?” I want her to know that I won’t take anything from her unless she wants me to. I won’t push myself on her, and I won’t force anything on her.

Her head nods in the smallest movement, but that’s all the answer I need. Moving closer to her, my lips touch hers as light as a feather, and a weak gasp escapes her. Just the taste of her lips, I want more, I *need* more. I slip my hand to the back of her neck and deepen the kiss, being gentle with her. My fingers tangle in her hair; I’m desperate to explore more of her.

I feel her body relax under my hands and as she opens her mouth for me, I slide my tongue inside, wanting to taste every part of her. Her hands move to my chest as I pull her even closer to me.

I groan against her mouth, not wanting to stop for air. Hope is all I need to breathe.

“Where the fuck is the bag?” Jackson yells, and Hope pulls away from me quickly and dashes off to the kitchen. “Leo, you have one fucking job when you get home.” He walks over to me, and as I take off my pants, I grab the blanket off the chair and wrap it around my waist so I can remove my boxers.

“Happy?” I growl, tying the bag up. I see Hope walking up the stairs.

Jackson watches me as my eyes follow Hope. “Please tell me you didn’t just do anything with her?”

“I didn’t do anything.” He doesn’t need to know about it, the fucker will only moan about it and say I’m doing the wrong thing.

“Of course you fucking didn’t. See you in the morning.” Jackson grabs the bag and leaves so I make my way upstairs.

I stop outside Hope's bedroom, and I just stand there watching her lying on the floor looking out of the window. Where do I go from here? What's my next move? Do I...? I have no idea. Shaking my head, I walk to my bedroom to shower and let tomorrow be a new day to see what happens with Hope.

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CHAPTER 15

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HOPE

“THIS WILL BE YOUR ROOM. The bed is to be used only when I want you, other than that you will sleep on the floor, but you know the rules.” He starts laughing behind me, he hasn’t even told me his name yet. All I know him as is the man that owns me, but all I want is my parents. I want to wake from my sleepover and my mom to come and pick me up.

Looking through the corner of my eye to see what I can of the room, but all I see is the bed. “Get on the bed.” I feel his finger trace down my back, and a cold shiver runs through me.

Lying on the bed, I close my eyes. “Now you know the rules, your eyes are to stay open and you look at me.” His hand moves to my neck. “I told your uncle everything I liked, and he better have trained you right.” His hand tightens around my neck as he says the words. I remember the lessons, I remember the rules.

My eyes locked with his as his grip tightens more and his hand moves down my body. I try to look away; I want to close my eyes. I can’t breathe.

I wake up clutching my throat, struggling to breathe. Closing my eyes for a moment, I take a deep breath in then look around the room to make sure I’m alone. Moving over to the window, I look out at the lights. I want to see the lights of hope.

Leaning my head on the window I pick up the newspaper article, the one about the fire at the house and I stare at it; the

house where my life was happy. I've lived in darkness until last night. Last night was different. Leo asked for permission, they don't ask permission. Leo was soft, gentle, but he still kissed me with power, and control.

When he got home last night, I saw him in a whole different way, and things started to change. He killed a man that he's never met; he killed a man for *me*. Leo is trying to help me, he's trying to make my health better, and he's trying to make me feel safe again.

I want to trust him. I want to believe him, but it never stays that way. They always break me, *he* always broke me. I've lived with rules for so many years; I just don't know how to tear my mind from them.

Leo has a touch that's helping me. Helping me feel like I belong and I'm not just a worthless girl in a room.

Quickly folding the paper, I feel him outside. Hearing the door open, I look out of the window.

I hear his footsteps getting closer to me. He laughs lightly. "I didn't even make a sound." I see him from the corner of my eye as he sits on the floor and leans against the window like me. "Bad night?"

"Used to them," I tell him. After last night I want to make to make more of an effort with him, even though every tiny muscle in my body is telling me to follow the rules. I'm trying to fight through them.

"What's in the box?" I grab it and pull it close to me, but he says, "I won't take it."

"I know."

Sitting cross-legged, he places his hand on top of mine and the other moves closer to my face moving some of my hair away and putting it behind my ear.

"I know as soon as you open up to me and smile you're going to be the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. How do I know that? You're already so beautiful when you hide."

My eyes close and I let out a tear I've been fighting. I've never been called beautiful. I've been called a lot of things, but beautiful is not one of them.

Leo's hand moves to my cheek to wipe away my tear. "I want you to talk to me, Hope. I want to—" Leo stops, and I wonder what he wanted to say.

"Do you kill a lot of people?" I ask. Last night he killed a man he'd never met, and he did it without even thinking about what could happen to him.

"You don't need to worry about that," Leo tells me. I go to lift my head, but stop myself and turn back to look at the lights again. "The only reason I do it is so no one will get hurt by these monsters again."

I nod my head. I understand if anything were to go wrong they wouldn't be able to link things together.

"What are you looking at?" Leo moves closer to me, and I can smell his cologne. It smells really good, like when I was sleeping in Central Park; the fresh woody scent in the morning. I always loved that.

"The lights. Where there's light, there's hope." I lean my head on his hand where he's placed it on my shoulder.

"I'll give you all the light you want Hope. I'll give you all the light in the world. I'll give you everything you need." Leo kisses my head and pulls me into his embrace. Just having his arms around me makes me feel warm and makes me believe he's really trying to keep me safe.

"Work in the morning?" I ask him, as we sit there looking out of the window.

"Yes," he says quietly.

"What do you do?" I don't really know anything about Leo, except that he leaves the house in the morning, comes back and his best friend is Jackson. Although now I know he kills people in his spare time.

"We have a financial company, and when people want to borrow money for a business idea, they come to us. We look at

it and decide if they get the loan or not,” Leo tells me. They are clearly a family with money.

Shaking my head to release the thoughts about money and men from my head, I don’t think that Leo is the same; I know he’s not the same.

“Do you give money—” I stop as I hear Leo laughing.

“No, I don’t give them money that easily. They have to come up with a brilliant idea before I say yes.” Leo moves back from me and leans on the wall. “Are you planning on staying awake all night?”

“No, I’ll go back to sleep soon,” I tell him, looking over to the floor where I sleep.

“On the bed?”

I want to say yes. I want to say I *will* sleep there, but I can’t lie to him, so I shake my head. The bed, for me, isn’t a place I feel comfortable to sleep. A bed for me is something that follows with a nightmare.

“Can I ask why?”

Shaking my head again, I wipe the tears from my cheeks as I think about the days, the nights that I laid on a bed, just thinking about what *he* did to me.

Leo takes my face in his hands and turns me to face him. “Just tell me something, just something little for now,” he pleads with me. But I close my eyes and shake my head again. What do I tell him? What *little* thing do I tell him?

“There’s so much... I...”

“Start from the beginning. Tell me...what was your room like?” I look at his face, and my eyes move to him, as my tears begin to build again.

“Uncle Jack kept me in the basement...a room about the same size as this bed.” I point to the one behind him. “There was a little room he built in the corner with a toilet and a sink. That was my cell for two years,” I tell him. I feel his hands soothing my cheeks as I tremble from the emotion tearing through me.

Leo sighs and clenches his jaw, as he shakes his head. I watch him for a moment; the silence around us is speaking the words we both want to say. “What about a shower or a place to wash?” I know he has more questions and he’s thinking of which ones to ask first and which ones will push me to the point where I shut down on him.

“I had to use a cup and cold water from the sink,” I whisper, moving my eyes away from him, to look at anything but the way he’s looking at me right now. There isn’t pity there, it’s more hurt, pain.

Kissing my forehead, he says, “Get some sleep, Hope.”

He gets up and leaves my room. Leaning back on the wall, I look over at the door. Is tomorrow going to be a day when I feel I can open up a little more to him? I need to push the rules out of my head. I need to get them *both* out of my head, but the second I think about them, the rules appear at the front of my mind.



The next morning I hear Leo and Jackson in the kitchen, they got downstairs before me. I didn’t hear Leo wake up.

I run down to the kitchen to get breakfast ready for them. “I’m sorry,” I say quietly to Leo, but as I walk past Jackson, I put my head down.

“Don’t make anything, Hope. Jackson picked up a few things from the bakery on the way here.”

I stop in my tracks, placing my hands on the counter. I’m not sure what to do now that I’m not needed to make food.

Leo slides the box toward me and gets off the stool. “But you can warm these up and bring some coffee to the table, please.”

“Can I get some coffee too, please?” Jackson asks as they walk over to the table. I know what Leo is doing; he knows I have a routine that I follow and he’s going to try and break me

from that. He's going to try and get me to live a life where I can be myself.

Opening the box, I look at the different pastries. I've never had food from a bakery or a restaurant before. I've always had to make my own food, but these look really good and smell incredible.

I hear them talking about something but Jackson seems angry with Leo. All I can hear is that Leo should have told him.

After putting everything in the oven to heat, I get some coffee ready. Whatever's happening between them Jackson isn't happy about it. Leo seems to be his normal self, doesn't seem to show much emotion but what can I say? What emotion do I show him?

I walk over to the table to put the coffee down, and Leo takes my hand and starts stroking my skin which is peeling. "Your skin doesn't look like it's improving, how about the pain?" He leans forward, so he can see my face, my eyes move away to the side where Jackson is sitting, then back to the table.

"It's fine," I tell him but it's not okay. My bones hurt a lot, but I thought I would give the medication some more time before I say anything.

I go back into the kitchen to get the food and get myself some water before joining them back at the table.

"The buyer has to have a shit ton of money if the price is that high just to enter the site!" Jackson shouts.

What are they looking for?

"Well, the dick didn't know the name. All he said was you needed money to get in."

Leo puts a pastry on my plate, then one on his. Staring at the pastry, I listen to them both talking about some website. Whatever they're looking for they need that website.

"Hope," Leo shouts my name a little louder to pull me away from my thoughts. "You've not even taken a bite." He

slides the plate closer to me.

“I’m sorry,” I say quietly.

“Hope, you know you can talk in front of Jackson, right? He comes over all the time. I mean the fucker hasn’t eaten at his own place since he bought it.” I hear Leo laughing, and I try to record the sound in my mind as it’s so beautiful.

“Now Hope is here, and she makes amazing food. Why would I eat at home?” Jackson says. I can hear the humor in his tone.

Leo grabs another pastry. “Get a cook.”

“Now that I’ve tasted the amazing cheesecake, I’m hoping to get some more of that, but before I get some more of the cheesecake, I’d like something else first.”

“Yeah, what’s that?” Leo asks, and I’m thinking the same thing. I mean I haven’t said two words to him.

“To see those beautiful blue eyes that Leo keeps telling me about.” Jackson leans closer to the table, and I feel his eyes on me. He doesn’t say anything to him, and neither do I.

I feel Leo moving and I look up through my eyelashes as his hand reaches mine. “Hope, Jackson is like my brother, he would never hurt you.” He places his hand on mine. I like his touch; it has a warmth to it.

Jackson throws his pen on the table. “So, this site, if we don’t know what it’s called, how are we meant to find it?”

Leaning forward, I pick the pen up, and Leo slides a piece of paper over to me. I write a word on the paper and slide it back to him.

“Underpleasure,” Leo reads it aloud and Jackson types. “Hope, you really need to start telling me something.” He reaches to touch my hand again, but I move it away from him.

“What are you going to do?” I ask. I get a feeling I know what he’s going to do and a part of me wants him to do it, but a part of me doesn’t all at the same time.

“I’m on the hunt for a man. For five years I’ve been hunting him. And when I do find him, I’ll kill him.” There’s so much anger in the answer, so much rage. “After I kill him, I’m going to kill the man who had you. Jackson is working on finding your uncle—”

“No!” I interrupt him pushing my chair away from the table. He can’t find him. Not even Leo can help me with him. He sold me, but he still came to the house to make sure I was behaving, and if I didn’t it was bad, really *really* bad for me. He always told me he would find me if I tried to run. I know one day he will.

I’m panicking. I can feel my lungs getting smaller. The air around me is thicker now. I can feel the sweat building, and I rub my forehead as I try to inhale, but it’s not working.

Leo kneels in front of me. “Look at me, Hope... Hope, listen to my voice, *look* at me.” His thumb moves along my cheek and wipes the tears away. “No one will *ever* touch you again. No one will *ever* come near you.” He brings his face closer to mine. “I promise.”

I shake my head. They don’t know him. He has people that work for him. He can and *will* find me.

“I know that a lot more happened and I want to know what that was, but you’ve got to trust me.” Leo puts his head down slightly to look at me, but I close my eyes.

“I can’t go back there,” I say quietly to myself. It took me years to find a way to escape, and I know that if they find me again, it will be the last thing I will ever do.

“You’re safe...”

I pull away from him. I can’t listen to promises that I know he can’t keep. I move back to the table. I just want the subject to change. I feel them both watching me and I quickly take a sip of my water.

“What did you find on the site?” Leo asks. His tone has changed a little, but I don’t think it’s because of me. I think it’s more because he doesn’t know what hold my past has on me.

“Nothing. It’s a porn site, asking me to log in.” Jackson takes another pastry off the plate. He can sure eat a lot; I think he’s had about four of them now.

“Username is password, and the password is username07,” I tell them. I turn my head towards Leo but don’t look at him. “I used to hear men talking about the website, so they gave them a username so that people could have a peak,” I tell him. I heard so many different voices talking about the site; I could easily pick the voices out in a crowd.

“Leo, you might want to look at this,” I hear Jackson as he pushes the laptop over to him.

“Welcome to Underpleasure. You know why you’re here. To enter the room, you need to pay \$50,000—”

“Fifty thousand dollars just to enter the fucking site!” Jackson shouts.

I start scratching my hands like crazy. Leo’s about to learn something about me, and I’m scared of what he’s going to do.

“You can see our items which have been sold, click the link.” He takes a sip of his coffee, and I watch with dread as his finger moves, and I hear the click. “We have everything you need from young to old, white or black. This is your answer to a sweet shop for adults,” Leo stops talking, and I look to the side to see what he’s doing.

Nothing. He’s facing me.

“Sweet shop for adults, is this how sick these fuckers are?” Jackson pulls the laptop over to him. “Have you seen the time? I’m sure we both have work to do.” He closes the laptop. “I’ll see if someone can help me find an IP address or something. I don’t really know how to do this side of things,” Jackson says.

I have to tell Leo before he goes to work. If he finds out while he’s out, or if Jackson finds out and tells him, then he might lose it with me, and I don’t want that. Leo is trying, and I’m trying too.

“Before... erm... there’s...” I start tapping my fingers on the table. “I...need—”

“Hope, talk to me.” Leo puts his hand on mine to stop the tapping.

I point to the laptop. “There...is something...you need to know,” I whisper. I hear Jackson sitting back down and opening the laptop and sliding it over to Leo.

“Okay, what are we looking for?” Leo asks.

I take in a deep breath. “Look under...” I swallow the large lump in my throat, “limited edition, there is only one person on there,” I tell him, and I look over as his fingers move around.

“We can provide one of a kind treats. If you want something, let us know, and we can find it. This little beauty was sugar coated by her uncle and was our most popular find. Her bidding broke all the records, lasted for months until one man made the biggest bid in history. Eight million dollars.” There is silence in the room; even Jackson isn’t saying anything, not one sound.

Leo pushes the laptop hard over to Jackson, I know there is a picture on there of a ten-year-old me.

Leo stands up and walks away from the table, Jackson stays where he is, and I wipe the tears from my cheeks.

Jackson clears his throat, and I swear I can see the emotion in his eyes. “Hope, I’m sorry this happened to you. Leo means it when he says nothing will happen to you again. Leo is a... hard man. Women are the last thing on his mind, and I mean *last*. So trust me when I say, he won’t let them get you,” he tells me and walks over to the kitchen where Leo is.

So, now Leo knows that I was sold and now he’s going to make it his mission to find out who bought me, and he’s going to make them pay—only this time *not* with cash.

CHAPTER 16

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LEO

“I WON’T LET anything happen to you, I promise.” I sit next to Jackson and pull him closer to me. One of Jack’s men beat him today because he said no. I tried to help him, but I got grabbed by two other men.

“Leo, I don’t think—”

“Hey, listen to me, as long as I’m alive, I’ll fight for you, and I’ll take any beating that I can,” I tell him as I can’t bear to hear him crying. I’ve let him down a few times when I just couldn’t help him. The other day after Jack was finished with me, I was so weak and tired that when they came for Jackson, I couldn’t even stand up.

We both sit up as the door opens. “You’re with me.” He points to Jackson.

I stand up and push Jackson behind me. “Leave him alone. Take me,” I tell them.

“Well, the boss wants him.”

“He’s not getting him.” He goes to grab Jackson, but I kick him. “He gets me, or nothing. I won’t let you take Jackson.”

“Take him.” I hear Jack behind the man.

The man’s hand wraps around my neck, and he pulls me closer to him. “Jack’s had a bad weekend, so get ready to have some fun.”

He pulls me out of the room, and my body begins to shake as I know that it’s going to be darkness and hell this weekend.

“Her past makes ours look like a fucking playground,” Jackson says as he stands next to me.

“I know, I thought it couldn’t get more fucked up than mine. I did my best to keep you safe—”

He places a hand on my shoulder and squeezes. “Don’t Leo. You protected me. You took it all so that I didn’t have to. Yeah, some shit happened to me, but if it wasn’t for you a lot more would have happened.”

I still remember the one day I couldn’t save him; he was locked away for three days before he was allowed out again.

“What are you going to do about the site?” I ask him. Now, this is not what we do, this is a lot bigger than we thought it would be. I wanted to kill one man, and maybe that man is on this site, maybe he’s not. But one thing’s for sure, this is something that neither one of us can do.

“I have no fucking idea. I suggest the best thing to do would be to go to the police. I don’t know.”

Blowing out the smoke, I shake my head. “If we go to the police, we might lose our only link in finding him and—”

“You want to find the man who spent eight million on Hope don’t you?” Jackson stands in front of me. “Some people owe me a favor. Let me talk to them to see if we can find anything on the buyer.” He glances over at Hope breaking off pieces of her breakfast. “She’s starting to open up to you, but before you make promises, I think you need to make sure you can keep them.” Tapping my shoulder, he leaves.

I smoke the rest of my cigarette and gaze over at Hope thinking about what to do next. She starts peeling the skin off her hands, but I move my focus to her face. My attention moves to her lips. I remember her kissing me last night. She *let* me kiss her, she let me in. She must trust me enough to do that.

Pushing myself off the counter, I make my way over to her. I turn her chair around to face me, as I sit in front of her.

“Jackson’s not here, you can look at me now.” She lifts her face a little, and I feel a spark of joy inside. She doesn’t try to hide her eyes away from me, for the first time she is looking *at* me and not behind me.

“How about we start walking with our head held high? You have nothing to hide from—”

“I’m hiding from him.” Her voice is broken, scared.

I swallow hard and think about Jackson’s words about promising her things. “In this house, you don’t have to hide from anyone. The only people that come here are my parents and Jackson. They won’t hurt you. I’m going to find who did this and I’m going to make them pay, but I don’t want you to hide from my family.”

“I’ve lived with rules for—”

“There are no rules in this house. Everything *they* said to you, everything *they* made you do, none of it lives in this house. This house...is *yours*.”

Her hand moves to mine where it’s resting on her leg. “I’m trying. I am...but then I remember something and the rules come back to haunt me.”

“Hope, do you trust me?” Until she trusts me, no matter what I say to her, she’s not going to believe me, and there’s nothing I can do to make her feel safe.

“I want to. I want to believe that you won’t hurt me once you get my trust, but they did it. Someone always got me to trust them then they broke it.” Pulling the sleeve of her sweater, she uses it to wipe the tears and her nose. “Someone always broke me,” she whispers the last part, as she drops her head.

“I won’t break you. I’m going to make you whole again.” Placing my finger under her chin, I slowly lift her face to look at me again. “Now, if it’s okay with you before I go to work I was hoping that I could give you another kiss.” My gaze moves to her lips then back to her eyes. “I might have enjoyed you kissing me last night.” I give her a wink.

Her eyes search mine and her fingers move to the scar just above my right eye. “You can kiss me,” she whispers, and I can’t help but smile. Her cheeks flush with pink, but I’m not going to say anything about that to her.

Leaning in closer, I move my hand to her cheek and then slowly to the back of her neck. I move my lips against hers. I just want so much more from her. I’ve become lost in her kiss; all our defenses are being pushed to the side. I know that there’s so much hunger inside me for her. Just the feel of her soft lips touching mine is all I want every day. She pulls away from me, but I don’t want her to. My hand is still on the back of her neck and my forehead leaning on hers.

Then I hear it, my phone’s ringing. She pulled away from me not because she didn’t want it but because someone is calling me.

“Hello?” I answer the phone.

“Mr. Masters, you haven’t come into work, and you have a meeting this morning. Would you like me to cancel it?” my assistant asks, and I look at my watch. I’m so late.

“No, I’ll be there.” I end the call and put the phone in my pocket. Hope is watching me.

“Have a nice day at work.” She goes to stand up, but I pull her back down.

“And what do you have planned while I go out?” I ask her. She doesn’t do anything fun, but I don’t think she knows what fun is, I don’t either. My life is work and home, and I like it like that.

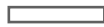
“I was going to wash the bedsheets and clean the bathrooms and then make some dinner.” She starts gathering the plates together that are on the table.

“How about pizza tonight?” Her hands freeze as she grabs a plate. “Or you could make the pizza?” I need her to step away from her routine. I can’t push her out of it. I’m starting to learn that I need *her* to break the chains that are pulling her back; I can only help her find the strength to break them.

“For two or three?” she asks, and I start laughing out loud. She knows Jackson so well.

“What do you think?” I ask her as I stand up. I walk over to the door and glance over at Hope cleaning the table. “Hey,” I call her, and she turns to face me, “Tonight, you can look up, he won’t bite.” I give her a wink, and I leave.

I don’t want her to keep hiding from Jackson. He’s over all the time and I want Hope to feel comfortable here, but I can’t make my best friend stop coming over.



This man in front of me has been talking about some hot dog van he wants to open. Yes, that’s what New York needs, another hot dog van. “Stop talking, were you born in New York?”

“No, no sir.” He looks at his presentation then back at me.

“I wasn’t born here either, but as a businessman, I know that New York already has hundreds of hot dog stands, so how about you leave and think of something that no one else has done.” This is the fifth person to walk into here that I’ve kicked out before they have had the chance to finish their presentation.

“If I—”

“Not interested, you can leave now,” I tell him, turning away from him to look out the window. There are over eight million people in New York. You’d think one of them would have something that I would be a little interested in.

“Mr. Masters, your next applicant is here,” I hear Katie say behind me.

Giving her a nod, I look at the rest of the board staff that is here. Most of the time, I have no idea why they come. They never talk or ask questions. I know why that is; they piss me off, they might lose their job. The business lawyer is always here, just in case I overstep and say something that I shouldn’t, but that still doesn’t stop me.

Turning around, I look at the group of four setting up. They look at each other and whisper something then turn to face me.

“You four, family, friends?” I ask them. There seems to be a vibe that’s off about them. It’s like they work well together, but there’s also something wrong between them at the same time.

“Friends, since high school.” They shift from foot to foot.

“And?”

“We’ve just broken our engagement.” One of the men points between him and one of the girls. “Two weeks ago.” Great that’s all I need, to hand my money over to someone that has just broken up with their partners.

My eyes move to the board behind them to see what their idea is. *You Are Loved*.

“Mr. Masters, if I may talk.” The girl steps forward, my attention moves over to her, then back to the board. I give her a nod, and she continues, “Yes, we broke up, but I promise that it won’t get in the way of what we have in front of you. Joe and I came up with this idea when we were in high school, then my best friend Beth and her boyfriend joined us when we knew that we could make this work. We’ve spent almost five years coming up with this. Our break up won’t get in the way of it. I can promise you that.”

“Joe, Beth, you two are?”

“I’m Chloe, and this is Adam.”

Leaning forward, I look at them. I can feel that they have worked together and known each other for a while, but relationships in business can mess things up. “I should tell you to leave because business and pleasure should never be mixed, but something’s telling me to at least hear what you have to say. So, you have one minute to hook me,” I tell them, and they look at each other, working on something. “Your time starts now.”

The guy, now known to be Joe, steps forward, “Rape is one of the number one crimes in this country and women are

not the only victims. Men are scared to speak up about it so we want to open up a center where they can come talk to us. Three of us are training to be lawyers who will fight their cases pro bono. They don't have to worry about anything and Chloe is training to be a psychologist to help them talk about and deal emotionally with what happened. Yes, we are doing this without financial gain, so we aren't asking you for money. What we want is your name to be behind the charity." Joe stops talking, and I lean back in my chair as they watch me.

We've had a few charities come in here and ask us to join them, but my answer has always been no; not because I don't believe in what they do, I think they're amazing in what they do. I've just never found one that fits well with us.

"Clear the room," I tell everyone. "You four stay." I wait until everyone has left. "Has one of you been assaulted?" I know it's none of my business, but someone who knows how to help people through such a situation must have been through it.

The group exchange concerned glances as if none of them wants to speak. "Prom in high school," the girl known to be Chloe answers.

I don't need to ask anything else. I know how hard it is to talk about it, so I'm not going to push the subject. I know respect, and I'm giving it to her.

"Do you have a booklet ready with your presentation?"

"Yes." Adam grabs one from the table behind him and brings it over to me.

"I'm going to read this, and I'll get back to you," I say as I take the document.

"Would you like us to talk through—"

"No. Three questions. One, when do you all finish your degrees? Two, do you have a lawyer that has some experience to help you? Three, are you planning on getting other jobs, to help pay for your living expenses?"

"We finish in a year. And no, we don't have an experienced lawyer, but if you help us then we will be looking

for a lawyer and no, all of our time will be spent on the You Are Loved project.

So, what are they doing for money?

I nod. I'm impressed but won't admit it. Not yet. "Again, I'll read over this. Give me some time, and I'll get back to you with any further questions." I stand up, and the four of them look at each other with those rabbit-in-headlights expressions again. "Don't look so worried, I'm leaving with your presentation, that's the most anyone has got from me this month. You might not think it, but it's a win for you."

They each breathe what I guess is a sigh of relief, thank me and leave. Once they're gone, I walk out of the conference room and head to my office. "Do I have any more meetings today, Katie?" This has been a long day of presentations –all but one of them useless. I look at my watch. Three in the afternoon and I want my time clear so that I can read through this proposal for You Are Loved.

"No, Mr. Masters," she tells me as I walk into my office. I'm relieved that I can have time to look through it.

After putting my coat on the back of the seat, I send Jackson a quick message to see what time he'll be finished for the day. If he finishes early, I'm going to get him to come over to the house so I can show him this proposal.



I walk through the door glad to be home. Jackson said he would be here in about twenty minutes. I could spend that time with Hope but at the moment my feelings for her are changing and I don't know how to control them.

Throwing the folders on the table in the sitting room, I collapse on the couch and close my eyes for a moment. I spent the whole evening reading through the You Are Loved proposal, and I've highlighted a lot of it and put notes for everything I want to talk to them about.

“How was your day?” I ask Hope as I feel her in the room. She’s still very good at staying quiet before she enters.

“Good, how was yours?” she asks.

The fact that she’s talking to me without me pushing her is a good start for me. Opening my eyes, I smile as she sits on the table in front of me.

“It’s nice to finally see your face first and not your head.” I smile. Her eyes aren’t looking at me, but I get to see her face. I’m happy with that. “My day was busy, so I’m going to enjoy my evening at home.”

“Would you like a beer?” Hope leans down and starts untying my shoelaces. “What time would you like dinner? The pizza is made, just needs to go in the oven.”

“Jackson will be here soon, so I’ll ask him.” She lowers her head as she takes my shoes off and I lean forward and take her hand in mine. “You don’t have to do this,” I tell her, bring her hand up and place it on my leg for a moment.

She keeps her head down. “I want to,” she says.

I have to start getting it in my head that some things will take longer for her to break free from. I mean she still hasn’t really broken free from the rules she had to live by. I just have to give her time.

“You going to keep your head high, show Jackson how beautiful you are?” I ask her.

“I will try, promise.” She takes my shoes and puts them by the stairs and walks over to the kitchen.

Leaning back again, I listen to the music coming from the kitchen—Avril Lavigne – Head under Water—she walks back over with a beer for me, and I take it. “Sit with me. Do you drink?”

“No, I don’t plan on it either.” Her gaze darts around the sitting room and mine rests on her. “They would drink and then do things to me,” she says, and there she is with them. Who are they? I always thought it was one person, never thought about there being more.

Pushing myself off the sofa to sit up straight I say, “When my mom was over, and I said she was going to look at your hands, you panicked and said you followed the rules...was it a man *and* woman that hurt you?” I ask her. I never clicked on it at the time, but she is saying *they* a lot more.

“Yes.” Her voice cracks a little as she answers me.

Bringing her hand closer to me I tell her, “You’ve peeled a lot of skin on your hands.” I hold her hand in mine for a little longer. “Are you taking warmer showers?” The lotion should be working by now; I might ask my mom about it.

“I should get some salad prepared.” Hope goes to walk away from me without giving me my answer, so I pull her down to sit again.

“Hope, please have a warm shower, it *will* help your skin. Why did they stop you having a warm shower?” Her eyes move to look at me; I wish I could see her smile just once. I bet her eyes would shine brightly.

“I wasn’t worth the heat.” She walks away the moment she finishes her sentence.

I hear footsteps. Jackson’s here, maybe he’s the reason she walked away. “Where’s Hope?” he asks, sitting on the couch next to me, putting the TV on to some NFL game.

“Where do you think?” I ask him. The place she spends the most time in.

“Kitchen?” He looks over as she walks toward him with a beer. “Thanks, Hope.” He takes the bottle from her and tilts his head to look at her face, but she turns around before he gets the chance. “I was close that time.” He starts laughing.

“Give her time. Did you get my message about You Are Loved?” I ask him. I want his input on this. I have a good feeling about it but there are a lot of obstacles to get it up and running, and I want him to be the head lawyer on this.

“Yeah, did you bring it with you?” Jackson looks over at Hope setting the table up.

“Hope, just bring the pizza in here, watch the game,” I shout out over to her. Returning my attention to Jackson I reply, “Yeah, but let’s have food first. It’s been one of those days where I just want to sit and do nothing.” I had meetings all morning, but my mind was on Hope the whole time. The website she mentioned, the price, the people. Who are they and where do I find them?

“After food.” Jackson leans forward to grab a handful of chips. “Got a new client today, the bastard’s on his fourth divorce.” I start laughing, and he goes on, “Maybe this one charity might get me away from the rich idiots.” He stops as his phone rings. “I have to take this,” I give him a nod, and he leaves the room. Hope walks in with two plates, and she looks over to where Jackson is talking.

“The pizza smells amazing.” One thing is for sure, Hope knows how to cook. Everything she has made has been delicious and the fact that she got Jackson’s stomach to fall in love with her cooking says a lot.

She stands up straight. “Can I ask you something, Leo?” She plays with her hands.

“Sure.”

“Can... I... watch the TV with you?” Her voice comes out quiet and scared all at the same time. Her question takes me back a little, and I just stare at her for a moment. No one should be asking that question.

I open my mouth to answer her, but Jackson walks back into the room, meaning Hope leaves. “You will never—”

“One second,” I tell him, following Hope into the kitchen to see if she’s okay. I lean on the counter as she gets the salad ready and grabs some dressing from the fridge. She goes to walk past me, and I grab her arm. I take everything from her and place it on the counter. Then I turn her to face me with my hands on her hips so that she can’t move. “Can you look at me, please?”

Her head moves up slowly until her face is turned toward me, but her eyes look behind me. I’m searching her expression

for an answer to a question I haven't even figured out just yet.

"I'm going to give you a little kiss now. Can I?"

Her eyes move to mine, and there's something different; hiding, questioning. "Why?" she whispers.

Leaning closer to her I say, "Because I like the feeling of your lips touching mine," I whisper against her mouth as I give her a kiss. I feel her body shiver under my hands.

She pulls away and leans her head on my chest, and we stand for a moment in silence. My hands run softly up her back. "Shall we go watch some TV?" I ask her.



