

Conflict

Book Two of the Control Series



M S Willis

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M.S. Willis

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Prologue

“We are all victims here.”

Momma walked the room in slow circles as she spoke to the group of women gathered for counseling at The Center. She was not a licensed counselor and she hired people to provide private and group sessions for those purposes. Momma was more of a motivational speaker, a natural leader in her own right, and a pure spirit that people could trust. As she paced the room, her footsteps clicked against the light wooden floor. The silence of the room as the group listened to her words

was punctuated by those rhythmic footsteps. Her words cut through that silence even more and the echo of those words in the soundless room only added to their intensity and command.

I'd just turned seventeen and had been assisting Momma in these sessions for the past two years. I very rarely spoke and mostly just helped by handing out whatever reading material or worksheets Momma used during that particular session. Most of the time, I sat around and listened to the sorrowful tales of the women and the strengthening and encouraging words spoken by Momma in response to those stories.

Today's session focused on the need to rebuild and also on the participants' views on the term 'victim.' Momma had a particular distaste for that word as so many people used it in such a singular connotation. To most, the term 'victim' only meant the person that was directly injured or abused, but not to Momma. She was more encompassing in her definition and avoided using the term in such a way that it would make any one person feel singled out or alone. Momma knew if she could get these women to realize they weren't alone in being victimized, they would gain strength in the knowledge that they were not weaker or more vulnerable than any other person

in the room.

Her voice was authoritative and assured as she spoke. “I mean, think about it, ladies. Yes, all of you underwent some form of physical or emotional abuse, the severity of which is different in each case. You can look to your neighbors on your right and left and I can guarantee you one of them went through something worse than you or they endured it longer than you. So, does that make them more of a victim and you, less of one?” Momma paused a beat to allow what she was saying to be processed by the group. “The answer is ‘no’, ladies. Regardless of the severity of the trauma, the end result is that the trauma occurred, it

affected you negatively, and as a result, you were victimized. But it does not stop with you. Think back to the things that happened to you; now think about the people who first found you, or helped you, or treated your injuries. Think about what it must have been like for a good person to see or hear about what happened, to feel powerless to stop the violent acts they knew were being committed by others on a daily basis. Think about having to see that every day. Those people are also victims. Think about how you feel when you watch the news and a child has been killed or some other horrible tragedy has befallen one person at the hands of another. It hurts us all, it

impacts us all, and no matter the severity of the attack or role you play, we are all in this together despite our level of participation.”

This is my favorite speech of Momma's. I know that when it gets to the point that Momma feels comfortable giving this particular speech, it means the women in the group have transitioned from the healing phase to the rebuilding phase. This is when Momma shines, when her inner strength and fortitude are displayed so brightly that you can't help but feel more powerful when you hear her words.

Momma stopped to kneel down so

that she was face to face with one of the older women of the group. She had tears in her eyes that Momma would reach up and wipe away. “Ellen. You are not weak for having been hurt; rather, you are strong for having survived. You are not alone in what happened to you either. I’m here with you, these women are here with you; the police, the lawyers, your family, your friends, we are all here with you and we hurt with you.” She paused a beat before continuing. “But we have a decision to make, Ellen.”

Momma stood up and starting pacing the room again, making sure to look purposefully into the eyes of every person there. “All of us have a decision

to make. It is probably one of the easiest decisions to think about and the hardest to follow through, but in the end, and when our problems are broken down into their most basic form, it's the only decision we are left with."

She stopped in the center of the group as she said, "We are at a crossroads, ladies, and we have two choices. At this point in our lives, as a group of people affected in some way by the evil and heinous acts of another, we have to choose. Do we choose the path where we let this break us and define us? Will we lay down and die because of what happened to us?" She slowly turned, once again making sure to look at each person. "Or will we

choose the path where we pick ourselves up, where we fight against it to get past it and where we come out stronger on the other side?”

The attention of the women was focused solely on Momma. Some seemed hesitant and unsure, while I swore I could see that special spark begin to build in the eyes of the others.

“So, what will it be, ladies? Let’s make our choice. It’s time for all of us to stop sitting around wallowing in the events of our past. I will warn you that the road to recovery is not always the easy road. We have to fight against those intent on harming us. But, because we are victims together, all of

us, we can fight together. We can rebuild together. There is power in numbers.” Momma’s eyes continued to look around the room to meet and hold each and every pair of eyes there. “You have to get angry, ladies. You have to use what most consider a negative emotion as a driving force within you. Do not let the anger consume you, but do let it ignite the fire within you that pushes you forward along that difficult road. Because when you reach the end of that road and finally obtain the life you deserve, you have won that fight and you have triumphed in the face of your abuser.”

She moved to Ellen again and took Ellen’s hand into hers. Her voice

grew softer as she spoke. "What's it to be, Ellen? Do you want to remain where you are sitting or do you want to stand and walk with me down the road to recovery? Take that road with me and I promise you..." Momma turned to look at everyone once again. "...I promise ALL of you, that when we finish walking that road, you will be stronger, you will be happier, and you will be more independent and more prepared to take back your life."

The air in the room was thick between the obvious hesitancy of the women and the charged and challenging quality to Momma's words. I held my breath in anticipation as to what would happen next. After a quiet

moment, Ellen stood up with Momma. She was on shaky legs; but she stood and that was what was important. Tears streamed down her face, but her expression was one of determination and courage. Slowly, the other women rose from their chairs. One by one they combined their hands forming a perfectly unified circle around the room. Each woman gave strength to the ones by their side and together they made the decision to move on. Tears always pricked at my eyes in this moment because I knew it was time for them to regain their lives and to regain hope

This part was about rebuilding and every person in this room was

about to walk forward into a life where they would never have to depend on another to survive, would never again put up with abuse at the hands of another, and would learn to fight each and every day against anyone who attempted to hurt them.

Momma smiled when the group had joined hands. Each face in the circle smiled as well. When their hands squeezed each other in solidarity and combined determination, tears pricked my eyes, but I smiled as well.

It was time to fight.

Chapter One

“Well, at least the bruises have gone away.”

Logan stood behind me, clearly visible in the full length mirror that I was using to inspect myself. My face had mostly cleared up. Thankfully, the physical evidence of having been used for a punching bag was wearing away. What had once been angry dark purple bruises with wisps of red and yellow were now pinkish discolorations that could easily be hidden with a light coating of foundation. The bruising to my wrists was gone as well, but slight

scarring had stayed from where the bindings had ripped into my skin.

It's been three weeks since I temporarily moved in with Daemon; four weeks since my roommates and I were attacked by Chris; or, as I like to think of him, the 'psychopath hell bent on seeing me dead.' The police have been tireless in their search for Chris, but have not been able to locate him. When I was first released from the hospital, Detective Troy had been in daily contact with me about their efforts in locating Chris; but as time progressed, their leads were few and far between. I only occasionally heard from her now.

My roommate, Annie, was the

person who was most badly hurt in the attack. She was released from the hospital two weeks ago, but she was immediately transferred to an inpatient psychological facility in town. When I visited her in the hospital, she refused to talk about what happened. Her normally vibrant personality has been dimmed to a point of lifelessness. She demanded that the nurses cut her once long auburn locks. Her eyes no longer shown like emeralds, but rather, were sunken and dull. We know that Chris raped her, that he had at least a couple hours alone with her, but we don't know the exact details of what he had done in that amount of time. She won't talk, she won't look anyone in the eye, and she hasn't smiled

again since it happened.

I know her behaviors well. I grew up seeing the walking shells left behind after physical and psychological abuse and trauma. I also saw how life could be reborn into those shells with the proper time, therapy and care. I had suggested that Annie be transferred to my parents' abused women's center following her release from the hospital, but due to the severity of Annie's psychological condition, The Center wasn't equipped with the types of treatments that Annie would initially need. Momma told me that once Annie could leave inpatient treatment, she could go to The Center as a sort of halfway point. It would be there that she could be taught to not let her

past define her and to continue moving forward with her life.

“Has Annie spoken to you since it happened?” I caught Logan’s eyes through the mirror. Even though he and Annie had only dated briefly before the attack, he’d been at the hospital every day trying to get her to see him. He’d never been forceful, but just put the request out there to see if she would finally accept. She never did. The only men Annie would allow near her were her father and brothers. She reluctantly allowed a male doctor to tend to her physical injuries, but a female psychologist had to be found for her other problems.

“No.” Logan sighed. “I don’t blame her though, you know? I found her that night, Paige. While Daemon had gone to help you, I ran to find her and the condition she was left in...” He paused and his expression could not hide the fact that he was picturing her broken body on her bed. “...I know it was bad. There was so much blood. I don’t want to think about what that sick bastard did to her, I can’t think about it. All I can do is keep trying to see her, keep hoping that she’ll pull through this.”

I nodded my head in understanding. “Have you seen David?”

Logan moved to sit on the dressing bench near the closet in my room. His

arms crossed over with his elbows rested on his knees. His shoulders slumped forward and his tired posture gave away how hard he was taking all of this.

“Yeah, I saw him yesterday when I went up there. Matt was there visiting him and he looked good, like he hadn’t been attacked like everyone else.” Logan chuckled and grinned slightly. “It was nice to see that David hadn’t lost his sense of humor after everything that has happened.”

I smiled at that. David had been beaten within an inch of his life. Matt, his boyfriend, had taken a decent hit to the head as well. Matt was released

from the hospital within a couple of days, but David had been in a coma for close to two weeks. He had severe swelling to the brain and several broken bones in his face. His shoulder had been ripped out of the socket and he had several large lacerations from when he and Chris had fought in the living room of our apartment.

“Oh yeah? What was he up to when you saw him?” With David, it could be anything. The man had a way of introducing levity into even the darkest of situations.

Logan laughed quietly as he remembered his experience with David. “He had Matt bring him over a dozen

magazines and they were picking facial features. David was adamant that he was going to need plastic surgery when his face finally healed, so he cut out parts of faces in the magazine that he liked and taped them all over his face. He looked like something out of a Picasso painting with little extra noses and mouths and other paper body parts stuck to him.”

I laughed. David was a beautiful person inside and out, however, his superficial side sometimes tended to dominate his outward persona.

My skin suddenly tingled. I knew that Daemon had walked into the room. I didn't even have to turn around to feel the powerful aura that surrounded him.

His scent, his heat, his energy immediately surrounded and seeped into me anytime he was near.

I'd stubbornly demanded that Daemon and I consider ourselves "roommates" and sleep in separate bedrooms when I relented to staying at his house. Chris still had not been found and the three weeks that I've stayed here have been pure torture. Daemon held to my demand and used his knowledge of my weaknesses and turn-ons to tease me relentlessly. It didn't help that he refused to allow me out of his sight, even refusing to go to Tomb to watch over the club. Combined with his constant presence in my dreams, I was living twenty four hour days of sexual

anticipation and need. My hormones have been on warp speed, it was getting to the point that just the sight of Daemon left me damp and panting. He didn't even need to touch me. His constant gaze was palpable. His desire was evident. But his ability to hold himself back, to deny me what he was igniting within me, was infuriating.

I could feel his eyes sliding up my backside as I stood there. His gaze caressed me and I saw a lopsided grin break through when he eyed the goose bumps running up my arm. His crystal blue eyes caught mine in the mirror, the intensity of his stare caused my breath to become erratic. My muscles were tense as I tried to hide my reaction to him, but

it was useless. I determined when I first met Daemon that my body and my mind were two different departments of the same corporation when it came to him. They worked together for the good of the whole, but had two entirely different methods of operation. However, despite the mutinous actions of my body, and those traitorous bumps that revealed my lust for Daemon, I would never openly admit how he affected me.

His eyelids grew heavy and hooded as his eyes held mine. The tip of his tongue darted out to wet his lips and his grin grew more seductive, causing his dimples to pop out on his shadowed cheeks. He had just finished showering and dressing for our day. The tips of his

perpetually messy hair brushed his jaw and curled from moisture from his shower. A single drop of water ran down the tan skin of his jaw and left a slow trail as it traveled down his neck to his shoulder. My mouth ached to wrap around that skin and lick up the path of that drop. My body trembled slightly and I had to break his gaze.

We were going to see my parents today and I was excited to go. It'd been several weeks since I'd seen them last. I was looking forward to showing them how I had healed. My parents' faces when they'd seen me after the attack were heartbreaking. Their worst fear had been realized when they saw that their daughter had suffered the very thing

they so actively worked against. They were pacifists by nature, but had an even greater abhorrence for violence against women and children. Their lives had been dedicated to helping the victims heal and teaching them to survive without dependence on another. They'd rebuilt and inspired so many people. Most importantly, they'd brought me up strong and independent. That reason alone was why I was so excited to see them, to show them I hadn't been broken by what Chris had done.

Through my peripheral vision I could see Daemon stalking up to me. His slow swagger was feline in movement, lethal and surefooted as he approached. Not once had I seen him glance in

Logan's direction and I realized how focused he was on my body. As I was not *permitted* to drive my bike after it was returned from the shop, I was able to wear a light blue sundress and sandals. My legs and shoulders were bare and the dress reached to my mid-thigh. My usual clothing consisted mostly of jeans and tank tops because of the motorcycle that I drive. However, Daemon was afraid that Chris would recognize the bike and attack me again if he were to see me. This meant that Daemon used his truck to drive me everywhere I had to go. The only good part was that I was able to wear some of the clothes that normally just hung in my closet. However, Daemon's current

reaction was making me reconsider not having chosen to wear jeans.

His eyes were locked to the bottom hem line of my dress as he approached me. I could feel as he imagined running his hand up my leg and lifting the material of the dress to discover the smooth skin of my thighs underneath. My knees gave at the sensation. I inwardly scolded myself for having reacted. Daemon's ability to project his desire was unnerving. I didn't understand how he could so thoroughly saturate me in his essence just by his mere proximity to my skin.

He stopped just short of touching me and my back was bathed in the heat

rolling off of his chest. His hands casually went to his pockets and the top of his pants hung just perfectly off his hips. The fitted black shirt hid nothing of the sculpted chest and abdomen underneath; the material was folded and stretched taught over his shoulders. His scent mixed with his cologne wisped past me and my skin was softly wrapped in the deep vibrations of his hushed voice.

“You look good enough to eat, Damsel. It’s too bad we’re just *roommates*. I would love nothing more than to show you how much I appreciate seeing you in that dress.” His voice dropped into a seductive purr as he spoke. I watched my feet intently,

willing myself to focus on anything but what he was making me feel.

Logan must have sensed the tension between Daemon and I because he cleared his throat as he stood up from the bench. “It’s been good seeing you, Paige.” He looked at the non-existent watch on his wrist before he continued. “Look at the time, I’ve got work tonight. Text you later.” And with that, he exited the door and was gone. I was left alone with Daemon and somehow, the tension that had already been thick enough to cut had increased to the point of suffocating. My body flinched when I heard the soft click of the door as Logan left.

Daemon’s mouth turned up into an

arrogant smirk. He knew he had my heart coming through my chest at his close proximity. My breathing was labored and my chest expanded noticeably due to the increased volume of my intakes of air. He removed his hands from his pockets and ran them up the length of my arms, almost but not actually touching my skin. When his hands reached my shoulders, he traced along my collarbones down to just above my breasts. Our skin only touched when my lungs expanded with air. He stayed in that position for a few moments before his hands continued their path down my body and over the curve of my hips.

His chest softly pressed against my back as he leaned down to whisper

to me. My body shook when his lips brushed along the outside of my ear. “You have no idea how much I want to remove this thin material from your body. You also have no idea how badly I want to run my hands and my mouth over every inch of your skin...” He pressed his hips into me so I could feel the physical evidence of his arousal just as he leaned down to nip on the delicate skin behind my ear. My body bucked at the contact and a small excited cry escaped my throat.

He stepped back just away from me when I reacted and his small chuckle aggravated me to no end. Daemon was pleasure dipped in chocolate and he knew exactly how to use that trait to his

advantage. “I’ll be in the living room when you are ready to go.”

I continued training my gaze on anything but him as he opened the door to leave. After he shut it, my muscles relaxed and I went to lie down for a minute on my bed.

My eyes followed the slow lazy path of my ceiling fan as my heart rate slowed. This torture was endless and I hoped they apprehended Chris soon so I could go home. I feared that I couldn’t contain myself for much longer. The possibility of throwing myself at Daemon’s feet, begging to be touched, was no longer unimaginable. The only thing keeping me from doing just that

was my refusal at losing this battle of wills. Daemon had succeeded in stealing the loyalty of my body, but I still had a slight grasp of control over my mind. If I could maintain that control, he would not take the advantage in this game we were apparently playing.

Once my vitals had returned from their critical state, I pushed myself off the bed and brushed down to straighten the material of my dress. I looked to my closet and considered changing into loose sweats for the day, but the heat in Florida was too much to take when your skin was covered up. The backyard of The Center was lush wetlands that were my favorite place to explore. I would be trapped inside and away from that

paradise if I dressed in anything heavier than this dress.

When I entered the living room, Daemon and Logan stood on the balcony and talked in hushed tones. My eyebrow arched when I discovered Logan hadn't been in as much of a rush as he earlier stated. I couldn't blame him though. The tension was too much for me to take and I was a participant. I couldn't imagine the discomfort it would cause if I were only a witness. Daemon had no issue with expressing his interests in me in front of a group of people. It was as if his self-control took second to his enjoyment of watching me squirm.

Both men turned their heads

toward me as I walked out into the room. Even though it was daylight outside, their faces were bathed in shadow due to the privacy curtains Daemon had hung on the balcony before I was released from the hospital. He was concerned that Chris would see me if he were passing through town and I happened to be sitting out there enjoying the day. I felt like I was a person in a witness protection program that couldn't be left alone for one second.

Logan took his keys from his pockets on my approach and ended his conversation with Daemon. He approached me to wrap me in a brief hug before crossing the living room and going out the front door. Daemon's face

had an unreadable expression as he stood in the same place, looking me over.

When Daemon and I had first started playing this game, I had been a worthy opponent. I teased him just as relentlessly at first but quickly learned that his reaction heated me up even hotter. It became too much when my body felt like it was ripping apart from the lack of physical contact with him. His will power was staggering; especially in light of the fact that I knew he was equally affected by me. There was a point in time in which I became prey to his constant predator, but it was so understated, I missed it when it occurred. Within three weeks, he had me

avoiding him if I could and constantly on alert when he was around me.

I stood in the middle of the room as I waited for him to come in from the balcony. Silently, he entered the room and shut the large glass doors behind him. He brushed past me as he sauntered his way into the kitchen and grabbed his keys. I stood still, keeping my eyes trained on the front doors until I saw him walk in that direction. When he opened the doors, my feet took me forward and he walked behind me entering the elevators, quietly riding with me to the garage below. I'd had enough of this silence so I spoke of our plans for the day to break up the strain of our proximity to one another.

“Are you looking forward to seeing my parents’ place? I know you will love it, especially the back yard. I’ve spent many days exploring the different parts of the wetlands, but even today, I still discover new nooks and crannies that I’d never seen before. It really is a magical place.” My voice was breathless as I rambled on about the backyard where I spent my childhood.

The corners of Daemon’s mouth turned up into a smile. He knew damn well that I was attempting to diffuse the sexual energy between us. His voice was like silk as he responded and I inwardly cursed him for continuing his torment. “I am looking forward to it. From what you’ve told me, it would

almost feel primal being wrapped in such natural surroundings. A place where instinctual behaviors could take over, perhaps?”

He winked at me and I huffed out a breath of air at his relentless teasing. “Dammit Daemon, can we stop this for a few hours? I don’t need to be quivering and hyperventilating in front of my parents because of you.” Daemon laughed at my statement and nodded his head in agreement.

“Alright, Damsel, I’ll agree to your truce...for now. But don’t be surprised if I have to make up for lost time when we return home tonight.” His smile brightened and those blasted

dimples popped out making me want to trace over the indentations with my tongue. Bah! This man was driving me close to desperate insanity. His arm brushed against my skin as he reached around me to open the truck door and place me safely inside. He leaned in to fasten my seat belt for me and I remained rigid and stiff while sitting up in my seat. After the soft click of the belt, he began to right himself, but stopped to brush his lips against mine. "Oh, excuse me. I didn't mean to touch you there." He closed the door and walked around the truck to begin our journey.

Chapter Two

The drive to The Center was without conversation. Daemon kept music playing the entire way and the songs he choose were heavy and full of hidden meaning. We had the same taste in music and the darker, almost gothic, song choices he was making were just another strand of the tangled web he was weaving. He agreed to a truce and I was foolish to believe that he would stick to that agreement. Daemon was a master of passive aggression and he knew just about every trick there was to making a statement without ever openly attempting to do so. He was tying me in knots and I

was desperate to get to my parents' place so that a buffer was put in place between us.

The truck shook slightly as we drove along the gravel driveway to the building. It felt like Daemon was continuously slowing down as we got closer. He must have been taking in his surroundings. The natural beauty of this place was awe-inspiring and the tranquility was another part of the healing people experienced when they came here. My parents had done well to choose this location.

We stopped once we reached the end of the driveway and I looked over at Daemon. His eyes were wide as he took

in the building and his expression was distant and strained. His reaction was unexpected and I quietly watched him as he stared holes into the front doors.

A few seconds had passed and I couldn't hold my curiosity any longer. "Daemon? Is something wrong?"

He blinked his eyes and shook his head before looking back at me. "Uh, no. Not at all. It's just that I find this place to be overwhelmingly beautiful." His voice softened. "I think you were right. So far, I love it." He gave me a weak smile and I returned one to him.

"It is beautiful, isn't it? My parents have taken such care of this

place and it reminds me of a sanctuary of sorts. It wouldn't surprise me in the least if I walked inside and found a bunch of monks levitating. It truly is that peaceful."

"Levitating?"

I turned to him and smiled. "Well, yeah. In my head, they are ninja monks; and ninja monks levitate. So obviously, that's what they would be doing if they were here."

Daemon silently laughed as he opened his door. He came around the truck to open my door and help me out. I placed my hand in his and he smirked.

Sonofabitch! I let him help me

down.

That particular action had been part of our game. Standard practice would have been for him to extend his hand and for me to push it away and jump down without his assistance. I blamed our current environment for the oversight of having accepted his hand.

The deep timbre of his voice was pronounced as he said, "It's good to see I'm finally wearing you down." He brought my hand up to place a kiss on it and I ripped it out of his grasp.

"Zip it up, Zippy. There are to be no hidden agendas, cryptic meanings, or stalking of any sort while we are here." I

pointed my finger up into his face to drive home my seriousness. “I mean it, Daemon. We called a truce and you need to abide by it.”

He laughed. “Stalking?”

I looked up at him and crossed my arms over my chest. “Yes. Stalking. You do that little sauntering prowling thing when you walk. I feel like a damn mouse waiting to get pounced on by a large tomcat. It distracts me and you know it, so try and conduct yourself in a more natural manner while we are here.”

His smile brightened. “More natural?” He leaned in to me slightly as he spoke. “Damsel, I can guarantee you

that there is nothing unnatural in the ‘sauntering prowl’ thing that I do. You *are* a mouse and it’s about time for you accept it.”

My face was cast downwards so that I could avoid his stare. I knew that he had that hooded eyelid thing going on and I needed to avoid it. My attempts at avoiding those crystal blue eyes lined with dark lashes was thwarted when he placed a finger under my chin and pulled my face up to his. I could feel his breath roll across my face as he whispered to me.

“But, you are right, we called a truce, and I am determined to stick to that.” He smiled and let go of my face. I

let out a defeated sigh and started walking towards the building.

I trained my focus on the front doors and marched my way to the buffer I knew was waiting inside. Daemon lagged behind me and, regardless of the reason, I was glad to escape his suffocating presence.

Momma and Daddy came out the doors as we approached and both of their faces held odd expressions. As usual, they walked out to meet me and Momma wrapped me in a huge hug while Daddy went to shake Daemon's hand. I could see that Daddy was saying something to Daemon, but his voice was so low, I couldn't pick up on what they

were discussing. Momma let me go and when she passed me off to Daddy, she turned and took Daemon into a hug. I found it unusual that the three of them acted as familiar with each other as they did. Trauma and heartache must really be a glue that binds people, because the two days they spent at the hospital together had managed to develop in them a close bond. I felt somewhat out of place; almost as if there was a something more of which I had not been made privy.

“Look at you, Paige. You are almost all healed up. And you’re wearing a dress?” Daddy smiled brightly. “I thought I’d never see the day.”

Daddy looked me up and down as Daemon and Momma passed. When Daemon was within a closer distance of us, he turned to Daddy and me and said, “I explained to Paige earlier how appreciative I was to see her dressed so nicely for us all.”

Daddy and Momma grinned and nodded their agreement with Daemon’s statement before he continued. “It seems staying with me and letting me take care of her suits her. I think it might even be a good idea for her to stay after they capture Chris.”

Momma smiled up at Daemon. “You have a point, Daemon. Maybe we should all team up to convince her to

give staying with you a shot.” My jaw dropped at Momma’s statement and Daemon winked at me. That bastard! I could immediately see how this day was going to go. We hadn’t even been here for five minutes and my parents were already jumping on ‘Team Daemon.’

We made our way into the building and Daddy took me into the recreation areas while Momma gave Daemon a guided tour of the facilities. I plopped myself down on my favorite couch and Daddy and I spoke quietly together while we waited for Momma and Daemon to return. Daddy caught me up on the ongoing activities at the Center and I filled him in on what it was like being held captive by an overprotective

Daemon. He laughed when he thought I was joking about my captivity, but I wasn't sure that it was a joke. Although Daemon wasn't holding me against my will, I still wasn't comfortable being watched by anyone; and in my mind, that was captivity.

Daddy didn't seem like his normal jovial self today. I couldn't quite put my finger on what was bothering him. After we had finished our polite conversation, I decided to be blunt. "What's wrong, Daddy? You seem upset about something."

Daddy's face fell a little bit and he appeared to be wrestling with what he would tell me. When I gave him my

pointed ‘hurry it along’ glare, he sighed and responded. “We’re just having some *slight* financial problems with The Center. I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about, but due to the state economy problems, our funding has been cut back. I’m sure we can put together some fundraisers to make up the difference. Nothing for you to worry about, baby girl.”

I was instantly worried over what Daddy had told me. The Center had been in operation for over twenty years. At first, The Center started small but quickly grew as more and more women and children looked to it as a bastion of hope. It was a place where they could put aside their poor choices; where they

could rebuild; and where they could learn to walk back into life, to love again. Due to their fierce love for one another, my parents built and tirelessly operated the facility because they understood what it meant to love someone. They made it their life goal to help those who were left broken by the very thing that made them so strong. What would happen to my parents if The Center was forced to close? More importantly, what would happen to the women and children who so desperately needed a place like this?

I started to respond, but quickly stopped when Momma and Daemon returned. I wasn't sure if Momma yet knew about the financial problems

because Daddy tended to avoid burdening her with those types of concerns. We sat together and talked about various topics. Daemon explained to my parents that he was a club and bar owner and that his businesses had proved to be moderately lucrative. My parents didn't delve too much into his childhood which I thought was strange. Momma is usually the first to ask about family members when getting to know someone, but she avoided the topic gracefully. We continued our discussion for a little over an hour before Momma and Daddy had to excuse themselves to tend to their responsibilities.

When Daemon and I were left alone, I inwardly groaned about having

lost my buffer. In spirit with the truce, he had been on his best behavior and I was concerned that being alone with him would prove to be too tempting for him to continue his good behavior. When I looked over to him to invite him out to the backyard, the twinkle in his eye told me that my concern had been warranted. This man was going to be the death of me and I pondered what death by sexual frustration would feel like. I concluded it must be some sort of spontaneous combustion that occurred and that's why my body always trembled and heated in his presence.

“Did you want to go with me to see the backyard? It's my favorite part of this place.”

Daemon's eyes met mine and his lopsided grin was a dead giveaway to his mischievous thoughts. "I'd love to. Lead the way." He stood and extended his hand to help me up from where I sat. I wasn't about to fall for that again, and I playfully batted his hand away and stood without his assistance.

I could feel his heat brushing across my back as he closely followed behind me to the backyard. Once we were outside, he stopped and his gaze slowly traversed the openness of the surroundings. The usual sounds of frogs, birds and cicadas were present and a breeze was softly blowing through the veranda just outside the back door. I stood staring at him as he looked over

the yard and wetlands and I wondered what he was thinking. After a few moments, he looked back over to me and smiled.

“It’s stunning, Paige. I couldn’t imagine growing up in a more beautiful place.” His words were distant and disjointed as he spoke and I picked up on something deeper in what he had said. I decided not to press it and I simply smiled back in response.

I took his hand to lead him out onto the yards and a jolt of electricity shot through our enjoined hands. I jumped slightly at the feeling and Daemon gave me his knowing grin. At some point, whatever this was between

us was going to give and I would have to face whether I could be the woman he apparently believed I could be. I knew that I could love him, that I might already; but I wasn't ready to admit it to myself, much less him. His patience was astonishing and I would have thought that he would have moved on weeks ago when I refused to openly acknowledge our relationship while at the hospital.

We walked out amongst the camphors and Daemon's eyes surveyed the large trees as we passed. I continued to lead him to the edges of the wetlands where the sparse grasses stood as high as our hips in some places. Remembering my past visit with David, I turned to warn Daemon to watch his

step.

“Be careful walking around these parts. The wetlands extend out and some portions of the ground are waterlogged and soft. I brought David out here about a week before everything happened. His feet got stuck and he lost a three hundred dollar pair of shoes.”

Daemon’s face took on a bemused expression as he thought about what I had told him. “Who wears a three hundred dollar pair of shoes into a swamp?”

His question caught me off guard and I laughed so hard it cramped through my sides. I haven’t laughed like that in a

long time and a feeling of euphoria crept over me from the effort. “Daddy and I said the same thing when it happened. I suspect he’ll make me stop at a budget shoe store the next time he agrees to accompany me.”

Daemon chuckled as we continued our path to the water’s edge. The sun shone off the water and blinded me as it rippled past. I looked down into the murky water and caught sight of the turtle heads I used to count as a child. Daemon spun slowly in place as he glanced over the yard surrounding us. He kept looking back towards the large camphor trees near the building and a funny glint was in his eye as he turned back to me. “Wanna climb a tree with me?”

My jaw dropped at his suggestion and I laughed at the absurdity. “Um, no. Even if I wasn’t deathly afraid of heights, I’m not exactly dressed for that type of activity.”

His eyes brightened at that statement. “It’s not a problem, Damsel. I’ll let you climb up first to make sure you don’t fall.” He wriggled his brows and I laughed again.

“Somehow, I don’t think looking up my dress is in keeping with our truce.”

He squeezed my hand and winked. “Hey, it’s not my fault if I have a fortunate view while helping you

climb.” His lopsided grin returned and I was once again fixated on the dimple that appeared. “Why are you afraid of heights? You don’t seem like the type of girl who wouldn’t have climbed trees when she was a kid.”

I looked over to the cypress tree that I had fallen out of when I was younger. I was struck by the thought that my first open act of defiance and stubborn will had almost killed me when I fell out of that tree.

“You see that tree right there, the tall cypress by the water’s edge?”

Daemon’s gaze followed mine and he looked at the tree to which I was

referring. He looked back at me and arched a brow in question.

“I fell out of that tree when I was younger. It had rained earlier that day and the moss on the branches was slick. I made it up just fine, but lost my footing as I was climbing back down. I landed on one of those roots sticking out of the water and laid there for a while until my father found me. It had started raining while I lay there and I was scared that I would die. You have to worry about snakes and other predators in places like this, especially when it rains.”

Daemon's face looked suddenly aggravated as he listened to my story. He looked between the tree and me several

times before finally settling his gaze back on my face. “You climbed that tree alone? After it rained? What in the hell were you thinking? You could have been killed.”

His response was unexpected and I couldn't figure out why he sounded so angry. What did he care if I fell out of a tree as a child? All kids did stupid things every once in a while. He didn't even know me when it happened.

I shrugged. “I know it was stupid to climb it alone, and Buddy had warned me about the moss before he left. But, I was determined to climb it. He never would climb it with me and...I don't know...maybe I was mad and trying to

get back at him for leaving. Like I was rebelling against his warnings.”

Daemon’s eyes softened. He took both my hands into his and looked down at our enjoined fingers. “Was Buddy the person to whom you gave the necklace on your shoulder?”

My eyes looked out over the water. I remembered that I had never really explained to Daemon the significance of the tattoo. I had mentioned it briefly that first night at his apartment, but other than that, it was a story I rarely discussed. “Yes. We used to climb trees together all the time and he always refused to allow me to climb that one. He said I would slip on the

damp branches and I guess he was right, considering what happened.” I absently rubbed my thumbs across his hands. “I’ve never climbed another tree since.”

Daemon pulled me into him and wrapped his arms around me. We stood silently in that embrace for a few minutes before he spoke again. “Tell me about him. I’d like to know about the boy who affected you so deeply that you felt a need to strike out at his absence.”

I was quiet. I didn’t know where to start when it came to Buddy. Even though our time together was so short, his presence in my life had been a large factor on who I became. Obviously, there was the traumatic event that we

had experienced together; but it was the bond that we forged in such a short amount of time that really stood out in my head. I pulled myself from Daemon's embrace and led him to a sunny patch of grass that had been my favorite spot growing up. I laid down in the grass and fixed my gaze on the clouds rolling above us. Daemon sat down next to me as I recanted the tale.

“Buddy had come here with his mother. His father had abused them both and he was very shy when he first arrived. I was too young to understand what he had been through, so I always pestered him in the halls and other places where I would see him. He came around eventually and we connected

almost instantly once he dropped his guard.” I smiled in memory of having broken Buddy down. I was as annoying and stubborn then as I am today and he had been a tough nut to crack.

Daemon continued to listen patiently as I relived one of the brightest and darkest times of my childhood. “For the three months that I knew him, that I physically had him in my life, he was my world. We climbed trees together, chased lizards and insects together, laid here in this exact spot watching clouds together.”

I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Daemon smiled at that statement and let out a small chuckle as I

remembered back. “He picked on me relentlessly and never let me forget that I was just a girl. He was older than me and bigger, but every time he pushed me down, I got back up again. If I hadn’t, he would have picked me up just to push me down over and over until I finally got up on my own. In his own way, he was teaching me to stand up for myself, to depend on myself, and to never give up. If I hurt myself, he would tend to the wound, but the tears had to stop when the bandage was on my skin, that was his rule.”

I looked sheepishly at Daemon. Most people couldn’t understand feeling as strongly as I did for Buddy when, technically, I should have been too young

for the effect he had on me.

“Momma told me once that she thought Buddy and I were twin souls, like we were meant to know each other. But I guess fate had a different idea. His father....”

This part was always the hardest to tell. I swallowed down the lump in my throat and continued despite it.

“...his father killed his mother in front of us. It was on my sixth birthday and Buddy was taken away. I never saw him again. Before he left, I gave him the only piece of me I could think of, the necklace, the same one as my tattoo. It was my way of sealing our promise that

we would see each other again. Buddy always kept his promises, but I guess that one was too much to keep. I don't blame him, he was only seven and his life was outside of his control, but I always hoped he would return to me somehow."

A few tears escaped my eyes as I thought about Buddy and I wiped them away quickly before Daemon could see that I was crying. It was embarrassing to admit that three months of my life as a child had been enough to determine how the rest of my life would be lived. "He was the only boy that I loved, and still love to this day; he was it. And I lost him at six years old." I let out a humorless laugh. "Sadly, the truth is, he

probably doesn't even remember who I am. He may have purposely wanted to forget me; who knows? But I'll never forget him. I just wish there was some way for me to tell him how much he meant to me."

Daemon was quiet for a few seconds before rubbing his hand through his messy hair and letting out a sigh. "I don't know about that, Damsel. You would be a hard person to forget with as aggravating as you are." He turned to wink at me. "Maybe the kid was never allowed the chance to talk to you and tell you how special you were to him. Maybe he had to fix his life, or become a better person before he could return to find you."