Jackson puts the proposal on the table. "So, you really want to do this with them?" He's been reading it for a while, and I've not been able to stop watching Hope watching the TV.

"What do you think?" I ask him. If I was a hundred percent sure about it, I wouldn't need to ask him.

"I can see that they've put a lot of thought into it, but it needs a lot of work. When do they want to open?"

"I don't know, it doesn't say anything in there about it. I think they're waiting to see what I say about it first," I tell him grabbing another pizza slice off the table. "I think with both of us helping with this it might just be a good thing for everyone." There are times I have no idea what he's thinking and others I can read him like a book.

"When are you meeting with them again?"

"I'm waiting for you to say if you'll join me on this first. Plus, I need to make sure that this is the charity that I want not just *my* name on, but my father's name on. We have so many that come through our doors. I have to make sure this is the right one.

"If you're in, I'm in. You've never taken me in the wrong direction before." Jackson stands up. "You want another beer?"

“Sure and—”

Hope stands up quickly. “I can...get them!” She starts to walk out of the room, but Jackson stands in front of her, so her head turns down to the floor.

“Beautiful, I know that you like to do things around here, but I think I can get my beer. Would you like anything?” Jackson takes two steps back from her and bends down a little, to see if she will look at him.

“Jackson—” I go to tell him to move out of her way, but he flips me off. He wants Hope to trust him a little, but we both know that it will happen slowly.

“Just let me look at your face once. I just want to see if you’re as pretty as Leo is telling me.” He leans close to her ear. I can’t hear what he says to her.

Hope walks around Jackson and into the kitchen.

“Leave her alone,” I tell him.

“I won’t touch her, you know that.”

I do, and I know that he wouldn’t do anything to hurt her either, so I never thought he would, but at the moment she’s still taken aback by him.

Hope walks back into the lounge and hands me a beer, then turns to face Jackson and puts out her arm with his beer. I watch her closely to see what she’s about to do. I can’t help but smile as I tap Jackson’s leg, he looks at me, and I nod towards Hope.

“Leo might just be one lucky bastard,” he says to her, but she lowers her head again and walks to the kitchen. “Hope, you’re beautiful, don’t hide it,” he shouts at her towards the kitchen.

“She might finally be ready to open up,” I say as I watch her, hoping this is a good start.

“Those eyes, fuck. You could lose yourself into a different world looking at them.” Jackson shakes his head and takes a sip of his beer.

He's right though. Those blue eyes, they make you feel like you're sitting on the beach and looking out at the sea. "Every second she lets me look at them, I forget all the crap that's happened to me." I turn to the TV again before I start telling him all about my feelings for her.

It's another win with Hope today, and I hope that every day from here is a win too.

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CHAPTER 17

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HOPE

THE DARKNESS IS TAKING AWAY ALL *my light, the light is shrinking.*

“Hello princess, tonight you’re all mine.” I can’t see her, but I can feel her breath on me. People don’t believe that women can be this cruel too, but I know from my own experiences that they can. My eyes are clenched tight, and I’m trying to think of being somewhere else; somewhere bright and happy, but the darkness is too strong to let in any light.

I open my eyes. I don’t want to relive that, I don’t want to go back there. I wipe the tears away from my cheeks. “I know you’re here,” I say quietly, I can feel him in the room. I can always feel him around me.

“How about you come over here and sit on the bed with me?” Leo moves from the chair to the bed. The bed isn’t a good or nice place for me; a bed only brings bad memories and the demons around me.

“Do I have to?” I ask him, one thing I know about Leo is, he will always ask before he touches me.

“No, can we talk?”

I move over to the window and look out at the night lights. “What would you like to talk about?” I ask him as I turn to watch him. He walks over to me and sits on the chair by the window.

“About you, about the bed, about how I can make you smile.” He pulls me closer to him. “But first I want to ask about the TV.”

“I got to watch the TV for ten minutes every day and only if I was good the night before. They gave me a little radio so I could listen to music, but I was never allowed to let the volume get too loud.” I remember the punishments I got when I broke that rule; I still have the mark on my shoulder.

“The bed?” My body tenses up, I don’t want to share those things with him, but I also know that he needs to hear them. “Hope, do you trust me?”

“Yes.” I do trust him, I do believe he wants to help me, and I know he wants to have some kind of relationship with me, but that’s the part I’m scared of.

“Can you at least look at me?” I lift my head, my gaze settles on his face as he gets off the chair and makes his way to me. “Does your neck not hurt looking down all the time?” His hand moves to my neck, and he starts putting pressure on it, massaging the tense muscles for me. I close my eyes as it feels so nice. I’ve never been touched in a way that makes my body relax, and I don’t want him to stop. I open my eyes when I hear Leo make a small sound, it’s like he wants to laugh.

“Turn around.” He spins me on the floor so that I’m facing the window looking out of it as he continues massaging my neck and shoulders. “Talk to me.” Bringing all my hair together he puts it over my left shoulder, his legs move one on either side of me.

I stay quiet looking outside, wondering what knowing the awful details would do for him.

I bring my legs in and sit cross-legged. “I was never allowed to sleep on the bed. At first, I cried sleeping on the floor, but after a while, the floor was the safest place for me.” I stop as I feel Leo’s hands move to my shoulders. “I was only ever allowed on the bed when they—”

“You don’t have to tell me, I know where this is going.” Leo stops me, his hands also stop. He rests them softly on my

shoulders.

“The floor is just...safe.”

Leo pulls me into his chest, and I can feel his heart beating against my back. He places a kiss on the top of my head, and he wraps his arms around me.

I feel safe in his arms, even though I can still feel the darkness around him, I still feel safe with him too.

Leo unwraps his arms from me. “Come on.” I turn around to see what he’s doing, and he throws two pillows on the floor. “We can start small.” He puts his hand out for me, my eyes move between his hand and the makeshift bed.

“There are two pillows.”

“I thought I could lay with you for a while.” I stand up, moving closer to him. “Only if you say yes.” He moves some of my hair out of my face. “I’m hoping you say yes.”

I turn and walk over to the drawers to put some of my lotion on. It’s getting colder, and my skin is getting harder, but I miss my walks to and from work. I miss being able to just go out and walk. Leo isn’t holding me here so why don’t I just go?

“Would you like to go for a walk?” I ask, walking over to the chair to grab my jacket. As I turn around, Leo is standing there watching me.

“It’s one in the morning,” Leo starts.

“I know.”

“If you’re running because of the two pillows, I can—”

“No, just ten minutes, just ten. Then yes you... can—”

“I’ll go change out of my PJs and get my clothes on.” He walks over to me and smiles. “Please dress warmer, it’s freezing outside.”

I nod, and he leaves the room. I change into warmer pants.

A few minutes later, I meet Leo downstairs. “So, where we going?” he asks me, and I don’t even know myself.

“No one around,” I tell him. Somewhere I can walk around without having to worry about anyone being there.

“Well, it’s past one in the morning so everyone will be home sleeping, so how about the street?”

Leo opens the door, and I put my head down, as I go to take a step forward Leo stops me. “Head held high.” I lift my chin and he gives me a wink.

The cold breeze hits my skin. I’ve missed that feeling, missed the smell of winter. I stop by a huge tree and stare at the few leaves left. I kneel and take a leaf off the ground, twirling it around in between my fingers, feeling the dryness of it.

Walking along the road again, I look at all the fancy houses. This is a very posh neighborhood. Then again, I’ve not really seen that many to compare it to.

Leo points to one with a white door. “That’s Jackson’s house.” Looking back at Leo’s house, I count that they live four doors away from each other. “Now you know why he’s over so early and leaves so late.” He laughs. It all makes sense now. I always wondered how he got home after staying there until midnight sometimes.

We continue to walk along the road when a rush of cold wind hits us, and I smile. I know that the cold isn’t good for me, but I do love the feeling of it.

Leo stops and stands in front to me with a smile. “You really are beautiful and if a one a.m. stroll is what I need to do to see you smile again, I’ll do it every day.”

I forgot for a moment he was here with me. I felt safe enough to let my guard down. “Shall we go back?” I ask.

“You getting cold?”

“Just a little.” We turn around to walk back up the road.

“Let’s go, there’s a floor waiting for me.” Leo starts laughing, and I stop just to look at him for a moment.

Back at his house, we walk up the stairs, and Leo disappears to his room to get changed. He'll be back in a second. Standing in front of the two pillows, I say to myself *small steps*.

Leo returns and stands behind me. "I can sleep in my room if you're more comfortable. I'm just going to lay with you for a while."

Taking a few small breaths in, I lie on the floor. It feels strange to have my head on a pillow. I stare into Leo's eyes as he lies next to me.

"Will you kiss me?" I ask in a whisper.

He leans closer. "Yes."

I close my eyes the moment I feel his lips touch mine, and I gasp as his hand touches my cheek. Opening my mouth for him, I feel his tongue sliding onto mine. I like him kissing me; I like the way he tastes.

He pulls away from me, his hand softly stroking my cheek. "Goodnight Hope."

"Goodnight Leo."



As I make breakfast for Leo and Jackson, I think about last night. Leo slept on the floor all night. I really thought he would leave the second I fell asleep, but when I opened my eyes this morning, he was still there.

Jackson appears and stands next to me. "Morning beautiful, is Leo still sleeping?" I move away from him, and he pouts. "I thought we had become friends," he says.

I'm trying very hard with Jackson; I know how his relationship is with Leo and what they've been through together.

"He's in the shower," I tell him, as I get three plates out.

“Not had French toast in forever.” He puts his finger into the syrup. “I’ve found someone, be ready for tonight,” Jackson says and I realize Leo is in the room and Jackson wasn’t talking to me.

“I’ll be free.” I hear him but feel him stand behind me. “Morning,” he whispers, and I can feel his stubble against my neck.

I step away from him. Things are changing between us. I like Leo. I just don’t know how to move on from here. What’s next?

“Morning, would you like coffee or juice?” I ask.

“Coffee,” they both say in sync.

I feel Leo’s eyes on me, but he’s staying quiet.

“So, what did you find?” I hear him asking Jackson as they both move to the bar stools.

“I found someone that uses the site, and I’ll have things ready tonight.” I pour coffee into their mugs as Jackson asks, “Beautiful, can I ask a question?”

I stop pouring the coffee, and my eyes move to Leo, who’s looking at Jackson. Clearing my throat, I reply, “Sure.”

“How do you survive on such little food?”

“Jackson.” Leo’s voice comes out harsh.

“I’m sorry, but she needs to eat more.” Jackson takes the coffee pot from me and finishes filling the mugs.

“When you were with *your* buyer, what’s the worst that happened?” The question just leaves my mouth, why have I asked this question?

Jackson lifts his head, clearly surprised by my words. “Leo protected me from all of the really fucked up stuff. I got locked in a room for three days and got beat and burned a few times,” he tells me. I know how that feels; I lived in a dark room every night.

Leo protected him, he was his savior.

Leo doesn't say anything, but he doesn't need to. I've seen the scars, he might not have told me the stories about them, but I can work it out.

I take a deep breath as I decide to share something. "I was only allowed to go to the bathroom once a day, so less food and water, the better it was." I walk away to the other counter and leave him with my confession. I remember the first few weeks were the hardest, but the beatings I got, sure made me learn faster on how to control everything.

"Hope—"

"Leo," Jackson cuts him off.

Anxiety grips me, and my hands are shaking, but I need to try and make them understand. "I'm trying, trying to eat more. Because you hate it that I'm not eating. But I've been eating like this for over ten years. My stomach—"

"I get it, take your time," Leo says. I feel him standing behind me, his hands stroking my arms softly. "I'm sorry this happened to you, and I'm sorry I can't help you forget," he whispers, and I lean back on his chest.

"You do," I whisper back to him. When he touches me, when he looks at me I don't feel like I'm breaking into more pieces, I feel like he's putting me back together.

CHAPTER 18

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JACKSON SENT me a message to let me know where to meet him. It was a longer drive than usual, but I never question where he wants to meet; he always has a plan for after it's all finished.

I spent most of my day working on You Are Loved. I got the team to look through everything we want to talk about, what we want and what needs to be changed. I spoke to my dad about this plan; he didn't say anything to me about it. He's known for a while that I wanted to start a charity like this one day, but I never really knew what kind of charity I wanted, or even how to go about starting it, so this proposal is probably the best thing for me. The group has come up with a plan, everything that I've always wanted to do, but never knew how I could go about it, and now I can be the man behind it with no questions asked.

I tried to call Hope a few times, but she never answered the phone, so today I bought her a cell phone. This way I can talk to her when I'm not with her or at least check in on how she's doing.

The more time I spend with Hope, the more it's getting complicated and not in a bad way either. All I want to do is spend more time with her. I know she doesn't really talk much yet, but just sitting next to her I feel so much peace around me. She makes me feel alive again. So here's the complicated part, how do I get her to trust me enough so I can make *her* feel alive again?

Later when I walk into the location, I hear Jackson whistling. I strut over to where he has tonight's guest. "You seem happy." I glare down at the sick fuck tied to the chair.

"I am, *you* kill to feel more relaxed. I fuck a woman to feel more relaxed." Jackson gives me a cigarette, and I look at it for a moment. Jackson laughs. "I showered before I came here, my lips are clean." Shaking my head at him, I take the cigarette from him.

I have to admit, I don't really trust where his mouth has been. Never seen any of the girls he has been with.

"Has he said anything?" I inhale the smoke and let it settle in my lungs, but it feels good.

"Yeah, he said fuck off." Jackson chuckles.

Walking over to him, I sit on the chair my partner in crime has prepared for me, and Jackson stands behind him. He's never been the one to do this part of what we do. He says his stomach can't take it, he can't kill anyone, but he can get rid of the body for me.

Me on the other hand, I enjoy it and find pleasure in it, knowing that I have got rid of yet another sick bastard.

"Do you know this man?" Jackson put the picture on the table beside our guest. I watch his eyes shift a little. "What's his name?"

"I tell you I die, I don't tell you I die, and something about you tells me both ways will be painful." He really doesn't sound like he's afraid of what's about to happen.

"No, I promise mine will be painful." I put my cigarette out on the table and pick up the pocketknife.

Leaning closer to him, I grab his hand and slit the skin just a small amount. I smile when I hear him laughing. He knows nothing about me.

"How do we find out about the owner of the site?" I slowly sit back down and look over at the table and the bottle which I plan on using next.

He looks at the picture, then back at me. “That’s the easiest question to answer. The owner is the man you can’t find.” None of this is making any sense; I look at Jackson pacing behind him. The man I’m looking for is the man behind his whole site.

“How do I find him?”

“You might as well kill me, I’m dead either way.”

I look up at Jackson. He’s shaking his head. I nod back at him. This bastard’s not going to tell us anything.

He fears the man in question just as much as he fears me. We both hold the same amount of power and the same amount of fear towards others.

I wanted to enjoy tonight, wanted it to go slow, I wanted it to last.

He’s not going to talk to me, no matter what I say, so why waste my time with him when I could be home with Hope.

I lean back in the chair feeling frustrated. No matter what is happening, it just feels like I’m never going to find the bastard that ruined my life. Standing up, I button up my jacket and grabbing the gun from the table, I shoot him between the eyes.

“We’ll find him,” Jackson tells me. He can see that it’s starting to piss me off.

“Just find *someone*,” I shout at him. This isn’t his fault. He’s working hard to find him, he’s doing his part. Turning to face him I say, “Get this all together. I plan on joining our heads together to find them.” Maybe it’s time that I start helping him a lot more than I have been.

“I need to—”

“Is anyone going to know it was us?”

“No.”

“Is there anyone around here?”

“No.”

“Burn the place down,” I tell him as I leave the room.

I hear him say something behind me, but I ignore him. “Waiting for Jackson,” I tell John as he closes the door behind me. “FUCK!” I shout, letting out some pent up anger. I’ve never gotten so angry about this stuff before, but this is getting worse.

Oh, the shit I have planned for him when I do get my hands on him. I’m going to make sure it lasts for days not hours.

“Nothing should be left of that place.” Jackson shuts the door, looking at the building as it goes up in flames. “Here, you need to calm down a little before we get home.” He hands me a lit cigarette.

“I need something a lot stronger.”

“Here.” He takes a flask out of his pocket. “You don’t even need a glass, I know you don’t.” He brings the bottle to his lips and takes a good amount down. “Leo, question.”

“What?”

“You and Hope-”

“None of your fucking business,” I cut him off. I mean, I don’t know the answer to that question myself, yet what the fuck do I tell him.

“I know, but I get the feeling this attitude is half because of him and half because of Hope.”

Jackson passes the bottle over, and I keep it on my lips and drink until I need to stop for air. “Before I was getting revenge for us, but now I’m getting it for her too. That’s all,” I tell him, taking more from the bottle.

“Leo.” He knows I’m lying, he always knows, he knew that Hope was different.

“She’s opening up, but she’s hiding something, and I’m not sure if it’s her illness or her past.” I take a long drag from my cigarette, not letting the smoke escape straight away. Instead, I let the smoke move around inside my lungs for a moment.

“You have to give her time, Leo.”

“What if it’s too late?” That’s my worry. If it’s her health and I’m too late to help, then I’m not just losing this fight in finding him, I’m losing the fight to save her.

Jackson doesn’t say anything more to me; he’s started to see the change in me, even though I’m trying to hide it from everyone else. I can never hide things from him.



Jackson said he would be over after having a shower. As I step out of my shower, I grab a pair of PJ bottoms and a plain T-shirt. Hope wasn’t downstairs when I got home, and I want to find her, but I needed to shower first, wash the day away.

Leaving my room, I go to walk over to Hope’s room but stop when I smell food. It’s eleven in the evening so why is she cooking? This is New York, you can order a pizza anytime, there’s always something open.

Walking downstairs I hear Jackson talking to Hope about his day. When I join them, Jackson looks at me then over to Hope.

She has her back to me. “Smells nice,” I say grabbing a beer for both of us.

“Can’t fully see her face but she doesn’t look too good,” Jackson whispers as he pushes something over to me. “She went shopping, I haven’t opened it,” he tells me.

I look back over to see if Hope has turned around, but no, she hasn’t.

Opening the letter, I see she has explained the reason for spending the money with the receipts. One item, pads. It takes me a moment before it clicks in my head what they are.

“Jackson, give me a minute, please,” I say as I throw the paper on the counter. Once I know that Jackson has left, I begin to shake my head. What the hell do I need to do for her to realize I don’t care what she spends the money on? “Hope

can you come here please?” It takes a few moments before Hope finally looks over at me, my eyes break away from her for a split second. She looks weak, pale. I’m not going to ask the question I was going to. I’ll search the internet or ask my mom. I never thought that blood could affect her because of her Lupus, and I never thought about her period.

She stands in front of me, and I tell her, “Next time I leave money, you don’t need to tell me where you spent it *or* give me the receipts. Next time you do, it’ll really upset me.” I’m never going to question where she spends her money, I’m just happy that she leaves the fucking house. “I’m not hearing anything, Hope.”

“I’m sorry, won’t happen again.” Her voice is weak. *Very* weak.

“What’s wrong? You’re scaring me, Hope. You’re bleeding.” I grab a towel from the countertop and put it against her nose. “Jackson, call Mom!” I shout, and I hear him running into the kitchen.

“Shit, take her over to the sink,” he says getting his phone out.

Hope tries to push me away from holding her. “It’s fine. Please loosen your grip. I know what I’m doing.” I loosen just a little as I walk with her. How have I not noticed this before?

“You want help?” I ask hearing Jackson on the phone to Mom. “Hope?”

She stops walking and looks at me. “I’m used to nosebleeds, just not had one in a long time,” she tells me and walks into the laundry room. I leave her for a moment to give her some space. I don’t want to piss her off anymore.

Too worried to stay away, I make my way back to the laundry room and stand behind her. She seems to be getting annoyed, and I don’t want that. I just want to help her, but I don’t know how. She just looks in pain but isn’t saying anything to me about it.

“Mom’s on her way,” Jackson says from behind me.

Hope lowers herself to the floor, and without taking my eyes off her, I do the same and kneel in front of her. “Hope?”

“Can you get the food out of the oven?” she says through the pain, and I shake my head with a smile. She’s sitting here in pain, and she’s worried about the food. Like, I give a shit about the food.

“Jackson’s getting it out. Something hurting?”

“Can you please just leave me alone?” She looks at the floor, and I don’t move. I just look at her. “Please?”

That one word has so much pleading, so much pain that I do the one thing I know will make her feel comfortable. I leave.

I lean on the counter closest to the laundry room but don’t take my eyes off the door.

“I should’ve listened to you and just let her be,” I tell Jackson as he walks around the kitchen behind me.

The last ten minutes I’ve been looking at the door thinking I should have let her carry on with the life she had. Maybe it would have been better for her. She was a ghost in her own life, and I knew she needed help, but at this very second, I feel like I’m hurting her more.

“Even *you* don’t believe the crap you’re saying. She was living in hell; you took her away from that.” Jackson hands me a beer. “Leo, I’m the way I am because *you* protected me, looked after me. You’re like this because of our parents. You were taken for *six years*.” He stops and glances at the door. “Hope was taken when she was, what, eight? She’s what, twenty-two now? She’s been alone for *one year*. So for thirteen years, you think about how they broke her, abused her, treated her. You’ve *got* to be patient. The way I see it, she’s a lot fucking braver than me.” He walks away as I hear the front door.

He’s right, she’s lived in the darkness alone; she’s lived with the devil alone. Not anymore, I’m going to live with her. I’m still going to fight through the darkness to show her the light.



My mom spoke to Hope about everything; she said that I need to take her to see the doctor and that her joints are hurting more due to the time of year. She said that a bleeding nose might sometimes happen too with her condition.

“She just about let *you* touch her, how am I supposed to get her to see a doctor?” I bite back at my mom.

My mom rubbed my arm reassuringly. “I know honey, but I really do think the weather change is affecting her and she might need stronger medication.” Mom looks over at Hope cleaning the kitchen. That was a fight that my dad had to pull me away from.

I told Hope that she needed to go to bed, but she ignored me and started cleaning which got me angry and I was losing my temper with her. I just wanted her to rest and understand I only want to help her.

I give in. “I’ll take her to the one she went to before.” I look over at her as she walks to the doors that lead to the yard. She stops there and just peers up at the sky. I cross the room to her, and I see tears escaping her eyes. I reach up to wipe them away but stop as she opens the door and takes a step outside.

“Leo,” my dad says as he walks toward me and I turn to face him. “Son, I see the look in your eyes when you look at her; a sparkle which we thought would never appear. Never.” He pats my shoulder. “Be patient.”

“I will.” I turn my attention back to Hope as I hear my parents saying bye to Jackson.

I’ve waited this long, a little longer isn’t going to kill me.



“There has to be something that we’re missing, I mean—” I start pacing the room.

“Maybe we need to go back to the start?” Jackson says.

He came over early this morning, we’ve both taken the day off; Dad said it was best I take the time to stay with Hope. I was happy to as the doctor is our first stop.

“How you feeling?” I ask Hope as she puts the coffee on the table. I’ve been trying to give her space and not be around her so much, which is working out to be a lot harder than I thought.

“Better,” she replies, sitting on the chair in front of me and looking at all the papers through her eyelashes.

“Beautiful, did you escape from those people in New York?”

I look over at Jackson, is he crazy asking her that?

“No, Florida.”

I turn to Hope in shock that she answered him. “Wait, how *did* you get here?” I ask her. We might be pushing it with the questions right now, but I know she didn’t fly.

“Does it matter?”

“Yes,” I answer her.

She shrugs. “Walked, hitchhiked, found a way.” She lowers her head letting me know there is a lot more to that answer, but she isn’t going to tell us.

I see Jackson taking a map from the bookshelf and looking at it with a frown.

I’m going to kill the people who had Hope, if I have to go to Florida to do it, then I will. “Hope, I’m taking you to your doctor today just before lunch.” I grab a slice of toast from the plate on the table and Jackson walks away to answer his phone.

I move around the table to sit next to her. “Hope, I miss looking at your beautiful eyes.” I lift her face to look at me, but her eyes are red from crying so much. “I’m going to kiss you now.” I lean forward and place a small kiss on her lips.

“Today is the anniversary of my family being taken from me.”

I fix my gaze on her, and I’m lost for words. I don’t know what to say to her to make her feel less pain.

“Is there something you would like to do today?” I ask. I’m not sure what I should do.

She shakes her head and her body shivers. Then it hits me, and it hits me hard. Her parents were taken, and so was Hope. She never got to visit her family’s grave; she never got to say goodbye.

“Can I go to my room?”

“You don’t have to ask,” I tell her softly. She looks at the floor as Jackson walks back over to the table.

“Please, I’ve been good.”

How did I just go back five steps with her? Leaning back in my chair, I rub my forehead. “Yes,” I answer and watch her walking away from the table.

“Did I miss something?” Jackson asks as I turn in my chair.

“The anniversary of the fire is today,” I say staring at the table, feeling like I’ve lost the battle. “It’s like she’s programmed to restart. When she remembers her family, a switch turns on, and she has to forget them again.” I light a cigarette and finally look up at Jackson.

For a moment he doesn’t say anything to me, he just looks at me.

“Thirteen, fourteen years is a long time for them to teach their ways, it’s going to take longer than two weeks to wash that shit out of her head,” Jackson tells me and gets back to his laptop.

Now I sit here wondering should I go talk to her, or leave it.

“Leave her alone for a while.” Jackson answers my silent question

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CHAPTER 19

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HOPE

SITTING by the window in my room, I look at the newspaper article about my parents. It's been so many years that I've never had the chance to sit and think about them. This was one of those dates where *they* would make sure that I was too mentally tired to think back to how my life had changed.

I hear Leo walking into the room, and I put my box to the side. Folding up the newspaper article, I place it underneath the box.

"What's on your mind?" Leo sits on the floor next to me. "We'll leave to go to see the doctor soon."

I went to the store yesterday, and I wish I never left the house. I know Leo knows that I've changed and he's wondering why. I keep thinking should I tell him?

"Hope, I only want to help you," Leo's hand reaches to mine, his touch is soft, stroking back and forth on top of my hand.

"I don't want to go to stores again," I tell him as I watch his hand moving gently over mine.

"Did something happen?"

"Just wasn't watching where I was going, bumped into someone and they just said a few words to me, which were cruel, and it scared me." It did scare me a bit and made me remember that I can't live a normal life; I can only live the life I know.

“I’m sorry that happened to you. If you want to order things online, you can. But to be honest, I want you to leave the house, and I want you to go out and walk with your head held high. I know that’s going to take time and I promise that I’m here with you.”

I turned my head to look at Leo for a moment. I’m not sure what I did for him to help me, but I’m happy he’s here.

I just wish that I could get the voices out of my head and the rules too. I try, but the memories of the nights in the dark room alone and having to take cold showers and the punishments always come rushing back.

“Jackson still here?”

“Yeah, he’s here all day. About to pop out when we do,” Leo says as his hand moves to the floor and slides the article from underneath the box. He opens it up. “Is this the only picture you have of your family?”

He’s the first man that I’ve thought about trusting enough to let into my dark life, so I grab the box, my fingers move over the old broken card, and I slide it over to him on the floor.

Leo’s fingers trace the lid, and he taps his finger. He takes the lid off and I watch him pull out the necklace. He moves closer to me, as he dangles the necklace in front of me. “Did your dad give you this?”

Stopping the necklace from dangling, I open the pendant to show the pictures of me and my parents on one side and me and my brother on the other.

Leo takes a closer look at it, then moves closer to me to put it around my neck, but I move away from him. “I’m not allowed to wear it.” *They* took the necklace the day Uncle Jack got me. He threw it to the floor and said that I was never allowed to think of them again, but when he wasn’t looking, I quickly picked it up and hid it from them. This pendant is the only thing that matters to me.

“Who said?”

Turning to face him, I don’t even have to answer that question. My eyes tell him everything he needs to know.

He moves my hair out of the way. “You wear this, and you wear it every day. And you wear it with a smile.” Leo moves closer as his arms move behind my neck as he fastens it on me. His hands move to the front and place the pendant nicely in the center. “Don’t hide; don’t hide from your family.” His forehead rests on mine.

“Thank you,” I whisper to him. He’s letting me be free. I just have to learn to be free with him now.

Leo looks at me, and he lifts my face, so our eyes connect. “Never say thank you for being here.” He stands up and puts his hand out for me. “Shall we go?”

Placing my hand in his, I stand, and we both make our way downstairs.

Jackson is shaking his head. “I’ll be back in a few hours, a client is having money problems.” He starts laughing as I walk away from them.

I hear Jackson say something about how the man is going to lose a lot of money. Filling my glass with water, I watch them both from the corner of my eye. I can feel Leo looking at me. I can always feel his eyes on me, as my body starts to heat up.

“Ready?”

Cleaning my glass quickly, I grab my jacket and make my way out with Leo.



“I’m going to give you some stronger medication which will help with the pain. You’ve explained the nose bleeds and I believe that you know how to handle them but if you have any concerns then call me.” The doctor hands Leo a piece of paper which has all my medication on it, and I don’t say anything as he is paying for the stronger medication. “Is there anything you would like to talk about?”

I turn my head a little to glance at Leo, but I quickly turn back. Taking a pen from the desk, I write *can we talk alone*

and push it to the doctor so she can tell Leo for me. I know he won't mind and will be happy that I want to talk to the doctor.

"All you had to do is ask," Leo says and I hear the humor in his tone.

"Hope, is Leo hurting you?"

I shake my head. "No." There is not one part of me that feels in danger with Leo. After so many years of feeling scared or feeling alone, I actually feel safe.

"How can I help you then?"

"In... the thing is... I'm not sure what it is. All I know is they needed to change it every three years." I point to my arm. They never told me what the implant was or why it was there, the doctor would come and change it for them.

She walks around her desk to me and asks if she can have a look at my arm. I nod, and she presses my upper left arm. She explains what it is; an implant to prevent me from getting pregnant. Suppose that makes sense seeing as they never used protection with me.

We talk for about an hour about the advantages of the implant and if I still want to keep it. I tell her that even though I'm not having sex, they might find me, so she gives me a new one. I ask her to tell Leo, as I can't hide it from him; I mean there is a huge Band-Aid on my arm. She also wanted to do some tests, as they had unprotected sex with me and she wants to make sure I'm okay.

I told the doctor it was fine for Leo to know about the tests, as he's the one paying for them.

"When do we get the results?" Leo asks.

I peel the skin from my hands as they both start talking about my medication. I know it's my own fault. I've not really been putting lotion on, and it's starting to really hurt me now.

Leo's hand moves to mine to stop me from peeling the skin. "You need to stop, or it won't heal," he tells me, and my hand stops.

“Hope, if you can just look after yourself, use the medication and the lotion for a few weeks, the skin will be a lot better, and the pain will be a lot less,” the doctor tells me. She turns to Leo for a moment then back to me, “the results will be about a week, and as soon as they come in, I will give you a call.”

I place my hands on my legs. It does sound nice not being in so much pain, seeing my hands with smooth skin.

The doctor continues, “You can put the lotion on a few times a day, so carry it with you and drink plenty of water.”

“We’ll do all that,” Leo says as he stands up. “I’ll call you tomorrow, and we’ll be back in a month.” I stand with Leo, and we leave the doctor’s office.

“John, we need a pit stop to the store,” Leo tells his driver, and I hear John tell him yes as I climb into the car and sit down.

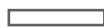
I look out of the window as we drive, leaning my head against the coldness of the glass. I feel a little under the weather and have a heavy head. I’m really tired.

Leo takes my hand in his. “Hope, are you okay?”

“Yeah, just tired.”

He pulls me closer to him. “Get some sleep.” He puts his arm around my shoulder, and I lean into him placing my head on his chest, I listen to the beat of his heart. The rhythm starts to settle, it’s not going as fast anymore. My eyes are getting heavy, his scent is settling over me, and I smile to myself.

“Hope, I’m just going to climb out, you get some sleep.” He softly places my head on the car seat and I hear the car door opening and closing.



Soft hands touch my body making me open my eyes fast.