I chuckled at Daemon's words. What he said was unlikely. Buddy had to have forgotten me, there was no other explanation. I've always known I was the odd person, the one who stubbornly clung to a childhood friend. Whereas most people grow up and let go of frivolous childhood fantasies, I held on to Buddy's memory like it was the only thing that mattered to me.

Daemon became quiet and appeared deep in thought and I returned my attention to the clouds lulling above me. I was slightly startled when Daemon spoke again. "Didn't it hurt you, Paige? When Buddy pushed you down and pulled your hair; it had to have hurt you. Why do you remember him with so much

admiration and affection?”

I shrugged my shoulders and answered, “Well, yeah, it hurt. Who cares? We were kids and kids do crap like that to each other. Besides, he was just trying to teach me to stand up for myself. He couldn’t have done that if he didn’t push me around. You know?”

He turned his head towards the lake. His expression was stoic, but it was apparent he was lost in his thoughts.

Daemon laid down beside me and we watched the clouds together. I’d started to fall asleep from the warmth of the sun when Daemon turned on his side and leaned over me. The sudden shadow

caused me to open my eyes and his piercing blue eyes burned into mine as he stared down at me. My body displayed its usual reaction to him and he laughed while running his hands down the goose bumps. Embarrassed by his amusement, I pointed my finger up at him and said, “We have a truce today, Mister. No bump rubbing for you.”

His smile brightened at my unintentional innuendo and those delicious indentations appeared on his cheeks. His smile faded quickly as he continued watching me and his eyes heated. I was motionless and breathless from his proximity and his expression was about to be my undoing.

Daemon smirked and said, “Fuck the truce,” right before bringing his lips down to mine. His kiss was gentle and full of unspoken emotion. Our mouths moved slowly against each other and I felt drunk from the warmth building between us. This kiss wasn’t created from fire or passion, but from something else entirely. It was the kind of kiss lovers gave each other when they are reunited after a long time apart; a kiss meant to sooth, to comfort, to convey thoughts and feelings without the use of words. It was the kind of kiss where we were breathing for each other and devouring each other; one where there was nobody else in this world. I was lost to him within seconds and only

when it was necessary that we come up for air, did it end. Daemon raised himself up from me just enough that the sun caught his hair, causing it to glow around his face. I gasped as memories of my first kiss flashed through my head and I had to shake away the image of Buddy above me to replace it with that of Daemon.

A lopsided grin came over Daemon's face. "You okay? You look a little dazed." His head tilted slightly and the shadows played across his cheeks and strong jaw.

I nodded before finally rediscovering my ability to speak. "Yeah. Everything's fine." My voice was

breathless and choppy. “Um, I just remembered something when you kissed me.”

“What did you remember?”

I pushed myself up onto my elbows forcing Daemon to move back over to his spot in the grass. I looked out over the water as I spoke. “Buddy was my first kiss. It was nothing fancy, just a little peck, but it was a kiss nonetheless. He gave me that kiss in this exact spot.”

Daemon arched a single brow. “This spot right here?”

“Yes, why?”

“Just think it’s an interesting

coincidence, that's all."

My eyes shot to Daemon to find him smiling. I was about to respond when we heard Momma open the back door and call for us. We peaked over the grass and a large grin spread over her face when she spotted us.

"Paige? Daemon? Could you two come help me with something inside?"

"Sure Momma, be right there!" I shouted back to her as Daemon started pushing himself up into a standing position. He stood above me and offered his hand to help me stand, but I pushed his hand away in stubborn refusal of his assistance. "The truce is back on,

Daemon, so I'm not taking your hand."

Daemon smiled and as I was just about to push up into a standing position, he grabbed my shoulder, smiled, and then pushed me back down to the ground. I landed with a hard thump on my bottom and he laughed before walking away.

"What the hell was that?" I screamed. When he didn't turn around to respond; I stood up, dusted myself off, and followed after him into the building.

Chapter Three

Daemon stuck to the truce for the rest of the day. We kept ourselves busy helping my parents with different chores around The Center and ate dinner before heading home. I was nervous walking out towards his truck with him because I knew as soon as those tires hit the highway again our peace treaty would go up in flames. I was right.

As soon as The Center was out of our view, Daemon started up his musical missive game. Every song he choose had dark, haunting lyrics about unrequited desire and absolute longing for another

person. I rolled my eyes when he started the first song and I could see his arrogant smirk out of the corner of my eye. I was not in any rush to return to his apartment with him alone so I suggested we stop and see David at the hospital. Daemon gave me a knowing grin and reluctantly agreed.

“Don’t think that being in a hospital will stop me from ‘stalking’ you. I’ve been anxiously waiting to pounce all day.” He glanced in my direction and then back to the road.

I let out a defeated sigh and decided it was time to clear up this stand-off we were having.

“Listen, Daemon. I know I made certain *demands* when I agreed to stay with you, but I didn’t intend for it to mean that we weren’t dating each other.” That piece of humble pie was particularly difficult to swallow. Daemon’s responsive chuckle didn’t help much either.

“That’s excellent news, Damsel. So tell me, what exactly am I to you?” He kept his eyes trained on the road but I could still see their amused sparkle as he spoke. He knew he had me cornered and he delighted in making me say things I wasn’t comfortable discussing.

I fidgeted with my hands as I struggled with what to say. A smirk was

glued to his face and I knew that he was enjoying watching me squirm.

“Why does there have to be labels?” I shrugged then continued. “You’re Daemon, I’m Paige. I don’t see why any more information is necessary or relevant. We should just be Daemon and Paige.” I smiled brightly at him in hopes that my suggestion would be sufficient to cease the unyielding sexual tension between us.

Daemon shook his head and silently laughed. His reaction wasn’t making me feel any better at having brought up the subject. He should have jumped at the chance to stop the game. He could finally act on his feelings for

me and I would let him. In fact, it would be in his best interests to do so. Men like sex. I was willing to give him sex. There was no down side to this situation.

“I don’t think so, Damsel. You won’t be turning me into another friend with benefits. If you don’t know what I am to you, then I have no problem continuing our relationship as *roommates*.”

I scowled the rest of the way to the hospital.

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“So, if you two will just use that marker to place a mark beside the features you like best, I will calculate

the most votes when it is time for the ultimate makeover.”

David sat up in his hospital bed as he directed our attention to the poster board display he had secured to one wall of the room. I looked over the board he prepared which gave you a choice of different noses, mouths, and chins. My jaw dropped upon sight of the board and Daemon’s face was puckered as he attempted to contain his laughter.

“David, have they said you will need cosmetic surgery? I mean, you look great. I don’t understand why you’re choosing new facial features.”

David let out an exasperated huff.

“Paige, I appreciate your kind words, but it is fairly obvious that my nose is now crooked and my face is definitely no longer symmetrical. Cosmetic surgery is definitely needed to return myself back to a state of hopeless beauty. Now pick a feature!”

I quickly grabbed a pen and turned to the board as directed. I looked back and forth between the board and David as I decided what parts would look best on him. My hand went to place a mark by the Roman type nose and David tsked.

“What?” I turned to him in question.

“Not that one. I would look horrible with that nose. If you are not going to take this seriously, Paige, then just put the pen down and let Daemon have a turn.” David crossed his arms and gave me a pointed glare.

I shrugged my shoulders and handed the pen over to Daemon. His face fell when he realized he was now on the spot. I nudged him with my shoulder. “Good luck.” Daemon sighed and took the pen before turning to the board to pick out his favorite features.

I chuckled silently as I crossed the room to sit on David’s bed. I wrapped him in a big hug and enjoyed seeing him healthy and happy again. “I’ve heard that

Matt and you have become quite the item. Has he been here every day to see you?"

David's face lit up as I asked about Matt. His smile widened as he told me all about their romance. "Paige, he's amazing. That man has been by my side this entire time. He doesn't even care that my face is misshaped. He's been playing nurse to my patient and I couldn't have asked for better care. I especially like the sponge baths." He wriggled his brows.

My jaw dropped at that mental image. David has never understood the concept of 'too much information' and I needed to change the subject before

Daemon got an earful.

“That’s great David! You’ll have to give me the PG version some other time. Have they told you when you can expect to get out of here?” I glanced over to Daemon and noticed that he had made his selections and was attentively listening to David and my conversation.

“They keep saying I should be out in the next couple of days, but I’m not sure how they are going to perform my makeover in that amount of time. It must be an outpatient procedure. Oh! Maybe I’ll get to relax at one of those cosmetic spa centers while I undergo my magnificent transformation!”

“You don’t need cosmetic surgery, David.”

“Way to rain on a man’s dreams there, Paige. Of course I do. I can look like anybody I want now. Although, I may just have to go with Daemon’s choices. Turning into the man of his dreams can’t be all that bad.” David winked at Daemon, who chuckled in response before making his way to where we were sitting.

Daemon stood behind me, once again crowding my personal space while not actually making physical contact. The heat immediately returned between us and I could feel my skin prickling almost instantly.

“Holy crap! Did you two feel that? I think a floating orgasm just breezed past me. How are the two of you not making whoopee on the floor as we speak?! The sexual tension between you two is fierce.”

I could sense Daemon silently laughing behind me and I rolled my eyes. His hands came up to rub up and down the bumps on my arms and a tremor ran through me at the contact.

“Unfortunately, David, Paige and I are only *roommates* by her own demand. I would love nothing more than to throw her down and make *whoopee* on the floor, but that type of behavior would be inappropriate. Don't you agree,

Damsel?”

I'm not sure if he could feel them but I was shooting eye daggers out of the back of my head. David laughed when he noticed the expression on my face and then an eyebrow arched when he thought about what Daemon had said.

“Roommates? Why on Earth would you demand something like that, Paige? Have you not seen the incredible specimen of ultimate manhood that is standing behind you? I for one would never let something like that go to waste. I can assure you Daemon, that if I was in Paige's position, you wouldn't be leaving the bedroom for weeks.” David paused and then pointed a finger to

Daemon as he continued. “In fact, I would offer that now if I wasn’t currently off the market.”

My face met my palm on that last part. I shook my head at David’s candor and was rendered speechless.

“Speaking of roomies...I wanted to know if I could stay with you and Daemon after they finally release me. Matt’s lease is up soon and he’s getting his own place, so I could start staying with him then. But in the meantime, I’m homeless and I refuse to go back to that apartment while Chris is still running around. That man is psycho on a stick and I don’t need another encounter with him.”

I looked up to Daemon before answering. Technically, the place was his and I didn't feel comfortable giving David permission to stay there as well.

Daemon nodded in response to David's question. "Of course. I'd be happy for you to stay with us. There is another bedroom you could use that has its own bathroom, so I'm sure you would be very comfortable."

David smiled a wide tooth grin and clapped his hands. "This is so exciting! Matt will be so jealous to see what I get to wake up to every morning. Daemon, by all means, please feel free to be your normal self while I'm there. I don't want my presence to make you feel

uncomfortable to walk around shirtless, or pantless, for that matter.”

Daemon laughed at David’s comment. “Your flattery is appreciated, but if you don’t mind, Paige and I need to be getting back. It’s late and I want to make sure she is good and tucked in when I get her there.”

His innuendo was not lost on me. The sonofabitch knew what he was doing and although he had actually managed to conduct himself appropriately while visiting David, I knew I was in for it when we got back to the apartment.

“I don’t believe tucking people

into bed is appropriate *roommate* behavior, Daemon.” I glared up at him to emphasize my point.

“Oh, Damsel. It most certainly is proper *roommate* behavior. What do you say David? Would you feel odd if Paige tucked you in; maybe read you a little bedtime story before you fell asleep.”

David smiled a wicked grin before responding. “Not at all! We wouldn’t feel like true roomies if we couldn’t do that for one another.” He patted my on the head. “I’ve even been known to help her out when she showers.”

“No you have not!” I paused,

“Well, ok, there was that one time, but you picked the lock on my bedroom door. I never agreed to let you in, so it doesn’t count!”

Daemon gently pulled me up by my arms and held his chest to my back. My knees slightly gave at the sensation of his hard muscles pressed against me and his arms wrapped around me to hold up my weight.

“You heard the man, Damsel. It looks like I’ll be lathering you up tonight.” His expression instantly became mischievous. “I would hate to be an inconsiderate *roommate*.”

There was no getting around this.

Daemon was just heating up when it came to his incessant teasing. My frustration with this game was only made worse by the fact that I enjoyed it at the same time. Daemon was nothing if not charm incarnate. He oozed sexuality and brute strength out of every pore. His self-control and calm demeanor only added to his lethal persona. I've been witness to the rare occasion that Daemon is angry, and even though he can be absolutely fucking terrifying when he's mad, he does so in an almost carnal and sensual manner.

Defeated, I shrugged my shoulders in surrender and gave David a quick hug goodbye. "Call me when you need me to come get your ass and I'll send my

personal errand boy here up to fetch ya.”

“Errand boy?” Daemon gasped in indignation behind me.

I turned to him and gave him my best triumphant smirk while I crossed my arms over my chest. “Yes. Errand boy. Considering you have to watch me and all, due to *safety concerns*, I realize that whatever I need, you have to drive me. Unless, of course, I would be allowed to drive myself...”

“No.”

I arched an eyebrow, “So than I must be correct. I say fetch, you go. Correct?”

His blue eyes shone out at me. A mixture of heat and amusement played across his features and I couldn't help but grin back at him. My heart was performing a little tap dance inside my chest and I became anxious waiting for his response.

Daemon smiled and moved up so close to me so that our chests were barely brushing against each other. He bent down so that his mouth was just on top of mine and I froze. He held that position, motionless, while I lost track of time and everything else around me.

BeepBeepBeepBeepBeepBeepBeep

David's heart rate monitor

suddenly sped up. Daemon and I turned in unison to look at him and David stared back at us with an innocent expression on his face. His hand brushed away our silent question as he said, “Sorry, but it’s like I said earlier; floating orgasm. Seriously, you two are in a hospital. That stuff could be deadly around sick people. You should go.”

Daemon softly laughed and reached down to take my hand to lead me out of the room. “You heard the man, Paige. We need to leave before we put any of the patients here at risk.”

I turned back to David as Daemon was leading me away and mouthed the word ‘traitor’ as I was pulled from the

room. David wiggled his fingers at me and smiled.

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We entered Daemon's apartment and I stood in the foyer as he crossed the room to turn on some lighting. He skipped the pendant lights this evening and only flipped on the flame sconces on the walls. His house was instantly bathed in dancing shadows and I let out a huff of air when I realized his slow, suffocating seduction was not coming to an end. This man was determined to be the death of me and I gave myself a little pep talk as I made my way across the room. Without looking in Daemon's direction, I struck out in the direction of

my room, hoping to go to sleep and avoid whatever plans he had for me. I could see Daemon smirking as I passed him and I refused to acknowledge his presence as I walked by.

Just keep walking, lock your door, and go to bed.

I'd almost made it to my room and my hand was just touching the small lever to open the door, when a hand clamped down on my shoulder and I stopped in my tracks. *Damn!* I turned my head slightly to find Daemon standing behind me with a huge grin plastered across his face.

“Where are you going, Damsel?”

I looked up at him and faked a loud, dramatic yawn. “I’m really tired. I think I’m just going to lie down and call it a night.”

Daemon’s large arm came around my body to open the door for me. His bicep softly brushed against my shoulder and I stood stiff and still refusing to react to his close proximity. I cringed when he brought his lips to my ear and whispered, “Guess it’s time for that bedtime story. I need to make sure you are tucked in good and tight.”

His low timbre voice wrapped itself around me as his lips tickled the outside of my ear. A fine sheen of perspiration developed on my skin and

my chest rose and fell with my labored breath. Something had to give between Daemon and I. It was insane how he could render me a quivering mess with nothing more than a few supposedly innocent words. He was a master at double meanings and unfortunately, I was observant enough to pick up on it. I mused over the fact that it was unfortunate that the head injury I suffered hadn't knocked my IQ somewhere deep into the dull range. Ignorance would be preferable at this time and I could simply walk into my room excited to have a book read to me and a teddy bear handed over for me to snuggle. Somehow, I didn't think that was Daemon's intention at the moment.

The door swung open in front of me and I continued to stand in place. Daemon's body softly vibrated from silent laughter and he nudged me to guide me into the room. I took a few steps in, allowing him to enter the room just behind me and my breath caught when I heard the soft click of the latch as the door closed. My full length mirror stood directly in front of us and I could just make out Daemon's large form behind me in the moonlight that came in through the windows. He hovered over me at 6'5" and his shoulder width had to have been twice the width of mine. Once again, he moved up so close to me that I could feel his body heat roll down my back.

His head leaned down and he brushed his face across my hair. This was way too intense for me to handle, so I quickly turned so that I was looking at Daemon. His eyes were beaming into mine and I took one step back to put some distance between us.

I put up my hands to keep him from coming closer and said, “I’m perfectly capable of tucking myself into bed. Thanks for the concern, but really, I’m fine.” I smiled brightly and turned to walk towards the bathroom. Daemon reached out and grabbed my upper arm.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

It should be made illegal for a person's voice to sound as seductive as Daemon's did when he spoke. The feeling of prey came over me and I had to actively remind myself to maintain my composure. War had been declared between my mind and my body and I had to give it my all to keep from throwing myself at Daemon at that moment.

"I'm getting a shower and then I'm going to bed. You can leave now." I glared over my shoulder in challenge and a wicked grin spread across Daemon's face. I looked back in front of me and started to step forward. My foot never reached the ground before I was thrown up over Daemon's shoulder. I cried out in astonishment and he

chuckled while he carried me out of my room.

He took long, purposeful strides across the living room and turned sharply down the hallway leading to his bedroom. The double doors leading to his room slammed open and he walked us into his bathroom. He placed me down on my feet and then turned to shut the door behind us.

My jaw was dragging the ground by the time he turned back around and I moved away from him. “What in the hell do you think you are doing?!” I crossed my arms over my chest and glowered up at him in outrage.

Damn if that little sideways grin didn't break out on his face. That particular expression gave him such a boyish charm that it was hard to ignore him, much less resist him.

“David got to help you in a shower, so I think it's only fair that I get to as well. As, *roommates*, of course.” He slowly stalked toward me as he spoke and for every step he took forward I took one back. We kept up our little dance until my back hit the glass enclosure of the shower.

Once I was effectively trapped, Daemon's expression changed from playful to seductive. I was motionless as he continued his approach. When he was

within inches of touching me his arm reached around me to open the shower door. He placed his hands on my shoulders and gently pushed me back. I must have resembled a cat getting shoved in a box at that moment, because my arms and legs spread out to hold on the walls of the enclosure.

Daemon laughed. “What’s wrong, Paige? Don’t think you can handle a friendly shower with a friend?”

I was reaching a breaking point and I quickly realized avoiding Daemon was not going to work. He wanted to play a game with me and up until now, I had refused. But, screw that! I was just going to up my resolve and play this

game to win. If Daemon was able to tease me relentlessly, then I would just have to return the favor.

I dropped my arms with such force, my hands slapped against my thighs and I stepped back into the shower. My eyes never left Daemon's and his expression quickly displayed his confusion. Giving him a slight grin, I reached behind me to turn on the water. My hair and clothes clung to me from the moisture and I looked up at him through my spiked lashes. His expression heated and I reached out, grabbed him by the shirt, and pulled him in the shower with me.

We both stood under the spray and

let the water wash over us. Drops of water slid down to fall off his jaw and I quickly discovered my error in judgment. Dry Daemon was a work of art; but wet Daemon was godlike. His shirt clung to his sculpted chest and abdomen and I couldn't drag my eyes away from him. I looked up into his blazing blue eyes, which were framed by spiky, thick lashes and my breath caught. We were in a standoff and, fortunately, it was obvious Daemon was as equally affected by me as I was by him.

This silence was thick and I needed to say something to break up this intensity.

“See, I can handle a shower with a

friend.” I held up my hands to indicate our presence in the shower together.

Daemon’s eyes traveled to my lips and I became anxious when he didn’t immediately respond. I felt smug for a moment when I thought I had won this battle. Daemon’s eyes looked back into mine and the corners of his mouth quirked up in response to some private thought. My muscles froze at the look on his face. He stood still for another second before he took a step forward and his mouth claimed mine.

My knees buckled. I reached out to grasp onto anything to keep from sliding down and Daemon’s hand reached around to hold me up by my lower back.

This was not the reaction I was expecting and I inwardly gloated at having caused him to go against the no touching policy in this game.

Daemon continued our kiss as his hands made their way up my body. When he reached my shoulders, he slipped a finger underneath each thin strap of my dress. Slowly, he pulled the straps down my arms and my dress started to fall off me from the weight of the water soaking it.

He broke the kiss and his eyes traveled down to watch my body as it was being unveiled to him. My first reaction was to freeze in place, but I had to remind myself that we were in the

middle of a game and I was playing to win.

My dress hit the floor with a wet slap and lay pooled around my feet. Daemon's eyes heated as he took in my exposed skin. My hands slightly shook as I reached up to grasp the bottom hem of his shirt. I started to lift the material; but when he didn't move his arms for me to remove the shirt, my eyes looked up at him in question.

Drops of water traveled down Daemon's face and slid over the crease of his mouth, now held in a wicked grin. I tugged some more on the bottom of his shirt and he reached over his head to take it off that way. The biceps in his

arm flexed from the movement and I couldn't help but reach up to run my hand over the taut skin of his arm. When Daemon finished pulling the shirt over his head, he reached behind to toss it out onto the bathroom floor.

Due to our height differences, my eyes were met with the sculpted outline of his pectoral muscles. I sucked my bottom lip between my teeth as I gingerly reached up to run my hands across his waterlogged skin. After three weeks of having not been allowed to touch him, I didn't want to move too fast for fear he would stop me. It was almost as if I was reaching out to touch a wild animal. His eyes burned into me as I ran my hands up and over his shoulders.

Grasping behind his neck, I looked up at him and pulled his mouth down to mine.

The combination of my feelings of triumph for having ended the game and the desire building between us was overly euphoric. My heart pounded against my chest and I went up on tip toes attempting to deepen the kiss. Daemon's hands came up to caress my breasts and he pinched the tips taut between his fingers. I pressed my breasts into his hand begging for more. I wanted him to grab me harder, pinch me harder, to awaken and set aflame that splendid nerve that ran from my breasts down to my center.

Daemon abruptly pulled away

from me and when I groaned in protest, he spun me around and pressed me up against the shower wall. With one large hand, he grabbed both of my wrists and held them against the wall above my head. Daemon's front pressed into my back and I could feel his chest expand and contract with labored breathing.

His other hand grasped around my hip with such force that his fingers dug into the sensitive skin. He held me in place as he lightly trailed his lips over my shoulder and up along my neck. His teeth would softly nip at my skin and the slight sting of those bites sent tremors shooting through my body. I was effectively trapped between the shower wall and his body. I had no choice but to

wait and see what he did next. The force of his hold was arousing and I leaned my forehead against the cool tiles while my breathing grew heavier and more erratic.

My body acted of its own volition and I pressed my bottom outwards to feel the tightness of his soaked jeans. I was writhing from need of this contact, but he held me pinned as he nuzzled his head against me.

His tongue ran a path along the outer rim of my ear and my head fell back as a soft moan escaped my lips. My body arched and awakened as my breasts pressed against the cool tile of the shower wall. Logical thought was replaced by carnal instincts and my skin

became hypersensitive to every touch.

His hand released my hip and slid down to rest against the silken material of my panties. When he fingers pressed against the small bundle of nerves at the apex of my thighs, I cried out from the pleasure that shot through me. His hand stilled and I wiggled against him to encourage him to keep going.

The anticipation was killing me and I was reduced to begging for him to continue. "Please, Daemon. Please keep going." My voice was breathless.

Daemon's mouth was pressed to my ear as he spoke. Between the heat of our bodies and the steam from the

shower, I felt liquid and loose and I was thankful he had me pinned upright.

“I’d love to keep going, Damsel. Just tell me what I need to hear and I’ll be sure to fuck you until you’re begging me to stop.” His voice was like pure silk wrapping itself around my body.

When Daemon bit down on my earlobe, my knees literally gave way and he was the only thing holding me up at that point.

What did he need to hear? That I was his? That there was no one else? I’d already told him those things that night at Tomb. I was frustrated to no end that he was making me think when my mind was

uselessly saturated by the hormones coursing through my body. The English language was a foreign concept to me and the only words I could intelligently mutter at that moment were “please”, “now”, “faster”, and “harder”. Discussions of relationships and labels should be saved for when he doesn’t have his hand shoved between my thighs.

“Daemon, please....just... please...more touching, less speaking. Please?!”

He chuckled and his voice was husky as he responded. “I’ve said this to you before, Paige. I will not let you turn me into another Alex.”

I flinched.

What the hell was wrong with him? What normal, red blooded man wouldn't keep going when he had a naked woman in a shower begging him not to stop?! My jaw clenched and my sexual euphoria instantly switched to righteous indignation.

I jerked my arms down and turned. My hands came up and shoved Daemon away and I scooted around him to exit the shower. Daemon called to me but I ignored him while I grabbed a towel and marched back to my room. He was an arrogant asshole. That was all there was to it. How dare he get me all hot and bothered and then try to use that to

manipulate me into defining whatever this was between us?! I knew he was fucking with my head, I *knew* it, and yet I still allowed him to turn me to jelly.

“Paige, wait!” He moved to quickly get behind me. “Stop, Paige. Fucking STOP!”

I stopped so abruptly his chest bumped into my back before he could react. He reached out to grab my shoulders, but I turned to jerk away and get out of reach.

“What the hell is your problem?!” His eyes gave away the fact that he was on the verge of anger. I’m sure my face was turning red as I scowled up at him

in return.

My finger was in his face as I yelled, “YOU are my fucking problem, Daemon! What is with this twisted game you insist on playing with me? You keep making your comments, and doing your little ‘come hither’ swagger, and rubbing yourself all up on me; but when I react in any way, you pull away and demand that I apply some label to our relationship. Then you have the audacity to throw Alex in my face?! There is something seriously wrong with that!” I took a breath to calm myself down before I continued. “Why are you so adamant about a fucking label?!”

And there's the anger.

Daemon's face went blank except for the rage you could see burning in his eyes. His body was tense and his jaw was clenching, but his words were almost lethal in how calm they were.

“Tell me something, Paige. When you introduce me to the next person, what will you tell them I am to you? Will I just be ‘Daemon’ then as well?”

He was referring to when I introduced him to my mom at the hospital. I wasn't able to come up with a word when I tried to explain our relationship, so I simply referred to him as ‘Daemon’. He was angry and walked out of the room, but never really directly talked to me about it until now. Sure,

there's been this stupid game we've been playing, but that linked back more to my roommate demand than it did to when I didn't know what to call him.

I had nothing to say. My head hung down and I refused to look him in the eye. I didn't know what to do and I was uncomfortable and irritable. He stepped towards me and used a finger to lift my chin. Even though we faced each other, I kept my eyes trained to the side, refusing to look at him.

“Paige, I've told you, I won't do this with you unless I have all of you. You working so hard to keep yourself distant and refusing to acknowledge anything more than friendship is your

fucked up way of keeping me separate. I want you to trust me, for once, trust *someone*. I know damn well that when you can't admit what I am to you, than I don't have every part of you. I wasn't joking that I would demand to own you if I was with you."

I threw my hands up and almost lost my towel. I quickly grabbed it and wrapped it back around me before responding. "That's fucked up, Daemon! Why do you have to own me? You had no problem screwing all those other women without it meaning anything. You should have no fucking problem doing the same thing with me!"

"That was different, Paige, and

you know it! Those women knew what they were getting themselves into. They knew I had no other intention other than to fuck them one night and forget who they were when they left the next morning. Hell! Some were even lucky to stay until the next morning, most didn't get that much!" His words were grating against me. I could not stand the way he was so casually discussing the way he used those women.

"So, why do you feel you have the right to constantly throw Alex in my face? He knew what he was getting himself into; I never lied to him or told him it was anything more than it was."

Daemon let go of my face and

stepped away. I could see his muscles twitching in irritation with me.

“I don’t bring up Alex for any other reason but as an example of how things will not be between us. However, if you still want an answer to your question, fine. Your arrangement with Alex was very different from what I was doing. I never kept those women around for longer than a handful of hours. There was never any time for them to build any types of feelings for me other than wanting in my pants. You, on the other hand, continued sleeping with a man who you *knew* was in love with you, without any intention to reciprocate the affection. You knew his heart was involved and yet never thought to stop

what you were doing out of the simple respect for what the ending would do to him. I never gave those women the luxury of that type of hope. That's the fucking difference."

His words pissed me off, but they were true. I wasn't man enough to admit that to him, but I could admit that to myself.

"Whatever, Daemon, you and I both know those women had hoped that they would be different. That you would give one of them the time of day after you were done getting what you wanted."

We stood staring at each other. I

was so angry I couldn't stand to be stuck in the same apartment as him. Even having separate bedrooms wasn't far enough away. I was so sick of this prisoner shit that I was living and this just pushed me over the edge.

“Where are the keys to my bike, Daemon?”

He instantly tensed at my question. “You’re not leaving here, Paige. It’s not safe.” His voice was low and menacing.

“I’m leaving this apartment for a little while Daemon, I don’t want to be around you right now.”

He stepped toward me and reached for me, but I stepped back out of

his reach.

“Paige, you can’t be running around town by yourself while Chris is still out there. He has targeted you and it would be stupid for you to think he would just give up.”

“Fine.” My next words were most likely not the best idea, but at that moment I was desperate to get away from him. “I’ll call Alex and have him pick me up. He’s overpowered Chris before, I should be sufficiently *safe* in his company.”

My body turned toward the bedroom and I didn’t look back to see Daemon’s reaction to what I’d said. I

shut my bedroom door behind me and
picked up my phone to call Alex.

Chapter Four

The intercom buzzer rang, letting me know Alex was in the garage waiting by the elevator. Without a key, he wouldn't be able to call the elevator and I was back and forth on whether I should send the car down to him to bring him up, or just meet him down there. Daemon had been out of sight since our argument and I was too relieved at not seeing him to worry much about where he was hiding. I knew he was in the apartment somewhere and that he would never leave me here alone.

My hand went to the button on the

intercom and I buzzed down to tell Alex I would meet him down there. After he agreed, I turned to go back in my bedroom to gather my phone and bag.

Alex was waiting by the elevator when I reached the garage. He had a baseball cap on, pulled low, hiding his hair and his beautifully unique silver eyes. His dark red button down shirt was pulled taut over his perfect form and he had his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He really was a sight to behold and I couldn't get over how much I had missed him over the past couple of weeks.

I threw myself at him in a giant hug and his large arms came around to squeeze me into him. A relaxed sigh

huffed from my lips and I held onto him for a little too long. When I finally pulled myself away from him, he smiled shyly at me. “Good to see you too, Paige. Ready to get out of here? No offense, but it feels fucking weird to be picking you up from his place.”

I nodded. Alex had a serious issue with Daemon. One part of that issue had to do with the fact that I stopped sleeping with Alex because of Daemon. The other had to do with Alex having overheard me telling David about Daemon’s demand for sexual control with me. Alex was convinced that Daemon was disrespecting me somehow by his sexual preferences, but I hated to admit that I enjoyed giving up control to

Daemon. David was right, it was the only time in my life that I could completely hand everything over to someone else. A giant weight was lifted from me in those moments and I wanted nothing more than to experience it over and over again. I was slightly concerned when Daemon warned that he had gone easy on me and would show me real control the next time; but even with that veiled threat in the air, I was anxious to sleep with Daemon again. I mused over the possibility that I was irritable and pissed off because I hadn't been given the release that I've grown to need. Although I'd been teased in every which way possible, and to a point of fucking tears; I've never been able to drop my

guard since the incident with Chris. I had to get Daemon to end this aggravating game he was playing, but I couldn't give him what he wanted. I wasn't ready for a label, I never have been.

“So, where would you like to go, Paige? You hungry? I haven't eaten yet because the shop was busy.”

I looked up at Alex and smiled. “Sure. Let's go get us some grub.”

Alex opened the passenger door of his truck and I hopped up into the seat. He went around to the driver's side and climbed inside. Before he started the engine, he glanced over at me and took my hand into his. “I'm really happy to

hang with you, Paige. You have no idea how absolutely boring life has been not having you around.”

Once we were out of the garage, Alex blasted his radio all the way to the restaurant. I didn't mind the noise. It was nice to get out of Daemon's apartment with somebody other than Daemon. I wasn't accustomed to spending so much time around one person and getting away helped me remember I had a life outside of Daemon Pierce. I missed my job, my bike, my apartment, my friends; everything. It was irritating that a psychopath like Chris could turn my life completely upside down. If he was smart, Chris would be far away from here by now, hiding out in some other

state. Daemon wasn't convinced of that and believed heavily that Chris was waiting for the right time to attack me again. My first instinct was to argue with him and pull a stealth mission to recover the keys to my bike. However, he had been right when he first warned me about Chris. Unfortunately, I didn't listen and my roommates paid for it more than I did.

Alex tore into the parking lot of the restaurant and I held tightly to the 'oh shit' handle. Alex's driving has always been reckless. It had been a while since I'd ridden with him, so I was taken by surprise at the turn. It's a miracle that he hasn't overturned this truck, driving like he does.

The hole-in-the-wall diner Alex chose was a perfect environment for the crappy mood I was in. The furniture was ragged, the staff was not talkative, and nobody had to act a certain way or care about being polite. I felt more at home in a place like this than I did at the swanky restaurant to which Daemon insisted on dragging me when I first moved in with him. I still was not sure just how wealthy Daemon was, but he had to be making decent money to afford the apartment he lives in and his expensive taste in everything else. The thought of him being ridiculously wealthy was intimidating to me. I've always lived a modest lifestyle and I wasn't cut out to mingle with the upper class. Quite

frankly, those people bored me to tears and, at times, I felt sorry for them. Sure, the money must be nice, but having to keep up appearances and having to conduct yourself with decorum at all times would be a nightmare. I'm very much the type of girl who can sit around playing video games while knocking back beers all day and I assume that type of behavior would be frowned upon in polite society. When Daemon dragged me to his haughty establishment, my energy was drained by the time we left.

Alex and I were seated in a booth in the back corner of the diner. Alex picked up the flimsy, laminated menu and went through his usual routine of scanning all the choices before finally

settling on a burger. I laughed every time he did it because we've only been to this place about a thousand times already. I memorized the menu years ago and knew exactly what I wanted. When Alex was done perusing the menu, he placed it to the side and looked up at me. His silver eyes were bright and he seemed genuinely pleased to be here with me. It felt so good to be sitting here with him. I was lazy in the comfort of his company and I reached over the table to take his hands into mine.

“So, how have you been, big guy? I haven't heard from you much in the past couple of weeks. Everything going okay at the shop?”

Alex squeezed my hands in his and let go to lean back. He rested his arms on top of his head and I had to pull my eyes away from the bulge of his biceps. I knew that underneath the sleeves of his shirt, his muscular form was made into a work of art by the intricate tattoos that swirled over his arms. I used to love tracing the designs with my fingers and it made me oddly sad to think I wouldn't be doing that again. Daemon was right when he accused me of being selfish in continuing to sleep with Alex. Although I loved him enough to know that I would do anything for him, I wasn't in love with him. It was my loss that my heart didn't react to him in that way because he was one hell of a good guy and his

looks were enough to stun any girl silent. Alex had the ultimate bad boy look, but he was a perfect gentleman and had a heart of pure gold.

“It’s been busy around the shop. I’ve been taking on longer hours and I’m in search of a new artist to help out. We have a large convention coming up in a couple of weeks and I’ve been working on some large pieces as examples of my work. Other than that, I haven’t really been up to much.”

He looked at the table and I couldn’t see his expression because of the brim on his hat. When he looked back up, the smile he had plastered on his face was fake and contrived. “How

have things been in prison?”

I chuckled. Of course Alex would know that I was miserable being a kept woman. Whereas most women might fantasize about having all their needs met for them by a supremely gorgeous man, I was unaccustomed to not fending for myself. There were times where I was infuriated that I couldn't hunt Chris down myself, just so I could hand him over the police and finally get to go home. I'm an investigator, dammit! I shouldn't be sitting around hiding from danger. I should be out there hunting down that psychopath and delivering him to jail.