“Hey, it’s just me,” Leo tries to calm me as I start panicking.

I quickly get off the bed, and my back hits the wall.

“You were sleeping and—”

“I’m sorry,” I interrupt him. “I shouldn’t have done that.” The memory of a mattress underneath my body comes rushing back to me, and I panicked. I know I should have stayed still. Even with the time that I’ve had away from *them*, I’m still used to not being placed on a bed and touched in that way. At the moment my head is fighting with me. Fighting with the memories of the rules and fighting with leaving the rules behind me so I can live a life with Leo.

He steps away leaving a small space between us. Even though there is so much darkness surrounding him, a black cloud around him, his face is the only peaceful thing I know.

Leo wipes off the tears from my cheek. “Don’t be scared of me.”

“I’m not; you’re the only one I don’t feel scared around.” I place my hand on his chest just to feel his heartbeat on my palm. “You make me feel safe.”

“You will live again.”

I take a step closer to Leo. How is it that one man can make me forget so much darkness that’s happened to me? How is it that I can just be so much more free with him now? I’ve known him for two weeks, and in two weeks he’s made me feel safe.

“Will you hold me?”

Leo wraps his arms around me, and it feels like a weight is being lifted from me. He holds me there for a moment and as I close my eyes, I picture my parents watching me. I always imagined they would be up there looking out for me and maybe Leo is the person they have sent.

Taking a step back I say, “I’m going to have a shower.”

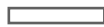
Leo smiles. “I hope it’s with warm water.” I smile back and roll my eyes.

“Yes.” I turn to walk towards the bathroom, as I get to the door I turn to face Leo.

“Hope, when you come downstairs don’t hide.”

I continued to walk into the bathroom closing the door behind me. Standing in front of the mirror, I look at myself for the first time in a very long time.

I think about Leo’s words about not hiding, but I know Jackson’s downstairs. Leo is trying to help me, and I *will* try. I’ll push every negative thought away and really try to push *their* voices away too, and I’ll let Leo help me.



Walking downstairs, I hear Leo and Jackson talking about Florida. I knew I had to tell them one day where I came from. I wasn’t going to tell them how I got here. That is a time that I really don’t want to replay.

Standing by the table next to Leo I ask, “Would you guys like some lunch?” It might not be very loud, but it’s louder than how I normally ask. I’m trying, and I realize that Jackson’s here all the time.

Jackson looks at me and I see him smile. My head isn’t held high, but it’s not low either. “Sandwich please.”

Walking into the kitchen, I turn back to see Leo following me and I’m not sure what it is about him, but I smile; something I haven’t done in a very long time.

“So, I thought you were beautiful before, but when you smile,” Leo stops and moves my hair behind my ear, “you take my breath away.” His thumb gently strokes my bottom lip before leaning in to kiss me. “I hope you smile more every day,” he whispers against my lips.

“One day at a time.” That’s what it’s going to be for me. Every day is going to be hard, but with Leo, I think, no I *know*, I’ll smile once again.

“And I’m here with you. Every day until you feel safe again and can make it on your own,” Leo tells me, and I’m taken by surprise with his words.

I look into his eyes. I thought I would stay with him, but it looks like he has other plans.

“I thought I would stay here,” I tell him. I don’t want to be alone again. I don’t want to be scared again.

“I’m happy you want to stay here but remember one thing; I’m not holding you here. There is the door. You can leave when you want to leave. I just have one rule. Just tell me you’re leaving.”

“I’m not leaving,” I answer.

“Good.” His lips touch mine again and I can’t help but smile again. “I got you something.”

I watch him walk away, and I start getting everything ready to make lunch.

He returns quickly. “I got you a phone so that I can call you when I’m at work and a backpack so you can keep your lotion in there.” Leo puts the backpack on the counter, and I just stare at the two things.

“I... Thank you,” pulling the bag closer to me. I can see that he’s already put my lotion in there.

“I’ve put mine and Jackson’s numbers in the phone.” He starts to show me how to use it, but I can’t keep up.

“Can you slow down, please?”

He’s going too fast for me, and I don’t know what he’s doing. I can feel him staring at me. “Is this your first phone?”

“Yes,” I reply. I can feel my cheeks getting warm, and I look at the floor as I tuck my hair behind my ears.

“Once we have eaten, I’ll show you how it works.” Placing the phone on the counter, he takes my hand in his. “I was thinking of an early afternoon walk, what do you think?”

“If I’m not feeling too tired.”

Leo walks over to Jackson as I get lunch ready for us. I keep glancing over at the backpack. I’ve never been given a gift before so it will be something to treasure forever.



I listen to them both talking about finding people that use the horrible website so they can find the man they both want.

Jackson sits on the seat next to me. “So beautiful, let’s get you and this phone connected.” I move a little so that there’s a gap between us. Jackson doesn’t say anything and instead starts talking about the features on the phone, placing it in front of me as he tells me about how it works.

“So I just sent you a message, what do you do?” Jackson says as my phone beeps. I turn my head a little to look at him, then back to the phone.

“Open the message?” I reply. I can feel Leo watching us. I know that Leo wants me and Jackson to get on well and I’m trying.

We spend another hour going through the phone even though we both know that I had got it all about twenty minutes into this, but I think Jackson just wanted to continue talking to me.

“Thank you for helping me,” I say bringing all the dishes together to clean up. As I place everything into the sink, I see a drop of blood. *Not again.*

I still remember the first time this happened to me, I was so scared. It was that first time I went to the doctors and found out that I have Lupus.

That was a lot of information to have all in one day; to find I have an illness which was going to be a long and painful one and to go through it alone. Then the nosebleeds started. Now that was a whole new story. I was told that because of the fewer red cells I have it’s easier for me to bruise and bleed. I always find that when I start my period the first two days are the worst for me. I’ve not had a nosebleed in a very long time, so I was scared the other day when it started.

Grabbing the towel I put it under some water and place it to my nose.

“Let me.” I jump feeling Leo’s hand on my lower back, it’s the first time I didn’t hear him walking close to me. Leo starts cleaning my nose. “Jackson’s happy you spoke to him.”

“If he’s here all the time, I have to start, right?” I say looking behind Leo at Jackson sitting at the table.

“I’m happy you did.” Leo takes a step back when Jackson starts shouting at him.

“Leo, found something, will tell you in the car,” Jackson says leaving the house quickly.

“I won’t be long.”

“Try not to get too bloody,” I say making Leo laugh.

I’m never going to ask where he goes or what he does; I have a feeling all this has to do with the man that took him.



I hear the front door closing, and I wait a moment to see if Leo comes upstairs. Nothing. Standing up, I head downstairs to see if I can see him. Walking past the sitting room, he’s not there, nor in the dining room.

Feeling a cold breeze, I turn to look at the yard, and I see Leo sitting on a deck chair. I can’t really see his face, but I take some water and a towel with me in case he needs to be cleaned up.

As I make my way toward him, the outside light comes on. I sit on the chair beside him.

No blood. That’s good.

“Are you crazy? It’s cold outside,” Leo says starting to stand up, but I stop him.

“I was hot,” I say getting him to sit back down. The breeze feels nice.

“You have two minutes out here in the cold.” He leans forward as the cigarette hangs from his mouth. His hands rest

on my legs, and his eyes move to the bowl of water to my left. "I stayed clean."

I smile at his words and run my fingers through his hair before moving my hand down to his cheek. Taking the cigarette out of his mouth and before he can let the smoke escape, I kiss him. I have no idea where the courage came from. All I know is that I wanted to kiss him, so I did.

His hand moves to the back of my neck, and he pulls me in closer. I enjoy the taste of him as his tongue dances with mine.

When I pull away from him he says, "Nice to know you want to kiss me too." He smiles and leans back a little to inhale from his cigarette.

"Jackson coming over for dinner?" I ask before I say something I shouldn't about kissing him.

"No, he'll be over in the morning." I feel his eyes move over me. "Your two minutes outside are up." Leo pulls me up to stand up with him. I bump into his body as I stand and his hand wraps around my back to steady me. As he looks down at me, I just gaze into his eyes.

Suddenly I take a step back from him; the air around us has changed, and I don't know what it is.

He frowns and rubs the back of his neck. "I'm going to get in the shower. I'm not hungry so don't worry about food," Leo tells me and walks into the house. After a few seconds, I follow him in.

It seems like Leo felt the electricity too, as his attitude has changed a little.

What's happening? I've never had that strange air around me before.

CHAPTER 20

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LEO

I LET the warm water run over my body. Hope is starting to make me feel things that I haven't felt for a woman before, and I know she isn't ready to even think about something like this. But I don't think I can stay away from her, the second her body touched mine outside, I wanted to kiss her again, touch her skin.

I close my eyes as the water runs down my face. I should stay away from her. I shouldn't let my darkness mix with hers when she has so much of it already.

Turning the shower off, I grab a towel and wrap it around my waist. Then I walk into my bedroom to grab a pair of sweatpants. Standing outside of Hope's room, I watch her lying on the floor looking up at the sky out the window. I keep thinking of what I can do for her to sleep more comfortably on the floor. I thought about putting the mattress down there, but I didn't think that would work for her. Her and that bed is a fucked up situation, and I can understand where she's coming from with it.

Walking into the room, I grab the two pillows off the bed and walk around her. "I thought we were going to sleep with pillows now?" I say placing mine on the floor and wait for her to lift her head.

"I forgot." She lifts her head a little, and when I've placed her pillow, she puts her head down.

I lay beside her. "Am I ruining your view?" I turn onto my back and stare up at the ceiling.

“No.” I turn my head to face her, and she asks, “Did you get any answers to finding him?”

Even though I don’t want her to know all the details about what I’m doing, I can’t hide who we’re looking for either. “A few,” I tell her.

Jackson and I talked tonight, and we both agreed that the closest lead we’ll get is from the people that took Hope. They had her for a long time, which means the owner of the site came to check on her a few times or at least stayed in touch. But that is a conversation for tomorrow, as I don’t want her to think about *them* just before she goes to sleep.

“Do you do anything for Thanksgiving?”

Her question surprises me. “Go to my parents for dinner.” This is normally the part where I ask what she does, but I don’t think *they* let her have a dinner. “I hope you’ll join us this year,” I tell her.

“When is that?”

“November, so we still have a while yet.” I turn to lay on my side. “Do you think we can get something more comfortable for you on the floor? This must hurt sleeping like this all the time.”

I mean her bones already hurt her; the hard floor can’t be helping. Standing up, I grab the throw off the end of the bed.

“Do you want to sleep by the window, or over here?”

Hope stands up. “By the window, please.” She picks up both of the pillows, as I put out the blanket. Throwing the pillows on the bedroom floor, I lie down and watch Hope as she slowly lowers herself and sits down next to me.

Hope’s fingers trace my stomach where the scars are. “Do you ever wonder where your mom is now?”

I never feel any pain when she touches me. I don’t care that she touches them. Others, I wouldn’t even show them; the lights would be off, and if they did see them, I’d stop the conversation then and tell them to never ask questions again.

But Hope, I want her to touch every single scar; I want her touch to heal every single one of them.

“I did a long time ago, but now I don’t care. Some of these scars are from her.” Taking her hand, I move it up slowly to the one scar on my collar bone and get her finger to trace the silvery line. “She cut me here when I was very little. She had a guy over and she cut me because I wouldn’t stay quiet. She was so high. I don’t even know how she was standing.” This scar still hurts when I think about that day.

I close my eyes as her fingers move to the small scar on my neck, there’s no way I could tell her all the stories, we would be here for weeks; it’s only the same as her not wanting to tell me everything about her past. The memories are too hard to relive.

I feel her finger move up more until it moves over my lips. Her hand stops and I open my eyes to see her looking at me. We stare at each other for a moment. I want to kiss her, I want to touch her, and I don’t know if I should.

“Are you not going to kiss me?” Hope asks, my grip on her hand loosens and her fingers trace my lips again. I shouldn’t, she isn’t ready for this, but fuck do I want her to touch me.

I lick my lips, as her fingers move away. Our eyes are still locked with each other. I sit up and kiss her, taking her mouth with a burning passion running through me, tasting the sweetness. She whimpers against my mouth, and the vibration runs right through me.

I pull away from her. I can’t move on from here, not yet. “Hope—”

“Will you hold me tonight?”

“Always,” I tell her, as I pull her closer to me, her head on my chest and I bring my arm over her waist. I lie listening to her breathing, and I smile as I hold her.



I'm listening to Jackson talking about a plan that he has about getting Hope's buyer, but all I can do is look at Hope standing in the kitchen staring at the tiles. I bought her a book to learn how to change the tile that has been annoying her, but since she pointed it out, it's been getting on my nerves too.

"Are you going to ask her?" Jackson nudges me to get my attention. "Have you heard a word that I've said?"

"No, what were you saying?" I ask him; my gaze focused on Hope. I glance back to him.

"Are you going to ask her if she knows where he lives?"

"Hope," I call her over, and she sits on the chair in front of us. "Jackson and I were wondering if you know the address of the place you were kept?" I ask her. I know that I could have done it a little better, but no matter how I ask the question, it isn't going to be easy for her.

She looks at me, ignoring Jackson, her eyes locked with mine and I can see the fear in them. I can see the fear in her.

"No," she says. But taking the notepad closer to her, she writes something down and slides it over to me. "Would you like anything to drink?"

"No, thank you." I look at the name she's written on the paper, *Joseph Price*.

Jackson clears his throat. "Can I get some cheesecake? I saw you making it earlier." Hope hasn't left the kitchen all morning. She has made a few different cakes and even a lasagna for dinner tonight, along with a few different things for Jackson and I to take to lunch this week.

She cuts a piece of dessert and hands it to Jackson with a fork.

"Thank you." He pushes the laptop to the side.

Hope sits down next to me, bringing her knees closer to her. I place my hand on her knee. I want to lean over and give her a kiss, but I don't know what's happening with us.

Hope clears her throat. "How is work Jackson?" she asks, making us both look at her.

“Good, you have to love rich idiots that marry women twenty years younger than them.” Jackson looks at me for a moment and then back to Hope. “Have you been getting used to the phone?”

“No, it’s not really that important to me. As long as I know how to call and message Leo back, I’m good.”

I sit here in surprise that she’s talking so much more than she normally does and I hope it stays like this. It’s nice to see it.

Jackson suddenly focuses on the laptop again and shakes his head before turning the screen toward me. “The gods must be on your fucking side, Leo, he’s in New York this weekend for some meeting, but you also have a problem.”

I feel Hope tense up. The fucker owns the two biggest nightclubs in Florida. I shake my head at the new fucking hurdle I have to go through. We have a week to get a plan together.

How the fuck can I kill this bastard knowing that people are going to ask questions if he’s missing? “They did say you need money to join the website,” I say, and I rub Hope’s knee softly letting her know that I’m here and I won’t let anyone hurt her again.

“Well, he fucking has enough of it,” Jackson talks with a mouthful of cake.

Jackson gets up and walks away as his phone rings and I turn to look at Hope staring at the screen. Closing the laptop she asks me, “Will you make it hurt?”

I turn my chair so I can see her face. “I plan on it. I plan on making it last all night.” Her hand moves to my cheek, then through my hair. I never thought that could feel as nice as it does. I hear the chair behind, letting me know Jackson is back with us. “Someone else looking to get a divorce?” I ask him looking over my shoulder.

He starts laughing. “No, something else.” His short answer makes me laugh. He’s got himself a girl for the day.

“What time you leaving?”

“Not until tonight.” He watches Hope as she gets up and walks out of the dining room. “So, you and Hope?”

“One day at a time,” I tell him.

“So, what are we going to do about *him*?” He points to the laptop as he opens it up again. “I really don’t think his dead body should be found in New York.”

I blow out air. I want *one fucking man*. My focus was killing him but I have to find a fucking ghost in this world of fucked up dicks. “Well, find me somewhere where I can make it last. There’s no way I’m ending his life quickly.” I stop for a moment and think about it. “You know what? Fuck it, get him to a warehouse, make sure that it has no ties to us and that we don’t leave any prints there—”

“Leo—”

I cut him off. “I don’t give a shit; we’re leaving him there once I’m finished with him. There’s no tie to him with us so what are the chances of him being linked to us?” I know that he wants me to think with my head, but at the moment I’m thinking of Hope and how he made her fear everything.

“Fine, let me think of something. You work on the torture, and I’ll have everything ready. You going to work today?”

“Yeah, about to leave now. What day do you want to come in and talk to the four of them about You Are Loved?” I was glad that Jackson said he would jump in with me on this and I know he’s serious about it as he’ll be doing a little more studying to learn about that part of the law for us.

“How’s next Monday?” Jackson packs all his stuff away. “I’ll get things ready for Sunday.”

“I’ll send them an email, and I’ll keep Sunday free. This is the only time we have to get him,” I tell Jackson. I have no idea how the hell he’s going to do it, but I know he will.

“Yeah, I know, and I’ll see what I can find on him. Might need to get some help to get him though,” Jackson tells me. Now the only other person who knows about this is John, and he’s not going to tell anyone. I mean he’s known for a long time about what I do to these assholes.

“I’ll talk to John, and he’ll call you,” I tell him as I make my way over to Hope.

Hearing the door close, I stand looking at her as she turns the pages of the catalog to change the floor tiles. “Have you found one you like?”

“No, but it’s your kitchen, you need to like it,” she answers me. I glance at her for a moment; I’ve never told her that I want her to stay here for good. I’ve told her that I want her to stay for as long as she wants, but in reality, I want her to stay and never leave.

“We can have a look tonight, please keep your phone on you as I’ll call you the moment I’m free.” Moving closer to her I take her hand in mine. “I’ll try to get back early.” I slowly lean down to give her a kiss.



I called Hope when I got to work just because I wanted to hear her voice. It wasn’t really a long conversation, and it was mostly one way, but I like that I can now talk to her.

I’m still surprised that she spoke to Jackson without me having to say anything to start the conversation and I do like that she’s trying to make an effort with him.

I sit at my desk looking through another proposal that I’ve said no to. The company that my dad wanted me to get on board with have sent me their whole product now, and I’ve spent most of the day fine-combing through that. I really didn’t think I would care about that, but I’ve added more notes than I thought I would. This product is going to take more time than I thought it would.

Walking outside to the balcony, I light up a cigarette and sit on the chair. Closing my eyes, I lean back. Hope’s question about wondering where my mother is got me thinking. I haven’t thought about her in a long time but do I want to know where she is now? My finger moves over to the scar on my left hand. Why the fuck would I give a shit about her? She never thought about me when she sold me. Inhaling the smoke, I

think back to Hope. How can I make her feel one hundred percent safe? How can I make her walk outside without having to look over her shoulder?



Walking through the door, I look around for Hope. She's sitting in the yard, and I'm not happy about that, it's cold out there. I'm going to buy her an outside fire pit; at least she will stay warm a little more than she is now. Grabbing a blanket from the sofa, I head outside.

"You need to keep yourself warm," I tell her walking around to her front and placing the blanket over her. "Have you been putting the lotion on today?"

"Yes, shall I warm dinner?"

"Not yet, I'm going to have a shower. I thought we could watch a movie tonight." I see her eyes light up. Now that I know she never got to watch TV, I'm planning on having a movie night with her as often as I can.

"That sounds nice." She looks up at me and bites her lip, it's like she wants to ask me something, but is worried about it. This is what I want to stop her from doing; I want her to ask me everything and anything without fear there. "I was playing on the phone, and I got this free book which I really enjoyed reading and I wanted to get another book, but it wouldn't let me." She hands me her phone, and I sit down next to her and have a look.

"First, if you want to read books go to the bookstore and buy the ones you want to read and one day we might get you an e-reader, that you can read on. Have you always liked reading?" I ask her. I would buy her one now, but if I do she would never leave the house, and I want her to go to the store and feel confident to leave the house.

"My mom used to read all the time, but when my parents died, I was never allowed to read. I thought I would try to read today and I really liked it."

I can't help but smile at her. Standing up, I lean down to give her a kiss on the head. "I've ordered you something special, it'll be here tomorrow. I thought that I would get you something nice and comfy to sit on while you read your books. So, I got this really comfy lounge for you, and once I've had a shower, we're going to the bookstore so you can get some more books." I see her body tense up a little.

"Can we go tomorrow, please? I want to stop at the coffee shop, the same as last time."

"Sure, what time do you want to leave? It's the weekend. Do you want to go visit your friend too?" I ask her. I don't want her changing her routine just because she's here.

"No, I see her every other weekend, as she moves around. Can we go in the morning?" Hope's voice goes a little quieter now, and all I can do is wonder what's got her on edge about tomorrow.

"Sure, I'll be down in a little while. Go inside and choose which film we should watch," I tell her, but I just want her to go inside where it's warmer.

CHAPTER 21

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HOPE

LAST NIGHT WAS SO NICE, it felt right to be in Leo's arms and watch the movie. I was sitting on the other side of the sofa then he pulled me closer to him. I leaned into his chest as he put his arm over my shoulder while we watched the film.

Putting my thick jumper on, I head downstairs. I was going to clean up after breakfast, but Leo told me to get dressed, and I've learned not to fight with him anymore as he'll win, but never in a way to make me feel scared of him.

Leo looks up from his phone. "Ready?" "Yeah," I tell him. I haven't told him what today is and if I can go all day without telling him, I will. I'm about to spend my birthday free. I'm not a prisoner or tied to the bed, I'm free, and I want to finally enjoy it. Last year I was free but scared; this year I have Leo. I never feel scared around him, I know he'll look after me and won't let anyone hurt me.

"Bookstore or coffee first?"

"Bookstore please," I say with a smile. I've never been in a bookstore before. "I don't really know a lot about books, but I'll be quick, promise."

"Take all the time you need, the day is yours. What did you read last night?"

I pull out my phone to look for the title. "This one." I hand him the phone.

"Stephen King?" I look up at him as he laughs. "How about we get a few mystery ones, a few funny ones, and some

sweet reads? I mean King is an amazing author, brilliant books but maybe a little fun would be nice to read too.”

I’ve never lived a life where I think that everything can be so nice and fun, but I’d love to read a story that makes me laugh.

“Sounds nice,” I tell him taking my phone back as we head out.

I stand close to Leo as we walk past his driver John. I’ve only seen him twice, but I’m not comfortable around him.

John nods and smiles. “Leo, Hope,” he says as we climb into the car.

“John, can you drop us off on Fifth Avenue? Then you can take the day off, and I’ll see you on Monday.”

The car door closes, and I look down at my hands. The lotion is making them better for me, and the skin doesn’t hurt as much as it did before, but it’s still peeling a little.

Leo stays quiet, but I hear him tapping away on his phone; he’s been on that all morning and from the time I’ve spent with him I know the only person he really talks to is Jackson. The other thing I’ve picked up is that he smokes, a lot. The smell doesn’t really bother me. I kind of like it, it reminds me of Leo now.

I look out the window as the wind starts to pick up now and it’s also coming to the time I hate most; Halloween. The monsters come out, and it scares me.

“You okay?” Leo’s hand is on top of mine, and I look over at him. “You seem a little lost today.”

“Yeah, just having to leave the house that’s all,” I tell him, and that’s not a lie. I hate leaving the house when I know there are going to be a lot of people out there.

“I’m with you; I won’t let anyone ever hurt you again,” Leo tells me as he leans closer. “I’ll always protect you now.” He gives me a kiss, and I can’t help but smile. “I do enjoy watching you smile.”

Shaking my head, I start to feel hot in my cheeks. I do like when Leo says nice things to me, and I like it more than he doesn't just say them to make me feel good, he says them when he means it.

The car stops and John opens the door for me, and I look around at all the people. "I'm right here," I hear Leo behind me. Biting my lower lip, I get out of the car and wait for Leo to stand next to me.

I walk along with Leo into a store, and I'm amazed at how many books there are. A smile spreads over my lips, as I look around. Leo is talking to someone, so I walk over to some of the shelves.

"I've told one of the sales assistants that we want a few different types of books, so she will get them for us. Do you want to walk around?"

"I don't even know where to start," I say gazing longingly around the store. I see stairs going to other levels.

"How about we go and find Mr. King's books?" Leo puts out his hand for me, and it takes me a moment to place mine in there. I've never had the choice to do this. Before *they* took whatever *they* wanted *and* whenever. But Leo always asks. I feel at peace knowing that he will never take anything from me that I don't want to give. Soon as I take his hand, a weird thrill runs up my skin, and I follow him. Whatever Leo is doing to me, I want him to keep doing it. I want him to hold me when we watch a movie, I want him to hold me when we go to sleep, and I want him to kiss me every chance he gets.

So, we now have a lot of books. So many, that Leo has called John just to take the books home as they're too heavy to carry around.

"Shall we go to the coffee shop?" Leo asks me as I move closer to him. A rush of people comes towards us and he pulls me in as we walk around them to the coffee shop.

Walking in, I take a quick look at who's behind the counter, and I'm relieved when it's who I want it to be.

The man behind the counter smiles at me in recognition. “Hope, just like I promised I worked today just for you, shall I take your coffee order?” the guy says. Last year, I came here to get some coffee, and I don’t know what it was about him, but he asked if I was having a good day and I told him that it was my birthday. That day he said he would work every year on my birthday so that he could give me my cake order. I have been coming to this cafe from the moment I got to New York, and it took me a long time to talk to him, but he’s never pushed me to talk to him.

“Please,” I tell him, and Leo stands next to me as the man walks over to the back.

“Why is he working for you today?” Leo asks, and I ignore his question as the man comes out with my order in a bag for me. Leo pays him and leaves a big tip for him, which I asked Leo to give him if he didn’t mind.

As we go to leave the café, I hear the man call my name. “Hope!” I turn around and lift my head up just a little. “One day you will look at me, maybe next year that can be your gift to me. Happy Birthday, Hope.”

“Thank you, Will,” I tell him and walk out of the cafe.

Once outside Leo pulls me closer to him. “And you thought it wasn’t important to tell me it’s your birthday today?” He sounds hurt, and I’ve not heard that from him before. I feel horrible that I’ve made him feel like that when all he’s done for me is make me smile.

“Ju... I... Sorry,” I say cringing. I don’t really have a good reason to tell him. I have all the *bad* reasons to tell him.

“Hope?”

“My birthday isn’t really a happy day—”

“I want to know.” He cuts me off, and my body shivers at the thought.

“They just made me do things to them. They did things to me that ... that I never want ... to relive again... so please—”

Leo pulls me in for a hug as the tears escape me and I cry into his chest. He has given me a life that I want to share with him; he's given me something to wake up for, and that's *him*.

"Let's go home." Leo kisses the top of my head and hugs me a little tighter as I nod into his chest.

Pulling me closer to him, his arm is around my waist, he shouts for a taxi. When one pulls up alongside us, he opens the door for me, and I climb in. Leo follows but the moment the door closes he pulls me to him as he tells the driver where to go.



Walking into the house, I go straight to the kitchen to put the bag from the café on the counter.

"Do I get to know what's in the bag, birthday girl?" Leo asks as he types a message on his phone.

Pulling out the boxes from the bag I tell him, "Last year was the first year since my parents died, that I got myself a cake. When I went to the café Will was just there and he gave me four extra cupcakes as a gift and he's done the same this year." Opening the box, I look at the pretty cupcakes, and I open the other to see a cake with a candle in the center that says, *Happy Birthday Hope*.

Leo stands behind me, wrapping his arms around my body. "So, is there anything that the birthday girl would like? Anything?" he asks as I lean against him.

"No, because of you I have the only thing that I've ever wished for. To be free."

"You'll always be free now," he whispers in my ear, and I smile as goosebumps appear on my arm.

I *am* free. I don't have to pretend to blow out a candle; I don't have to sing happy birthday to myself in my head.

"Well, let's make a wish," Leo says as he lights the candle and I look up at him. Taking his thumb, he wipes my tears.

Leo moves in closer to me and, tip-toeing, I lean into him as he kisses me. This time it feels different. I don't know why, but I'm lost in him. Every part of me is with Leo, and I don't want it to change.

Leo leans his head on mine. "So, what are you wishing for?" "I always thought if I tell my wish, it won't come true."

He smiles widely. "I'll always try to make your wishes come true. Just tell me what it is?"

"To be happy," I whisper as I close my eyes and blow out the candle. Slowly opening my eyes, I feel Leo's gaze on me.

"Get ready for your wish to come true," he whispers.

I think back to my last birthday with my parents. As I get older I'm forgetting them, the years *they* had me, they beat out any of my childhood that I spent with my parents, so they're slowly becoming blurs to me now.

Leo nudges me playfully. "I have something being delivered for dinner. It's my special birthday meal that I get for my day."

"When is your birthday?"

"August 20th." I watch him cut the cake and place it on a plate. "Happy Birthday, Hope." He brings a spoonful of cake to my mouth, and I open up letting him feed me.

"You grab one of your new books, go sit down, and today I'll be in charge of serving dinner when it arrives." I go to open my mouth, but Leo puts his finger on top of my lips. "Don't argue with me about it, sit, read and let me treat you." Placing his hand on my left cheek, he gives me another kiss.

I go to walk to the bag of books, and he laughs. "Don't read anything too fucked up. I know there's one in there that has a colorful cover so read that." I look over my shoulder, and he's smiling at me.

Looking through the bag, I grab one of the colorful books as instructed by Leo. I narrow my eyes and read the back of the book. Seems interesting.

Sitting on the sofa, I look over at Leo in the kitchen. For someone that has ordered food, he's making a lot of noise over there. But I can't stop watching him. He glances over at me a few times then gets back to whatever he's doing.

Thirty minutes later, Leo sits next to me with our food.

I point to the pizza with a grin. "This is your special birthday meal?"

"When my parents took me in, the only thing I wanted was pizza. So, every year my dad takes me to this place and it's the best pizza on the planet." He gives me a slice.

"This is good pizza." I look over at him, watching me.

He winks. "Told you."

I've started to feel so much more relaxed around Leo, to the point where if he's not there I feel alone. I look back over at the TV, as I start to feel hot in my cheeks. I can feel Leo's eyes continuing to watch me.

"How's the book?"

I glance at the book on the table and shrug. "Okay, just a little too happy for me."

I hear him laughing next to me. "One day you're going to really enjoy these happy books, but in the meantime, you enjoy the dark world." Leo picks up the book and starts reading the back of it.

I don't reply as I watch the film. "You back at work on Monday?" I ask as the silence is a little annoying. Before I loved it, but now with Leo and Jackson around who are always talking—Jackson more than Leo—I like the sound of their conversations.

"Yes, would you like to come see where I work?"

"No." My answer comes out fast, I know, but I feel safe in the house. Being outside and being seen is not good for me. I know *he's* looking for me; I know that he has *people* looking for me.

“Maybe one day.” Leo grabs another slice of pizza and goes to put it on my plate, but I move my plate out of the way. He frowns at me. I haven’t even finished the other one; I’ve started to eat more food now mainly because Leo makes me sit there until I eat a little more. “Come on, one more. I’ve made dessert too,”

I look over at the kitchen and see a pie on the countertop. It smells delicious but I’m full. “I don’t think I can eat anymore,” I tell him. I’m trying very hard to eat more because I know that it upsets him, but too much starts to hurt my stomach.

“We have all night, eat slowly.” Leo leans back and pulls me with him. “I have a lot of movies planned now that I know you like the scary stuff.” I feel his lips smile against my cheek as he gives me a kiss.

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CHAPTER 22

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I SLAP my hand on the floor next to me as I feel for my phone. “Hello?” My voice is full of sleep.

“You ready?” I hear Jackson ask and my eyes are wide open now.

“Where?” I ask, turning to my left to where Hope should be but she’s not there. I make a quick scan of the room and see her standing in front of the window. I can’t help but smile at how beautiful she looks when the moonlight hits her skin.

I finally got to see her face with her hair tied back at dinner today and I think she looks beautiful with her hair down, but when it was up, you could really see all of her face and how pretty she really is.

“John is coming to get you. He’ll tell you what to do.” The line goes dead, and I put the phone back on the floor and crawl over to Hope.

“You will make it hurt won’t you?” Hope asks as she looks out the window, playing with the skin on her hands. She asked me that once before. I told her I would, but I know that this man hurt her in ways that I don’t want to imagine.

“Yes,” I turn her round on the floor to face me, “I promise.” Her eyes meet mine, and all I want to do is kiss her so she knows that he can’t hurt her when she’s with me.

She gives me a nod, and I lean in to give her a kiss. “John’s outside waiting for me. I don’t know how long I’ll be.” I grab my phone from behind me. “Call me if you need

anything,” I tell her as I stand up to go to my room and get changed.

“I will. Leo, be safe. Like I was told over and over again, he’s only the pawn in this game.”

I stand by the door for a moment to see if she’s going to say anything else to me, but she doesn’t, and I don’t think it’s because she’s scared. I think it’s because the man that hurt her for years is about to be taken out of her life and she doesn’t know how to live knowing that she doesn’t have to fear him anymore.



I’ve thought about this moment since the day Hope told me about him. I just didn’t know how I was going to have fun with him, but Jackson said he would have everything ready that I would need and fuck did he come through on his word.

I know that Jackson hates this part of what we do, but I get a feeling that he’s going to enjoy this just as much as me.

Jackson and I were talking the other day, and he was saying that Hope needs something good to happen for her and killing this dick will be the second best thing. I asked what the first thing was and he replied with, “You.”

Now I want Hope to live the best life. She’s lived through hell, so it’s about time she gets to live a good life but am I the right person to give that to her? The things I do right now are dark, and it will only bring her to the darkness I have inside.

I want to be the light in her life, but I need to finish what I’ve started. Until then, I don’t think I should get too close to her. I’m already finding it harder to stay away from her; she’s finally starting to open up to me now—getting comfortable. I’ve had a glimpse of what life will be like once she finally gets out of the dark place and I want to be there when she does.

As I walk into the room, I see Jackson standing with his back to me. I look over at Joseph with his hands strapped

above his head.

“Did Hope enjoy her birthday?” Jackson asks as I stand next to him. “I got her something.”

“She did, I hope. What did you get her?” I ask as I light up a cigarette.

“I got it for *her*, and you can wait until she opens it.”

“When you coming over?”

“Tomorrow.”

Inhaling smoke, I look over to him. “Has he said anything?”

“I’ve not asked him anything.”

I’m not going to ask Jackson how he got him here, he’ll just say the less I know, the better.

Walking over to the sick fucking asshole, I look at him, wondering what questions I want to ask. Questions about Hope. Questions about *him*.

“Why do you have me here? I don’t even know you.” Joseph glares at me as I just stare—all I can do is stare at the evil bastard with his arms tied above his head and his legs tied at the ankles. This man has everything and could get any woman if he wanted her. I mean, he’s fucking rich. Jackson works for men like him all the time, men that are rich and can get what they want and when things go wrong they get divorced. None of them are sick enough to buy cute girls and do all that shit to them.

But I suppose a sick fuck like Joseph will never be normal.

“You’re right, you don’t know me, but you hurt someone that we’ve started to care about.” I pull a chair over as he stares blankly at me.

“I’ve never seen—”

“No, you haven’t,” I stop him. I mean, his voice is annoying me now. “We’ll get back to who it is in a little while. But first, I thought we could play a game.” I grab the knife off the table. “I mean *I* will play a game.” I turn to him and smile.

Joseph's eyes widen as I walk over to him. When I get started on this piece of shit he's going to beg me to stop, he's going to cry, he's going to scream.

"Please," he snorts, his mouth twisting up at the corner into a snarl before he yells, "People will be looking for me, and when they find me, there'll be no place for you to hide. The bounty on your head will be so big; nobody will be able to resist taking you out for the cash!"

I don't doubt that's what he'd do, but I think it's hilarious that he thinks he's going to be leaving here on two feet.

I lift the knife to his left wrist, letting the cold blade slide across his skin to his forearm, his veins bulging from where he's straining against the ropes. The look of shock on his face makes me smile, and his murderous words are cut off as he follows the path of the metal.

I continue down his arm, gradually tipping the blade against his skin until the sharp edge slices into his filthy flesh in the crook of his elbow. His scream echoes off the walls, and I stop.

"Wow." I shake my head. "I barely made it an inch before you screamed. You're a pathetic coward," I say next to his ear, my voice low and menacing. "And to think, I haven't even gotten started."

His mouth opens to protest, but before any sound can pass his cracked and split lips, from panting so much his dried his lips so they are cracking, I make a quick move and slice into his right arm, giving him matching wounds.

I turn and slowly walk back to my chair and sit. I cross my leg over and lazily glance to the items on the table, eyeing up the next one I can't wait to use. Oh, he's not going to enjoy this, but I am.

Sulphuric acid has always been my go-to when it comes to these ugly assholes. I enjoy the sound of them screaming. They get a taste of how it felt for the young, innocent lives they destroyed.

“Are you not going to ask him?” Jackson asks as he comes over to stand by the table.

I don't take my eyes off my target, watching two thin streams of crimson trailing down his arms and soaking into the fabric of his grey shirt. “Oh, I will,” I reply as though I have all the fucking time in the world.

Before I do, I want him to be in white-hot agony. I want the pain to steal the breath from his lungs until it feels like they're going to explode inside of him. I walk over to Joseph as I grab the small glass bottle of acid from the table. I stand in front of him and revel at the terror showing in his eyes

I keep my voice calm as I ask, “I have to know... You have money, you own clubs, so why buy little girls?” Why would a young, hot-shot businessman, the kind that has eyes on him at all times, buy girls? It's so fucking high-risk of being exposed.

He starts laughing. “Because I can. Just the thought of the sweet little bitch I had makes my dick hard—she was something special, all right.”

I clench my fist and pull my arm back before letting it fly toward his face, his jaw crunching under my knuckles on impact. “You know, it's people like you that make me enjoy what I'm doing right now,” I say as he spits blood out onto the floor.

I gently squeeze the dropper from the top of the bottle and pull it out, careful not to lose any of the precious liquid inside the glass tube.

“What the fuck is that?” Joseph asks, his voice trembling while he stupidly tries to back away from my unhurried movement.

“Shh, this won't hurt much.” I move the tiny end of the tube over the first wound. “It'll be fucking excruciating,” I say as I allow one small drop to be released. I close my eyes as his high-pitched screams fill the room. “Music to my ears.” A couple more drops and then I do the same to the other side,

watching as his skin begins to melt, the smell of burning flesh filling my nostrils.

I walk back to the table and grab the small photograph.

Joseph's heavy breaths calm a little, his chest heaving as he pants through his pain. "I don't understand; what have I done to you?" he grinds out through his clenched jaw.

"You haven't done anything to me; you've done it to someone else. A girl you bought.—"

"Hope." Joseph shakes his head.

I narrow my eyes and cross my arms over my chest, still holding onto the photo. "What makes you think I'm talking about her?"

"She's the only one I've ever bought," he purrs. An evil smile stretches across his face, and I want to rip it from him. "She just needed to learn the rules and when she did," he licks his lips, "God, she was perfect."

I slide my eyes to Jackson and see that he's staring at him in disgust. When he faces me, he grinds his jaw, hatred burning in his eyes.

"You know that there's a two-million dollar price on Hope's head," the sick fucker says, catching our attention. "The big boss wants her back—teach her a few lessons." He lets out a low chuckle. "She was the best he ever trained." His grin drops and he glares behind me towards Jackson. "So, instead of wasting your fucking time on me, go and make yourself a rich man—find her."

I can't help but laugh, and his surprised eyes move back over to me. "Do we look like we need money?" The asshole has read me wrong in so many ways. I get up close to him, so close that I can smell the whiskey on his breath. I hold the photo in front of his face. "Do you know this man?"

Joseph's eyes flinch, but he shakes his head. "Never seen him."

I spin around and walk over to Jackson. "He's lying," I grind out.

“You want me to get him down?” Jackson looks over my shoulder. “And try to keep your fucking cool. I’m worried you’re going to slip and fuck this up before we know anything.”

I let out a long breath. ”I know, but he’s talking about her —”

“I know,” he cuts in, grabbing my arm as I try to walk around him. “But now you know why she’s always hiding. They’re still looking for her.” He walks away as I decide on what item to use next.

Hearing the chair behind me, I turn to watch Jackson pull the rope from the overhead hook, lowering the man’s arms. He tries to struggle, even with his bound legs, but Jackson’s too fast and throws him in the chair. His fatigued arms slam down on the table when Jackson hauls him forward, and I hold them down while Jackson grabs the duct tape. It takes no time for Jackson to secure his arms by rolling the tape around the table over and over until he’s satisfied the nonce is secure.

“I’m going to ask again,” I say calmly, holding up the photo as I perch on the edge of the table. “Who is this man?”

“Like I’ve already said—never seen him,” he replies, his trembling tone giving away that he’s close to shitting his pants.

I stand up and grab the other wooden chair to sit opposite him. I trail my fingertips over the object of my desire, a five-inch dagger that has been sharpened so much it could be used for surgery.

In one quick movement, I grab the knife and stab it through his little finger, barely scraping the knuckle. I grin as the digit comes away easily, rolling off the table and dropping with a light thud on the floor.

Joseph screams out a string of curse words too choked up in blinding agony to understand. He pants as he tries to catch his breath.

“Where can I find him?” I ask again. This asshole knows the answer to every question I want to ask, and I’m going to get them if I have to cut everyone out of him.

“I don’t know where he lives—he comes to me.” He lifts his sweat-soaked head to look at me again, his eyes red and his lids fluttering. “What do you want from him?”

“I don’t want anything from him, I want to *kill* him!” I roar as I slam the knife into his next finger and smile as he screams. “You have eight fingers left, asshole. Shall we see how many it takes until I get some answers?” I sneer, taking the blade as I run it over the three digits he has left on his right hand.

“You can’t find him first—he’s a ghost. *He finds you.*”

I can’t believe how hard it is to find one man. Even when I track down people that know him, I *still* can’t find him.

I lift out of my chair and lean over, getting in his face. “But you know where he is, or you know how to find him, so start talking!” I yell. I sit back and take the small plastic bowl and pour acid into it, excitement stirring inside of me with the idea of what I’m about to do. I look up and smile as I shake the last drop into the dish.

“Stop, *stop*, you fucker!” he bellows, but I don’t. I grab the thick rubber glove from beside me and put it on. I use the same knife and slice through the tape holding down his intact hand and grip it tightly. “No, no. I don’t know anything!” Joseph’s scream pierces my ears as I put his hand into the bowl of acid. “I’ll tell you! I’ll tell you whatever you want!” The chair rocks as he thrashes about against his restraints, but it’s no good. Jackson did a good fucking job as usual.

“Where can I find him?” I ask again, spittle flying from my mouth.

“Honestly, I don’t know, but he’s looking for one person.” He grits his teeth as the acid does its job of making a fucking mess out of his hand. “You find them, you’ll find *him*,” he spits.

“Who do I have to find?” Maybe they will be easier to find than him.

“Hope... You find *her*. He wants...*her*.”

My eyes move over to Jackson and then back to the piece of shit in front of me. “And why is that?”

“She was the prize of all prizes, everyone wanted her, and I mean *everyone*. But then she escaped, and he wants her back.”

Joseph’s head dips as his eyes begin to droop. His body’s starting to shut down on him—doing what it can to block out the stress I’ve put him under. I thought he would last a little longer than this.

Leaning back in my chair, I pull out my pack of cigarettes from my pocket, light one up and take a long drag. Jackson picks up the cold bucket of water and throws it over him to wake him up.

“How do I get in contact with him?” My eyes move to Jackson, letting him know what I want him to do next. I told Hope I was going to make sure that his last breath will be filled with the worst kinds of pain, worse than the acid disfiguring his skin and worse than what he could ever think of and I’m going to make sure that it is.

“You have to go through the...” His eyes close as his words trail off.

I slap his face and click my fingers. “Hey, hey, wake up. I’m not finished with you yet.”

“Website,” Joseph whispers. He’s not going to last much longer now.

“Give me your information,” I demand and remember everything he tells me to access his profile page.

Jackson starts pouring gasoline over him as I reach the end of my cigarette.

Joseph shakes his head quickly, sputtering against the flammable liquid as it cascades down his face. “I told you what I know!” He continues to futilely struggle against the ropes and duct tape holding him in place. “I never did anything to you!” He looks at me, and the fear in his eyes sends a sweet shiver down my spine.

“No, you didn’t.” I lean closer to him, the sharp stench of gasoline stinging my nostrils. “But, you did to someone I care about.” I stand up and walk back away from him, my eyes never leaving his. “ Hope says hello,” I say, flicking my cigarette toward him. I watch as he catches fire, the flames bursting over him and I smile.

My work here is done.

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CHAPTER 23

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HOPE

THE MOMENT LEO'S phone rang, I knew what it was for. I knew Jackson had found *him*. I stayed calm in front of Leo, but deep down the fear was there. Fear that maybe they've come to New York because they found me.

Because of that I haven't left from this space, tucked in close to the window. Leo says he'll protect me and I believe him but he doesn't know Uncle Jack and how much power he has. What if it's a trap and they hurt him? I close my eyes for a moment trying not to think the worst. I need Leo to be okay. I need him to win.

The way I'm feeling for Leo is getting stronger every day. He treats me so well. He respects me, and I've never had that before; I've never felt wanted or special.

The moment Joseph bought me, I lost my life, lost my soul. I had become his property.

Leo is giving me the chance to become a person again; he's giving me my soul back, giving me the chance to live. I wasn't able to go back to sleep once he left, there was too much happening in my head. From all the things *he* did to me, to worrying that Leo was walking into a trap.



“Your Uncle taught you well.” Joseph sits behind me. “I’m going to make sure that you only ever think of me.” His mouth moves closer to the back of my neck. Closing my eyes, I grab a

handful of the bed sheets. I don't think my body can retake this today, five times and it's not even evening. My body hurts to the point that I don't want to touch it.

My eyes open when I hear the door closing; Leo's back. Staring out the window for a moment, I remember the last time he came back from a night like this. It looked like it had taken a lot out of him. As I look up at the night sky, the only question that I have is, is one of my monsters finally out of my life?

Grabbing my sweater, I slowly make my way downstairs. The room is so quiet, not one sound can be heard. Jackson must have come with him as I see the door close before I reach the bottom of the stairs.

Looking around, I head to the kitchen and turn to the yard. I've picked up that Leo likes to sit in the yard when he's had a hard day. He's sitting on the chair as he smokes, leaning forward with his head in his hand. Something is stressing him out; did Joseph say something to him about me?

Making my way outside, I sit on the table in front of him. He slowly lifts his head as the smoke leaves his nose. I'm not sure what I should say, I don't want to say anything, but I know I should.

Bringing my hand closer to his I move my fingers over the cut across his knuckles as he takes another drag from his cigarette. My eyes move over him, and I see that he's changed his clothes, which tells me Jackson was here.

Leo's gaze meets mine, and I feel like I can read everything he wants to say, the coldness in his eyes makes my body stiffen, but at the same time the power in them feels like a tornado hitting me.

"You don't have to fear him anymore." He takes my hand in his. "I told you I won't let you fear anything."

Just the thought of *him* never being around me again and never having to hear him again has me feeling in ways I can't control. Biting my lower lip as the tears escape, Leo wipes

them away with his thumb, and his hand rests on my cheek for a moment. “Hope, ask me. You’ve wanted to ask for a while.”

He’s right. The moment he came to my apartment, the moment he brought me here I’ve had one question.

“Why are you doing all this?” I sob. This man who I hardly know saw the pain I was in, understood the scars I was hiding before even seeing them and he helped me. He wants nothing in return and I don’t know how to deal with it. No one has ever been selfless with me. Not since I lost my family. And there’s nothing I can give him to express my gratitude.

“I walked into the restaurant, and I stopped in my tracks. I looked around to see what was happening because someone in that restaurant pulled me towards them. Then my eyes found you, and I have no idea what happened. Hope, something so strong was pulling me towards you, so strong that I couldn’t stop looking at you.”

I turn away from him for a moment as I wipe the tears away. His words are hitting me so hard that my emotions don’t know what to do. My heart is racing so fast that it’s scaring me; all I can think is why me? But I’m so glad he chose me even though I don’t know how to tell him.

“Hope, I don’t know what happened that day at the restaurant. But I don’t regret following you, I don’t regret bringing you here.” His finger rests under my chin, and he turns my face toward him. “I don’t regret anything when it comes to you.”

As much as I’m trying to hold it together, the emotions running through me come out like a silent uproar from my throat. Beads of water are falling one after the other. I’ve never had such a feeling of happiness before. My world has just turned into a blur. All I want to do is find a way to thank Leo for everything. I want to hug him, I want to kiss him, but my body is shutting down on me.

Pulling my sweater sleeves down, I wipe the tears away. “I don’t regret staying here,” I tell him. There is always the thought in my head that maybe I should leave, but my heart tells me to stay.

Leo moves closer to me. He puts his cigarette on the tray and cups my face. "I'm going to kiss you." I give a small nod, and then he's kissing me. I've gotten a taste of him now and I know I'm never going to have enough. His hand moves to the back of my neck, and he kisses me harder, deeper. It's like he needs me just as much as I need him.

He pulls away just a little, his hand moving from the back of my neck to my cheek. The softness makes my body shivers.

"If I carry on, I don't think—"

"I want you to." Usually, the thought of a man touching me scares me, but not with Leo. His eyes meet mine. I don't see anything in them; don't know what he's thinking.

Leaning back into the chair, Leo puts out his hand, and I slowly place my hand in his. He wraps his fingers around mine and pulls me softly to him so that I'm straddling his lap. Sitting like this, so close to him feels right.

He continues to stare at me, and I don't know what I should be doing. I've always had to lie there, and that's it.

His hand strokes my thigh. "Are you okay?" His voice is quiet as his right-hand moves closer to my face. His finger softly strokes my cheekbone and my eyes close involuntarily at his touch.

"Yes... I just don't know what—"

"Hope." I open my eyes "I won't do anything to hurt you."

Something in my expression must tell him that I know he won't hurt me. He places his hands under my bottom and stands up making me wrap my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist as he walks back into the house. He carries me into the sitting room, and lets go of me, and my feet hit the cold wood floor. My hands slowly move down his chest, and I can feel his muscles through the thin material of his t-shirt.

I feel Leo's hands moving to the hem of my sweater, his finger traces the skin of my stomach; his touch always feels like an electric shock and a feather at the same time, and I like it. He lifts my sweater up slowly, and I take in a sharp breath

as it comes over my head, my breasts are free, but Leo's eyes are locked with mine, as his hands rest on my hips.

"You know you look beautiful," he whispers against my lips as he softly pushes me to sit down on the sofa. Kneeling in front of me Leo leans closer and kisses me, as his hands move to my PJ bottoms.

My body tenses up just a small amount, but he feels it and pulls away from me. "I won't—"

I pull him down to kiss me again. I don't want him to stop and if he asks if I'm sure then I'm going to keep thinking about the worst times and I don't want to. All I want to think about is Leo touching me.

Leo continues, his hands on my PJ bottoms pulling them, he starts kissing down my neck, as his hand rests on my stomach. I moan as I can feel his hand moving further down. It's all so new and exciting. He moves his lips down my neck to my nipple and sucks on it, making me moan out loud and arch my back.

I tense as his mouth moves further down and I close my eyes. "I'll look after you," I hear Leo say and I feel his tongue teasing me slowly, softly, and I jolt as he blows on me. Leo's finger moves around my inner thigh, with the gentlest touch, moving closer, and a little flick on my clit makes me moan again. This is so new to me that I don't know what's happening, but I don't want it to stop either. The pleasure Leo is giving me is caring, perfect.

His right-hand rests on my breast as his fingers pinch my nipple. I bite my lower lip and a rush of adrenaline courses through my veins. He's teasing me again, moving faster then slower, not letting my body settle to the rhythm of his tongue, as his hands move down my waist. His tongue stops by my clit, and he starts circling. His hands rest on my hips to hold me down.

"Leo," his name leaves my mouth in a whisper and my hands grip on the blanket on the back of the sofa. I feel his fingertip on my entrance, and I gasp. I scream out his name

this time as he slowly curls his finger inside me and hits a spot that gives pleasure beyond words.

He kisses my stomach as he enters another finger; his thumb is teasing my clit. Finding a rhythm with his hand, he kisses my neck as my hips move with him.

“Don’t hold back Hope,” he whispers as he moves a little faster and I place my hands on his shoulders, as I moan out his name, my body jolting as I cum.

Leo slowly removes his fingers and softly rubs my inner thigh as I float back down from the high he’s just taken me on. I hear him take in a deep breath, as he nuzzles my neck with little kisses.

Placing his hands on my hips he pulls away from me, and I gaze into his eyes to see what he’s going to do.

“ I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone as beautiful as you.” He lifts me off the couch wrapping my legs around him as he turns around and sits down, placing me on top of him.

I have no idea when Leo took his pants and boxers off, but I can feel him hard. I look down and slowly lick my lips as I look at his hard, long and thick cock. This is a new experience for me. I’ve never looked at a man’s body so closely before as I’ve always had to just lie there, but now I have the freedom to look. I enjoy taking in Leo’s physique.

Keeping his eyes on me and his hands firmly on my hips he tells me, “You can stop this whenever you want, but I’m hoping you don’t.” He pulls me closer to him so that he can kiss me.

Leo lifts me a little and brings me forward. Breaking away from the kiss, his eyes lock with mine as he slowly lowers me down. I place my hands on his shoulders, and my eyes drift closed.

“No, look at me, Hope.” Opening my eyes again, I meet his. I moan as he starts to enter me. The deeper he gets, the more I moan. He’s not hurting me, he’s not rushing me, he’s making everything perfect. The moment I feel all of him inside

me, his hands take a tighter hold on my hips, and my hands hold firmly on his shoulders.

Leo begins to move my hips back and forth, up and down. Even though he's letting me be in control and stop when I want, he's in control of my pleasure. I know I can trust that I can stop this the moment I want to. But the truth is I don't want to stop. The way he's making me feel is that only he and I exist right now; only us. He sucks on my nipples, and an almost electric vibration runs through me. I move my hands into his hair not wanting him to let go of me.

"Cum again Hope," Leo says, breathing fast, "and look at me. I want to see you." I peer down at him as I can feel ready to explode again; my grip in his hair tightens.

"Leo," I moan as he begins to move me up and down faster and each thrust is getting harder. I want him to carry on, I want to feel him cum inside me, and I want him to hold me.

I feel my body begin to shake as my orgasm tears through me.

His grip tightens, and I know he's getting close. He throws his head back, and his nails dig into my skin. I close my eyes as I hear my name leave his lips as he cums.

The moment he relaxes, I go to move, but Leo stops me and pulls me into his warm embrace. "How about we stay here for a moment?" He kisses my neck.

My hands rest on the sides of his stomach. How perfect he is for me, how he has saved me, but I think I'm saving him in a way too. Leo's head leans back on the couch again, and my fingers move through his hair. I smile as my touch is making him do the same. His eyes close, so I get to look at him freely, and I admire the view.

We sit here for a moment longer as Leo won't let me get up. "I'm getting a little cold now," I whisper. I don't want to move from here, but I can feel the cold hitting me hard.

Leo opens his eyes, moves his hand behind him and wraps the blanket around me. "Time to get up then I suppose." Then he leans over and kisses me. Slowly getting up, he grabs my

hand. "I'll join you once I get some clothes on." Giving him a nod, I take my clothes off the floor and make my way to my bedroom. I turn back to Leo for a moment as he pulls another blanket over him and leans back on the couch again.

Once I've cleaned myself up, I get changed and sit by the window. As I look at my hands, I smile remembering how Leo was touching me and how it made me feel. I'm finally at a place where I can be happy again; I don't want that to change.

Rubbing some lotion into my hands, I hear the door behind me. I look over and see Leo throwing two pillows on the floor and the blanket. "It's starting to get cold, let's try step two," he tells me as he sits on the floor next to me and gives me a kiss on the cheek.

We sit there in silence as we look outside. I do like that we are both so comfortable with each other that we can sit together and not have to talk; just having him next to me is enough and all I need.

CHAPTER 24

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TURNING around my arm hits the cold floor. Slowly opening my eyes, I look around for Hope. I rub away the sleep and grab my phone to check the time. Eight? How did I oversleep? I never oversleep.

Last night took a lot out of me. Joseph was a piece of shit, and I enjoyed watching him burn. Even now I can still hear him screaming, begging. But I didn't care, there was only one reason I wanted him dead. Hope. She was the reason I wanted to kill him and to let her know that I would do anything to protect her. When I got home, and she sat in front of me, that was it; she controlled me, she had me.

Talking to her last night and letting her know that I don't regret bringing her here was the best thing I could have said to her because in that moment I knew she wanted to be here and even once all this is finished she'll still want to stay here.

Last night with Hope was... I don't have words to say how it was. I thought she would have pushed me away, told me that she couldn't do it, but she didn't. She let me in and as much as I wanted to bring her to my bed, I knew she wouldn't be ready for that yet; one day.

Everything she did last night I know was new to her. Now I know she has *had* sex—well she's been raped and that's not the same thing. It will *never* be the same thing. So, I knew everything I wanted to do. I wanted to make it perfect for her. I wanted her to know that sex can be amazing when it happens between two consenting adults who care for each other. Now I just have to hope she wants to do it again with me.

Making my way over to my room to have a shower, I hear Jackson downstairs. I love the man, but I wish he would fucking have breakfast at his own house once in a while. Walking into the bathroom, I look in the mirror, which is not something that I normally do. I've learned to live with the scars now, but that doesn't mean I like looking at them. Last night Hope was doing things to me that I like, things that make me want to smile every day.

Getting in the shower, I let the warm water run over my body. Closing my eyes, I replay everything about last night with Hope; the way she tasted, the way she smelled, the sound of my name leaving her lips. Just the thought about it happening again makes me hard.

I shake the thought out of my head; I need to take this slow with Hope. If I rush her, it could all go wrong. But I also need things to go slow for me. I can't hurt her, I won't hurt her. And until I find *him*, until that part of my past, until that darkness is finally gone, I don't know if I can move to the next step.

Making my way to the kitchen, Jackson gives me a knowing look. I can tell he's stifling a smile. "Morning," I say as I walk over to get some coffee.

"She's in there," Jackson answers my silent question, and I look over to see what she's doing. "She's been in and out a lot."

"How long you been here?"

He chuckles to himself, "Long enough to have a nice breakfast. So you overslept—"

"Is she okay?" I cut him off. I know he knows what happened, but I don't want to hear what he thinks about it.

"Well, you seem more relaxed this morning, so I'm going to say tha—"

I turn to face him as anger bubbles up inside of me. "Yes, I had sex with her. No, I don't regret it, and I hope to be doing it again. Anything else you want to say?"

He shrugs. "You seem happy, so I'm happy. Just don't get in too far if you can't promise her the world. Other than that, I

have nothing to say. But her skin looks like it fucking hurts.” He nods his head for me to look behind me.

I turn to see Hope as she brings two bottles of laundry detergent out with her. I stare at her arms, they do look like they hurt, and they look burnt. “What happened?” I walk over to her as she puts the bottles on the counter.

Standing next to her I place my hand on her hip, but she moves away from me and turns her head a little to Jackson’s direction

“Hope, are you okay?” I ask again and glance over at Jackson. I don’t want him to leave as I want her to start talking more freely around him.

“Um, I think the detergent is doing this.” She turns the bottles around and starts reading them.

“I think we need to go to the doctors.”

“I’ve had an allergy pill so it’ll be fine in a little while,” she tells me but doesn’t make eye contact. She hasn’t looked at me since I’ve come downstairs.

Does she regret last night?

Leaning on the counter, I watch as she reads the two bottles. My eyes flick over to Jackson for a moment as he watches her too. His eyes meet mine, and we have the silent conversation about when to talk to Hope about *him*. How is she connected to him and why does he want her?

I give him a small nod to let him know that I’ll ask her today, soon as she finishes what she’s doing.

“Do you want some help?” I ask picking up one of the bottles to see what she’s looking at.

“Just looking to see if there’s anything different in this one to the one I used the other day.”

I take a look at the back, then pick up the other and read that one. “This one doesn’t have dye in it.” I put it back on the counter. “We won’t be using this one again.” I wink as she finally looks at me and there’s a small smile on her face. I

can't wait for that to be a full smile that she shows to the world.

Hope puts the bottles back in the laundry room. "Would you like some breakfast?" she asks walking over to the cooker, but I stop her and pull her closer to me. She knows I want a kiss which makes her look to the side; she wants to make sure that Jackson isn't behind her.

"I'm going to kiss you now, and I'll kiss you again and again. If Jackson had breakfast, lunch, and dinner at his own fucking place, you wouldn't have to worry about him being here, but we both know he'll be here, so you might as well get used to me kissing you while he's here." I give her a smile as she looks up at me, shaking her head. "So, are you going to give me the kiss I want?" I ask.

Leaning closer to me quickly, she gives me a peck and walks away from me. The smile on my lips right now must be that of a fifteen-year-old boy because Hope has just made one big step by giving me a peck in front of Jackson.

"Would you like some breakfast?" she asks me again.

"Please." I walk around to sit next to Jackson. I don't want to ask Hope about *him*, I don't want to ruin her mood as she seems happy today. I watch her moving around the kitchen a lot more freely now. She still has her head down, but slightly higher than before. She could easily walk around this whole house with a blindfold on and not bump into anything.

"Hope, have you picked out the tiles for the floor?" I ask her. I know she has looked at the book and folded some of the pages she likes, but we haven't had a moment to sit and look through it together yet.

She's not talking to me, and that always worries me, as I don't know if it's because she's thinking about her past, her family, or something I said that reminded her of them.

"No not yet, but it's your house so you should see what you like." She puts my plate of food in front of me and Jackson puts a gift on the counter for her.

“Happy birthday Hope, I hope you like it.” He pushes it closer to her, and she doesn’t move.

I see her body tense up a little, and a small part of me is worried that something is flashing through her mind. Jackson taps my arm and nods letting me know that he’s leaving the room for a moment. Walking around the counter, I stand next to her as I lean on it.

Taking her hand in mine, I say, “Talk to me.” A flashback has just run through her head, and I might not want to know what it is, but I need to know what we just did wrong, so we don’t do it again.

She takes in a long deep breath, closes her eyes then opens them as she lets the air out. “Are you going to let Jackson... Do I have to... Will Jackson—”

Oh my God, she thinks that I’m going to let Jackson sleep with her. That’s the last thing either of us want. “No, why would you think that?” I ask. Jackson has never made a move on her or said anything for her to think like that, and I’ve never mentioned anything like that to him.

“When I get gifts from other men, then—”

“Stop, Hope. You have to start believing me when I say that you will *never* have to live that life again. The life I want you to live is with me and me alone.” Softly pulling her over to me, her head falls on my chest. “Jackson got you that gift for your birthday as a friend and he’ll get you one for Christmas too.” I kiss the top of her head, wrapping my arms tighter around her.

“Sorry,” she whispers into my chest. I choose not to say anything to her, she’s told me something about her past, and I’m happy about that.

I see Jackson standing by the table and give him a nod so that he can rejoin us. “I thought we could sit at the table,” I say, grabbing my plate as Hope brings over some coffee.

“If you don’t like the color, I can change it,” Jackson says as he puts the gift in front of her.

Her hands move onto the table, and very slowly she brings the gift towards her. I see Jackson watching her as she opens the paper and I eat my food. Can't believe how hungry I am at the moment and the fact that Hope makes amazing food is even better.

As I see the gift, I'm pissed that he got that for her, but at the same time happy too. "What is it?" Hope looks over at me.

"It's an e-reader, so you can download books and read them on there," Jackson answers for me. "If you put it on charge I can show you how it works, we can link it to Leo's account." He looks over and smiles.

I wait for Hope to walk away from the table. "Why did you buy her that?"

"You said that she likes to read, I thought it would be a perfect gift." He looks hurt. And he's right, she does like to read, and I love that she does.

"The reason I never got her one is because that was going to be my reason for her to leave the house, to go to the bookstore and buy books," I tell him. I mean Jackson didn't know about that, so I can't be too pissed at him about it.