“It sucks. Bad, but not because of

Daemon. He's actually been really great and he's trying not to step on my toes too much, given the circumstances. I'm staying in one of the guest rooms and I've been trying to pay him rent, but he keeps refusing. Every time he does, I slip some cash in the books on his shelf and I plan on texting him to let him know to look for it once I return home."

Alex looked surprised by what I said. "You're staying in a guest room? Why? I thought you two had some kind of screwed up master and servant thing going."

My eyebrows knitted together at Alex's statement. "Master and servant? Um, no. Far from it actually. But, why in

the hell would you think that?”

Alex shrugged. “Just remembering what you told David that day in your apartment. Plus, after seeing the way you allowed Daemon to yell at you and order you around in the hospital, I just thought that he had somehow...I don’t fucking know...brainwashed you or some shit.”

The waitress approached before I had a chance to respond and Alex barked out his order. It was apparent that he was losing his good mood from earlier. The haggard looking waitress didn’t even appear to notice his temperament and simply turned to me to take my order. When she left our table, I turned back to Alex who was looking

anywhere but at me.

“Daemon hasn’t brainwashed me, Alex. I’m still the same old Paige, I’ve always been. You know damn well I’d never be servant to anyone’s master.” An exasperated huff escaped me and I stared holes into the front of Alex’s hat.

He finally looked up at me and let out a small laugh. “I hope you’re being honest, Paige. I have to say, I was shocked to hear you would take the submissive role. I always imagined you would be the one to be walking around in dominatrix gear with a little riding crop or some shit.” His smile grew lopsided after having said that.

I let out an astonished laugh and I'm sure my eyes were as wide as saucers at his statement. "When in the hell did you imagine something like that?!"

Alex looked at me with a matter of fact expression and said, "As often as I possibly can."

I called Alex a pervert and laughter bellowed out of him at my comment. We were quickly falling back into our comfortable closeness with each other and I hoped that it could stay this way from now on. Fighting with Alex had taken more out of me than I realized. His hot temper is difficult to deal with at times, but you can't help but love the

guy.

After wiping the tears away from his laughter, he looked up at me again. “Be real with me, Paige. Is he treating you well? I know the guy had a reputation around town as being a player and I would hate for you to get your heart broken over an arrogant asshole. You’re better than that. Plus, do you even know anything about him? I assume you’ve already looked into his background, given what you do for a living.”

I had to think about Alex’s question. Technically, yes, Daemon was treating me well, but I couldn’t shake my anger over the game he had been playing

with me since I started staying with him. I felt like he was manipulating me through sex, or the lack thereof, and it irritated me that he couldn't just be up front about what he wanted. At first the game was fun, but that last time in the shower was too much for a girl to handle. He had me at the verge of orgasm with just one simple touch between my legs and then for him to pull away was like torture. I probably shouldn't have reacted like I did, but the tension was suffocating me and I needed to get away. I know I handled it improperly and I owed him an apology for leaving like I had, but at that time, I had no other option but to strike back at him.

“No worries about me. I’m as spirited as ever and if you need to worry about anyone, it’s Daemon. I’ve been moody having been cooped up in one place all the time. And yes, I’ve looked into his background.”

Technically, I had looked into Daemon’s background. Unfortunately, the only information I was able to obtain was about his business dealings and his current stats. His background didn’t reach back farther than five years and I wasn’t able to discover where he came from or who his family was. I’d asked Daemon about his youth before, but he was short and slightly cryptic in his response. He admitted to having been in foster care growing up, but that was it.

With everything that had gone on since that time, I never revisited the discussion with Daemon and I didn't want to admit to Alex that I had been careless in my search for information. I needed to change the subject before Alex chastised me for my lack in follow up.

I smiled. "So, have you had a chance to see David lately?"

Alex's eyebrow arched up as if he knew I was intentionally causing a 'subject-redirection'. I wasn't surprised that he knew; Alex had known me for a long time.

"Yeah, he and I have been texting back and forth occasionally. It's

upsetting to hear about Annie's condition. I'd go see her at the psych place, but David warned me that she's not too keen on talking to anybody right now." He adjusted his sitting position to lean his elbows on the table with his forearms stretched out my direction. He placed his hands flat against the surface of the wood and looked down at them before returning his gaze to me. "David told me that Chris was in the process of doing what he did to Annie when he and Matt arrived back from dinner. He said that Annie was unconscious by the time they got there and that sick fuck was still doing shit to her even while she was passed out. Matt ran to get a phone in the living room and Chris ran after him and

hit him over the head with something. David tried to help Matt and he fought Chris for a while, but I guess Chris was just too strong.”

I already knew the story of what happened, but I let him vent without interrupting to tell him so.

“It’s fucked up, Paige. It’s just so fucked up what happened to them. Especially to Annie.”

My heart was breaking into a million pieces at that moment. This was the first time I had heard about Annie being unconscious when they arrived. I didn’t know whether to feel better or worse that she wasn’t aware of some of

the things being done to her. I never asked David what he saw Chris doing when they opened that door. I didn't want to know and I certainly didn't want the mental imagery.

Alex sighed and looked me directly in the eyes. "What happened to you, Paige? Please tell me that bastard didn't get to you too."

I was momentarily stunned. It occurred to me that, except for the brief time I saw him at the hospital, I haven't really had a chance to talk to him. He's had no clue whether Chris succeeded in hurting me or not.

"I took one hell of a beating from

him, but that was really all that happened. Fortunately, Daemon and Logan showed up and heard screaming from the parking lot. They were pretty quick to start breaking through the door to get to me. Chris hightailed it out a window when he heard them.”

I wasn’t being exactly truthful with Alex, but I wanted to spare him some of the more gory details.

He grabbed my hands and rubbed his thumb along the scarring on my wrist. “What about these? Did he tie you up?”

I pulled my hands from Alex and placed them in my lap under the table. I didn’t like those scars. They made me

feel weak somehow, like I was vulnerable enough to be taken captive.

“Yes. He did. He had to knock me out first to do it, but he did tie me up. The binding probably wouldn’t have cut into my skin as bad if I hadn’t been fighting; but you know me, I wasn’t just going to sit there and take it.”

Alex slightly smiled at that. “Did you do any damage to him in return?”

“Yes sir. I do believe I broke the asshole’s nose. In fact, I hope I fucking shattered it.”

“Good girl.”

Alex and I sat, ate our meals, and then drank coffee for two or three hours. Our conversation had turned back to a light banter and we didn't discuss what happened anymore throughout the night. It got late and Alex drove me back to Daemon's. I walked to the elevator and realized I didn't bring a key. I buzzed the intercom and waited for Daemon to answer. I became nervous that he may have fallen asleep and I would be stuck out here all night.

I hit the little button again just before I saw that the elevator car had been sent down. I rode back up to Daemon's floor and found that the front doors were unlocked. The room was dark except the soft flicker of the wall

sconces and Daemon sat on the couch directly in front of the door. His arms were slung over the back of the couch and he had what looked like a drink in his hand. He was dressed in pajama pants alone and my eyes took in the expanse of smooth skin over his chest and shoulders. The position in which he sat only added to the perfection of his muscular build. His face was half hidden in shadow and the entire picture was menacing and cold.

Slowly, I walked into the room. He was so perfect, almost unreal, as he stared at me. I wanted to apologize to him for how I had behaved earlier but I couldn't seem to speak while he was looking at me in that way. My eyes

searched his stoic expression for any hint of what he was thinking.

After a few quietly intense moments, Daemon pulled his arms down and leaned over to place his glass on the table. He got up from the couch and deliberately stalked over to stand just in front of me.

“You want to be like one of my other women?” I could smell the alcohol on his breath and his tone was flat and without warmth. “Fine. Let’s go.”

He grabbed me roughly around the arm and pulled me in the direction of his bedroom. My feet tripped over themselves as I tried to keep up with his

fast pace. Once we crossed the threshold into his room, he threw me onto his bed and stood in front of me.

“Take off your clothes, Paige.”

Something wasn't right here. It was obvious Daemon had a couple of drinks and was possibly drunk. The problem was, I didn't like drunk Daemon very much. He was cold and distant.

“What are you doing, Daemon? You know you can't sleep with me by *your* own rules, so stop fucking with my head.”

“Take off your fucking clothes, Paige.” His words were slow and

intimidating. I wasn't sure if I should attempt to flee the room or stand up and do a strip tease. I was completely ready to have sex with Daemon, but not with this angry, cold stranger standing in front of me.

I didn't move. I had absolutely no earthly idea what I should do at that moment. I sat motionless for close to a minute before Daemon became impatient. "Do as I say, or get the fuck out. Either way is fine with me. Just remember though, if you leave, you no longer have any right to bitch about me not fucking you like I have everybody else."

His words stung and I recognized

that our argument from earlier had angered him more than I realized. But damn if I was not a curious person. Add that fact to the relentless teasing inflicted on me for the past three weeks and it was enough for me to go along with whatever he was saying.

“Ok, Daemon. We’ll try this your way.”

I pushed myself up to a sitting position on the bed and reached below to the bottom hem of my shirt. I slowly removed the material and tossed it over to the floor. Daemon’s eyes seared into my body as I reached behind to remove my bra. My position was awkward for going any further so I moved to stand up

from the bed. Daemon's hands came down on my shoulders to keep me from doing so.

“I need to stand up Daemon or I won't be able to take off my jeans.”

Daemon removed his hands and stepped back to allow me to stand up at the foot of the bed. I unbuttoned my jeans and started peeling them down my legs to remove them. Once the clingy material had pooled near my ankles, I sat down on the bed to remove them the rest of the way.

Daemon's heated stare intensified as I now sat before him in only my underwear. There was something off in

his expression and I was somewhat skittish when he began moving towards me again. I wasn't used to his lack of emotion and I was intimidated by the unfeeling man standing in front of me.

Daemon reached over to me and took me by the shoulders again. He pushed me back until I was sitting in the center of his large bed. His pajama pants had tented and his excitement was obvious. Regardless of his abnormal lack of emotion, my body started to purr with anticipation. Once again the complete disconnect between the needs of my body and the concern running through my mind was unnerving and uncomfortable. But I was done fighting it. I was mentally exhausted after the

events of the past few weeks and I wanted nothing more but to lose myself in this. I wasn't worried about the fact that I was about to sleep with the uncaring version of Daemon, I needed this release.

Daemon slowly crawled up the bed towards me. Every muscle in his body flexed and released with his movement and my mouth watered at the idea of finally having this man after so many weeks of his relentless teasing. I sat motionless as he progressed towards me and any feelings of animosity were lost to me when the hormones started raging their usual course. When Daemon and I were face to face, his large hand came around and grasped me by the back

of my hair. His fingers gripped into my thick mane and he pulled my head back to expose my neck. My scalp stung slightly from the force with which he had pulled me, but I ignored it. I wanted this contact with him and I was willing to take it any way I could get it.

Daemon bent his head down as if he was going to place his mouth on my neck and I trembled with need in wait of the warm contact of his lips. He stayed in that position, not quite touching me, and my breathing became labored and erratic. Without moving, he asked, “You would allow yourself to be used by me?”

Was that a rhetorical question or

did he actually want a response? Yes! I would allow that. Anything to reach the point of weightlessness I so desperately needed.

“Yes.” My eyes met his and I intentionally projected a look of resolve and determination.

His mouth was so deliciously close to mine, I couldn't help but lean up to kiss his lips. He pulled back away from me just before I was able to reach him. His face was angered and aloof. Even my body was turning off at the expression on his face. This was not the usual Daemon. This was someone else entirely.

“Then roll over, I don’t kiss those other women. They serve one purpose and so shall you.” His voice was ominous and condescending. It grated against my nerves rather than softly wrapping itself around me as it usually did. My body instantly tensed and I wanted to crawl out from underneath him to escape to my room. I had no other choice but to go along. I needed this game to end. If I could just get him to sleep with me without requiring that fucking label, I could possibly get us back to the point where we had previously been.

Daemon’s hands roughly turned me over to face the mattress. He didn’t bother worshipping me as was common

for him. This was about what he needed alone. I was his means to an end and that was all.

He ripped my panties down my legs and didn't even bother with removing them from around my feet. I could feel as he pushed his pajama pants down around his ankles and he grabbed my hips and jerked me into position in front of him. I was nowhere near turned on by his behavior and I was starting to feel like a toy to be used and discarded. I was so angry at what he was doing but I held my place; too stubborn to concede that I didn't want this.

After obtaining and wrapping a condom around his length, he positioned

himself at the entrance of my core and grabbed onto my shoulders. His fingers dug into my muscles as he stayed where he was positioned without proceeding any further. After a few moments, he bent his head down to my ear. The venom coming off his voice when he spoke was livid and bitter. "I did not teach you what I did just so you could become so guarded, you would allow yourself to be used."

He pushed off of the mattress and walked into the bathroom before slamming the door behind him.

What. The fuck. Was that?

My mind raced with his words.

What did he think he had taught me? Was he losing his fucking mind? And who says something like that and then shuts himself away?! I became enraged and jumped up from the bed to start pounding on the bathroom door.

“What the hell, Daemon? What exactly is it that you think you have taught me? Get the fuck out here and explain yourself!” I continued banging on the door for close to five minutes, but he never said anything or opened the door. I grabbed my clothes from around his bed and stormed out of the room to mine. Fuck him. If he wanted to be an asshole, that was fine. I’d had enough of this shitty game and I refused to play it any longer. From this point on, Daemon

and *were* just roommates. He could kiss my lily white ass if he tried anything else.

I reached my room and slammed and locked my door behind me. I threw on some new underwear and a t-shirt and tossed myself onto my bed. My body and mind were tangled up in fits of rage and I tossed and turned seeking sleep. It must have been hours before sleep finally claimed me.

Chapter Five

I'd been playing in the backyard of the Center for several hours while I waited for my new friend, Buddy, to come find me. He had been here with his mommy for a little over a week now and he had to take part in the group activities with the rest of the resident children before he was allowed to come play with me. I always wanted to take part in those group activities as well, but Momma always told me no. I didn't like the feeling of being excluded and I voiced that opinion to Buddy regularly. Buddy always just shrugged his shoulders and said that he didn't like

being part of that group and that I should feel lucky I didn't have to attend.

I was climbing up my favorite camphor tree when Buddy finally came outside. The bruising on his face and arms from before he arrived here had all but vanished. I watched as he pulled himself into the apex of the tree and climbed up to sit beside me on a large branch. We sat in silence for a few minutes and I could tell he wasn't in his usual good mood.

"How was group?" I turned to him innocently looking for a response to my question.

Buddy's face was held in a scowl as he sat next to me. I could feel the negativity rolling off of him and I didn't like the sensation of being this close to him while he was angry.

After a few moments, Buddy finally huffed out his response. "It sucked. They made me talk about stuff I don't want to talk about and I'm sick and tired of having to think about it. I wish they would just leave me alone."

I was taken aback by his words. It was obvious Buddy was in a sour mood, but he normally didn't say mean things about anything at The Center. "Well, why don't you just refuse to talk? They can't make you if you don't want to say

anything.” In my little head that was the best advice ever. I mentally patted myself on the back for that little tidbit of useful information.

Buddy glowered even more at my words. He was definitely NOT in a good place at the moment. “That’s easy for you to say, Paige. You have no idea what it’s like to live through what I’ve lived through. You’ve lived the life of a little princess and you wouldn’t be able to handle the things I’ve seen and heard. You’d probably just cry all the time like a little girl.”

His words ignited a stubborn rage in me and I wanted nothing more than to get away from him. How dare he

call me a 'little girl'?" I could climb better than him and swim better than him. I wasn't afraid of bugs, or reptiles or other critters like the other girls here. I looked behind me and grabbed on to an adjacent branch. I swung myself over and hastily made my way down the tree. Buddy climbed down after me and I was just starting to run off when he caught me.

As soon as his hands were on my shoulders, he shot me the meanest look and pushed me down on the ground. Dust billowed up around me from the force of my fall and my feelings were hurt from the way he was treating me. I couldn't help it when tears sprang from my eyes. The shock of his actions and

the fact that nobody had ever treated me this way were too much for me to handle.

Buddy crossed his arms over himself and looked down at me with disdain. "See, I knew you would cry. Now, stop being a wimp and get up."

I was sobbing harder after he made fun of me. Why was he being so mean all of a sudden? I couldn't understand why he was shoving me and saying nasty things to me. I never treated him this way. I didn't get up like he said and I kept crying, hoping Momma or Daddy would come outside and see what was happening.

Buddy watched me cry for a few more moments before finally reaching down to pull me back to my feet. He looked into my tear soaked eyes and then scowled again before shoving me back down. Once again, I hit the ground with a thud and I started crying even harder.

“Stop crying and get up, Paige. People will only keep hurting you if you don’t stand up for yourself. I’ll keep pushing you down until you fight back for once. Get up!”

My mind was racing with ideas of why Buddy was doing this. He had always been so nice to me before. Even when he was annoyed with me, he never

treated me so badly. I looked up at Buddy through my lashes and his face still held a nasty scowl. When I didn't immediately do as he said, he picked me and pushed me down all over again. After I had finally had enough and my tears had run dry, I picked myself up off the ground and shoved my hands into Buddy's chest as hard as I could.

“Stop it, Buddy! Get away from me! You're being mean!” I shot Buddy an irate glare and crossed my arms over my chest. Buddy's face changed from an angry scowl into one of satisfaction. He reached over to me to brush dust off my clothes and I jerked back out of his reach. “Don't touch me!”

Buddy huffed out a breath and his expression softened. “Let me help you get the dirt off, Paige.”

I stubbornly stayed just out of his reach and I locked my eyes with his in challenge. “Why should I let you help me?!”

He sighed again and stopped attempting to approach me. “Because you did what you were supposed to do, so I don’t need to push you down anymore.”

“What?! You’re happy because you made me cry?”