He sighs deeply. "I can take it back—"

"No, once she knows how it works, she will love that thing. I'll get a bookshelf made and tell her that she will have to fill it or something." I turn to see Hope as she joins us again.

"Thank you," she says, well whispers but we both heard it.



"How are we going to ask Hope about *him*?" Jackson looks over his shoulder at Hope walking around as she mops the kitchen floor. You'd think I would be used to her doing all this stuff now, but I still hate it; I hate her cleaning when I can pay someone to do it.

"We?" I narrow my eyes at him.

“You, but I’ll be right here.”

“I don’t know. I suppose we could just ask. We have no idea how they are linked or anything,” I tell him, as I take a drag from my cigarette.

“Before I forget, I’ll be at your office next week for the meeting about We Are Loved, and I had an idea about it too.”

“What’s your idea?” I’ve got the group coming in next week so they can meet Jackson. I won’t sign off on it unless he likes them too.

“Think about it, there are girls out there like Hope, who are too scared to talk to anyone; yes you said one of them is studying to be a psychologist, but what about a medical doctor?” Jackson looks at me as the light bulb flashes in my head, how did I not think of that before?

“Hope’s doctor and that building.” I smile.

“You walked into the building and said it needed work, so how about you buy the building and redo the whole thing? You have the team of four and me so ask the doctor if she will join the team. Ask her to come to the meeting next week.” He stops talking as Hope walks closer to us.

I’m not trying to hide this from her; I mean I can’t wait to tell her about this as I think she would be happy we’re helping people that have been through what we all went through. But, I want to wait until I know that we are definitely going ahead with the project.

Hope stands next to me. “Would you like anything?” I place my hand on the small of her back and smile as she doesn’t flinch, not even a little. She’s so comfortable with me now that I want to jump up and down for joy.

“No, but can you sit down, please.” Now it’s time to sit with her and find the answers to my questions, and with Jackson here I do find it easier. Hope sits on the seat next to me, and I place my hand on her thigh. “So last night, I went there for one reason, and you know that reason. But while I was there, I asked him about the man I’m looking for.” My eyes settle on Hope, as she listens to the conversation intently.

She knows about him, and she knows why I started all this. “As *he* uses the site, I thought he would know where I can find him, and he said something to me that I need to ask you about.” She puts her head down a little making it hard to read her.

Jackson slides the picture over to me. “Joseph said that in order to find *him*, all I need to do is find one person. And that one person is you.” Hope tenses up, and I start rubbing her leg letting her know that I’m right here and nothing will happen. But she starts to shake which gets me worried and I’m hoping that this doesn’t push her back five steps. “Can you have a look at this picture? This is the man I’m looking for.” I slide the picture faced down toward her.

Hope’s hands tremble as she brings her hands to the picture, slowly turning it over and she only takes a second to look at it before she turns it back around. Something’s wrong. What the fuck is happening? Her breathing rate increases. I can hear the choking sound as she breathes. Her hands are shaking so much now that even Jackson can see.

I try to take her hand in mine, but she pulls it out. I look over at Jackson as he quickly moves the picture away from her.

“Hope, look at me,” my voice comes out low, calm. I turn her chair to face me so that we block Jackson out, but I look at him to let him know to stay where he is. “Hey beautiful, look at me.” I keep my voice low, putting my finger under her chin and as I touch her, I can feel her body shaking. That picture has really done something to her.

Hope finally looks at me, and her eyes are filled with tears. Something that hits me a lot harder than I thought it would. This is one thing I never want to see again; I never want to see tears in her eyes. Last night when she was crying, I could tell that was because she became comfortable with me, but the salt water in her eyes right now is fear. She is scared, and I want to know why.

“Talk to me, what’s happened?” I ask her as I wipe the tears away.

“I... I know the man,” she whispers as she brings her head down, but I lift it back up, so she looks at me.

“How?”

Shaking her head, this is getting hard for her to talk about. Wiping the tears away, she takes in a deep breath. “The man is Uncle Jack.”

My hands loosen around hers, as I take the information in. There’s a silence around me. I’m not sure that I’ve heard correctly what she’s just said. I can’t believe that the man I’m looking for is the same man that Hope has been running from. I see her lips moving, but I don’t hear a word she’s saying to me. How fucked up is this man, that he groomed Hope but still had the time to come fuck up other children’s lives? How?

I see Hope leave the table, letting me stare off into space at nothing. The only way that I’m going to be able to find him is if I put Hope’s face out there, but that means putting her life in danger. I can’t do that.

I see Jackson sit in front of me where Hope was. “Focus, come back to the room.”

I give him a nod, as he waves his hand in front of me. “Did you hear the same thing?” I ask. I think my voice is still locked away from me, but I know Jackson heard me.

“I didn’t want to believe it, but her hands haven’t stopped shaking since she told us. When she saw your reaction, she asked me if she could go to her room, so I said yes.” Jackson hands me a cigarette.

I put it between my lips, flick the lighter on and take the longest drag that I can take. I let the smoke settle in my lungs before blowing it out.

Rubbing my forehead, I say, “She must hate me right now. I shut down on her,” I tell him as I get up and make my way outside. I designed this yard to be a place that I can sit and relax for a while, a place that no matter how fucked up my day is, being outside would give me the answers.

“She doesn’t hate you. I think it’s more the shock of seeing his picture,” Jackson says as he sits on the chair next to me.

Not once have I thought about how it affected her. I went into a dark place for a split second and pulled myself out fast but still didn't think about how it would affect her.

“Should I go up?”

“Leave it for a moment; I think she needs some time to herself.” When it comes to Hope and Jackson, I know that he cares about her, maybe a little more now that he knows I want something more with her, so I do trust him.

“What are we going to do?” That's the question I want answering, the question that I need a plan for. I still want to kill him for everything he did to me, to Jackson and now what he did to Hope.

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CHAPTER 25

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HOPE

SITTING in the corner by the window I stare outside. I didn't even have to turn the picture all the way around to know who it was. I knew he had a lot of power; I knew he had men around doing his dirty work but having a secret house where he kept others? Why am I even surprised with that? He has a lot wrong with him, and I know it will only be a matter of time before he finds me.

The moment I walked into the room I had that feeling; the bad feeling running through my body that something was about to go wrong and I'd be living the life of hell again very soon. Even though I have Leo looking after me, the fear is still there, and I don't think it will ever go away. I don't want to go back there; I want to have a life with Leo.

"Can I come in?" I hear Leo behind me. He's never asked me before which only means that he doesn't really know what to do right now either. Nodding my head, I look to the side as he sits down next to me. "I've made this promise before, and I'll make it again. I won't let anything happen to you." He takes my hand, his thumb rubs softly on my palm.

I know that he'll do anything to protect me, but I also know that Uncle Jack has a lot of men that will do anything for him.

"I'm sorry that I shut down on you, it was—"

"I know, I want to say surprised, but I think it was more fear," I tell him. I've got to that place with Leo now that I

know I can be open with him. I don't have to hide away from him. "Now what?"

"Jackson and I are talking about it." He peers outside. "Would you like a midnight walk tonight?"

I watch him for a moment, wondering how he can think about going for a walk when he has just learned something so awful. It's not something small either, it's huge. I thought now that they know who he is they would want to finish this. Leo and Jackson have been searching for him for five years now. Why would they not want to just find and kill him?

"How about you find him and end this for both of us?" Reaching over to him, I place my hand on top of his. "I don't want to be looking over my shoulder anymore."

"Jackson is downstairs looking at any connections between Jack and Joseph. There has to be a link in there somewhere." Leo stands up, putting his hand out for me. "I thought we could order some lunch. Jackson wants to show you how to use the e-reader."

Placing my hand in his, I let him pull me up. When I'm on my feet, his hand moves to my lower back, and he gives me a kiss.

"There's only one thing that I ask, don't hide away again," Leo whispers against my lips. I'm trying very hard to stop myself from running away from here. Finding out that Joseph was here made me believe that Uncle Jack wasn't far behind.

Walking back downstairs, I look over at Jackson on the phone as I walk over to the kitchen to get myself some water. Leo joins him. I can't make out what they are saying, but Jackson is still on the phone as Leo talks to him.

I go to the fireplace. Today is the first day that I'm starting to feel the chill in the air, and I've never sat in front of a fire before so it would be nice to see how they work. Looking for the switch, I place my hand on the cold marble as I feel for it. I smile to myself, this is the first time that deep down I feel like I can really be here, see myself living here with Leo.

“Wants some help?” Leo kneels next to me and flicks on a button under the mantel, and I smile as the flames go up. “You getting cold now?”

“Yeah, my wrists are getting a little painful, but that’s just the weather,” I tell him. The doctor did say that the weather would affect them, so I’m not worried about it so much.

Leo moves closer to me. “Would you try sleeping on the bed tonight?” His voice is quite soft, but my body still tenses up, and he must notice as he says, “Okay, not the bed, but how about we spend all night under the covers.” I look at him wondering why he thinks I don’t sleep under the covers. “I know that you wait until I’m asleep then you remove the sheets, so tonight even if it means I don’t sleep, all night under the covers. Please?” Leo’s hand softly brushes my leg, and I look back at the flames.

I don’t say anything to him, as I admire the beauty of it, the colors flickering.

“Hope, the e-reader is charged. Would you like me to show you how it works?” I look behind me as Jackson walks over to the sitting room. I glance over at Leo as he brings his drink to his lips. I know he won’t stop me. He wants me to be more comfortable with Jackson, and I’m starting to be.

“Jackson, sit here, Hope’s feeling cold.” Leo leans over and gives me a kiss on the cheek as he moves over to the couch.

“I have already hooked this up to Leo’s account, so beautiful you’re all ready to read all the books you wish to read.” Jackson sits on the floor, as he smokes the last of his cigarette. Bringing the tablet to me, he talks me through how to look for a book and how to buy it, read it and then find all the other books that I have bought. I smile the whole time. I can’t wait to start reading e-books. “You should smile more beautiful, it’s a nice view.”

I frown at Jackson, as I didn’t realize I was smiling so much while he was telling me everything.

Jackson moves to stand up. “Right, I’m off. I’ll be over for breakfast.” He quickly leans down and gives me a kiss on the cheek. “Happy birthday, Hope.”

As he stands, I grab his hand to stop him walking away, and I smile up at him. “Thank you for my gift, Jackson.”

He grins and gives me a wink. “Any time.”

I turn back around as I start looking at the reader to see that Jackson has already bought me some books to read.

“How about you sit over here and read?” Leo gets off the couch and walks over to me. “We can put the heat up if you would like?” He presses a button, and I see the flames get a little bigger.

Getting up, I make my way to the couch and sit down next to Leo. He pulls me in closer to him and without another word he puts on the T.V. There’s a football game on so I start looking through the books that I have to read.

I do enjoy that we can sit in silence and find it easy to be with each other.



A while later I start to watch the game as Leo gets up to get himself another drink. I don’t know the rules of football, but I get the feeling that Leo likes it a lot as he is always watching it.

He stands by the couch. “Want to order some dinner?” I move to the side so that he can sit down.

“I can make something,” I begin to get up, but Leo grabs my hips for me to sit again.

“Now, I don’t know about you but I like the way we were sitting and plan on spending the rest of the evening doing it so what shall we order?” Leo says then starts to kiss my neck. It makes me laugh as his stubble tickles me.

“Okay, we can order,” I say through giggles now that Leo has worked out what makes me laugh.

“Good, pizza, Chinese, Thai—”

“I don’t mind,” I cut him off before he starts listing more, as I really *don’t* mind.

“Don’t move, I’ll just go order it.”

I watch as he walks away from me and I can’t help but smile to myself. This is what I want my days to be like cuddled up to Leo on the couch as he watches the game and I read a book.

As Leo sits back down, he grabs the reader from me. “So, what are we reading?”

“A book about a girl that drops her life in England and moves to New York. I didn’t think I would like it, but it’s not too bad.”

“Sounds nice,” Leo says as he hands the reader back to me. I continue to read the book, and I start thinking about all the sex scenes it has.

I never really thought that sex could be like it was with Leo. I never thought sex could make me happy. During that first time with Leo, I felt things that I’ve never felt before. The biggest thing I felt was beautiful.

The more I read this book, the more I see that I’ve missed out on so much when it comes to feeling good about myself. Now I know that I won’t wake up tomorrow and have the most confidence in the world, or feel like the most beautiful girl on earth but one thing I know is, with Leo, I’ll always feel like that, and one day I’ll start believing it too.

There’s one part in this book where the girl was giving her boyfriend a blow job. I was always forced to give them, and I had to hold back my tears every time. Those were the worst days for me, but reading this book, I’m starting to think that it can be good if you *want* to do it.

“Leo, can I ask you something?” I put the reader on the couch as my throat dries up.

“Sure.” His finger makes circles on my arm.

“Um, you know, never mind.” I have no idea how to start the conversation.

“Hey.” Leo gets me to sit up straight. “Talk to me.”

“You’re going to think this is stupid and—”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

Taking a deep breath, I look up at Leo as he waits for me to say something. I’m playing the sentence in my head and then shaking my head as I think of a new way to start the conversation.

I turn to face him as I place my hand on his pants. “I was... Can I do something?” As I look away from him for a moment, Leo adjusts in his seat then holds my hand.

“Hope, don’t—”

“I know, my decision.” I look up at him, and our eyes meet for a moment. The only thing going through my head is that he’s going to stop me.

Taking the back of my neck he kisses me, pulling me harder into him, my tongue moves into his mouth, and I enjoy the taste of the beer. I move my hand up to the drawstring of his pants. Placing my hands on the waistband, I breathe in and out once, and then I tug the material slowly downwards. I can feel my heart beating against my chest so hard right now.

I pull away from him as his cock springs out. I stare at it, I can’t help myself, and Leo starts rubbing my back softly. He must know that I’m nervous as he takes one of my hands and guides it to him. I grip his shaft gently, getting a jolt as my fingers wrap around him.

His hips jerk a little when I enfold him, and he gives a sigh of pleasure. I’m not sure if he’s doing that to let me know that I’m doing okay, or if he really does like my touch. His flesh is warm and soft, and as I begin to stroke him, running my hand lightly up and down, I can feel his body temperature rising. He sighs again, but as I lower my head towards him and begin to lick at the head of his cock, the sigh transforms into a deep-throated moan.

Leo pulls me up, and I look at him. Moving forward he gives me a quick kiss. "I'm going, to be honest. Every time you touch me I feel more alive than ever, so I might not last that long." He leans back into the couch.

Lowering my head again, I flick my tongue back and forth, tracing the contours of him, lapping up and down his shaft and licking at his balls. This is a new one for me, but the way Leo jolts when I do it, I know he likes it, and that makes me happy.

I work my way from his balls to the tip and then back down again. I move back up on him and open my mouth wide as I take the first few inches of his cock in. He tastes amazing, exotic and salty. I begin to suck experimentally; this feels so much better than I thought it would.

He puts his hands on either side of my head, pulling back my hair. I get the feeling he wants to watch me, and I'm happy with that. I want him to stop me if I'm doing anything wrong. I look up at him, staring into his beautiful, dangerous eyes as I try taking another couple inches of him into my mouth. My throat contracts and I cough lightly. He groans, his hands move into my hair and pulls me away just a little.

"Slowly," he whispers.

I begin to move my head back and forth as I suck him, loving the slick friction of his cock sliding in and out from between my lips. Doing this right now to him makes me believe even more that Leo is the one that puts all my pieces back together.

He rocks his hips a little, and I hold still, letting him thrust as he pleases. He cradles my head in both of his hands and begins to rock in my mouth, very slowly, giving me time to adjust to him. His hot flesh slides against my lips, his cock passing over my tongue and slipping down my throat until I simply can't take any more of him. My throat contracts, pushing him back a little as I can't take too much more.

Leo lets me settle around him, as I give myself a moment to adjust to him. I then take Leo deeper down my throat. His thrusts become more powerful, and I open myself to him,

marveling that I'm actually here, actually doing this, kneeling between his legs and enjoying this so much.

Suddenly he pulls away and looks down at me. His pupils are dilated, and his breathing is coming hard and fast. I feel overheated, and my limbs tremble. My heart hammers inside of my chest. This is turning me on a lot more than I thought it would and I want him to have sex with me, but I also want to carry on.

"I'm going to cum." His thumb moves along my bottom lip.

Bringing my mouth back down, I take him in again and move up and down a little faster. His hands move into my hair, his grip tightens as he thrusts with the same rhythm as my mouth.

"Hope," Leo groans my name, and I feel the hot liquid hitting the back of my throat. It takes me a moment to adjust to it, as it's thick and keeps coming, but I swallow. I swallow every drop from him. Slowly, very slowly pulling away from him, I place my hands on his thighs as I let him free from my mouth.

I lick my lips, and Leo lifts my head up to look at him. "I'm not sure how that was for you, but for me, trust me, there's no way I'm going to stop you from doing it again. Amazing." Leaning forward he holds my hips and lifts me up to sit me on his lap.

Moving closer, I give him a little kiss. I want to do that again. I want to do that a lot more. It was the best thing I've done in a long time.

"If I touch you here," Leo's hand moves from my back to my stomach, then slowly to the waistband of my pants closer and closer, "would you be wet for me? Did that turn you on? Because I really want to fuck you now." His finger teases me, and I moan quietly. "Don't be so quiet Hope; I like it when you say my name." I look at him watching me, his eyes not leaving me and it's making me hotter. "So wet, so, so wet, moan my name, beautiful."

“Leo,” I moan against his lips, as he starts kissing me harder, our tongues dancing together. He picks me up as he stands, and places me on my feet as his hand moves down my back. He pulls my pants and panties down, quickly followed by his. Grabbing my bare bottom in his hands, I feel the smile of his lips against mine as he picks me up.

I feel Leo licking from the side of my neck up to my earlobe, making me moan ever so slightly. He takes a few steps, and I’m hoping it’s not to the bedroom. I’m not ready for that yet. Then I feel the coldness on my bottom, the table.

He softly pushes me back, and as I lie down, he leans down to take my nipple into his mouth. He sucks hard, then a little softer, then hard again. Every time he sucks on it hard I moan out his name.

As Leo’s mouth works on my nipples, I feel his hand moving down my stomach. As he reaches my clit, I jolt with the pleasure running through me. “I do love how wet you are,” I hear Leo say as his finger starts to enter me making me arch my back.

I do enjoy moaning out Leo’s name, and I do so more as his finger and thumb work their magic on me. My pelvis starts moving with Leo’s hand, and my fingers move into his hair as he comes back up to my lips.

“Are you ready?” Leo asks.

“Yes,” I whisper the only word that I can get out. I want him so much it hurts; it hurts when he’s not around me.

“Open your eyes, beautiful.”

Opening them, I see that Leo’s eyes are full of desire and I think mine are too. He pushes his cock inside me; he knows I want it and I do. I moan louder as he moves deeper inside me. His pace quickens, I can feel his cock pulsing against my insides.

“More,” I beg him. I want him so much. My hands move to his shoulders, our eyes are locked on each other. He begins to move faster and faster.

He put his hands against my stomach and pushes down. I'm pinned beneath his powerful thrusts and full of his magnificent cock. An animalistic groan comes from deep inside him, and I feel his cock begin to spasm.

I feel spurt after spurt of his cum filling me, and that pushes me over the edge. I cry out with bliss, his name leaving my lips. I never knew that sex could bring so much pleasure, so much light. This is like nothing I've ever experienced before. Like a new world has opened up to me now. We both gasp and moan and thrust against each other, begging each other to keep fucking, to keep coming, to keep this amazing feeling alive for as long as we can. I want it to go on forever.

Each mutual thrust gives me a new wave of orgasm that gradually ebbs as we slow and stop.

Leo leans forward and wraps his arms around me and kisses my jawline. He brushes the hair from my face as he continues to kiss me. I do like that he's so gentle after and looks after me.

Picking me up, he carries me over to the couch and lays me down. "I'm going to get a towel, so I can clean you up." Bending over, he gives me a kiss and puts the blanket over me. "Don't fall asleep," he says with a chuckle.

Snuggling up in the blanket, I stare at the TV at some commercial about beer. "Move over a little." Leo takes the towel and gently cleans me. My hand rests on his arm as he puts the towel to the side.

He looks down at me and softly with his finger moves my hair out of the way. "Can I join you in there?" His voice is so soft. I move back a little as he lifts the blanket and climbs underneath.

My hand rests on his chest. I feel his heart beating against it, and I smile. I smile that he found me and is treating me so gently and that even with how I am and what has happened to me, he still wants to be with me.

"I hope that smile is because you enjoyed yourself."

I start laughing and give him a kiss. “I’m smiling because I’m happy.”

“Then always stay happy, because you look beautiful when you smile.” He pulls the cover over us both. “Shall we go to sleep?” I bite my bottom lip; this is not where I sleep, this is not... “Stop thinking so much. I’m too tired to move, and you’re falling asleep.” His lips curl into a sexy smile, “So let’s finish watching the game and go to sleep.”

I close my eyes as I can’t seem to keep them open much longer. “Mmm,” is the only sound I make. I feel his lips on my forehead and wrap my arm over his chest as he turns onto his back.

This might just be the best sleep I’m ever going to have.

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CHAPTER 26

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LOOKING OVER AT THE DOOR, I see Jackson entering so I put my finger to my lips to tell him to stay quiet and I point to Hope sleeping on the couch. I just didn't have the heart to wake her when I got up. She got dressed last night before she fully went to sleep and this is the first time that she has slept the whole night without waking up from a nightmare or flinching in her sleep, so there was no way I was going to wake her up.

Jackson looks toward her as he makes his way over. "Have a good night?" He walks over to the coffee machine.

"Very."

Leaning on the counter, Jackson peers over at me. I don't have to tell him what happened. I can tell he knows, so I don't need to tell him anything.

He nods his head. "Glad for you both, just putting it out there. Never thought either one of us would find someone, but it looks like you have. So, when you have kids I'm a godparent, don't want to hear another thing about it."

I start laughing. Having kids is not even in my head one little bit, and I have no plans to even think about it yet. I just want Hope to smile in the house without thinking about what she's doing, so anything else after that I'm not thinking about.

"Please tell me you have something about her Uncle," I say as I make breakfast for us. I want to finish this damn business with Jack so I can finally move forward with Hope.

“Can I get some food in me first?” Jackson moves closer to see what I’m making.

“Should have had food at your place.”

He laughs. “Now we both know that won’t happen, so plate it up.” Jackson takes out some plates, he looks over at Hope, and I turn around as he nods.

I walk over as she starts to wake up. I kneel by the couch, “Morning beautiful.” I lean over and give her a kiss on the cheek. She rubs her eyes and looks around. “Breakfast is ready.”

Sitting up she looks around the room, then back to me. “I’m sorry,” she whispers to me.

This is one habit that I can’t wait to get out of her. “Never say sorry. I might not make breakfast as good as you, but I think I pass.” I sit next to her. “Hope, I really need you to feel at home here, never feel like you have to do everything,” I tell her. I just want her to make this her home and do what she wants around here.

“I’m trying, then something in my head just flicks on or something,” she tells me as I take her hand in mine and she leans on my shoulder. “I’ll try harder.”

She has finally started to eat a little more, almost half a plate full of food and that’s making me happy as I know she’ll be able to get the thoughts out of her head as soon as she’s strong enough to fight them.

“Go freshen up, then breakfast and we can go later to see your friend.” I haven’t been at work much this week, and that’s because I wanted to spend my week with Hope, but next week I have lots of meetings including the one with Jackson and We Are Loved. So, I really have to go back to work. Otherwise, my dad will be coming over wanting to know what I’m doing.

Joining Jackson in the kitchen I enquire, “So, what did you find?”

“Well, Joseph’s murder is in the news. They say that the warehouse was burned to a crisp and that they won’t find any

DNA there. At the moment, they think that another nightclub might have been behind it. They'll close the case without any answers."

Well, that's a good sign for us. Jackson and I always said that the moment we thought we would get caught we would stop no matter what. I mean I want to kill that man, but I want to live my life too. I was a prisoner for so long, and I don't want to be a prisoner again.

"And what about Jack?"

Jackson goes to say something but stops; I look at where his eyes are to see Hope walking over to the kitchen. "Morning beautiful."

"Morning Jackson," I hear as she gets some water for herself. I really want to get her to drink something warmer like tea or coffee in the morning.

"So, what did you find out about him?" I ask. There's no point hiding all this from Hope, she wants this to end just as much as we do.

"I spoke to this one asshole, and he said that someone was coming to New York last night and this man holds a lot of power." Jackson's eyes move between Hope and me. "I've got a few people to keep their ears to the ground and see what they hear." Jackson holds his eyes with me for a moment.

"Hope, can you please set up breakfast?" I ask as Jackson and I walk out to the yard. "Spit it out, you're holding something back," I tell him. Hope might not know when he's hiding something, but he must have taken a stupid pill this morning. Jackson looks back into the house at Hope. "Jackson!" I shout his name.

"Someone said that he's here because he's found *her*. Now I don't know if they're talking about Hope, but—"

"The chance of it being Hope is high," I cut him off as I watch her through the window. "Fuck."

"You have to tell her," Jackson says, and I already know that I just don't want to.

“Yeah, I know.” We make our way back to the house. “Stay close today, we’re going to see her friend and ... I don’t...” I pause again. I don’t want her to go see her friend just in case, but I can’t tell her to hide away either.

“I’m close, let me know when you go to the park and I’ll be close by,” Jackson tells me.

Maybe the bastard doesn’t know where Hope is, but I’m not taking any chances. If he finds her, I want Jackson close enough to get her away from him.

“Would you like some coffee or juice?” Hope brings the plates to the table and I look over at Jackson to let him know that we are talking to her now about it.

“Coffee please.”

Sitting down, I wait for Hope to join us. “You really need to fix that fucking tile,” Jackson says as he looks behind me, making me turn around as Hope walks past it and glances down at it. “You can tell the tile annoys the hell out of her.” I start laughing.

As Hope sits down, I give her a nudge. “Someone is coming to rip out the tiles next week, so you better pick a new design,” I tell her.

“I was thinking wood floors that run all through the kitchen and the dining area, so that it’s all the same, but it’s your house so—”

“It’s *our* house. We can do that, have you picked any out?”

“No, I’ll have a look in the book.”

“Hope, we need to talk about something—”

“He’s found me. I kind of thought that when you and Jackson went outside.” I can hear the nervousness in her voice, and I’m worried about how it’s going to affect her.

“We don’t know, it’s just what we hear at the moment, but Jackson will let us know the second he finds something out.”

Hope looks down at her food and starts playing with it with her fork. She better not be shutting down on me. I know

that she knows I won't let anything happen to her, so I need her to still have faith that everything will be okay.

“What time do you want to leave to see your friend?” I ask her. I need to get her out of the thoughts that she's having. If she talked to me about the thoughts I wouldn't mind so much, but she's keeping them to herself, and that will make her go crazy.

“You still want to go?”

“Yes, you're not hiding. Hope, I'll do anything to protect you, so I don't care how many times I fall, I'll get up until I know that you're safe.”

She goes to say something but stops; I think my words came out in a firm tone, enough for her to know that we *are* going. I look over at Jackson, as I feel he has something to say.

“What?”

“I just think that it won't be an easy, torture kill. He seems too smart for that. It might just have to be that you kill him when you get the chance.” He moves his attention over to Hope, then back to me. I take a quick glance at her too to see how she is reacting.

“You won't find him alone,” Hope adds. I look over to her as she continues to play with her food. Her hands are shaking, and it's clear that she's scared. Her breathing rate has started to pick up. Something is preying on her mind right now and if I ask her, she might shut down on me.

“Hey,” I say, placing my hand on hers. “Eat something, then have a shower, get dressed. Don't worry about anything.”

She's going to worry about this every second of the day until it's over. I have no idea how to reassure her when I know myself what he's like. To me he is still the man that abused me, hurt me, but to Hope, he's so much more. He's the man that took her in when her family was taken away from her. He was the man that was meant to look after her, but instead, he hurt her, abused her, raped her and then sold her. Even after he sold her, he was still there to make sure she was following the

rules. She knows him a lot better than we do, but my worry is that she's scared he'll take her back.



Later we walk to the café so that Hope can get her friend some coffee and food. She hasn't said much since this morning, and I haven't asked her anything because I don't want to upset her.

"Would you like to have lunch somewhere today?" I ask. Now, I'm not really a person that likes to eat out or be out in public for very long, but I know a few places that know me well enough to give me my own space. That was the mistake I made last time. I should have called my friend ahead of time and asked him to get me a table at the side of the restaurant, but I didn't think. So I won't be making that mistake again.

"Don't mind." I watch her as she walks around people with her head down. I expected her to hide away from everyone knowing that Jack is in New York. She asked me before we left if it was better going to visit her friend in the evening and when I asked why she looked away. I suppose I already knew the answer to that question. She's more comfortable in the dark outside; less people and because she knows all the little cracks on the pavement she won't ever have to look up. To anyone, she would just be a ghost.

I don't reply. I'm going to wait until we head back home to see how her mood is. I open the door to the café. "Would you like anything?" I ask her, as she grabs two sandwiches and some water for her friend.

"No thank you." She places the things on the counter. I order myself a coffee and a hot chocolate for Hope. It's getting much colder now. I hand it to her, and she frowns. "What's this?"

"A hot chocolate." She takes the cup from me as we walk out of the café. She takes the lid off and looks inside. "Hope, I promise it will taste nice." I can't help but smile at her. She's the cutest person I've ever seen.

I watch her take a sip and lick her lips. She glances up at me. “Thank you, this is really nice.”

I pull her closer to me as I see a group of businessmen walking out of one of the offices. Her grip on my jacket tightens as they walk past us. She hangs her head and looks at the pavement as we make our way to the park.

Jackson told me that he would be close just in case anything happens; we both need to be ready for anything. I know how fucked up that man is so he’ll do what he wants when he wants and I have to find a way to get one step ahead of him.

Making our way to the tunnel, I stand a few steps back as she hugs her friend and gives her the food. I can’t fully hear what they are saying, but I can hear the odd word here and there. Hope takes off her jacket and gives it to her friend. Taking a deep breath, I shake my head. I take my coat off and walk over to wrap it around her. Hope’s friend looks at me with a smile. Returning it, I take a few steps back so they can carry on talking.

“Looks like he’s been there to help you. You look healthier, happier.”

I smile and feel good that Hope looks happier to her friend, as that’s all I’ve ever wanted for her.

“I’m happy with him,” I hear Hope reply. Taking a few more steps away from them both, I light up a cigarette and lean on the wall as I watch them talking.

As I stand there, I think about the charity We Are Loved. I’m in a position to help in more ways than that, and I think I’m going to talk to the doctor on Monday about a few other ideas I have.

I push myself off the wall as Hope makes her way to the other side of the tunnel and I remember what it’s for, so I leave her for a moment, but I still take enough steps closer to see what’s happening around her.

“I thought I told you to never look up.” Hope freezes and I glare at the man walking close to her. I quickly walk toward

her, but I'm stopped by two men who move me back a few steps.

Hope screams as her Uncle grabs a handful of her hair and throws her to the ground. "I told you I'd always find you!" he shouts at her.

Hope's gaze drops to the floor. *Come on Hope look at me.*

"You must be the man that's looking for me," he takes a step forward. This fucker doesn't even know who I am. My attention moves to Hope again, and her head moves to the side so that I can see her.

"What do you want? You're killing a lot of people that I do business with." He looks back at Hope then at me with an evil grin on his ugly face. "Talking about business, this one is for sale, but I also know that she is worth—"

"Fuck you, asshole." I push one of the guys out of the way to make my way over to him. "You look at me and tell me that you don't know who I am!" I yell. This fucker *will* know who I am and he *will* know who's going to kill him.

He looks me up and down then his eyes connect with mine, and we stare at each other for a moment. He starts laughing and a rush of cold blood runs through me as I remember him laughing like that once he was finished with me.

"Leo... Leo, Leo, Leo. You ran. You know, I haven't found anyone like you again."

"You're one fucked up man, and I can't wait to kill you."

He kneels and grabs a handful of Hope's hair and pulls her to stand up. "Just like this girl here; never found anyone like you either." He moves his face closer to her.

"Don't you fucking dare touch her!" I shout at him. "Hope, look at me." It takes her a moment, but her eyes lock with mine. "Do you trust me?" She gives me the smallest nod. "I'll find you. I promise I'll find you."

Her uncle starts laughing again. "This is just so sweet, but I'm going to enjoy having to train you again." He slaps Hope

hard across the face which just pushes me.

I push one of the men and take quick steps toward her, but I'm stopped again when the other one punches me in the face. As I hit the ground, he continues to kick me in the stomach. He pauses briefly as I'm on the ground, so I grab my phone from my pocket and ring Jackson before putting the phone back in my pocket. I try to stand up, but get punched in the back.

"Get him up!" Jack shouts. One of the guys goes to grab me, but I push him off me. "Now Leo, this is what I'm going to do, because I like you. I'm in New York for a week then I'm leaving. So you have a week, to find me. You haven't had much luck finding me, but if I'm in New York, I'm making it easy for you."

I'd say something to him, but he knows just as well as I do that if I don't find him in the week, he'll become a ghost in my life again. This is my only chance to find him.

He looks at Hope and pulls her closer to himself, gives her another slap and whispers something into her ear and I watch as her body shake.

She tries to fight her way out of his grip but it's tight around her hair, she's crying now as I hear her sobs.

Taking a step closer to her again, I receive a hard punch to the stomach, and I start coughing as I try to get my breathing back to normal. I look over at Hope and signal to her with a nod. I need her to break free and run.

I grit my teeth and hiss at Jack, "I'll find you, and when I do, I'm going to make you scream the same way you made every child you took scream." I glare at him, our eyes locked. "I'm going to make sure that you will never hurt—"

"You really think you can find me? You've been hunting me for so long but nothing." He pushes Hope to the ground again, as he walks over to me.

"Hope run!" I shout, and I watch as she scrambles to her feet and sets off as fast as her legs will carry her away from this.

“Get her!” Jack shouts at one of the guys. Then he turns back to me. “I have to know one thing. How did you do it? Escape and not just alone but with Jackson?”

Where the fuck is Jackson? He said he was going to stay close, so he should be here now. “I wouldn’t tell you anything,” I look behind him as I hear Hope screaming and I try to fight to see if she’s okay, but the guy smacks me in the face again.

“Now I’m going to get what belongs to me, and you’re time now begins.” I look at the guy coming back and smile at the fact that Hope isn’t with him.

I look to the side when I hear a gunshot, hitting the man to my left. I look at Jackson, “Go find Hope, now!” I tell him, and he knows that I can look after myself. I watch Jackson running in the same direction that Hope ran. I turn to face Jack again. “If anything happens to her, I promise you one thing. Your death will be very, *very* painful.”

“You have to find me first.”

The guy hits me across the face once more, and it’s fucking hard enough to knock me back a little. I watch them walking away and I try to get my balance, my ribs are hurting from the amount the fucker was kicking me.

I walk in the direction that Jackson went. I need to find her. I told her I would find her.

I find Jackson but no sign of Hope. “Where is she?” I ask as panic grips me. “What’s that?” I point to his hand.

“Her phone and I found a knife with blood on it. It could be anyone’s—”

“I heard her screaming, and it’s fresh blood.” I take the knife from him. “Hope!” I yell her name a few times to make sure that she can hear me. We search the area, but there’s no sign of her. Where the fuck is she?

“Leo, let’s stand for a moment,” I hear Jackson say from behind me. Ignoring him I continue to walk through the park, she can’t be too far. Then my mind takes me back to the first night at the restaurant, she was gone at a click of a finger,

nowhere to be found. If she's out there, she's gone far enough to hide. *Really* hide.

I stop and stand in the middle of open space, looking around as I wipe the blood from my lip. My face fucking hurts. Rubbing my forehead, I feel Jackson standing next to me.

“Breathe and let's focus. You want to find Hope, I want to find Hope. But first, tell me what *he* said so that information is out of your head and you can focus on her.”

“The only thing I can think about is Hope!” I shout, but he knows me well enough to know that in a small part of my head I'm replaying what he said to me.

I let out a long breath. “He's here for a week, that's the timeline he's given me. Then he'll be a ghost to us again.”

“We have a week and when we find him just put a fucking bullet between his eyes. There's no way that we can get him to a warehouse.” Jackson stands in front of me. “Just finish this nightmare for all of us and then live a happy life with Hope.”

“I need to find her first,” I tell him as I shout out her name once more, she needs to know that I'm here.

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CHAPTER 27

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HOPE

I BRING my knees closer as I hideaway. I have no idea if they're still after me, but I ran. I ran so fast that I didn't get a chance to look behind me. Leo told me to run, so I did, but then Jack sent someone to get me, and when they grabbed me I thought that was it. He was going to take me back to the place I had finally escaped. But I didn't want to go back. I *can't* go back. I've seen what my life can be like away from him; seen what my life can be like with Leo and that's the life I want. I want to live my life with Leo.

The moment the man grabbed me, I saw the knife in his hands, and I panicked. The second my body hit the floor I started kicking my feet and I got lucky. I kicked him in the face, and he lost control of his hand and just cut me a little on my forearm.

So here I am. I found this little tunnel a long time ago on a night out walking. It seems like no one else knows about it, or they don't come here as I've never seen anyone here before. I don't blame them it's so small in here; you could get maybe three people inside. And at the moment I know that no one will find me here and that's good with me, although, that also means that Leo won't find me. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath. If I leave when it's dark, I can make it back to Leo's house and go back to being a ghost on the street and just hope that Jack won't be out there.

"I thought I'd come to see how you're behaving." Uncle Jack sits on the bed, his hand moving up my thigh. "I've heard

that you're starting to fight a little, do I need to show you the rules again?"

I shake my head. I don't want him to ever touch me again, ever. I still feel him on my skin; feel his breath on me.

His hand starts moving up my top, resting on my stomach.

Taking a deep breath as I open my eyes, my body shivers at the memory.

The words he whispered in my ear made me cry inside. I can't let him find me; I can't let him get me. *"The moment we get back, I'm going to make sure that every part of your body remembers me again."* The fucked up thing is, I *do* remember everything, the only time I don't is when Leo is touching me.

Wrapping Leo's coat tighter around me, I look at my hands as they continue to shake. I can still hear Jack's voice in my head.

I was free. I was free, and now I'm a prisoner again in this dark world I tried to escape, but no matter how much I try to run he'll always find me. The memories will always follow me.

Pulling the coat around me as I lie down, I wait for the stars to come out and then I can go home.



Crawling out of the tunnel, I look to see how dark it is and how many people are outside right now. If I go the back way, it will take me about an hour to get to Leo's house. Or I can go through the busy route and get there a lot faster. I mean Leo must be really worried; there's part of me that believes he's still out there looking for me. He promised that he'd find me and Leo wouldn't lie to me.

Looking around, it must be late now. Jackson will have dragged Leo back home by now as it must be coming close to midnight. *Right Hope, time to get back to being invisible.* It's

not like I was full of confidence and walking around letting people look at me, but I was starting to let myself be free a little so it won't be too hard to do.

I walk up the small hill to get out of the park. There's no one around at this time which is a good thing for me as I can make it out a lot quicker. When I get to the road, even though it's so late, there are still people around.

I put my head down as I make my way past a group that is drinking and doing drugs. They say a few things to me, and I ignore them as I pick my pace up a little. If I turn around to look at them, it will make them think I want to talk, but all I want is to get home.

I can't remember the last time I was this scared to be out here alone. Walking to work when I first started I think, it was a new road and I didn't really know the way but after a week or so, I was fine as I remembered how to get there and back without having to look up. I know most of the way back to Leo's, but there are some roads that I don't know well enough unless I look up.

"Well, aren't you just a beauty?" a man says as I go to cross the road. He grabs my arm. "I'm talking to you sweetheart."

"Please, let go of me," I manage to say in the smallest voice, and the moment his hand loosens around my arm, I make an escape.

"Get back here!" one of the men shouts, and without looking behind me I continue to run, but I hear them behind me.

Dashing between the buildings, I find the right road that leads to Leo's house. I know it's not far from here, I'm sure of it. I hide behind one of the buildings while I get my breath back, taking in the roads around me to figure out where I am. I hear footsteps gaining on me, so I duck further into the shadows as they run past me. I kneel down for a moment just to get my surrounding settled in my mind, five minutes away, I'm sure of it. A few blocks out of the busy crowd then I know

the way from there, just need to get through the rush now without running into them again.

Getting up, I start making my way out onto the street again. Looking both ways, I make a quick move trying to get out of the rush of people. People will be coming out of the clubs soon, and I want to get out before that happens.

Running for the last few blocks, I see the same group of men from earlier and my heart is beating faster. I'm so close, so close to Leo. I move quickly through the buildings to the other side so that I can get out of the busy area. As I get out of the side street, I bump into one of the guys that were running behind me.

I dodge away from them before they can grab me. *Three streets away now, I can make it.* I look over my shoulder to see they're still following me. Why are they following me? Why? Wiping the tears away from my cheeks, I feel a little relief when I have Leo's street in sight.

I take another look over my shoulder and see that they are still coming after me, so I pick up my speed to increase the gap between us. *Please, Leo, be awake, please.*

Running up to the house, I start banging on the door as I look over my shoulder to see them getting closer. I hammer harder and louder at the wood. *Please open the door.*

The door opens, and I jump in and quickly slam the door behind me.

"Hope!" Jackson pulls me in for a hug, and I don't fight him.

"Hope," I hear Leo say as Jackson lets me go. Leo pulls me and wraps his arms tight around me. "Are you okay? You're shaking." He rubs my back to calm me down.

I jump when I hear the guys shouting outside. I hear Jackson open the door and my body tenses up again. "Hope." Leo moves to my eye level then looks over at the door as the men are out on the street looking around.

"Have you seen a girl running past here, long dark hair?" one of them yells, and Leo's hands leave my body, but I

quickly stop him. I just want him to hold me.

“I’ve got this,” Jackson tells him.

“Please don’t leave me,” I whisper, as Leo pulls me closer and I start crying into his chest.

I hear some shouting outside, but nothing that I can make out, just listening to Leo’s heartbeat is enough to calm me down.

“Come on,” Leo starts walking, but I don’t unwrap my arms from him. “Take a seat.” He lowers me down onto the couch and his hands move to my neck, lifting my face. “I’ve been looking for you for hours, Jackson made me come home.” His eyes move over my body as he turns my arms. “Where were you cut?”

“Just a little cut here,” I tell him pointing to my arm. My body has finally stopped shaking, and I just want Leo to hold me. Hold me to take all the pain away from me.

“Hope, have a drink.” Jackson places a glass of water on the table. “Those guys won’t ever be looking at another girl or woman again,” Jackson tells Leo, as I just stare at him.

“Where were you? We looked over every inch of that park.” Taking the water as Leo hands it to me, my hands begin to shake again. “Let me.” He brings the water to my lips, and I take a small sip and pull away from him.

“I just want a shower please.” I want to wash him off. I want to wash his touch off me, his breath off me, just the feeling of him off me.

Jackson tells Leo, “I’ll order a pizza. She’s still in shock about it all.” I slowly stand on trembling legs as Jackson talks to Leo. I know they both want to know where I was, what happened after I ran, but I want to shower then I want to lie down and sleep.

As I make my way up the stairs, I feel Leo’s hand on my lower back. As I make my way to my room, I look down at my hands which are shaking so badly now.

“You need to take your pills.” Leo walks over to my medication and takes out what I need. “Here, then take a warm shower, sit in front of the fireplace and have some food. You have to eat.” He walks me over to the bathroom the moment I have taken my pills.

I hear the water and lean on the counter for a moment as I start to feel light headed again. “Come here.” Leo helps me undress as I don’t have the energy to do it. “Do these hurt?” I look down at where he’s pointing.

“I didn’t even know they were there,” I tell him, as I look at the bruise.

Moving my hair out of the way, he kisses my forehead. “I would have looked all night for you, I’m sorry.” Pulling away from me, he continues to undress me and the moment all my clothes are off, I watch Leo undress. “Come on, let’s get in.”

I close my eyes as the water runs over my body, and as Leo wraps his arms around me, I start crying all the tears I’ve been holding in for so long.

“You’re safe.”

“Please don’t let him take me again.”

“Not going to happen, the next time I see him, I’ll be putting a bullet between his eyes.”

Leo’s touch leaves my body, and I already feel lost without it. Opening my eyes, I watch Leo with the body wash. “Turn around.” I do as he asks and I feel him softly washing my body but then he moves in front of me and I flinch as he reaches my stomach. “I’ll be gentle,” he whispers.

Nodding, I look at the bruises covering my body. There’s one part of me that Leo hasn’t said anything about, my face. Uncle Jack hit me twice. I know my lip is cut and I know that there’s bound to be a bruise too.

Taking a step back under the water, Leo joins me, his hand on my back as the water washes the soap away. I gaze up at Leo, as his fingers move away some of my hair and his thumb moves over my lip.

Taking his hand in mine, I stop him moving his thumb. “I know you tried to look for me. I know that you would have never stopped looking.”

“Never.”

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CHAPTER 28

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JOINING Jackson in the sitting room, I flip open the pizza box and take a slice and go sit on the couch. I thought this night was never going to end. I thought I wouldn't see Hope again and that was causing more heartache for me than I ever imagined possible.

I know that she's a survivor. I mean after everything she's been through she's still standing, and that just shows she has a lot more willpower than anyone else I know.

"You can ask it," I say without looking at him. I know that Jackson has wanted to say something to me the moment we couldn't find Hope. I already know what the question is, but I've been too scared to say it out loud. I know that I can treat Hope better than anyone else out there; I know that I can look after her, so why am I so scared to admit it?

"Are you falling in love with Hope?"

Leaning back into the couch, I sigh, "Past falling." I turn to look at him. "I'm in love with her." Then I move my focus to the blank TV screen waiting for him to say something.

"I thought being in love was meant to make a man feel happy, you don't look happy." He joins me on the couch and hands me a beer.

"Don't think that I will be—"

"I'm going to stop you there." He leans forward tilting his head toward me. "Don't think that you can't be good enough for her, okay? Don't think that you can't make her happy. We both know that you'll be the best thing to happen to her and

she'll be the same for you. So how about we finish what we started, so you and Hope can finally be happy and forget the past?"

"I don't think either one of us will ever forget the past. That shit is burned into us." The memories are burned into every cell of my body; no amount of time will ever take that shit out of my head.

"I agree, it is, but you need to start looking at the life you can have with her if you just let it happen." Jackson stops talking when Hope walks into the room and sits in front of the fireplace.

Maybe Jackson is right. If I stop overthinking everything, I can have some sort of normal life. All I know is I can't think about my life unless Hope is in it.

"Can I take a look at your arm?" I ask sitting in front of her as Jackson goes to the kitchen to get the first aid box for me. Hope pushes the sleeve of her sweater up and puts out her arm for me. "It's not deep at all, just needs a clean and that's it." Moving my hands down her arms to her hands, I frown. We had finally got them to look healthy and one night in the cold and they looked fucked up again. "Did you put some lotion on?"

"Yeah," she sounds broken and exhausted. Just listening to her cry in the shower brought the biggest lump to my throat.

Taking the first aid box from Jackson, I get out antiseptic wipes and clean the cut on Hope's arm as Jackson hands her a plate of food. She takes it but just stares at it.

"You'll feel better once you eat something."

"Can I go to sleep? I just want to sleep."

I wish she'd eat, but I understand that food is the last thing on her mind right now. "Yeah, get some sleep. You'll feel better in the morning." I smile reassuringly and take the plate from her. Without another word, she leaves. Have I just gone back to step one with her? I hope not. I was finally getting her to smile, and I want to see that smile every damn day.

Jackson pats my back. “I think we all need to get some sleep. I’ll be over in the morning. We *will* find him.” I nod and smile weakly as he leaves. Once I’m alone, I sit staring at the fireplace.

Jack knows I’m looking for him. He practically challenged me to find him. And even though he’s in New York, I know it might be as hard to see him again as it was before. Tomorrow every hotel will be looked at, every pimp house, I want this man dead.

Once upstairs, I stand in the doorway and I watch Hope lying on the floor looking out of the window, no cover, no pillow. Taking a deep breath, I walk over to her and lie in front of her. “What happened to sleeping with a pillow?”

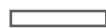
“I like sleeping like this.”

“Hope, by the end of this week I promise that Jack will be dead. And you can finally be free.” I push her hair over her shoulder so that I can see her face. “This is just a bump in the road to freedom. You’ll smile every day. I miss your smile.”

“Will you hold me?”

“Yes.” Pulling her closer to me, I place my arm under her head. Feeling her breath on my chest, I wait until it becomes steady and I know that she’s sleeping before I pull the blanket on top of us.

By the end of the week, I’m going to get her to sleep in my bed too. I know she doesn’t like beds, but the winter is coming, and I know that my room will be a lot better for her than this one. I’ll show her why tomorrow.



“I don’t think he’ll be in a high-end hotel. Wouldn’t he want to stay low key?” I say as I pour coffee for myself and Jackson. “So, what about some of the cheap hotels? Have a look into them.” Leaving him in the kitchen, I walk to the stairs as I see Hope coming down. “Morning beautiful.”

“Morning.”

“Feeling better?”

“A little, thank you.” She goes to walk downstairs, but I stop her.

“I want to show you something. If you won’t sleep in a bed or with a cover, I want you to start sleeping in my room.” Taking her hand in mine, I walk her to my bedroom.

“But—”

“But nothing,” I stop her before she can tell me some stupid reason to why she can’t. “Trust me, you’ll find it better in here, and the view is still really nice. I promise.” Opening the door to my room, I walk in with her.

I watch her as she goes over to the window. She doesn’t look at anything else.

“At night it’s really nice,” I say as I stand next to her. “So, the reason I want you to sleep in here tonight is that of this.” I point behind her and wait for her to turn around.

I see the smile on her lips, and that makes me so happy right now. “Tonight we can sleep in front of the fireplace. I thought this way you won’t be uncomfortable with a blanket on you, but you’ll still be warm at night.”

Placing my hand on her lower back, she leans back a little, making me move my whole body behind her to that she can lean on me. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

I kiss her cheek and she turns around and wraps her arms around me. I just hold her for a moment; a moment that feels perfect.

Later, sitting at the dining table, I watch Hope eating a little of her breakfast as Jackson works at looking for Jack. We also have that big meeting today with We are Loved which I can’t cancel. My dad keeps asking why I’ve been missing work, and if I cancel this, then he’ll be asking again. The other reason I need to be there is that the doctor is also coming after I called her about the plan too.

“Right, I’m in court this morning; soon as I’m out, I’ll be over at the office for the meeting.” Jackson closes the laptop and gets his things together. “Right beautiful, I’ll see you this afternoon.” He gives me a nod too and leaves.

“What’s happening this afternoon?”

“Well, you’re coming to work with me today. I’m not leaving you alone at home.” Her body tenses up, but I don’t care what fight she’s going to have with me, she’s coming, and I’m not changing my mind about it either.

“Okay.”

Finishing our breakfast, I told Hope to go up and get dressed. She did ask a few times what she should wear as she doesn’t want to embarrass me in front of my employees. That did make me laugh, I think it’s the first time I’ve laughed like that in a while. I think today she will see that everyone at work fears me and won’t even think about saying anything about her.

“Ready?” I walk into her room. She’s putting on her lotion.

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“Let’s go then.”



“Morning John.”

“Morning Mr. Masters, morning Hope.”

Getting in the car, Hope moves close to me and I take her hand in mine to relax her. Nodding her head, she looks out of the window as I reply to work emails on my phone. It doesn’t take us long to get to work, and the moment the car stops Hope’s hand tightens on my thigh. John opens the door for her and, taking a deep breath, she gets out of the car.

“You’ll be fine, head up high,” I whisper to her as we make our way into the building. I nod my head to everyone that says morning to me. As I get to the office, I look over at Katie, and her attention moves behind me to Hope. “Get me a

coffee and then let me know when they arrive,” I say walking into the office.

Placing my jacket on the chair, I watch Hope as she walks around the office looking at everything. I never thought I would want a girl in here, but it does feel nice having her here, walking around proud to be my girlfriend. I’ve never asked Hope to be my girlfriend, but I don’t think we need to really have that conversation; we both know that it’s more than a casual boyfriend/girlfriend relationship. This is so deep I think it touches the soul.

“You have a lot of degrees,” Hope points to the wall as she looks back at me.

“Yeah. When I got away from *them*, I thought I’d take my second chance and do something with my life. Make the most of it, you know?”

She smiles. ‘Yes, I get that.’ She continues to take in the certificates and pictures on my walls.

“What did you want to do when you were a kid?” She never got to go to high school or college or follow the dreams that she once had.

“I don’t know, never really thought about it. Any hope of anything was tortured out of me.” She stops at a picture of Jackson and me after a baseball game at school. She’s gone quiet, and I don’t blame her, she’s looking at a life that she could have had.

“Did you bring your e-reader?” I ask her changing the subject.

“Yep.”

Waiting for my computer to load up, I look up at the door as Katie walks in with my coffee. “Is there anything else you’ll need, Mr. Masters?”

“No.”

“You have a few messages which I’ve put on your desk and the woman that you had a pitch with last week has been

waiting here all morning to talk to you.”

Now that has my attention. “How long?”

“She says she’s been here since six this morning.”

“What was her pitch again?”

“The fitness app.”

“Send her in.” She must be one of two things. One, she has a better pitch that I won’t find boring, or two, she just wants me to bring her back down from the high that she thinks she is on, by having a new idea.

I look at Hope sitting down on the small couch that I have to the side of the office. The door opens, and I hold my finger up before she can say anything to me. “What was your name again?”

“Mr. Masters my name is Amber. I came last week about the fitness app.”

“Yes, I remember, and before you bore me about that again, the reason I said no was because there’s nothing different about your app and the million already out there.”

“Sir, if I could just—”

“You have one minute to make me change my mind.”

“If I can have one more meeting with you in one month, I can come back with a new app, new idea, everything. I know that you don’t take interviews easily and I had to wait a year for my last one, but if you can give me a month—”

“Stop. I didn’t tell you to beg for an interview with me. I told you to tell me what the app is.” I cut her off. If everyone found out that I was letting people just sit outside my office and wait for me to see them, there will be hundreds of people out there.

“I’m working on a safety app for girls, an app that, if they are in danger a signal will go to the police. I don’t know how yet, but I’ll work hard for a month if you agree to see me.”

“What’s in the folder?”

“The very first rough draft of the app.”

“Leave that here and go,” I tell her. She stares, wide-eyed at me for a moment; a moment longer than anyone else has.

“My number and email are in here. Thank you.” Placing the folder on the table, she doesn’t say another word and leaves the office.

Picking up the file, I add it to the pile of things that I have to read today.

“I can feel you watching me.” I look over at Hope then back down at the papers. “They need to know that they have to work hard to get the money.”

“Didn’t say anything.”

“I know, but you’re looking at me.” I look through my eyelashes at her as she looks back at her reader. I do wonder what she’s thinking, and I don’t want her to fear me. This side of me is just the business side of me, not the man she is at home with.



Hope sat in with us on the meeting with We Are Loved. She took her reader with her and sat at the table as we met. Jackson was happy to join the group and the team was pleased to have Jackson on board. I told them about the building and how the doctor was going to take part as well. The team was a little taken back by it, saying that it was going to be a lot bigger than they had planned and that they weren’t prepared for all of this. Jackson and I informed them that they will be working with a few members that we have hand-picked to help them, so now they will have to add everything together and make a new plan. We’ll be looking for someone to make the building safe for this charity to work.

Sitting in the office, Jackson tells me about some of the hotels that look good for where Jack might be staying. We’ll go tonight. I glance at Hope as she keeps glancing over at me.

“Can I read through this please?” She points to the We Are Loved file.

“Sure.” I turn back to Jackson. “I’m taking my shot the second I see him, and I don’t care who’s around me.”

“About that, as your friend, I agree, but as your lawyer, I think we do have to play this right. You kill him in front of people, and you’ll be in prison for life. *Life Leo.*” He glances over his shoulder at Hope. “Do you really want that?”

“Then what other option do we have?” I’m not leaving Hope, I have a plan set for us after all this is done and me being behind bars is not one of them.

“You’re not going to like it—”

“Spit it out.”

“If Hope is around, you can shoot him in public, and I can fight that her Uncle abused her and was trying to kidnap her and you were protecting yourself *and* your girlfriend. With all the doctor’s notes, the court will see the trauma that she’s been through. You’ll be fine, and nothing will happen.”

Throwing my files on the desk, I lean back in the chair and look at Hope.

“I agree with Jackson,” she says without even looking up from the file.

So, they both want me to use Hope as bait? Now I don’t think that’s the best idea and I would prefer to do this without using her. “No.” My tone must have been firm as they both stay quiet. My eyes lock with Jackson, and I shake my head, telling him that will never happen, *ever*.

He shakes his head and hands me a paper with the list of hotels on it. I close my eyes for a moment as just the thought of last night still has me on edge. To make things worse, I didn’t sleep at all.

Without opening my eyes, I already know who is walking through the door. “I’ve told you enough times, when this dick is in the office you’re not allowed in here, Katie,” I tell her. She flirts with him way too much for my liking, and he’s just

as bad, as he teases her. I won't let him fuck her as she's good at her job, but I'm at that point that if they do—because I know him well enough to be sure he won't call her or even look at her again—I'm going to let them.

“You can be a dick,” I hear Jackson say.

I open my eyes and glare at them both. “Just fuck each other and get it over with. And Katie, the next time I see you here when he's here, you might have to find a new job.”

“Sorry, Mr. Masters. I've been sent this email and the subject says it should only be opened by Hope.”

“Forward it over to me.” I wave my hand letting her know that she can leave.

Jackson walks around to my side of the desk. “First, I'll fuck her just to piss you off and second Jack's watching us.”

I grin at the fucker. “First, I'm impressed that you haven't fucked her already and second why do you think Hope is here? I knew he would be watching.” I tell him. I thought that Jack had eyes on me last night at the park; I kept getting the feeling that someone was watching me. In my head, I kept thinking it was Hope, but my gut was telling me it was him.

“Hope, you want to read this?”

“No.” I didn't think she would, but I wanted to give her the option.

Opening the email, as Jackson stands beside me, I read the email aloud.

You know where to find me; I told you things about me. The night we spoke after I taught you, we had a little chat. Think back to a time I mentioned New York and think back to what I was doing to you then. Think about how I made you feel that day, and you'll know where to find me.

Love Uncle Jack.

I look over at Hope who's still reading the file, but I also know that she listened to everything I just said. So now she'll be thinking back to all the times he abused her so that she can remember the time he mentioned it.

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CHAPTER 29

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HOPE

HIS HANDS ARE MOVING *over my body, it's like a needle piercing me over and over again. Closing my eyes, I let the tears escape me.*

"Your skin feels better each time," Uncle Jack tells me as his tongue moves around my ear. "I'm never going to forget you, and you will never forget me."

He climbs off me, his hand still on my stomach, to make sure that I can still feel him. The voice inside my head is laughing. Does he really think I will ever forget his touch? No matter how many people touch me after this, his touch will always be the one I remember.

"I'm going to do so much to you one day, there is this place in New York; the museum of sex. I haven't been there, but I've heard a few things about that place." Uncle Jack sits up, bringing his leg around me.

There is nothing that I hate more than this, he always goes too far; I choke too much, and it hurts.

"Hey," I jump at the touch on my leg, "Hope?"

I look up and around the room realizing I'm still back at home, safe. I then turn to Leo. "Sorry," I say with a shaky voice, and I start looking at the file again.

The moment Leo read out the email so many thoughts have been running through my mind. So many nights, so many

words. At the moment, my head has so many awful memories churning around and all I want to do is hide in a dark place.

Jackson told Leo to use me as bait and I agreed. The quickest way to finish this is to give me to him. I trust Leo so much that I know he would never let Uncle Jack take me, *never*. This can all be ended today if Leo just agrees.

The thought of being near that evil man again makes my body shiver in horror, but I do feel this is the best way. I trust Leo with my life and I know he will make sure I'm safe. I know he doesn't *want* to do it this way and I'm going to back him in whatever he chooses. So, if he feels he can find him, kill him and save himself from going to prison, then I trust him with that too.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, just reading this, that's all." I know what game Jack is playing and if he gets the upper hand he'll kill Leo before he can say a word to him.

"How about we stop lying and you tell me what's going through your head."

All day I've kept to myself. I've let them talk about how to find Uncle Jack, looking at every hotel and I've heard Jackson tell Leo a few times to just ask me.

"You need to go to the sex museum," I blurt out. I glance over as Jackson starts typing and I look back at Leo and shake my head to let him know I don't want to talk about it further. I don't want to tell Leo things that he doesn't need to know.

"It closes in two hours," Jackson confirms.

"I'll make dinner, so you two can eat before you go." I get up and let them talk.

I have a feeling that this is going to be a bad meet up. Uncle Jack is playing a game with them for running away and he's using me as a pawn. He's killing two birds with one stone.

Leo comes over and stands next to me in the kitchen. "I've called John to sit outside the house to make sure that everything is safe here. Want to talk about it?"

“No.” He knows just as well as I do the things that Uncle Jack does, so what good would it do to talk about it?

Placing his hand on mine, he pulls me closer. I stand in front of him and he puts his hands on my hips. “This time next week, all this will be put behind us and we can move on.” Bringing his face down, his lips brush mine, “And I can see these lips smile again.” He looks over at the ingredients that I’ve taken out. “Hey, Jackson and I will get some food when we go out. I told John to get you something.”

I lean into him and think about how it will be in a week when this is all over. How will our life be? “Are you going now?”

“Yeah, if I go now, then I can be back to spend some of my evening with you.” He wraps his arms around me as he kisses me again. “Always smile, please.”

“I’ll try.”

“That’s all I ask.” I see Jackson walking towards the door. “Hi John, thanks. We won’t be long.” The door closes and I look back at Leo. “Don’t worry. We’ll be back before you know it.” Leo gives me a reassuring smile. I take the food from Jackson.

“Hey beautiful, we’re going to end this I promise and then we’re going to do something fun, like ice skating once the rink is set up.”

Leo starts laughing. “When have we ever been skating? No, when have we ever done anything fun? We work and then come here to watch sports.”

Jacksons shrugs. “Well, maybe it’s time to live a little.”

“I think we live enough and I looked at the house magazine that Hope’s been reading, I think my house is about to get a full makeover so we might be moving in with you soon.” Leo looks over at me and smiles. I don’t think that I’ve folded that many pages, but I do have a lot of ideas.

“Um, not sure that will work.”

“Sorry, will it get in the way of your sex life?” Leo asks and I start laughing, not loud but it’s enough to make Leo look at me in surprise. “Now that’s a sound I’m going to enjoy listening to.”

“Yes, it will,” Jackson tells him, these two really are like brothers. I think I’d probably fight like this with my brother, not about his sex life, but other little things.

“Well, you’re going to have to zip it up for a while, but don’t worry you’ll have time. I need to get some quotes for how much it will cost and get this one to tell me what she wants done to the place.”

“Give me some notice, now let’s go.”

“I’ll see you later. Someone needs to get back in time for his hot date.” Leo starts laughing, as he kisses me before they leave. I stare into nothing, thinking about how calm Leo is being. I know that he has killed a lot of people before, but tomorrow he is about to finish what he started, finally killing the man that made his life hell.

Now, I wait until he gets back. To find out what Jack had planned for them today. He’s going to play a game that only he will enjoy. I just hope that Leo and Jackson are ready for it.

CHAPTER 30

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LEO

HOPE LAUGHED, and it was like music; I do enjoy the days when she laughs. I can see her really coming out of the darkness even though it keeps trying to pull her back. Once Jack is dead, she'll be able to smile freely, and I'm going to be there for the whole time. I'm going to watch her every second of every day and love it.

“What do you think Jack's game is?” Jackson asks.