Buddy looked at me with resignation. “No. I didn’t want to make

you cry; I had to make you cry. If I didn't, then you won't learn how to stop crying and get yourself back up. If anybody else ever touches you, you have to promise me you will fight back. If they push you down, you get back up. If you can, you get away from them. Never just sit there and cry, Paige. You can't let people hurt you and you have to promise me you'll get away or fight back."

I was completely confused by what he was saying to me. My mind was muddled as to why Buddy would hurt me and then tell me not to let other people do so. He was right, though. I couldn't let people push me around.

My voice was soft as I stated, “I promise, Buddy. I won’t let people push me around. Not even you.”

With that, Buddy nodded his head and turned to walk back into the building.

~

I woke up in the morning to my phone chirping. My mind was still foggy and I couldn’t shake the anger from the dream I had of Buddy. I always remembered him pushing me down, but somehow I had forgotten that particular incident. That was the first time Buddy touched me out of anger and I remember being slightly afraid of him for a few

days following that. Eventually we returned to our usual closeness, but that particular day was a strange one for us both. My brain wrestled with why these memories were suddenly flooding my subconscious mind and I decided that maybe it had been something Alex said at dinner; or maybe it was the anger I saw in Daemon when I returned home. Either way, memories that had long been forgotten were reemerging in waves, and my heart was getting battered by the emotions they elicited.

After untangling myself from the blanket, I reached over to my side table to pick up my continuously chirping phone. The screen flashed a picture of David as he called repeatedly. Hitting

the little green button, I brought the phone to my ear.

“Paige?!” David’s voice was rushed and he sounded slightly annoyed with me.

I cleared the sleep from my throat and responded. “What is it, David? I was sleeping.”

David huffed out a breath in annoyance and said, “I’m being released from the hospital today. I need you to send over your errand boy to retrieve me. I don’t like being made to wait. Oh! And make sure he brings a vehicle large enough to carry my ultimate makeover poster, please.”

I shook my head and smiled. “Uh, yeah. Let me go see if he’s awake and I’ll come with him to pick you up. We’ll probably need to go by the apartment to get some more of your stuff.”

David was silent for a moment and then responded. “What do you mean ‘see if he’s awake’? Aren’t you two sleeping in the same room? Don’t tell me your still holding on to that stupid roommate demand, Paige. You need to be using that man to your benefit. Seriously, regular sex makes you less bitchy and that’s good for everyone involved.”

How was I supposed to explain what was going on with Daemon? Up until yesterday, our game had been in

good fun, but now it felt like there had been a line drawn between us that neither was willing to cross. I was still angry at him for the way he treated me last night and I wondered what the hell he meant by that statement.

“I’ll talk to you about what’s going on later, David. We need to catch up when we get some time to ourselves. Let me get up and ready and I’ll be heading over. I’m excited to be getting my ‘roomie’ back. I’ve missed you.”

David clicked his tongue in appreciation of my words. “Well, of course you missed me, Paige. It’s never a party if I’m not around.” He laughed and continued. “I’m excited to see you

again as well, but don't expect to have the same type of sexual tension with me that you do with your other 'roomie'. I'm no longer an available man and it would be best for you to remember that."

David's comment made me chuckle. He was always so sure of himself and he was never shy to express it. "Okay, David. I'll be there soon."

We said our goodbyes and I grudgingly pulled myself up and off the mattress. I visited my bathroom and then made my way out into the living room. As soon as I opened my door, I was assaulted by the smell of the delicious coffee goodness being brewed. Daemon must already be up and, although I

preferred to avoid him at the moment, I needed to let him know that David was ready for rescue.

Daemon was standing in the kitchen as I came through the living room. He was leaning against the counter and his head was held in his hands. He must have a hangover from the amount of alcohol he drank the night before. Good. Serves him right for drinking so much he became the ultimate asshole. I'll admit I owed him an apology for leaving with Alex like I did, but that was no reason for him to have treated me so poorly when I returned home. My mind quickly scanned through the events from the previous evening and I remembered that Daemon was now on

full ‘roommate’ status.

Entering the kitchen, I held my chin up and pulled my shoulders back. I was proud damn it and Daemon wasn't going to break me down this time. My hand reached out to open the cabinet door for a cup while my head and body were slightly turned, still eyeing Daemon. I had to make sure he wouldn't start his usual sexual voodoo on me while my back was turned. He was wearing only a pair of pajama pants and I couldn't help but admire the way the scant daylight coming in through the windows accented the ridges in his stomach. The skin across his chest glowed a golden tan and as usual, the shadows played across him, defining the

absolute perfection of his build. He hadn't yet looked up since I came in the room and I wondered if he was still angry.

My cup held the perfect mixture of creamer and sugar as I finally poured my coffee. I watched as the powder and crystals dissolved upon contact with the heated liquid. Normally, I wouldn't pay as much attention to the dissolution process, however I was looking for anything to stare at besides Daemon. The motion of my spoon was creating a whirlpool in the cup. After what must have 100 revolutions around the perimeter of the mug, I rinsed off the spoon and placed it in the sink. This sucked. I'd run out of normal morning

activities to avoid speaking to the pissed off Daemon currently standing across the room from me. My mind drifted to David and I resolved to deal with this like a mature adult for his good. He needed rescuing and I was going to make sure that happened. I wouldn't bring up last night if Daemon didn't.

“Mornin’.”

The only sound which followed my greeting was the slurping from me sipping on my coffee. Daemon didn't move, didn't speak, and didn't react in any way. I was at a loss as to what to do. Do I greet him again? Did I speak too quietly the first time? I wasn't sure. I stood silently waiting for Daemon to

respond. After a few moments, he groaned before raking his hand over his face. His eyes were still closed and he placed his hands on the edges of the counters beside him as he stretched out his large frame. I was stunned by his glory. He was no longer hunched over and I had an unobstructed view of his body. If ever there was a perfect man; a man who was the epitome of masculinity and carnal strength, Daemon was it. My adherence to the 'roommates only' policy was already coming unglued and the man hadn't yet voiced a single word. I hoped David could be a buffer for the remainder of my time here; a friendly reminder to maintain my tenacity.

His beautiful blue eyes finally

cracked open and as they met mine, Daemon smirked. “Your mouth is open.”

What? I was looking at him with a questioning wrinkle between my brows when his words finally sunk in. I slammed my jaw shut and my face must have turned purple from the embarrassment. I could not believe I just *literally* stared open-jawed at him. There was no gracious way to get out of this. I reverted back to my earlier tactic and rolled my shoulders back while holding my chin up. I was absolutely mortified at that moment, but I wasn't about to show it.

“Very funny, Daemon. I was yawning...silently...and for a long time.

There's no reason for you to get a big head over that."

He chuckled at my cover. "How are you doing this morning, Damsel? I woke up before you, so I decided to put on a pot of coffee. It's amusing that you got up right when I started the pot; almost like you are psychically connected to the machine." He arched a brow and his mouth crooked into a lop-sided grin.

That would be excellent. I wish my mind really did subconsciously sense coffee preparing within a certain distance around my body. I would never miss that first cup again. I'd be like the coffee burglar wherever I went; always

swooping in and swiping the first taste. I had to forcefully free myself of that reverie to remember I had more pressing issues to attend to; mainly, David.

“Um, no. It wasn’t the coffee that woke me up; David called. He’s being released from the hospital this morning and would like for us to go get him. We’ll probably need to go by the apartment as well so we can pick up his things.”

Daemon nodded and turned to retrieve a cup from the counter behind him. I felt my jaw drop again as I observed the muscles on his side stretch and flex with his movement. He turned back and my jaw slammed shut. That

boyish grin came back over his face and I looked away quickly in shame.

He sauntered towards me and I kept my gaze trained on my feet. Even hung over, Daemon managed to exude virility. After filling his cup, Daemon placed the coffee pot back on the machine and leaned a hip on the counter as he turned to me.

“Are we going to talk about last night, Paige?”

Damn. And here I was trying to be good and not bring it up.

I shrugged a shoulder at him. “What’s there to discuss? Oh, except maybe that cryptic statement you made to

me right before you *locked* yourself in a bathroom without explanation as to why you were being such a prick to me when I got home.” I arched an eyebrow at him to convey that I had the upper hand in this conversation. Whether or not that was actually true was still up for interpretation, but I wasn’t about to let *him* know that.

He looked thoroughly confused by my statement and I wondered if he even remembered our little interlude from last evening. “To what cryptic statement are you referring? I thought I had made myself very clear with you prior to your departure with Alex.”

My eyebrows shot up when I

realized he was talking about *early* evening. Not *late* evening when he was drunk Daemon. I could avoid the certain argument that my line of questioning would incite, however, that would require that I find within myself some semblance of tact. Determining that I had none, I went with my curious nature instead.

“I’m talking about the comment you made that you didn’t teach me something just so that I would allow myself be used. I’d like to know what exactly it is you think you have taught me.”

Daemon’s body visibly tensed and his face immediately lost all expression.

“I don’t know what you are talking about, Damsel. I don’t remember saying that to you.”

He must have had more to drink last night than I realized. I searched his face for any clue that he was lying in an attempt to avoid this conversation, but there was none. He appeared to honestly have no idea what I was talking about. “Last night, after I got home, you dragged me in your room. Don’t you remember?”

His head fell into his hand again and he groaned. I stood there dumbfounded that he apparently had no recollection of the events from last night. On one hand, I was relieved to know that

his behavior was the result of having too much to drink; on the other, I was irritated that he couldn't remember treating me like he did. I had to admit to myself that I wanted him to feel *some* guilt for being an ass.

Daemon raised his head back up and his eyes locked with mine. Regret and turmoil roiled in those crystal blues. He was obviously struggling with his next words and my breath held while I waited for his response. "Paige, I believe I may have had one too many drinks last night waiting for you to come home. I remember you leaving. I remember being angry and starting to drink; and then I remember waking up." His inner struggle grew more intense and

his voice was stoic and controlled when he spoke again. “Did I hurt you, Paige? Please tell me I didn’t do anything to hurt you.”

His eyes searched mine and I stood motionless in my shock. A deluge of thoughts flooded my mind and I grasped at them, trying to focus on just one. He didn’t recall what happened. He had absolutely no idea what he did to me last night. Then it dawned on me; he was worried that he had hurt me. Why? Should I be nervous that there was a side to Daemon I didn’t yet know or understand. Alex’s words rang though my head. I didn’t know Daemon as well as I would like. His background was still a mystery and I had become

complacent in my investigation. That needed to change. I needed to know who Daemon really was.

“Why would you think you hurt me? I mean, sure, you hurt my feelings, but nothing physical.” I took a step away to ease some of the discomfort that I was having with this conversation.

Daemon shook his head slightly and then reached out to grab me by the shoulders and pull me back into him. “I would never physically hurt an *unwilling* woman, drunk or otherwise, if that’s what you are assuming I meant. It’s just that I have a tendency to get a little more...rough...than you are used to.”

Unwilling? What the hell did that mean? Why would any woman ever be willing to get hurt? *Oh*. It dawned on me what he was implying and my cheeks reddened from the sudden realization. The flood of hormones that assaulted my brain at his confession was staggering but I had to find out exactly what he meant. I took a breath and gathered my composure before asking, “You mean, as in sexually, right?”

He nodded and an uncertain expression played over his features.

Snap! That was the sound of my adherence to the ‘roommates only’ policy finally releasing. I imagined the roughness of Drunk Daemon combined

with the emotion of Sober Daemon and my mouth watered involuntarily. Daemon was expecting me to be turned off to the idea of being tossed around like a salad, but he had no idea that was exactly what I needed.

Of all the responses that I could make to that statement, there was only one that managed to escape my lips. “I’d like that.”

Daemon’s eyebrows shot up at my admission and a twisted grin came over his sculpted lips. His eyes gave away his wanton thoughts and I pulled my bottom lip in between my teeth. My legs shook in response to his sudden change in demeanor and I was once again prey

to his predator. I watched as his resolve was tossed aside and replaced with a sinful fervor. His tongue peaked out to lick his lips as he readied himself to devour every part of the woman standing before him.

I was taken by surprise when his strong arms pulled at my lower back, arching my body into him. His lips crashed against mine just before his tongue forced its entrance into my mouth. Daemon wasn't asking permission at this moment, he was taking what he wanted. I purred at the sensation of his oral caress and a delicious fire ignited within me. The silk fabric between my thighs was instantly drenched and I was panting in anticipation. Daemon's large hands

grasped my hips and he lifted me to place me on the kitchen island. His need was apparent in the tenting of his pants and I reached down to grasp him along his hard length. He growled when I touched him and the sodden wet fabric of my panties was swiftly ripped from my body. I was running on autopilot and all I could do at this moment was lose myself in his heated actions.

His fingertips dug into the delicate skin of my hips and my nerves screamed at the sensation. My teeth dug into my lips from the force of his kiss and those unbelievable convulsions ravished my body. I was moaning in need when his hand came down to rub at the apex between my thighs. Daemon pulled his

mouth from mine and the corners of his lips curled into a satisfactory grin. He enjoyed the effect he obviously had on me and he was never ashamed to watch my body's reaction to him. The knowledge that his eyes moved over my body excited me and I pushed myself roughly into his touch. He nipped at my lip before running that gloriously hot mouth down my neck. His hands moved away from me and I groaned before realizing he needed them to remove the rest of the offensive cloth between us. He grasped the bottom of my shirt and ripped it upward, not waiting for me to lift my arms. This was the forcible, rough side of Daemon and I submitted to his raw power and dominance.

Once the shirt had been removed from me, I sat bared to him on the countertop. His eyes raked over my skin and I tingled wherever they landed. I visibly trembled as he took in every detail of my body. His wonderfully hot mouth came down on to my breast and he sucked the taut peak between his lips. His tongue swirled and teased me, sending electrical shocks running down the nerve to my core.

Finally raising his head, he said, "I want you wet, I need to taste you. Lay back and spread your legs for me, Damsel, let me see just how beautiful you are."

His hands pushed on my shoulders

so that my back pressed against the cold stone upon which I sat. The differing sensations of the heat within me and the chill of the stone made me cry out in pleasure and astonishment. I was laid out like a buffet for this seductive man. His mouth came over my core and his tongue flicked out to tease that sweet bundle of nerves causing me to writhe in absolute ecstasy. His tongue laved at my folds and then dipped into my entrance. My head fell back as he tasted me and the moans would not stop from pouring off my lips.

While one hand grasped my hip tightly, the other came up to accompany the movements of his mouth. He shoved three fingers inside my entrance and

slammed them into me before pulling back, just to do it again. I was coming apart from the tremors his actions elicited and I could feel my orgasm build and intensify. My body quaked and quivered and when I finally found my release it was like a freight train forcing its way straight through me. I cried out from the sheer force of the release. My entire body froze and my lungs momentarily lost their ability to draw in a breath. Lights flashed before my eyes and every wonderful muscle in my body tightened only to loosen again. Daemon slowed his motions in perfect rhythm with the calming of my body creating smaller quakes to roll through me as he did so. When I was finally able to open

my eyes, I found the most beautiful man staring in awe at the woman spread out before him.

“There. Now, you are ready for me. I suggest you hang on tight.” Daemon’s hands gripped the sides of my body and he turned me over with such speed that I was disoriented from the change in direction. He grabbed both of my hands and placed them on the edges of the countertops. Squeezing his fingers over mine, he forced me to grip along the edge.

“I wasn’t joking when I said hold on. I don’t want to see your hands leave the sides of the counter. If you let go, I’ll stop.” His voice was rough and I was

enchanted by the hunger in his tone. I gripped the sides tightly, knowing that Daemon would, in fact, stop, if I didn't do as he said. He had the maddening ability to go from full throttle to a sudden stop when I said or did something he didn't like. His self-control was astounding and I had to respect that he had much better control over his body than I did over mine.

His hand suddenly slapped across my bottom and I yipped from the sting of the slap. He rubbed at the red mark he had caused on the soft skin and chuckled at my responsive outcry. "Like that, Damsel? Because I know I absolutely adore seeing the mark of my hand on your remarkable ass."

Daemon pulled down his pants and replaced his hands on my hips. He positioned himself at my entrance and then slammed his full length into me. My head arched back while the edges of the counters dug into my fingers due to my grip. The force of Daemon's repeated thrusts knocked me forward and pulled me back and I become lost in the marvel of our combined bodies. Never before I had I been able to let go of all control; to entirely submit to the desires and wants of another over my own.

“Are you holding on tight?” His questioned was not quite spoken, but growled and I nodded my head in response.

Once Daemon was satisfied that I held my grip on the counter, he abruptly let go of my hips. While one hand reached up to tangle itself within my hair and pull, the other reached underneath me to massage that one special spot between my thighs. *Oh, God!* The fire was building within me and my insides felt like they would tear themselves apart. I wasn't sure I could handle the release I knew was coming and I held on tighter trying to keep myself from jerking away from the overly intense feeling. Tears welled in my eyes as he thrust into me repeatedly. His rhythm was relentless and never ending. He fit within me perfectly; filling me and leaving me empty, only to fill me once

again. He let go of my hair to once again grasp and take control of my hip. I rested my forehead against the cool stone and clenched my teeth to keep from splitting apart entirely. The countertops continued to push into my hands and legs as he pounded at my body and the pain of those sharp edges blended perfectly with the succulent sensations he drove along the walls of my core.

“Come for me, Damsel. It’s been so long since I’ve been wrapped up in you, I’m about to fucking explode.”

Daemon’s words were my undoing and my release blasted through me, freeing me from my tired body as every luscious muscle in my core gripped

around Daemon's rock hard length. Nirvana had been bestowed upon me by this virile man. As the final spasms shot through my muscles, Daemon roared out his release and spilled himself inside of me. My body once again spasmed around him. He twitched within me as he came down from his own release and his fingers gripped into the skin of my body. My core tightened along him as he finally pulled himself from me and I lay breathless and quivering from what he had just done. The stress and tension of the last couple weeks had been incinerated by the splendor of that encounter. I wanted to cry out in relief from the weightlessness Daemon had caused but I just stayed there, laying

across the countertop, trying to control my breathing.

Daemon's arms came around me and he lifted me up from the counter before pulling me to the floor with him. I sat languid in his lap and rested my head against the broad expanse of his chest. We calmed our bodies together and sat silently in our embrace.

Daemon eventually stirred and grabbed my chin to pull my face to his. "That was...incredible." His voice was gritty as he spoke. His hand reached out and rubbed along marks on the upper parts of my legs. He chuckled before saying, "I'm afraid I may have marked you on the counter."

My eyebrows shot up as I looked at the line running across my legs and I hurriedly looked at my hands to see if they also had a mark. Angry red lines ran two paths along my hands and I held them up to show Daemon. A wicked grin came over his mouth and he bent his head to softly kiss both hands. “Those are the most beautiful marks I have ever seen.”

I was confused by his statement and I looked at him in silent query. He chuckled. “They are evidence of the fact that you followed my instructions.” His brow arched up into an arrogant peak and one side of his mouth quirked. “I love nothing more than when you listen to me without arguing.”

I let out an astonished laugh, but smiled brightly when he wriggled his brows at me.

His expression turned serious after a few seconds. He cleared his throat before saying, “I wanted to apologize to you for last night. I was wrong to throw Alex in your face as I did. You didn’t deserve it.”

I nodded at Daemon’s apology. He had an aggravating way of always steering us back to the awkward conversations I preferred to avoid. “No worries. We both have something to apologize for.” I left it at that. There was no need to rehash the drama; we both acted poorly and I was game to just

simply let it go.

He pressed a soft kiss on my lips and stared into my eyes with such tenderness. “What have you done to me, Damsel? I think I’m falling for you more every day.”

My eyes must have gone wide at his statement because he paused before reluctantly continuing. “I know it should be too soon for me to tell you this, but there’s no denying how I feel. You are everything to me. More than you know, or may ever know. You’re all that I’ve wished for and never thought I should have.”

I was suddenly uncomfortable

with his admission and I squirmed at his candor. He smiled as he said, “I know you need time to open yourself to me, to tear down those frustrating walls you have guarding your heart. I’m willing to give you whatever you need. Time. Freedom. Space to come to me on your own terms, when you are finally ready.” As he runs his long fingers through my tangled hair he whispers, “You have invaded my soul and there is no separating from you. All I can do is wait.”

My voice was soft as I asked, “Are you sure about this, Daemon? I’m not sure I know how to define things yet. I don’t know that my walls will ever fully crumble down.”

He chuckled before he responded. “At this point, even if you can only open a small window for me to squeeze through, I would be pleased. Don’t worry that pretty little head of yours over labels. In all honesty, I’m not sure there is a word in existence that could describe the absolute perfection of what we are. Any label you could come up with would be lacking as an explanation. I want to live for you and for you to live for me. It’s that simple. I don’t want to complicate it with the use of a fallible description of our relationship. Take your time, Paige. I’ll give you all that you need. Just promise me that you will try to trust me; trust that I want to be everything to you in return.” His mouth

curved into a sly grin and one glorious dimple made its appearance. “I can’t promise that I won’t pester you *while* I wait. To be honest, it’s just too much fun aggravating you to stop. I’ve told you before; you are insanely enticing when you are stubborn and angry.”

I arched a brow in response to his veiled threat, but my heart softened to know that he would try. His words were a caress, a beacon of hope that we could find a way to move past our differences and find harmony in our combined needs. I wanted to trust him as much as he wanted my trust. I was so tired of the walls that I constantly maintained and nothing would be as satisfying, as fantastically relieving, as finally being

able to drop them for another soul. Daemon's patience was his strength; and even though it could be irritating and infuriating at times, it was also the part of him that spoke the loudest to everything deep within me.

At first, I was too choked up to speak so I simply nodded my head in agreement with his words. When I regained my voice, I looked up at him reticently before resting my head back on his chest. My voice was soft and unsure as I answered. "I can't promise I won't be difficult...or frustrating...or stubborn...or proud..."

His shoulders shook from his light laughter.

“...But I can agree to try.”

His arms tightened around me as he rested his chin on my head. “I’ll take what I can get with you, Damsel, and I’ll be happy to have that.”

We sat motionless together as our breathing evened and our hearts began to beat in time with each other. I never expected to feel so free, so safe, in Daemon’s arms; but this determined man was slowly whittling away at the stubborn barriers I have always carried within me. In this quiet moment that we shared, I realized the true depth of the respect I held for this man. It would be nothing for him to tear through me each time I challenged him or for him to

simply walk away when I didn't submit. Yet, he stayed; he was patient instead of forceful, loyal instead of detached. Trust was a foreign concept, but one I could now acknowledge was a vital piece missing from my very being. I wanted to give him the chance to find the scattered pieces of me, to combine them, for once, making me whole.

Chapter Six

“Do I even want to know what kept you two so long?” David eyed us as we walked into his hospital room. He was walking around, packing the small amount of possessions he had with him into a bag. He crossed the room to pull the pins from his ultimate makeover poster, freeing it from the wall. The cardboard flapped loudly as he made his way back to his bed. After placing the poster flat on the mattress, he looked back up at us. “Because if you two are late due to finally getting past that moronic ‘roommate’ rule; that is definitely something I want to know.” He

wriggled his brows and stared expectantly in our direction.

Daemon took my hand before looking over to me. In an amused voice, he asked, “What do you want to tell the man, Paige? It’s your call.” He nudged me with his side and I looked up at him to find a mischievous grin plastered across his face.

Crap.

We hadn’t even been here for ten minutes and David managed to place me right back in front of the firing squad. Ten sets of eyes were staring down their barrels, intent on firing unless I was able to bullshit my way out of this.

“Uh, well, we’re no longer just roommates,” I admitted.

I looked back over at David before continuing. “We’re Paige and Daemon, if that makes any sense.” My eyes traveled to my feet as I ventured into this conversation with David. It didn’t matter whether the situation was appropriate or not, if he wanted more information he would get it. Nothing would stop him until he felt satisfied that he knew the entire story. David was a tenacious person and I could only hope that he would save the interrogation for when we had some alone time.

David must have picked up on my hesitancy to go into detail because he

graciously dropped the subject. I was in absolute shock when he merely nodded and continued packing his things. He neatly folded and packed his hospital gown before zipping up his bag. I cocked an eyebrow at David wondering why in the world he would want to pack his hospital gown.

“Can I ask why you are taking that god-awful gown with you, David?”

David shot me a look which clearly conveyed how stupid he thought I was for even asking that question. “Well, duh, Paige. I’m taking the gown because Matt likes playing nurse and I like playing patient. You figure it out.”

I shivered at the mental imagery that appeared in my head. After those thoughts, I felt dirty and was suddenly in need of a long, hot shower. “Good to know...you ready to get out of here?”

David nodded to indicate his readiness and we walked out of the room. As we passed the room next door, a little, silver haired woman stood in the doorway, glaring at David as we passed. “Good to see you are going home, son. At least now I know my chocolate pudding will be safe from your grubby hands.” She crossed her tiny arms over her chest and stared David down.

David stopped in his tracks and turned to the old woman. “It’s so nice to

see you too, Ms. *Hugsmybottom*. Unfortunately, as you can see, I'm leaving, so I don't have time for your chocolate pudding delusions at the moment. Why don't you find another neighbor to harass with your geriatric antics?" David crossed his arms back at the old lady in challenge. I looked between her and David as I tried desperately to figure out why they were arguing about a dessert product.

The wrinkles on her face deepened and warped into some kind of evil old lady mask when her scowl grew more atrocious. She uncrossed her arms and pointed a long bony finger up into David's face. "It's Higgenbotham, boy, and you'd do well to remember that.

Now get your skinny ass out of here and stay away from other people's sweets. If this were back in my day, I would bend you over my knee and beat the tar out of your thievin' behind."

David smirked at her words and bent down to get in her face. "Is that supposed to be a threat, *old bitty*, because who's to say I wouldn't enjoy that?"

The color drained from Ms. Higgenbotham's face as her jaw dropped in astonishment. She appeared to regain her composure before slightly turning her body and motioning towards her bed. "Well, come on in and let's get this over with. You're not my normal type, but

you'll do for now." Her wrinkled mouth turned up in a lewd grin.

"That is the most disturbing thing I've ever heard!!" David's expression was one of surprised disgust and it caused little Ms. Higgenbotham to chuckle triumphantly.

"Just as I thought. I'm too much woman for ya." Without saying another word she carefully turned around and slowly marched her way back into her room. I assumed she didn't move very well at her age and that was the swiftest speed she could muster.

An astonished expression was pasted to David's face and he snorted in

response to Ms. Higgenbotham's statement. He turned up his chin and moved to continue his path down the long hallway.

Daemon and I looked at each other in confusion and I called out to David to ask, "What the hell was *that* all about? Why was that old lady yelling at you about dairy treats?"

Executing a perfect 180 degree turn, David spun on his heel to face Daemon and I. He pointed a deliberate finger at Ms. Higgenbotham's door and said, "She keeps accusing me of stealing her chocolate pudding and I keep telling her I didn't steal it." He turned and continued his fast-paced quest towards

the elevators and Daemon and I rushed to keep up. The poster board in David's hands flapped loudly and echoed through the wide halls with his increased speed.

“Why would she accuse you of stealing her pudding?” I gasped in realization. “David! Did you steal that nice old lady's pudding?”

He continued his clipped pace and slammed his finger into the elevator call button when we reached the end of the hall. “First off, that particular old lady is a senile, snarky, little witch. Second, I didn't steal her pudding. While the old bag was sleeping, I *switched* it with the horrible green gelatin they insisted on giving me.”

My eyebrows shot out up to my hairline and I stood staring at David with my mouth hanging open. “Holy shit, David. That’s really messed up. How often did you switch out her pudding?”

David huffed out a breath and his hair slightly blew around him. “Every day,” he admitted before quickly adding. “But I’m a growing boy and I need my dairy. Plus, she’s over 1000 years old; it’s hard for people that age to digest certain foods. The gelatin was better for her.”

Daemon chuckled next to me and I elbowed him in the side. “Do not encourage him, Daemon. He should not have been touching that woman’s

pudding!” I turned to David. “Why didn’t you just order your own pudding?”

David had a mischievous look on his face when he responded. “Because it was more fun stealing hers. Drove the crotchety, old broad nuts. I had to find *some* way to entertain myself while I was locked up in this place.”

Laughter bellowed out from Daemon and I froze in amazement from the absurdity of this conversation. Eventually my laughter joined Daemon’s and we didn’t stop until we reached the garage parking area.

I had my David back. My

excitement was evident by the shit eating grin I had as we packed ourselves into Daemon's truck. Finally, we could sit around, drinking coffee, and gossip about the drama in our lives like old times. Talking to David was like therapy for me and I'd missed having my friend all to myself over these past weeks. I also would not miss the antiseptic smell that seemed to permeate the walls of that hospital.

Once we were on the road, heading in the direction of the apartment, I turned in my seat to look back at David. "Are you going to be okay going back to the apartment to get your things? I haven't had a chance to clean it up yet, but they did remove the...soiled...parts

of the carpets...” My complex was decent enough to have a professional service come in to remove the blood stained portions of the carpet in our apartment. When Daemon and I had returned to gather my things, the stains still dotted the floors. My face must have given away my discomfort with those stains because Daemon immediately called the front office and asked that those areas be removed. I knew David hadn't returned to the scene of that horrific night since it happened and I imagined he felt as anxious as I did when I was first released from the hospital.

David waved off my concern. “I’m not worried about it, Paige. Bad things

happen all the time and it's not the fault of the location where those things occur. The only blame that can be placed is on that psychotic fiend. As long as he's not there, I'm good to go."

We rode in comfortable silence as we continued our trek across town. My eyes scanned the people hustling along the sidewalks in their business suits and uncomfortable shoes when David finally broke the silence.

"So..." I could hear the rustling behind me as he shifted around in the back seat. His head suddenly popped up between our seats as he inched closer to continue his statement.

“Now that we are all ‘roomies’, I guess we will need to discuss any house rules that need to be established.” I groaned slightly and peeked toward him out of the corner of my eye.

“The first thing we should discuss is boundaries. Now that you two have progressed past your silly little platonic status, and now that I have Matt, are there any areas off limits for clothing optional encounters, or maybe areas that I should avoid all together?”

Daemon’s mouth quirked into a sideways grin and the appearance of one of those dimples caused my heart rate to increase.

“Well, you may want to avoid the kitchen island until I’ve had a chance to clean it. I believe I may have been a little sloppy eating my breakfast this morning.” He shoulders slightly shook from his amusement.

My jaw dropped at Daemon’s confession and David’s eyes widened in realization of what he had just been told.

“Paige, you little vixen! Kitchen islands?! Oh sweetie, I’m so happy that you are broadening your horizons.” David flew back to sit properly in his seat and before long I heard the little clickety-clack of the keyboard on his phone.

I turned in my seat with a questioning look. “Who are you texting, David?”

David maintained an innocent look as he shrugged his shoulder. “I just remembered I was supposed to text Matt when I got out of the hospital.”

I turned back in my seat and within seconds, my phone chirped. Digging through my bag, I finally located the small device and pulled it out to check it.

David: OMG!!!!!!! They do it in the kitchen!! I might get to witness Man God in action! You should hang around as often as

possible. This is going to be epic!

My brows furrowed as I read the text that apparently was not meant for me. I turned slowly to look back at David and he smiled slightly while I glared. “Did you, perhaps, punch in the wrong number, David? Maybe you should try that again.” My eyebrow arched.

His mouth formed a little “o” as he snatched up his phone to check his last text. Once he discovered his error he let out a small giggle and placed his phone back in his lap. “Ooops. My mistake.”

I shot him a pointed look and then turned back around in my seat.

We stood at the base of the stairs, glancing up at the three flights of pure torture that we had to climb to reach my apartment. I mused over how unfair it was that Daemon's building got an elevator while we had to schlep it up on foot. I thought about whether I would consider moving in with Daemon permanently just to have access to the elevator, but quickly dismissed that idea in favor of my freedom. Daemon had a tendency to become forceful in his demands that I be *safe* and *cautious* and I enjoyed the idea of eventually having a place where I could go escape his ridiculous anxieties. Just because I was

a woman, didn't mean I couldn't take care of myself. Sure, Chris gained the upper hand on that last encounter, but I'd be ready if someone tried that again. Plus, I'd had my roommates to worry about. It wasn't 'every man for himself'. If it had been, I'm positive the results would have been substantially different.

We dragged ourselves up the stairs and I unlocked the door while turning back to David. "We had to change the locks. Don't let me forget to give you a new key when we come back."

David nodded and I could see the apprehension in his expression. My poor David was trying to be brave by going back in the apartment, but inside I knew

he was tied up in knots. I couldn't blame him, I had experienced the same feelings when I first had to walk back through this door. My mind flashed to Annie and I was instantly saddened that our other roommate wasn't able to be here with us. I made a decision to visit Annie as soon as I got the chance.

I huffed out a breath of air and swung the door open. Everything was as we had left it. There was still broken glass spread around the floors and the furniture lay haphazard and destroyed in the living room. Shards of wood were littered in the front entryway from where Daemon and Logan had broken down the door. This place desperately needed to be cleaned and I decided to ask Daemon

to bring me back here within the next couple of days so I could do so.

My feet slowly carried me in and David stayed close behind me. His eyes were wide as he took in his surroundings and I worried that he was remembering the events of that night. He must be in agony recalling what had been done to Annie and I was shamefully thankful I had been spared the full brunt of what he had seen. The burden on my shoulders was already too heavy to carry and I had only witnessed their bodies as they lay helpless throughout the apartment.

My arm went around David's shoulder and I held him to me in a sympathetic embrace. Appearing to have

regained his resolve, he straightened his shoulders and began walking back towards his bedroom. I followed after him and I was grateful that the door to Annie's room was closed. We entered David's bedroom and, luckily, his things were orderly and neat. The fight had never reached this room and everything appeared as David had left it. He immediately crossed the room to throw open his closet doors and retrieve a duffle bag. Ripping clothes from their hangers, he was sloppy as he threw them into his bag. From his lack of care with his clothes, I knew David was bad off emotionally. I felt awkward standing uselessly behind him so I turned to go get some more clothes from my room.

My door was shut and I reached for the handle to let myself in. I hesitated momentarily due to my sudden recollection of what had happened in this room. Briefly, I pondered over the idea that none of us would ever really get over what happened that night. Even though I hated the idea of being chased out of my home by a monster, I decided it would be wise to seek out a new apartment for us. David and I would have to make the tough decision of whether we should get a two bedroom, or split the cost of Annie's share for a three bedroom in hopes that she would eventually come home.

I shook myself free of those thoughts and pushed the door open. My

head was hung low as I entered the room and when I looked up, my entire body froze. Over a hundred pictures were scattered on my bed and I was stunned speechless to realize someone had been in my room. After freeing myself of my initial shock, I raced over to the bed. My hand shot to my mouth as tears burst from my eyes. A veritable collage of vicious and sadistic acts was laid out like a buffet before me and pure evil now existed where there had once been only sheets and a mattress. Horrifying images of Annie being raped and beaten were laid out carefully; each picture worse than the other. Every detail of what Chris had done to her; every single demented and depraved act was

displayed in the photos and I cried as my eyes scanned the images. The cruelty of Chris' actions were now known to me and I slammed my eyes closed to keep from looking at them.

Oh god, Annie, I'm so sorry.

I should have been here that night. I was the target and because I was too busy spying on Daemon, my roommate took the punishment that Chris had envisioned for me. She was an innocent victim in a crime full of evil and malice; used like a whipping-boy and tossed aside when the intended prey finally came traipsing through the front door. Rage started to boil within my veins and I forced my eyes back open to once

again look at the images. I stood there and analyzed each one, every little detail. It was obvious that Chris had placed the camera on an automatic timer and set it up somewhere to capture his actions. Intense anger built within me at each new picture I studied and I was drunk off the fire being stoked. I memorized each photo. Chris beating Annie with his fist. Chris violating Annie with his body. Annie positioned, much like I had been, with her face pressed down into the mattress. Annie's face streaked with tears and blood, one eye already swelling shut from the beating she had taken.

But those weren't the worst of it.