“Fuck knows, but he knows that Hope is with us, so he's going to play more fucked up games than before.” My body fills with excitement just thinking about putting a bullet between his eyes.

“You do know that we can finish this if—”

“We are *not* using Hope. I *can't* lose her.” I know that Jackson and Hope agree to this and I know what they're saying is right. Yes, we can end it all now by using her but I just can't risk it. Jack always seems to be five steps ahead of us and if we use Hope he could take her and I'll lose her forever.

“You won't. Leo, I won't let anything happen to her either. Before we put Hope in any danger, I promise that we'll have a plan A, a plan B *and* a plan C. Nothing will happen to her.”

I know that Jackson means it, but I can't, I just can't do it. Just the thought of *him* looking at her again makes me sick, never mind him touching her.

“Let's just see what happens here first.” Maybe they are both right, Jack is five moves ahead of us and using Hope will

give *us* the upper hand; maybe we need to be a step ahead of him. I'm fighting with myself over this now, am I really thinking about it?

"Fine." Jackson's single word speaks more than anyone else would think. I still remember the day that Jackson was taken and thrown back into our room, the tears told me so much more than words could because of just the day before or week before that had been me. No matter how much I tried to save him, some days I was too tired and when I asked anything, the only answer I got was fine. Fine was the word he would use when he didn't want to talk about it anymore because no matter what he would say nothing would change.

"Three days, if nothing in three days, we'll do it your way."

Jackson parks the car. "I won't let him win. I know how much Hope means to you and I *will* protect her the same way you protected me." He gets out of the car, and I watch him walking toward the museum.

I follow him. "So what, we wait here, go inside?" Looking around the street to see if I can see anyone, I wait for Jackson to answer my question.

"Well, out here seems dead so let's see what's in there."

"Like you haven't been here before."

"I haven't if you must know." Jackson opens the door for me, and I give him a look. "I swear I haven't and looking around I don't think I will either."

Looking around, I think that this doesn't really seem like a place either one of us would ever step foot in and some of the things on display are things we know very well how that shit feels.

"So, what are we looking for?" Jackson asks as we walk around.

"I suppose we'll know as soon as we see it." I peer at the statues with disgust. Is this really what people like looking at?

“Found it.” I turn around to see where Jackson is, and I walk over to the wall of what these people think is art.

I look at the three images, printed on A4 paper and stuck in a row. Anger bubbles up from deep inside me, and my body shakes with rage. I thought I wanted to kill him before, but now I want to make sure that I get a few more bullets in him now before he’s completely dead. Hope can only be sixteen in these pictures. I’m filled with rage as I see how he has Hope placed on the bed. No wonder she prefers to sleep on the floor after what he put her through. I’m going to enjoy killing that bastard.

“Leo, there’s a note.” I rip the pictures from the wall and walk over to Jackson to read the note.

She was the purest of them all, they all wanted her, but I will always be the one that got her first.

I clench my jaw as I rip the note into tiny pieces. “He’s playing games with us, getting in our heads,” I growl.

“And he’s doing a fucking good job.” We walk around to make sure that there’s nothing else here, no more pictures of Hope, or letters for us to read. I storm over to the guy behind the front desk. “Who put these pictures up?” I ask, slamming the pictures on the desk.

He shrugs. “I-I don’t know, never seen them before, but—”

“Think fucking twice before you say your next words because I may rearrange your fucking face.” I cut him off. Just seeing him looking at the pictures makes me want to punch him.

“When were they put up?”

He’s clearly intimidated by me as he twiddles his fingers. “W-well I did a walk around thirty minutes ago, and they weren’t anywhere then.”

“They were here waiting for us to come. That bastard is playing a fucked up game,” I shout in anger. I need to punch something or someone right now.

“Come on.” Jackson pulls me around from the desk and out of the museum. When he lets me go, I punch the lamp post. Yes, that fucking hurt, but I punch it again. “You’re no good if you break your hand.”

“How is the fucker in the same state and we still can’t find him?” I turn around and see a man standing a few steps away from us and I nod towards him so that Jackson will look at him.

“Can we help you?”

“Are you Leo Masters?”

“Yes,” I reply. He silently holds an envelope toward me. I take it and rip it open before reading aloud, “You have four days to find me, and then I’ll be gone and so will Hope.” I pass the paper to Jackson so that he can look at it as we walk back to the car.

“Might want to give Hope some self-defense lessons and looks like she’s going to be in your office a lot more this week too.”

“She’s not leaving my sight and seriously? Self-defense lessons? Have you just met Hope?” I climb into the car. It’s not a bad idea, giving her tips on how to hit back might be a good thing.

“I’ll teach her,” Jackson says as he starts the car. “Just little things; where to punch them, or how to get out of a hold.”

I rub my face; frustration and exhaustion are fighting for my attention. “Sure, I’ll let her know and see what she says.”

Looking at the note again, I know I have to find him before he takes Hope. Not for one second do I think he won’t try to take her. He’s been looking for her for a year, and now he knows where she is.

“We’ll win this time.”



“Anything happens while we were gone?” I ask John when we arrive back home.

“Sir, this was left on the doorstep.” John hands me a small box. “Hope’s been upstairs since you left.” I look up to see which lights are on. It’s not the one in the front which means she’s in my room.

Jackson opens the box, as I look back at John. “Thank you for doing this, John. Go home now and get some rest. See you in the morning.” He gives me a swift nod and heads out to the car. I turn my focus back to Jackson and the delivery. “What’s in the box?”

“Something you might not want to give Hope just yet.” He hands me the frame. It’s a picture of Hope with her family. “Are you going to tell her what we found?”

I blow the air from my lungs out through my puffed cheeks as I think about his question. “I don’t think she wants to know anything, she seems to shut down on me.” I put the frame back in the box. “You coming over in the morning?”

“No, but I’ll come over to the office once I’m out of court and I have to go see someone about Jack. I asked someone to look into some places for me.”

“See you tomorrow then.”

Making my way to my bedroom, I see Hope lying on the floor in front of the lit fire. She sits up as I make my way over to her. “Glad you like it in here.”

“It’s warm.”

“It’s warm in my bed too.” I sit on the floor as I take my jacket off and place it on the chair behind me. “Want to know what we found today?”

“No.”

I didn’t think that she would but thought I should ask. “What have you been up to since I left?”

Her face lights up. “Folded a few more pages in my magazine.”

I have no idea what she wants to go to the place, but it's the first time she's been excited about something. "So, when do I find out what you're planning?"

"If you're not too tired, I can tell you now. Shall I make some hot chocolate and you can have a shower if you want." Hope looks up at me, and I smile. She has this beauty about her that will always knock me backward, and the funny thing is she's doesn't even see how beautiful she is.

"I'd love that."

As Hope leaves the room, I put all the stuff from today away so she can't see it. I feel bad not giving her the picture of her with her family, but I think if I give it to her today, she'll only see it as a mind fuck from her uncle and that's the last thing I want for her, especially when she's in a good mood. I also want her to sleep without thinking about *him*.

A little later as I get out of the shower, I see that Hope has come back. Her back is toward me as she puts out her magazines.

I make my way over to her. "Hope, I want to look at this, but I want to say something first." Grabbing a pillow for myself, I sit on the floor. "I know that you're scared and I have to admit you're staying calmer than I thought you would, but I'm scared holding it all in will bury you."

She shakes her head and tries to smile. "I... I just don't want to talk about it; I don't want to think about *him*. For the first time since I've been running, I feel like I don't have to anymore. For the first time, I feel like I can breathe and that's because of you."

Placing my hand on her cheek, I softly rub my thumb across her chin. I want to say it, I want to tell her that I'm in love with her, but I'm scared at the same time. "Right, shall we have a look at what we have to change?" I say, grabbing a magazine to have a look. Hope gets up and hands me my mug, and the sweet aroma of chocolate makes my mouth water. "Thanks."

I flick through the pages she has folded over. “You know with the amount of work, it looks like we might be at Jackson’s house for a while.” I start laughing, it seems like she wants to rip out the whole kitchen.

“I just think a new kitchen would be nice, with all the space you have, you can have a nice opened up room.”

“Well, you’re the one that spends all day in there, so you get the kitchen you want. This is *our* house, so I want you to be happy in it.”

“I am happy with it, but the kitchen just seems tight that’s all.”

I take a sip of my drink, and the flavors that hit my tongue are incredible. “Oh wow, this isn’t the hot chocolate we have downstairs.” I take another sip; this is good, *so* good, that I can already see Jackson moaning at me for not letting him know about it.

Hope shrugs. “Fresh chocolate,” she says as if it’s the most natural thing in the world. She puts one of the magazines in front of me. “I really like this with the lights over the top.”

“That’s nice, not as nice as this drink, but good enough for me to say let’s do it.” I lean on the bed frame next to Hope, putting the blanket over us both. She lays her head on my shoulder and we both watch the fire burning as we drink.



“Morning, ready for another day at the office?” I ask as I walk over to Hope. She’s putting her lotion on. “Most of the day is meetings about We Are Loved. You can stay in the office if you want.”

“No, I’d like to join. They’re fun, and I like the charity. Anyway, I wanted to talk to my doctor today about something.”

“Do I get to know why?”

“My wrists and some other bones are starting to really hurt, just wanted to check it out.”

“You should have told me,” I say, taking her hand in mine. I massage her wrists a little. “Can we try sleeping on—”

“Please can we not—”

“When you’re ready,” I say giving her hand a kiss. I turn to head downstairs, but she stops me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, just...” Her hand moves to my tie so eye contact is broken and just like that I know what she’s thinking. The last two times she’s gone shy on me is when we’ve had sex, and as much as I think it’s cute when she gets shy, I can’t wait until she’s more confident in asking me. She takes off my tie. “I’ve missed you touching me, missed you taking all the memories away.”

“I’ve missed touching you too.” I place my hands on her waist just under the hem of her tank top.

She grabs my shirt and scrunches it up as I kiss her; the sweet aroma of her perfume and the cinnamon from breakfast lingers on her lips. Kissing her lips is something addictive. It’s turning in to an aching desire which I’m craving every day.

I press my body against hers making Hope take a step back and hit the wall. I move my mouth to her neck, sucking and biting her tender skin. She moans every time my lips touch her. It does things to me, gets my body all worked up.

In no time the clothes that are keeping us apart are scattered on the floor. I do enjoy touching her bare skin.

“You’re so beautiful,” I tell her, kissing her again. I’ve never had such a powerful sexual relationship before. My heart races, my breath almost refuses to come out, she has a touch that can take my body and make it do whatever she wants.

Pulling away from her for a moment, I close my eyes as her hand wraps around my cock and she begins stroking me. For someone that’s scared to do things, she knows how to do them to me.

Our lips touch just slightly as she begins to move faster, leaning forward. I kiss her again, as my body burns with need.

Bringing my hand down, I tease her clit; God she's wet. Slowly, I slide my finger into her and Hope's hands come to my chest.

She begins to moan, parting her thighs, allowing me to sink my finger deeper. She whimpers as I draw my finger and drag it over her clit. She moans out my name. Her eyes lock on me as I begin to rub faster, her body leaning into the wall.

"Don't hold back, beautiful," I tell her knowing that she is about to orgasm. As my words leave my lips her stomach flexes, her fingers dig into my chest and her body trembles.

"Leo," my name leaves her lips in a whisper.

She wraps her legs around me, my hard cock rubbing against her. "The bed?" I ask.

"No."

I want to make love to her on the bed. I want to show her how amazing it can be, anything out of bed feels like a fuck. And Hope is not just a fuck for me, she's my world.

Pushing her against the wall, I slide myself inside her. God, it feels like heaven when I'm inside Hope. It's like she's made for me, I fit perfectly. I grip her hips tighter, and she gasps in pleasure as I thrust inside her. Her hands are on my shoulders pulling me closer to her.

Just watching her enjoying herself like this makes my body ache with need for her.

The sound of her moans matches the rhythm of my thrusts. I do enjoy the sound of her pleasure escaping her lips. Her body begins to shake in my arms. I bury myself deeper into her as she starts to come down from her orgasm, her body relaxing. I start thrusting faster for my own release.

Heat and pressure begins to burn inside me, and I groan out Hope's name as I explode. Bolts of pleasure run through my cock. My hips rolling forward to get deeper inside, as my cum shoots into her.

I drop my head between her neck and shoulder as we both catch our breath; I plant small kisses across her jawline to her lips.

“You’re so perfect,” I tell her just before taking her mouth and kissing her hard as I still have a rush of excitement running through me. “Shall we get cleaned up?”

She nods, and I walk over to the bathroom. “Just so you know, the next time we do this it will be in my bed, where I plan on making love to you over and over again.”

She doesn’t say anything back to me, and that’s fine. I just want her to know that’s the plan. I’m going to worship her body the way it’s meant to be. I’m going to show her just how beautiful she is and show her just how amazing sex can be. Walking out of the bathroom, I watch her for a moment as I make my way over to her, just taking in everything about her.

I lean forward, and in the quietness of a whisper, when her lips finally touch me, I feel a bit of my soul melting into hers.

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CHAPTER 31

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HOPE

THIS WHOLE MORNING I haven't been able to think about anything else but Leo telling me that the next time we have sex, it will be in his bed. I'm not stupid; I knew that he would ask me sooner or later. At the moment, the thought of laying on a bed still makes me panic, just thinking about it now is making me panic. Maybe if I try it, ask Leo if I can sleep in my room on my own, maybe it will take me hours of staring at the bed, or days, but if I don't try I don't know. My body shivers just at the thought of it.

"Hope, the doctor's here." I look up at Leo walking over to the door.

"Doctor Adams, thank you for coming here first," I hear Leo. Sitting up, I smile at her as she makes her way over to me.

"I had the morning free, ready for the meeting today." She sits on the couch next to me. "So Hope, Leo said that you're in pain."

"Yeah, my wrists are really hurting, and things just don't feel right."

She takes my hand with the softest touch, even though I've been seeing her a while now I still can't look at her fully.

"What I will do is take some blood, run some tests to see if the medication is working for you and just double check your blood levels." Opening her bag, she takes out a few things, and I look over at Leo walking over to the door.

Taking my jacket off, I put my arm out for her as Jackson walks into the office.

“Your arms are starting to look so much better, but you have to stop peeling.”

“That’s what I keep telling her,” Leo tells her, and I see him smiling as he makes his way back to his desk. He and Jackson start talking to each other as the doctor takes my blood.

“You look a lot healthier now, are you eating?”

“A little.”

She moves closer to me. “Hope, are you happy?”

“Yes, as much as I can be.” I don’t think I’ll ever be fully happy, but this is the closest I’ll be.

“Right, I’ll get a rush on this. I have your cell number, Leo gave it to me. I will call you later.” Packing her bag, she walks over to Leo and Jackson as I sit back into the couch.

I watch the three of them talking, not really listening to them. I hear a few things here and there. Mostly about the meeting and the building that Doctor Adams works in. Picking up the file of We Are Loved, I start flicking through it. There is a lot to read, and I haven’t been able to finish it all yet.

I do like this idea, helping girls that need it; girls that are too scared to go to the police and the fact that Jackson will be the lawyer, I know they will be in good hands. What Leo is doing, putting so much money into this is amazing. The amount that We Are Loved alone needs is a lot, and on top of all that, he is about to knock down a building and have it all rebuilt for the project.

“Morning beautiful,” Jackson sits down next to me. “Did you miss me at breakfast?”

“Did you miss us at breakfast?”

“Well, I’m coming over tonight. I’ve heard you make this amazing hot chocolate.”

I give him a smile. One thing I do know about Jackson, whenever he does want to stay with one girl, they'll need to be able to cook, but I also get the feeling that Leo and Jackson never want anything more. They have both been through hell. I can see why they wouldn't trust anyone, not with their past.

Leo said that he never told anyone about his past. I'm the first girl he's spoken to about it. I have no idea what it is about Leo and me, but we have this connection that's on a level that I don't know or understand.

The way that I was always treated, I always thought that's the way all men would be, but not Leo.

The way he treats me, touches me, the electric shock that runs through me, the air around me, everything just makes me feel free.

"I'll make you some. I'll get some marshmallows too," I tell Jackson and his eyes light up. Leo is deep in conversation with Doctor Adams, so I whisper, "Can I ask you something, Jackson?"

"Always."

"Do you have a plan to find Uncle Jack?"

He glances over at Leo, then back to me. "I don't want to lie to you, and if you asked Leo, he wouldn't lie to you either. No, we don't have a plan."

I nod my head. They have no plan. Maybe using me is the way to go, it'll be over faster, and I can finally put all this behind me; we can all put this behind us.

"I know what you're thinking Hope and trust me at this moment, Leo will not go for this. I think he just needs to try it his way first."

I don't reply. I think about it for a moment. How long will Leo play this game? He doesn't have much time at all, three days. Three days to find the man he's been hunting before he vanishes again.



My day seems to go a lot slower when I'm at the office with Leo. As much as I like to spend time with him, I don't get time to do anything at home; clean, cook, the things that I enjoy doing. The moment we sat in the car, Leo said that Jackson was going to bring food over for us. I told him that I would cook something, but he didn't listen to me, and I know when to argue, and the answer to that is *never*.

Sitting on the floor in the laundry room, I watch my clothes. I've worked out that if I wash my clothes, and then have the last rinse cycle twice, my skin feels better when I wear them

"Hope." I open the door when Leo shouts my name. "You've been quiet since we got here and I'm not sure what I've done wrong?" When we got home, his dad called, and he's been in the office ever since.

"Nothing, you had a phone call."

"Hope."

"Nothing's wrong, I just have to wash my clothes again. I just haven't made any food in a few days, and I don't like it," I tell him as I continue to fold my clothes.

"Then make something." His voice comes out a little louder than it normally does.

I keep my head down, taking another item from the basket. "Sorry," I say. Grabbing the folded pile, I make my way out towards the kitchen.

"Hope."

"I said I'm sorry," I say again a little quieter as Jackson stands in the kitchen.

"Hey leave her, what's wrong with you?" Jackson stops him as I get to the sitting room to get my other clothes.

"Just got something today." I hear Leo, and his voice is in the same tone. He's not happy about something, which makes

me think that Uncle Jack is playing his games with him.

I already knew that Uncle Jack was going to do this, but I thought Leo would have been stronger and not let him get under his skin as much. I keep my head down as they both come into the sitting room.

“Hope—”

He stops as my phone rings in the kitchen. I walk out already knowing that it’s Doctor Adams.

I answer the call. “Hello?”

“Hope, this is Doctor Adams. I have the results to your tests and I’m not sure how to tell you this.” There is silence for a moment, and I’m worried about what the problem could be. “What I’m about to tell you I know that you might not want Leo to know. I am *your* doctor, and I’ll respect your wishes.”

“I understand.”

“You’re test results show that you’re pregnant.”

The air gets stuck in my throat and fear runs through my body. “How?” is the only question that I can get out.

“It seems that the medication that you are on has affected your hormone levels. To put it simply, the medication is very strong, and it stopped your implant from working.”

“Can we... I mean—”

“Hope, we don’t have to tell Leo anything, have a few days to let the news settle and I’ll call you in about four or five days.”

Before she can say goodbye, I end the call and grab my clothes. I rush straight to my room before Leo and Jackson can say anything to me. What’s happening? How is this happening?

Walking over to the window, I sit down as my legs begin to shake from the fear running through me.

“I don’t know who I should be more angry at, you or me,” Uncle Jack shouts at me. He’s angry, and I don’t know what I’ve done wrong. He grabs my face. “How fucking stupid, you should have told me!” he shouts.

I don’t know what he’s talking about, what have I done?

“You’re pregnant, and I can’t take you to the hospital, so there’s only one way to fix this, isn’t there?”

He throws me across the floor, and I close my eyes as he starts walking over to me, already knowing what’s about to happen. The pain that I’m going to go through and no matter how much I’m trying to keep from crying, tears fall quickly as I see his leg swinging back and before kicking me hard in the stomach.

I cry out loud as I curl up into a ball trying to stop him, this isn’t happening.

Where there is light, there is hope, where there is light there is hope.

“Hope.” I jump at the sound of Leo’s voice. “What did the doctor say?”

“Nothing, just wants me to try some more medication,” I tell him, quickly wiping the tears away. “I’m just going to have a shower.”

“Hope, what’s wrong? I’m sorry about downstairs.”

“I’m sorry that I upset you, but I would like to have a shower.”

“I’ll meet you downstairs.”

Closing the bathroom door behind me, I turn on the shower, and I sink to my knees and start crying. From fear, because I’m scared because I don’t want to feel that pain again, because this is not how it was meant to happen.

Standing in front of my bed, I think about this baby, a baby that was so far from planned that I don't know how I'm feeling just yet or if Leo will want it. But would Leo take me to the hospital? Or would he do what Uncle Jack did? No, Leo wouldn't do that to me. But a baby can change everything in so many different ways.

If Uncle Jack finds out about this... my body shivers thinking about it. I can't let him get me, he has to die, and Leo is being stubborn. Just let me out in public, and the moment Uncle Jack is in front of me, Leo can shoot him. I'll tell everyone that it was self-defense. But Leo won't go for it. I've written a few things down and I know Jackson will back me up. I want this to end, this *needs* to end.

Closing my eyes for a moment, the flashbacks running through my head are taking over. No matter how much I push them away, they are more powerful. All the hateful words, all the kicks, the punches, slaps, painful stomach, the two weeks of crying in pain with what was happening to me. They're all there. I can feel Uncle Jack right next to me. I can feel him touching me. I run to the bathroom and throw up.

Sitting on the floor, I take deep breaths to calm myself. I need to think about what I'm about to tell Jackson. Friday, this will all end and Jackson and Leo will both have to agree, as we both know that they won't find him unless I'm there.

Once I'm calm again, I walk into the living room. "Jackson, can I talk to you for a moment?" I go straight to the yard and wait for him.

"Everything okay?"

"We both know that Uncle Jack isn't going to just come out in the open and we both know that you and Leo can't find him—"

"No."

"Yes, we know that he'll have men and we have you two and a split second to shoot him." My voice starts to become shaky and tears of fear flow again. I put my hand up in front of

Jackson to make him stay where he is. “This has to end Jackson. I can’t...I can’t keep watching over my shoulder.”

“Okay, Hope look at me.” I lift my face. This is the first time I’ve looked into his eyes like this. They are hazel in color and have peace behind them, not the darkness that Leo’s hold. “We *will* end this before the week is over.”

“Friday, just listen to me. You know my friend at the park?” Jackson nods. I know that Leo got him to look into her. “I want you to give her this letter, you can read them all, and if she says yes to that, you give her letter two.” I hand that over to him as he finishes reading the first one. “If it’s a yes again, you give her letter three, and if it’s a yes again, then Friday Leo and you can finally kill him.”

“You want your friend to tell Jack that you’re going to visit her on Friday and he’ll show up?”

“I know he’ll show up.” I shake my head as pain runs through my body, the pain of that night, of him, kicking me over and over again.

“Hope, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing, will you do it?”

“Yes, are you telling Leo?”

“No, you are.”

Walking back into the house, to the kitchen to get some water, I watch Jackson telling Leo about the plan. He doesn’t look happy at all about it, but he’s been in a bad mood since he got something from Jack.

“Fuck off Jackson,” Leo growls and walks over to me. The anger in his expression tells me that this is going to involve some shouting. I put my head down. “Lift your head.” I lift it a little. “Hope, lift your head!” he shouts, and I look up at him properly. “You must think I’m fucking crazy if you think that I’m playing along with this.”

“Well, it’s happening,” I say with courage that I pluck from who knows where.

“Like fuck it is.”

I stand my ground. “You always said that I can leave this house when I want. What are you going to do, lock me up in my room?” This is the first time I’ve raised my voice, and my heart feels like it will burst out of my chest.

Why am I being like this with him? I don’t know why I’m so mean to him. My emotions are all over the place at the moment. I’ve had news that has brought back every fear in my body, every fear from my past. I need to start thinking about what I did when I ran away from Joseph because if Leo doesn’t kill Jack this week, I have to go on the run again as he’ll know where to find me. I can’t let that happen, I can’t go back and live that life. I need this to end, not just for me anymore, but for this baby.

“I have no idea what the fuck is happening in that head, but you must have fucking hit it somewhere if you think I’m going to let you out of my sight with a fucked up asshole looking for you,” Leo shouts at me, and I can see that there is no talking to him at the moment, there is no way of him agreeing to this at all.

As his voice gets louder, my mind and body go back to that night.

“I’m not sure how you could do this,” Uncle Jack shouts at me as he continues to kick me.

How is this my fault? I don’t even know how this happened.

“I’m going to make sure that you remember how much this is hurting you.” He stops and grabs my face and pushes it against the wall. “Now I have to find a way to make sure this never happens again.” He throws me to the floor again and takes a few steps away from me. “So now that you have really, really upset me, you don’t get any food tonight.”

The door closes, and I hold my stomach as it hurts so much, I can’t breathe. I think this is the worst pain I’ve felt so far from Uncle Jack and he’s done things that have made me sick.

“Hope!” I jump at the loud bang, seeing Leo’s hand on the counter, I take a step back.

“Leo, you’re scaring her.” I hear Jackson but don’t see where he is.

“Scaring her? I’m scaring her?” Leo shouts at Jackson. “I fucking love her and want to protect her, and she’s thinking fucking stupid shit!”

What did Leo just say? He loves me?

Someone loves me? My body and mind have both frozen on me, no words are leaving my mouth, but I don’t even know what to say to him. I never thought someone would love me.

“Hope, go up to your room. I think Leo needs a little time to cool down,” Jackson tells me, and before Leo can say anything, I walk around him and up the stairs.

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CHAPTER 32

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“HOW ABOUT A DRINK?” Jackson places a whiskey in front of me. “Well, you said you loved her. I really didn’t think you would admit it to her.”

Saying it out loud to her just makes it more real, and I think it took me by surprise when I said it. But the thing is I don’t regret it.

“Are you seriously thinking about this plan of hers?” I can’t believe how angry this has made me, that she’s willing to let herself stand so close to him, why she would risk it. She knows him better than Jackson, and I do, so she knows that anything could happen to her.

“Look at this from her point of view for a second. Say we don’t do what she wants and we don’t kill him by the end of the week. Jack now knows where she lives, so that means she will be even more on edge than she is now, looking over her shoulder living in fear. Neither you nor I can stay here all day every day. She can’t go to work with you all the time, and she’ll start to hate you. So what’s the one option she has?” Jackson stares at me, and I glare back.

“Spit it out.”

“She’ll go on the run again, the only thing she knows to do when it comes to that asshole.”

I run my hands through my hair and grip the strands. “Fuck.” I never thought about it from her point like this. “But still, do you really think this is the best way?”

“Considering what we have to work with, yes I do.”

Lighting up a cigarette, I down the whiskey and look over at the stairs. “Never thought this day would happen, a day where my life is all about some woman that I would easily die in order to save her.”

Shaking my head, I look at the counter. Something is going on in her head, but she’s too scared to tell me what. One thing I do know is that it is connected to her Uncle; she only ever goes quiet when she’s thinking back to her time with him.

I haven’t helped at all. The email that Jack sent was just more pictures of Hope, with the words *I will have her again, and you can’t stop me. Find me, or you lose her.*

Reading what I’d just received from Jack pushed me over the edge and I know that I shouldn’t have snapped at Hope, and now she’s scared of me, that’s the last thing I wanted.

“You want to go talk to her?”

“And say what?”

“How about you try and find out what the doctor said to her?”

The only thing I seem to be doing is upsetting her tonight. Passing Jackson my cigarette, I head upstairs and pray that I don’t do it again.

I stand by the door; she’s not in her usual spot by the window. “Hope?” I take a step in and see her sitting in the corner of the room with her knees close to her, head on her arms. I can hear her crying, and my heart aches for her. I walk over to her slowly and kneel. “Hope?” She sits up and moves away from me a little. “Why are you not sitting by the window?”

“You think he’s not got eyes on the house? He has, he’s watching me,” she tells me without looking up.

“Are you scared of me?”

Her silence tells me my answer. “No.”

Sitting in front of her, I place my hands on hers. “The last thing I want is for you to be scared of me, Hope. I never want you to fear me. I meant what I said, I love you and I won’t, I

can't let anything happen to you.” I place my head on her hands, and I feel one of them move. She runs it through my hair. “Hope, please talk to me.”

“I want it to end.”

Lifting my head a little, my chin still on her hand, I bring my hand to her cheek and wipe the tears away. I know she wants all this to end, but the moment she got off the phone to the doctor something changed in her.

“It will, but you have to know that I can't put you in any danger.” I slowly stroke her face with my thumb. “If anything were to happen to you, then...” the words get stuck in my throat as just the thought of her getting hurt knots my insides.

“I'm pregnant.”

My hand freezes on her face, my head shoots up as I sit up straight. Did I just hear her right? No child should be around me. I can't bring any light into that child's life. The only thing that comes from me is darkness; a darkness that shouldn't be around a baby.

“I thought—”

“Doctor Adams said that my medication was a lot stronger and ended up overpowering my implant. I'm sorry. This is my fault.” Her eyes are rimmed red and wide with fear.

“How is this your fault? I still should have used protection.” How could I have been so stupid? When the hell do I have sex without protection? I know that I should be happy for her, not to scare her away even more, but at the moment I don't even know how to process this, something that I never wanted, something I never once thought about having. Now it's happened, and my head is all over the place.

“I'm sorry,” she tells me again with a trembling lip and tears streaming down her cheeks.

I shake my head at her. “Hope, can you please come downstairs and eat something? If not for yourself, for our baby.”

She wipes her face, and I help her up. I wrap my arms around her. “Did you think I would have done something bad when you told me?”

“Yes. Uncle Jack beat me. He beat me for three days, didn’t feed me and...” She starts sobbing into my chest, her whole body shakes, and her legs weaken.

That bastard got her pregnant then killed the baby and could have killed Hope. He gets sicker by the day and my hate for him increases even more.

Cupping her face, I make her look at me. “I love you Hope, and I promise you one thing, everything *will* work out this time.”

Wrapping her hands around me tighter, she buries her head into me again. “I’m sorry. I know this shouldn’t be happening.”

“Don’t be sorry.” I take in a deep breath. I just need a moment to process all of this. It’s a lot more to take in than I thought. “Let’s go down to eat.”



Standing in the kitchen as I finally got Hope to eat something, I let out a big sigh. *She’s pregnant.*

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Jackson says as he hands me a beer and a lit cigarette. The smoke in my lungs has never felt so good.

“Hope’s pregnant.”

Jackson just stares at me for a moment. “If you didn’t have a smile on your lips, even though it’s a small one, I would say you didn’t want it.” He glances over at Hope then back to me. “I swear this is amazing. We’re going to be a family of four.”

“Four?”

“Oh, come on. You, Hope, me and the baby.”

I roll my eyes and try to ignore that comment for a moment. “You seem to have taken it better than I did.”

His eyes widen. “What the fuck did you do?”

Taking in a long drag of smoke, I cringe. “I froze. I love her Jackson, but a baby? A baby in our fucked up world?”

“Our world is fucked up because of one man; think about all this after that man is *dead*.”

I suppose Jackson is right, once Jack is dead maybe my life will be much calmer? I already know that Hope is the light in my life and perhaps this baby will bring the happiest time I’ve ever known.

“I’m going to say congratulations to Hope and tell her that I’m the Godfather.”

Pushing myself off the counter, I follow Jackson into the living room. I watch as he sits next to Hope. I can’t hear what he’s saying, but he’s smiling the whole time. At least one of us is showing Hope how happy they are. I’m a fucking dick that did nothing.

“Right, I’ll see you in the morning, and we need to talk about this plan.” Jackson pats my back as he walks past me to leave.

I sit beside Hope on the floor. “Are you happy?” I put my cigarette out in the ashtray as Hope watches the flames in the fireplace.

“Are *you* happy?” She doesn’t look at me again.

“Truth?”

“Please.”

“You being around me makes me so happy. You’re the best thing to ever happen to me, and out of all this, that’s all I want, *you*. You smiling every day makes me happy,” I tell her. She is my world now and I’m going to make it my mission to make her smile every day.

“And...”

I take her hand in mine. “The baby... I’ll admit it took me by surprise and I never saw my life with a woman *or* a baby. I’ll always have this darkness around me. I don’t think it will ever leave and I never wanted to bring that darkness around someone else, someone innocent.” I stop for a moment as her body shivers; she knows what I mean, she has her own past, her own darkness, but I’ve killed people, and I’ve enjoyed killing them, that darkness will never fade away.

“Hope, no matter what, I’m going to be here for you and our baby. Please don’t think I don’t want this, because I do. I think I just have to finish what I started to finally feel a little more free from the past.”

“Leo, I understand. Out of all the people you know, I’m the one who gets that. Even I keep fighting with myself.”

“About?”

She wipes the tears that have continued to leave damp trails down her face. “Should I keep it or not? Is it wrong to bring a child into a world that’s so dark? I mean, I have no idea how to look after a baby. But then I think about keeping it because this baby could be the light that I always wish for.”

A little chuckle leaves my lips. “I was thinking the same thing. Can two broken people really win in the end? But you’re my light. So whatever it is that makes you shine, I’m going to do it.”

“Leo, not for me, but do you want this baby for you?”

“You’re saying this baby will be the light in your life and I’m hoping that it will get rid of the darkness in mine too. So yes, I do want this baby and who knows, we both might enjoy this journey, and we can practice making more.” I lean closer to her. “I’m going to kiss you now, and I’m going to kiss you every day, for the rest of my life.”



I called the doctor this morning to see if she could come over to the house so we can talk, but she had appointments and said

she would come over to the office this afternoon.

“Morning beautiful,” Jackson says as he looks behind me. I turn around to give Hope a kiss as she walks over. Jackson grins. “So, as you’re both going to be redoing this kitchen and making a nursery, my house is open for you when you need somewhere to stay while the work is being done. But only and I mean *only* until the baby is born. Once the baby is here you both have to leave.”

I roll my eyes. “You know one day I might hit you.” Jackson starts laughing as I put breakfast on the counter for us all. “And before you go any further... your plan to catch Jack? We’ll do it, but you must think I’m stupid if I’m letting you get too close to him.”

She looks at me and then at Jackson but holds his look a little longer. “I spoke to your friend, and she said yes to all of them. Friday, she will have the rest of her friends to help,” he tells her.

“You’re still not going.” I point to the stool for her to go sit down. “You’re leaving the house with us. As you said last night Jack has eyes on the house, so you have to leave on Friday and you’ll walk to the park with me, but you won’t go see your friend.”

“We’re going to go through a few tunnels, which Jackson and I will walk through tonight while John is here. We’re going to find a spot that’s safe—”

“Stop, please stop,” Hope says making us both look at her. “You have one day, Leo. One day to finish this. We’ll have enough people. I’ll have Jackson around me *and* my friend so no one will be able to get close to me. You have one day, one shot. Please just—”

“Hope.” I cut her off, but I have nothing to say. No words in my head to speak out loud to her. She is showing me this brave side of her that I’ve not seen before and I’m speechless.

The three of us sit here in silence. The reason Jackson and I are quiet is because we both know she’s right. We have one day, one shot.

“The doctor is coming this afternoon, and she’ll book you in for a scan later too,” I change the subject, as I think Friday is a conversation that I need to have with Jackson without Hope. No matter what we say, she’ll want to do it her way, and nothing else will work.

“I want it to be a girl,” Jackson announces. I turn and frown at him. “Come on, you can’t push me out now! I have to get some say in all this.”

I grin. “And what if it’s a boy?” I ask him.

“Then I’ll be the fun one.”

“And if it’s a girl, you’re going to be what? The *not* fun one?”

“No, I’m going to make sure that no boy comes close to her. Her clothes are all passed by me and if— and I mean *if*— she dares to have a boyfriend, I think he’ll cry every time he thinks that he can touch her, as he’ll think of what I’ll do to him.”

I start laughing, a full-on fit of laughter. I suppose I couldn’t ever ask for a better brother for myself or a Godfather for my baby.

“So, now that we’re on the same page, if it’s a girl can we please call her Fleur or Nova? I do like those names.”

I turn to Hope as she shifts in her chair a little then back to Jackson. “I take it you’ve never had sex with a woman with either of those names?” There’s *no way* I’m naming my child after one of his sex partners.

“No, but they’re pretty names and if it’s a boy—”

“Nicholas, Nico for short,” Hope tells us as she walks to the sink to put her plate away.

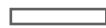
I turn to Jackson as I rack my brain. Why does that name sound familiar, like I’ve heard it before?

“Her brother’s name,” Jackson reminds me.

“Nova was her mother’s name.” No wonder she flinched on her stool.

“What are the chances that I mention the name Nova? I totally forgot that it was her mom’s name. Talking about moms, when are you telling Mom and Dad about this?”

“They’re coming to the office this morning.” Now, that is going to be one very interesting conversation. I think my parents never thought they would hear this news, so I’m not sure how they’ll take it. Plus, they haven’t spoken to Hope much either. I just hope that they are happy for us.



Well, my parents took that a lot better than I thought they would. They both wanted to hug her, but I had to stop them, well at least my dad. I couldn’t stop laughing when they told Jackson to find a girl and get married as they want a lot of grandkids. The look on his face was priceless.

Mom asked if she could stay for the appointment with Doctor Adams. Hope said it was fine and I liked that she’s letting my mom be a part of this.

“Okay, I’ve prescribed you some medication if you want to continue with this pregnancy—”

“We do,” Hope cuts her off and the doctor looks at me for a moment. I can see her worried expression. She’s been concerned about Hope from the moment she walked through the door.

I hold up my hands. “I’m not putting pressure on her,” I say, letting the doctor know that I’m not making her keep this baby for me, but *we’re* keeping it, *for us*.

“Okay, this medication will help with the Lupus, and it will still be safe for you. I’m going to remove your implant now and Leo you asked for a scan, which we can do tomorrow just before lunch.” She begins to take a few things out of her bag.

“You’ll need a full bladder,” my mom tells Hope with a smile.

“Okay, Mrs. Masters,” Hope replies as she lifts the sleeve on her right arm.

“I’m so excited for you both, you promise to make sure that Hope eats and sleeps well.”

“I promise Mom.” I kiss her on the head and grin. I love seeing my mom so full of joy.

“Hope, can you relax a little.”

I glance over at my girl. She’s thinking about something, she always has that faraway look in her eye when she does. I go to kneel next to her. “Hey sweetheart, you want to look at me for a moment?” I move the hair out of her face. “Just so you know, Jackson said he’s going shopping later.” I give her a light kiss.

“Done,” Doctor Adams announces. I’ll see you tomorrow and please read the information that I gave you.” She smiles at my mom. “But I think you are in good hands and if you can’t get in touch with me, I think you have four people that are more than happy to help.” She starts laughing with my mom.

“Doctor Adams, I’ll walk you out.” My mom helps her with the bags.

“You know that my mother will be phoning me or you every day now.” I help Hope to sit up and take the seat next to her. Hope places her head on my shoulder. “You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Lies. Hope, you really need to start talking to me a lot more now.”

“I *am* fine. I’m just scared that’s all.”

I stop myself from laughing. “Well, that makes both of us.”

Never been so scared of anything in my whole life. I’m about to be looking after a little person. A little person that will look up to me. I’ll be the hero in their eyes. That’s a lot to take on board.

CHAPTER 33

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HOPE

I STARE at the fireplace in Leo's room. We didn't get back until late. The meeting about the charity went on for a lot longer than I think anyone wanted it to. They finally have permission to get things sorted for the building, and all that will start next week. They said they're hoping for it to open at the end of spring, so the company is working on a marketing plan to get the word out. Leo is trying to get his dad to be the face of it, so he won't have to be in the newspapers, or do any public events for it, but his dad said no. I didn't really listen to the conversation too much, as Leo's mom was talking to me.

She mentioned a few things for me, one thing was making sure that I get some sleep and that I stay comfortable. I'm not sure if Leo told her that I sleep on the floor, but she kept telling me to look after myself. I thought about sleeping in a bed, and my heart started to beat even faster than I thought it would.

"You promise to stay with Jackson the whole time?" I look over my shoulder at Leo watching me from the bathroom.

Leo and Jackson spent a long time talking about tomorrow, they said they wanted to talk about work, but the way Jackson looked at me told me they weren't. In the end, they both agreed to the plan and said I have to stay with Jackson and not leave his side.

"I promise." Leo sits behind me, legs on either side of me as he pulls me into him. His hands rest on my stomach, and I can't help but smile. "Your parents are very excited about this."

“They are. Dad is going to open a savings account.” I feel the vibration of Leo laughing through my back. “And Mom said that she might start knitting.”

I take a sip of my drink, as the flames flicker. No matter how much I try to push the thoughts out of my head, the rules, they’ll always be there. No matter what. My body still shivers with the thoughts, and Leo’s picked up on when those moments are.

“What are you thinking about?”

“The bed.”

I’ve thought about it for a while now, the moment Leo said the next time we have sex will be in his bed. Every night I’ve been thinking about every time I was put on a bed, everything they did to me on there. I’ve not been able to sleep as the flashbacks wake me up.

“I’ve told you when you’re ready.”

“I know.”

This is one thing that I respect most about Leo, he respects me.

Leaning forward so that I can turn around to face him, I run my hand through my hair. I’ve thought about this for most of the day. Tomorrow anything could happen. Uncle Jack could get me, he could kill Leo. The list is different every time I think about it. But there is one thing that I keep telling myself, one thing I’ll regret.

Not letting Leo show me how amazing having sex in bed can be.

Does it scare me? To the point, I just want to hide in the corner, but if tonight is my last night with Leo, I want to make it count.

Leo’s eyes search mine; I’m not sure what he’s looking for. The only thing I see in Leo at this moment is safety. Leaning forward, his hand comes up to my face, and I feel the softness of his thumb caressing my cheek.

He eases closer to me, his lips pressing against mine and the small kiss slowly turns into a deep passionate kiss. I don't fight him; I let my body become his.

There's something different about this kiss, it's longer and a lot more heartfelt. I let my tongue dance in rhythm with his as I take in the taste of whiskey and cigarettes.

I run my hand up his chest. From the moment I first touched his chest, it's been the one part of him I love the most.

His hand gently strokes the side of my face as he pulls away from me for a moment, just enough to get our breath back. And then his lips are on mine again. As our kiss begins to get intense, his hands move to my shoulders, down my back. The kiss, the feel of his fingertips it's lighting a fire in my blood like it does every time he touches me.

Whatever friction just ran through my body must have run through his, as he tilts his head back a little. I lean back, and he begins kissing softly down my neck, nuzzling and nibbling. His hands move to the hem of my shirt and he pulls it off. His hands move lower as his lips are on my collarbone.

My nails run lightly down his back. Pulling away from me, Leo's eyes are telling me everything I need to know, making my body tense up.

"I will *never* hurt you." His hands stop on my hips as he gets me to stand.

His touch doesn't leave as he takes a step back pulling me with him. Not breaking away from my lips, we stop, and my body begins to shake just a little, but I keep telling myself that Leo won't hurt me. Leo loves me.

He breaks away from the kiss. "Look at me, think of me, nothing else. Just think of me," he whispers in my ear and before I know it I feel the cool cotton sheet beneath my back, and I take a deep breath.

Leo leans on his elbows, his eyes focused on me. "Touch me, Hope, I'm right here." He takes my hand and starts rubbing it for me to relax it and the moment that it does he brings it to his chest and I feel the beat of his heart. "I'm never

going to leave you.” Leaning down, he starts to kiss me again, and the longer he kisses me, the more I relax.

His mouth kisses a trail down my neck, his hand moving up my torso. As he reaches my breast, he takes my nipple between his fingers massaging it. I moan into his mouth, as his touch gives me such pleasure.

Lifting away from me, his hand begins to move down my stomach. Keeping my thoughts with Leo, I try hard not to think of *them*. My eyes lock with his. I always feel my heart melt when he looks at me in this way; a way that tells me that nothing else in the world matters to him, but me.

I arch my back a little as his fingers start teasing my clit, his touch is soft, but it sends electric shocks running through me, and I moan. His mouth is on my neck and my hands move to his hair as I gasp out his name.

Pulling away from me, Leo stands between my legs, and he pulls my pants and panties down, not breaking eye contact. He slides his own pants and boxers off.

Closing my eyes for a moment, I take in a deep breath.

“Hope, look at me. I’m right here.”

Opening my eyes I look up at him, he leans down and straight away his lips are on me, his tongue moving across my lips. I open and soon his tongue is dancing with mine. Our kiss deepens; I can feel how hard he is against my thigh.

“Please, don’t stop kissing me,” I say as we pull away to catch a breath.

“Never.”

Leo’s lips return to mine, and I feel him entering me. I press my hands on his back as he moves. His hands rest on the pillow on either side of my head, as I feel him inch by inch. The moment I feel him fully inside me, my hands relax as he holds himself there for a moment.

I moan his name as he moves slowly. Breaking away from my lips, his hand caresses my cheek, and his eyes lock with

mine, as he moves in and out of me. I bite my bottom lip as the pleasure takes over me; his touch is the only thing I want.

The speed of his movement increases, he knows me well enough now. He knows that I don't want him to stop.

“Leo,” I whisper, arching my back as a rush of blood speeds through me, the pleasure of him getting closer and closer.

I begin to move with him, our bodies in perfect rhythm as I feel myself getting closer to the edge.

“Hope,” my name leaves Leo's lips as my orgasm rushes through me. His speed picks up more and more, as I feel him so close to his own release.

Both his hands move to my hips, and my name escapes his mouth as he cums. Slowing down his thrusts, he moves my hair from my face and places his hand on my cheek. He leans down and gives me a kiss. “Are you—”

Placing my finger on his lips, I know he wants to ask if I'm okay, but I just want to take this moment and enjoy it for a while. I give him a small nod, and he collapses on top of me and nuzzles my neck.

After a few moments, he gets off the bed and puts the blanket over me, but I move it off my stomach and leave it on my legs. I turn to look out at the night sky.

“Are we sleeping here?” Leo asks.

I close my eyes for a moment, just to get my thoughts out of the past. “Yes.” I know that I won't be able to go to sleep, but I need to start trying. I need to do this for my baby.

Leo was right. He made love to me, and it felt like I was in heaven and I want to go there again with him.

CHAPTER 34

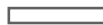
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LEO

HOPE DIDN'T SLEEP at all last night; she looked out of the window the whole time. I even got her to cuddle with me, hoping that would help her sleep but nothing. I wanted to stay awake with her, but my body and mind were both tired, and I slept for a few hours.

We didn't talk really after last night, and I didn't want to push it with her. Last night was a very big step for her, telling me how much she trusts me. For me, that was a way to say to me she will always be with me. She didn't have to say the words to me; I just felt it last night with her.

Hope and I have this connection that is not your simple soulmate thing. This is a connection that's not even physical. I mean the sex between us is incredible, she makes every fiber of my being stand to attention, and just thinking about her in my bed makes me hard. I love everything about her. But if she said she never wanted to have sex with me again, I would still love her. The connection we have is so pure, so true, so emotional, and so powerful, that no matter what it will never break.



The doctor's appointment went really well, our baby should be making their appearance early July, and when Hope saw the baby on the screen, I could see the tears of joy in her eyes, which didn't once leave the screen as she watched the doctor checking to make sure everything was okay. I smiled more that

second; the joy that was in her eyes is a moment I won't forget.

We pick up all her new medication, and the doctor has double checked that everything will be safe for our child. Then, as instructed by the doctor, we pick up some vitamins and a book about pregnancy. The doctor spoke to Hope peacefully, about why it was a good idea to read the books, how she would be able to prepare herself for everything. Hope was a prisoner, so a lot of the things she should have learned at school were never taught to her.

We stand in the bookstore, and I realize that there are a lot of books out there about what to expect with pregnancy and neither one of us knows which one to buy, so I decided to just buy them all. Hope says that we only need one or two, but I'm not taking any chances. It won't just be Hope reading them but me too. I'm going to make sure that Hope has a stress free pregnancy.

"Shall we get some lunch before we meet Jackson at home?"

"Can we have a hot dog?" she asks as she moves closer to me; we're getting to a busier part of the city. "I've never had one." Her voice comes out quiet. I'm not sure how long it's going to take for her to get the confidence to walk around the city alone, but one day she'll do it without even thinking about it.

"Sure." She's been quiet all day and to be honest, I'm not really in the talking mood. Today is going to put an end to a five-year hunt for a man that made my life hell. If I lose today, then I've lost it all, he'll never be in front of me again.

I've been working on other ideas where I don't have to put Hope in danger, but not one thing is coming to me, nothing to even give me a one percent chance of winning. Everything I think of ends with him walking away with Hope. So, not only do I lose the woman and child I love but the man I want dead.

"Do you want to buy some clothes? You haven't really bought any since I got you some," I say as I pay the vendor for the hot dogs. We continue to walk as Hope takes a bite of her

hot dog. Even if she eats half of that, I'll be happy. She might not eat a full meal yet, but she's eating a lot more than when we first had dinner together.

Her eyes widen, and she grins. "This is really nice," she says through a mouthful.

I laugh heartily at her expression. Amazing how such things can be so normal to some but a huge thing to others. "Good to know, we can get another one later." I bring my thumb and wipe off the mustard from her lip. "Clothes?"

"No, thank you." She moves her focus to the distance but quickly steps closer to me as a loud group of men start walking to the store behind me. I wrap my arm around her as we continue along the street back to the house. I could have asked John to drive us, but I figure if she starts walking around the city with me it will help her a little.

We walk back to the house in silence, and my mind goes back to the conversation with my parents this morning, how I wasn't expecting it and it took me by surprise.

They told me that Hope and I should get married now that we're having a baby and I said no to that straight away. I told them that neither one of us is ready to get married; at the moment I don't think either one of us *wants* to get married. I know I don't, or I didn't until Hope, but still, I don't think marrying someone because they're having your baby is the best move.

My dad saw through that. I mean I wasn't lying about it. I do feel that way, but my dad called me out on it and asked for the rest of the story once my mom and Hope went into the kitchen.

I told him that I love Hope and I will never let anything happen to her and will fight for her every day for the rest of my life, but at the moment I'm scared.

Scared that I don't have any connection to the baby, all my focus is on Hope, making sure that she's okay. I love her so much that the thought of having to share her or the thought of her having to go through pain when she gives birth is giving

me pain, I never thought I would feel. My reasons went on for a while, and they all revolved around Hope, not the baby, but Hope.

My dad started laughing, laughing so hard that he had tears coming from his eyes. Once he finally stopped, he sat next to me and told me not every man connects with their baby until they're born and in their arms, which I thought sounded right. And when it came to Hope his words were: The amount you love that girl, you get married, or you don't, she'll be the only woman to take your heart and no matter what, no one, not even a baby will affect that. He also said I needed to stop worrying about it, that Hope and I will be fine, as we're made for each other.

When we were at the doctors, I looked at our baby, and I felt so happy, but again, all I wanted was to look at Hope and know how she was with all this. So, I do pray my dad is right, and I connect with the baby once it's born.



My heart is pounding; my skin is damp from sweat. I'm not scared for *me*, I'm scared that I can't protect Hope and Jack will take her. I can't let him take her again.

"Are we all ready for this?" Jackson asks as I pull Hope closer to me.

"Yes," I answer and Hope nods her head. "What time is your friend telling them that we're going to see her?"

"One." I can feel her body shaking, so I pull her tighter into me. Letting her know that I'm here, not leaving.

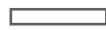
"When are all the others coming?" I look at Jackson and frown. We've been over this five times already.

The notes that Hope gave Jackson asked that her friend get some of the army veterans she knows to be there. If Jack brings too many men, we have a chance to level the numbers. When John found out what was happening, he said that he'd be there too. He wouldn't take no for an answer. I have

Jackson with Hope, and there is no one else I would trust; I trust that man with my own life.

“One.” I glare at Jackson to stop him from asking any more questions.

Taking my coat from the back of the stool, I take the gun from Jackson and the knuckle rings and we stand there for a moment in silence. So many years of friendship and we both know what we’re saying to each other without speaking a single word. If anything happens to me, you take Hope and get out of New York. Giving each other a nod, I take Hope’s hand and leave.



Jackson and I stand at the end of the tunnel as Hope talks to her friend. I look at my watch for the millionth time now. It’s just hit one, he’s about to come. When we were kids and he told us that he would be back at a certain time, he was *never* late.

“It’s nice to know that I’ll be taking Hope right in front of you.” I focus on the other end of the tunnel. Jack has a few men next to him. His eyes move to Hope and I feel relief run through me as her friend steps in front of her.

Jackson slowly starts walking over to Hope, as I start walking toward Jack.

“I have to admit, I do like how people fear you, Leo. There’s a lot of talk going around about a man that does unthinkable things to people.”

I too enjoy that people fear me, people like them should fear men like me.

Standing a few steps away from him, I see the men have their guns out, and I smile. “Can’t fight your own battles?”

“Looks like you need help too.” He looks behind me.

I shake my head. “No, they are here to keep your men away from *me* so I can kill *you*.”

Jack starts laughing, and I stand there watching how the fucking asshole is so full of himself. He thinks that no one can touch him, but he's wrong.

Without a second thought, I punch him hard; hard enough for his face to be knocked to the side. One of his men takes a step closer but stops when Jack puts his hand up. "This one is mine." Just as the last word comes out, he punches me in the face; he has a strong punch on him, he's made my lip bleed.

He goes to grab my collar, but I move back making him rip a little of my shirt. "I'm going to make sure that you die slowly."

I grin. "I'm going to make sure that you die fast." I swing my right hand over connecting with his jaw, and before I can swing again, he punches me back.

One of his men pulls me away from him. "I told you he's mine!" Jack shouts.

One of Hope's friends yanks him off me, and I run back over to Jack and throw a few more punches, and Jack does the same. We connect hard knocks, and I can feel my face throbbing.

I yell out in pain and look down at the knife stuck in my side. I hear Hope scream out my name. Pulling the knife out and throwing it behind me, I hit him again. I grab my gun and hold it in front of me. I hear people running behind me, stopping Jack's men from getting close to me.

"As much as I want to hurt you, torture you, I'm ready, *we're* ready for you to die!" I shout at him. Before he can fight or his men can get to me, I pull the trigger and hear the sound echoing in the tunnel.

"Come on!" I hear Jackson, but I take the gun up to his chest and shoot again. I want to make sure the fucker is dead, and I'll never have to see him again. "Get off him," Jackson shouts and takes the gun from me and pulls me up, but I immediately fall to my knees.

"Leo." Hope sobs as she cups my face, "Leo."

"I'm fine, I promise."

“You *have* to be fine because for the first time I have someone that I love. I love you Leo, so you better not leave me.”

Sitting up a little, I take the back of her neck and kiss her. “I love you too.” My voice comes out shaky, and I hold my side in agony.

“Yeah, yeah, get the fuck home, all clothes in a bag. I’ve got the gun,” Jackson talks at a rapid speed; he knows the police will be here. “John, take him. Hope holds the gun, put your prints on it.” I watch Jackson wipe mine off and hand the gun to Hope.

With a shaking hand, Hope takes the gun, as John helps me to my feet. “Wait, wait,” I tell him before he drags me to the car. “What about them?”

“We have enough witnesses to say you were never here, the plan is fine, and they won’t do too much talking, they know what happens to pedophiles in prison.” Jackson looks at them. “Now get the fuck home, and John will clean you up,” he shouts at me, and I look over at Hope once more as she stares down at Jack.

She’s just staring at him; I go to take a step closer. “Leo, what the fuck, John take him now! Fucking kick his ass if you have to.” Jackson pushes me away.

As John pulls me away, I look at Hope’s friends holding down the four men Jack brought with him.

“We all have the same story, yes?” I hear Jackson shout and they all nod.

Hope’s plan worked.

This is over. Five years is over and the weight that has been lifted off me, it’s like I’m breathing so much more freely.

The man that hurt me is dead.

The man I’ve hunted is dead.

The man that’s been hunting Hope is dead.

We won.

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EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR later

Leo

I'm lying on the floor as I watch my daughter on the play mat. At three months I would think her being here wouldn't do anything, but her eyes are moving around so much as she looks at the animals spinning at the top.

My dad was right. Throughout the pregnancy, the only person I cared about was Hope, nothing else mattered to me, and I felt like I would be the worst father in the world. I didn't care about my own baby. But the day she was born and was in my arms, I felt like I had everything in the world. I knew she was going to have me wrapped around her little finger and I really didn't care.

I have two girls in my life that mean more to me than my own life and making sure they are smiling every day is the only thing I care about.

"Lunch," Hope says as she sits on the floor next to me and hands me my plate. "I've put Jackson's in the oven to keep warm."

Leaning over to her I say, "Have I told you that you look beautiful?" Grabbing the back of her neck, I give her a kiss. Her hand rests on my cheek, as she kisses me back.

Hope still has her bad days. Sometimes she can't sleep in the bed. And sometimes she zones out, and it's clear she's

thinking about the past, but I don't say anything to her about it. I mean it's only been a year; that shit will take some time to leave her, but she's not the same Hope I brought to this house. The darkness that I had around me, it's there for the same reason it is for Hope. It will take some time to really move from the past, but I don't care about it because I have light in my life now, that light's name is Hope.

She walks around with her head held high and smiles. Smiles every day.

"You have now." Her smile brightens up my day. "You back to work this week?"

"Yeah, have a meeting with someone about them coming in to talk to the staff at We Are Loved." That place is doing so well, we have homeless people come in a lot for warm food and some stay to sleep for the night, but most of them eat and go. They let Doctor Adams check to see if they are okay, so that part is running smoothly. The other side of it is a little more tricky. We've had girls walk into the building, and we've won a few of their cases, but lost a few too. So, Jackson and I are getting the team together to talk about things.

"Back to being busy then." She looks down at our baby. "Right, then Fleur it's just you and me, huh?"

It didn't take us long to pick the name. Hope said she fell in love with the name Fleur the moment Jackson said it, but I wanted Nova after her mom, so in the end, we went with, Fleur Nova Masters.

"I'm sure I can work from home some days."

"So, where's my beautiful girl?" We both look up at Jackson as he walks into the room.

Hope smiles and rolls her eyes. "I'll get your lunch."

"Thanks, Hope." Jackson leans down and picks Fleur up. With him being around Fleur we've all seen a new side to him. We already knew that he would be protective, but if he's over—which is all the time—he won't let anyone else hold her. "So beautiful, what have you been doing today? I know you've missed me." He gives her a kiss.

“Why do you have a house?”

“You know why and I don’t want to talk about it in front of this little one.” He looks behind him to see where Hope is, then back to me. “You all ready for the weekend?”

“Yeah, I would ask if you’re ready, but looking at you that’s a stupid question.”

I’ve planned a nice day tomorrow; we leave in the morning and come back in the evening as neither Hope nor I wanted to go for the whole night. We talked about getting married before Fleur was born, but Hope never really answered me. She would change the subject or make excuses to leave the room, so I thought she would say no and I left it. Even now, she doesn’t really talk about it, but I’m going to ask her. I don’t see my life without her in it; she’s the only woman I’ve loved and will be the only woman I love for the rest of my life.

“Jackson, your lunch.” Hope sits on the couch next to him to take Fleur so he can eat, but he stops her.

“I can hold her and eat at the same time.” Hope starts laughing as she makes her way over to me.

Leaning on the couch with my arm wrapped over her shoulder, I lean closer to her. “I love you.”

Turning her head a little she smiles warmly. “I love you too.”



Hope

A year has passed, and things have changed. Changed for the better. I mean I feared Leo the day he came into my apartment, but today I love him so much. I love the way he looks at me every day. I love him, even more, when I see him playing with Fleur. The way he smiles when he’s with her, the way he laughs. I love everything about him.

I still have my down days, and I still have my bad nights, but they don’t bother me as much anymore because my day is

filled with so much light. That light's name is Leo and now Fleur.

"You ready?" He wraps his arms around me from behind, and he kisses my neck.

"I'm still worried about leaving her for the whole day."

"I'm not, have you seen Jackson with her?"

I start laughing as Leo has a point; Jackson with Fleur is the cutest thing I've seen. Leo said that he wanted to go out for the day, just us. When I asked where he said we're staying in the city because he wants to show me, New York. Since I've been here, I haven't really experienced the city, and he wants to show it all to me. I didn't fight with him, as I'm really excited to see it.

"Do I need to change?" I ask him. He's not telling me where we're going or what to wear.

"I said jeans and a t-shirt, comfy clothes." Turning me around, he gives me a kiss. "You still want to go to the cafe?"

"Please." I want to see Adam, he was the first person to talk to me without judging me and I've finally started to get the confidence to look at men, maybe not all of them straight away, but Adam is one that I want to see.

"Let's go then. I have something nice planned for this evening."

Taking my hand, he leads me downstairs, hands me a travel mug which is empty. I started drinking coffee a little after having Fleur to keep me awake. "Why is it empty?"

"We're going to the coffee shop, we can get some there," Leo tells me, then turns to Jackson. "Right, you call us and—"

"I will, I will. I think Hope got to me the second I walked through the door." Jackson gives me a kiss on the cheek. "Have a nice day beautiful. Now, my little princess and I have a day full of cartoons." Walking into the café, I hear Adam say, "Hey Hope, not seen you in a while." Leo's hand is on my lower back as we walk over to the counter.

I look up at him. “Hey Adam, two coffees please.” Adam smiles as his eyes roam over my face.

“I did say that you’re beautiful and I was right.”

“Thank you, Adam, and for the first time looking at you, you’re handsome.” I turn to Leo as he starts coughing and I give him a smile.

“I’ll get you your coffee.”

I lean into Leo, and he wraps his arms around me. “See it wasn’t that hard, was it?”

“No.”

Once it’s ready, I take our order from Adam. Leo pays and leaves him a big tip. “See you next week Hope.”

“Yep.”

Taking Leo’s hand in mine as we walk down the street, I stay close to him.

One thing that I do enjoy now is coming out into the city during the day and being able to see what people are doing. Before I would be looking at the ground, but now I’m looking at the buildings. I never knew how tall they were. I get to see how amazing central park really is too. I missed a lot in the year that I hid away, and there’s one person to thank for giving me the chance to see it, and it’s the man next to me.

“Okay, this is the last place,” Leo tells me as I look up at the building.

Today has been amazing; Leo took me to the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building. I’ve been on the bus to see everything and I’ve loved every second.

“I really enjoyed today,” I tell him. I’ve told him so many times already, but this could almost be the best day of my life, after having Fleur.

“Well, it will only get better.” Leo takes my hand and pulls me closer as we step into the elevator and the door closes. Nuzzling my neck, he wraps his arms around my waist tighter

so I can't move away from him. "You know I can always book a hotel for us, I'm sure Jackson will be fine for the night."

"As nice and perfect as that sounds, I'm sure that whatever you have planned, you'll still do tonight at home."

Leo starts laughing. "I suppose. Fleur tends to sleep for a few hours before waking up, but those hours you have to promise are mine."

"I promise."

The doors open and Leo turns me around, my back against his chest as my eyes widen.

"Leo," his name escapes in a whisper, and I can't take my eyes off the path of rose petals leading to the balcony.

He has to push me to move as I freeze on the spot. We walk, and my heart beats faster as I look at the candles flickering. I gaze down at the rose petals on the ground, and I wipe the tears escaping my eyes.

As we reach the end of the balcony, I turn to find Leo on his knee holding a box in front of him, and I gasp as I bring my hands up to cover my face.

"Hope, I promised you that I would never let anyone hurt you, I kept that promise. I now want to make new promises. I promise to make you smile every day, I promise to love you more than life itself. I promise that no matter what, you'll always be my life. You are the light in my dark world, and I promise to always be your light until the day I die. Hope, will you marry me?"

"Leo, yes." Standing up, he wraps his arms around me as I cry into his chest.

"I love you."

Where there is light, there is hope. Leo is my light.

The End

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you all my readers who have took the time out to read my book. Your support means so much to me.

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