It was when I reached the pictures of her unconscious body being violated by foreign objects, being sliced open with a razor from our bathroom, and Annie being propped up in her bed, posed with her childhood stuffed animals, that I truly felt righteous vengeance build within me. Those were the images that built within me the strength and resolve to finally find that sick fuck and bring him to justice. It wasn't going to be easy to get around Daemon, but I *was* going to find Chris. He was nothing more than damaged goods; a warped human shell, still functioning despite having rotted within. He needed to be behind bars; it would fix everything if he were behind bars. I

would avenge Annie and I could finally get back to moving on with my life. My decision had been made and I developed renewed energy as a result.

I didn't hear Daemon when he came in my room, but the bumps running up my arm were enough to tell me he was near. I spun on my heel to find him looking down at the pictures. A blank expression was written across his face except for the ticking of his jaw. His eyes scanned from left to right and his body grew more rigid with each image he studied.

His eyes remained trained on the photographs as he spoke. "You need to call Detective Troy, Paige. You need to

call her right now.” He never looked at me and his voice was authoritative; almost businesslike in its lack of flexibility. Daemon’s anger was palpable and I swore I could feel a slight charge to the air that surrounded him. He intended for me to do exactly as he said, and expected nothing less.

“I’ll call the Detective, Daemon. But I’m not waiting around for them to find Chris. It’s been almost five weeks and they haven’t found that bastard. I’ll look for him too. I’m an investigator, I can...”

“THERE IS NO FUCKING WAY YOU ARE GOING ANYWHERE NEAR THAT PERVERTED MANIAC,

PAIGE!!”

Daemon’s expression was harsh and his eyes burned with undiluted fury. My body stilled at his booming voice and I was slightly angered that he thought he could order me around.

My arms crossed over my chest and I caught his eyes with my own. “What the fuck ever, Daemon. You seem to have forgotten, I’m not actually yours to order around. I’m staying with you because my apartment isn’t safe, but that does NOT give you the right to tell me what to do. I will make my own decisions when it comes to this situation.”

His face turned a slight shade of red as I continued, “You said you would make suggestions, but the final decision is mine. Well, I’m calling this one, Daemon, regardless of you being against my decision.”

We silently stared each other down like two western gunman at high noon. Imaginary tumbleweed blew through the room as an odd little trill sounded in my head. Daemon stood in an offensive stance and I matched his posture in return. His eyes searched mine for what felt like hours before he finally spoke. “That’s fine, Paige. You can make whatever decision you wish.” He angled his head and he slowly stalked toward me. “However, I also get

to make a decision.” His voice was stoic, yet menacing, and the deep timbre added a lethal edge to his words. “No matter what you fucking decide...I will lock you away and keep you from doing anything stupid. I will stop at nothing to keep you safe and to keep you alive. That, Paige, is MY decision.”

My heart felt like it was about to come through my chest.

He wouldn't lock me away; he couldn't. I tried to convince myself that Daemon had no intention of actually following through with that threat, but still, there was something about him that told me he wasn't joking. I decided to challenge his statement. “You wouldn't

actually lock me away, Daemon. The word for that is ‘kidnapping’.”

Daemon’s voice still had that menacing edge when he responded, “Wouldn’t I?”

We were at a stalemate. My mind raced with the idea that Daemon would do whatever it took to keep me from going after Chris. Unfortunately for him, I had no choice but to hunt that sick bastard down. I couldn’t continue to wait around for someone else to solve this problem for me. My present position was between a rock and a hard Daemon and I had to come up with some way to assert my autonomy while not stepping on the toes of the man who wanted

nothing more but to keep me safe. I wanted to be angry, to stubbornly demand my bike and my freedom; but I couldn't. How can you be angry with someone who cares enough to commit a felony just to make sure you don't get hurt? I had no doubts that Daemon would follow through with his threat. That left me with only one option; I had to find a way to go after Chris without letting Daemon know what I was doing. This argument between Daemon and I could not continue because there would be no way that he would let me out of his sight if it did. I had to make him believe I was agreeing to his demands. If I let it blow over long enough, he would drop his guard, and I would find a way to follow

through with my intentions. Fortunately for me, being stubborn is not my only talent. I also had a healthy dose of sneaky and underhanded and I determined that those attributes were just what I needed to fix this situation.

I let out a sigh and my voice was resigned when I finally spoke again. “You’re right. I’m calling Detective Troy.”

Daemon’s eyebrow arched at my quick admission of defeat. He knew me better than that and he had been prepared for the fight I was about to put up. It would take time to finally pull this mission off, but considering I was presently restricted from everything in

my life, time was all I had.

Grasping my phone in my hand I headed in the direction of my bathroom to make the call. Once again I was stopped in my tracks when I saw what Chris had left me in there. A message was written in lipstick on the bathroom mirror.

*Miss me whore? You can't hide
forever...*

My rage boiled through me again for two reasons. Number one, Chris obviously thought he had the upper hand and number two, he ruined my favorite tube of lipstick.

Daemon followed me into the

bathroom and his body tensed when he saw the writing on the mirror. His anger was obvious; but it had turned to a cold anger. His was the calculated type of anger, rife with determination of an end result, but not driven by superfluous emotion. Daemon was dangerous at this moment and even I would be nervous to piss him off.

My phone came to my ear. “Detective Troy? This is Paige Stone. We have a problem.”

Chapter Seven

The police showed up within fifteen minutes of my call, followed by a forensics team and my favorite little she-demon, Detective Troy. As usual, she was dressed prim and professional in a slate grey pantsuit with a demure blue top. Her hair was well managed and she wore just a hint of makeup. From the moment she walked into the apartment, she took control of the scene and I enjoyed watching everyone run when she gave the instructions. Even Daemon was a bit tamer in her presence and I observed closely at how she commanded the room.

While Daemon and I had been in the bathroom, David had walked into my room in search of me. We found him standing by the bed looking at the photos of Annie. Tears stained his face and his shoulders were slumped over as if he held the weight of the world upon them. I immediately took him by the arms when I found him and I led him out of my room into his. He remained there as the police documented and cataloged the evidence spread throughout my bedroom. A search was made of Annie's room as well, but it appeared that nothing had been moved since the cleaning crews had cleared it.

Once Detective Troy was satisfied that every man had his duty, she turned to me. "Good evening, Ms. Stone. I hate

that we have to meet once again under these circumstances.” Her expression remained businesslike and sedate. It was impressive how well she was able to control her tone, expressions and body language given the present circumstances. I’m not sure I could do her job without losing it.

She turned to Daemon to exchange a greeting with him and then immediately back to me. “Ms. Stone, how long have you and your friends been away from the apartment? Have you returned since gathering your things?”

I shook my head in response and she continued. “Given that you were released approximately four weeks ago,

Mr. Baxter has had plenty of time to set up his little...display. Has a method of entry been discovered?"

Short and to the point. My respect level for this woman continuously increased with every encounter. "No. We haven't really looked, considering we were stunned at the sight of Mr. Baxter's...um...display."

Her head nodded as she processed the information I was providing her. I could imagine the gears churning in her brain as she compiled the facts and evidence. Her mind was imaginably a complicated file system where she could categorize and tuck away bits of information to be recalled when another

piece to the puzzle was found. I envied her focus, her inner purpose to build an entire picture from the separate, small details gained in the hunt. Her finger went to her lips as she scanned the room around her. "I'd like to see your room, Ms. Stone. I'll be a moment, if you could just wait here." She turned on her heel and disappeared down the hallway.

My legs were tired and I wanted to sit down. I peeked over at the couch in hopes that I could sit on it, but decided against it due to the shattered glass. Daemon's hand touched the small of my back and I leaned into him. Tenderly, he kissed the top of my head and pulled me tighter into his side. "Are you okay, Paige?" The concern on his

voice warmed my heart.

“Fine.” My throat felt closed up and raw. I cleared it before continuing. “I’m fine.” I nodded my head to emphasize just how fine I was. Truthfully, I wasn’t fine. I was very-very not fine. But, I couldn’t let Daemon know that. He needed to believe that I was unaffected by those pictures. If he understood just how hot my rage really burned, he would watch me like a hawk never slacking from his constant vigil for my safety. It would be a difficult task to find Chris under the watchful eye of Daemon, but I had no other choice. It was sadly apparent that the police had been run off the trail and were clueless about where Chris was hiding. I didn’t

blame the police, especially not Detective Troy, for that failure. People tended to clam up when faced with a badge and sometimes it took a plain clothes investigator to loosen up tongues.

“They’ll find him, Damsel. You know that.” Daemon’s words were meant to console me, but there were no words in existence that could do that for me until Chris was found. It was obvious by Chris’ message on my mirror that he was looking for me and I knew the ultimate victor would be the one who found the other first. I had to make sure that person was me. He would come out of the woodwork for me. I was the ultimate bait and if I could make my

presence known, it could be enough to bring him out of hiding. Poor Daemon believed I was scared; when in truth, I was resolute with my decision to end this cat and mouse game Chris was intent on playing.

All I could squeak out in response was a weak “I know.” I shrugged him off before saying, “I’m going to go check on David.”

Walking down the hallway, I glanced in my room and observed Detective Troy as she scanned over the photos. For the most part, her expressionless eyes flitted back and forth over the images, but there were some that caused her focus to slow. I

wondered which images she took in longer than the rest and why those images drew her attention over the others. I admired her poise when faced with the atrocious deeds of the criminals she hunted. It would take an inner fortitude more solid than Fort Knox to daily face the deluge of horror she undoubtedly witnessed.

I continued my path to David's room and when I opened the door, I found him lying on his bed, staring out the window beside him. His eyes met mine as I walked in the room and I could see the pain and despair that haunted his thoughts. I crossed the room to crawl onto the bed with him. My arms came around him as I practically spooned him

from behind and we just held each other, attempting to gain any comfort that could be had in this situation.

“Those photos were horrible, Paige. I...” His voice wavered as he forced his inner turmoil into words. “I feel guilty.”

I pushed myself up onto an elbow and rolled him over so that he was facing me. “You have no reason to feel guilty, David. You tried to help her. You were pretty fucked up as well. The last thing you need to feel is guilt.”

David shook his head and his eyes focused on the area above me. “I’m not guilty about that. I know I did everything

that I could when I found her. I feel guilty because, here I am feeling sorry for myself for just having seen those photos, and yet, poor Annie had to live through it. She gets to carry those disgusting images as memories of something that happened. I have no right to feel sorry for myself, but I can't stop."

Momma's 'victim' speech from The Center suddenly reverberated through my thoughts. Watching David struggle in his guilt only emphasized the accuracy of the words she had spoken to so many women at The Center. When I was younger and I listened to that speech, I understood what she meant by her words, but I never realized the absolute truth to what she was saying. I

understood now and I needed David to understand as well.

“David, we are *all* victims in this. Sure, the degree to which we’ve been victimized is different, but in the end, we are in the same boat. Hell, even those cops in there are victims. They have to look at those images as well and it can’t be pleasant for their psyche. I don’t care how seasoned and indifferent a person is, images like those cannot be forgotten.” I gave him a weak smile and shrugged a shoulder. “The only thing we can do is join together, find the monsters like Chris and lock their asses away, never to be heard from again.”

David rolled his eyes. “Please,

Paige. No disrespect to the boys in blue, but it's been a month; yet Chris is still running around. Meanwhile, you and I have been chased from our home and Annie is locked up in a mental hospital. I'm losing my faith that he will be captured."

My eyebrow arched and one side of my mouth quirked up. "Well, actually, I have a little, miniscule idea...okay, a *plan*, if you will."

David eyed me suspiciously at first but his eyebrows shot to his hairline when he realized what I was suggesting. "No! No, no, no, no, no. You are not going after him, Paige. There is no way in hell I'm allowing you to go after him."

David quickly pushed himself up off the bed and started walking towards the door.

I jumped up to follow after him. “Where are you going?”

He stopped while keeping his hand on the knob. “I’m going to tell Daemon on you. Someone needs to know that you’ve lost your damn mind.”

Before he could turn the knob, I lunged across the room, bringing him down like a lion does a gazelle. A small shriek escaped his lips and I think I may have actually growled in my attack. There was no way I would let David out of this room with his ability to speak

intact until he swore that Daemon would not know of my plan.

“Damn it, Paige! Watch my face, it’s still healing!” David shrieked as I brought him down like the wildebeest I imagined he was at that moment. Once I had him pinned to the ground, my hand covered his mouth and I shot him a pointed glare.

“Shut up, David. You cannot let Daemon know what I am planning. If he finds out, he will do everything he possibly can to stop me, and I don’t need the added headache of sidestepping him as well.”

David attempted to respond but his

words came out muffled.

“If I remove my hand, do you promise not to scream or do anything else stupid before I have a chance to talk to you about this?”

David’s head nodded emphatically and I eyed him suspiciously. I slowly removed my hand allowing David to speak. “Fine, Paige. I’ll hear you out *before* I go tell Daemon, but could you please remove yourself from me?”

I released David and barricaded the door with my body. David pushed himself up off the floor and moved to sit on the bed. Once I thought he was sufficiently settled, I relaxed my posture

and started my explanation. “Thank you for listening. I’m not going after Chris like you think. I’m just going to find him and then we can send the police to apprehend him. I’m not putting myself in any danger.”

David arched a single brow at my explanation. “And how, exactly, are you planning on finding him? I suspect if there was a way to find him, the police would have already done so.” He crossed his arms in challenge.

“I haven’t thought it out that far yet, David, but I can’t just continue sitting around and letting that guy fuck with our lives. It’s obvious his focus is on me, yet you and Annie ended up hurt.

I have to do something about this.” I blew out an exasperated breath and continued. “The police are limited in what they can do. People are far more willing to give up information to another ‘regular’ person than they are to the authorities and I’m hoping that any information I can find will help us capture Chris.”

I could tell by David’s posture that he wasn’t completely convinced. He seemed to mull over my suggestion before he finally responded. “Where would you find the information, Paige? It’s not like you know enough about the guy to be able to ask his friends. I don’t understand how you expect to pull this off.”

He was right. I didn't have much information on Chris and whatever I was able to obtain online or through background searches would have already been revealed to the police. I did know that Chris worked at the flea market and there could possibly be someone there who would know where to find him. More than likely, the police had already covered that ground, but I suspected most of Chris' true acquaintances would have been less than forthcoming with them. I needed to formulate a plan, and the best place I could think to start my search would have to be the flea market.

“We'll go to the flea market. He worked there. We can ask around and

see if anybody has information that could lead us to him. If nothing turns up, fine. We'll call it a bust and go home. But there is no way that I won't at least try. Come on, David! He won't attack me in broad daylight and surrounded by hundreds of witnesses; it'll be safe."

David considered my plea. His expression was one of resignation when he finally nodded his head and spoke. "Fine. If you are limiting your plan to a fact finding mission in public, I'll keep my mouth shut; but only on the condition that I go with you."

His eyes held mine for a few seconds before I relented to taking him with me. It would be easier for me to go

alone, but considering what Chris has already done, I knew David would never let me go alone into a place where Chris could potentially find me. Shaking Daemon while we performed our mission would be the tough part. I knew I would have to give it some time to let the emotions from today's event die down and then I could slowly make him believe that I would go along with whatever he wanted. Eventually, Daemon would have to return to managing his businesses and David and I would have our chance.

My face beamed back at David. "Thank you, David. We will eventually have to discuss the plan and figure out all of the details, but now is not the time.

We should get back out there, deal with whatever else we need to and then figure everything else out when we get to Daemon's and have some time alone."

David nodded but his face fell almost immediately afterward. "I don't want to go back out there, Paige. This whole experience has been heart wrenching and depressing. I am in serious need of a mood booster. Why don't we pick up some wine on the way back to Daemon's and get ourselves insanely drunk tonight? I'll invite Matt."

David's suggestion wasn't a bad idea. In fact, getting drunk with Daemon would be a good start to convincing him I wasn't planning anything in response to

Chris' message in my room.

“Sounds good, David. Tonight... we drink!”

~

“Holy shit. I've died and gone to Camelot.”

David spun around slowly as he took in Daemon's apartment. I laughed at David's expression as he studied every small detail of the space. He looked like a child who had been taken to one of the local theme parks for the first time. I remember feeling the same way when Daemon first brought me home with him. The medieval and renaissance décor was subtle and tasteful. The room was

so well put together, that in the certain light, it resembled an old world room from a distant land. The wall sconces added the finishing touch when they were the only illumination in the room. I enjoyed watching the shadows play across Daemon's face, sharpening his features and defining just how breathtakingly beautiful he really was.

Daemon smiled at David's comment and walked into the kitchen to drop his wallet and keys on the counter. Blood rushed to my cheeks when I noticed that Daemon had picked up a sponge and was cleaning the island as David adjusted to his surroundings. Memories of what happened on that island were fresh in my mind and I could

feel a pull through my center as my body yearned for more. I held my hands palm up to inspect the markings from earlier and there were still faint lines crossing over my palm. I wanted to check out the condition of my legs but, due to my jeans, I would have to leave that inspection for later.

David finished his assessment of the living room and turned to look at Daemon in the kitchen. "I'm very impressed, big guy. I love the whole 'castles and white knights' theme you have going. Tell you what...once I'm done putting up my things, I wouldn't mind at all if you wanted to show me your sword." David turned to wink at me and my face met my palm. I heard

Daemon chuckle from the kitchen and I was glad that David's blatant advances were being received comically.

“Speaking of putting up my things, where am I staying in this place?” David picked up his bags and looked to Daemon for directions.

Daemon finished cleaning the kitchen island and crossed the room to direct David to the hallway leading to the bedrooms. While David and Daemon were busy, I made my way over to the refrigerator and stowed the wine bottles away to keep them chilled for later. I'm not a big wine drinker, so David selected two whites and a blush that he described as being dessert wines. I

wondered if Daemon would be joining us in our alcohol-fueled debauchery. Not that I wanted another night with angry, drunk Daemon, but I couldn't help but be curious what regular drunk Daemon was like. My muscles clutched at the thought and I had to shake those thoughts from my head in order to continue to function as a normal human being. I remembered that I needed more information on Daemon and considered taking advantage of his drunken state to dig a little more into his past. Hopefully, I would be able to see past my lust in order to stay focused on my fact finding mission.

My thoughts were interrupted as Daemon emerged from the hallway and

sauntered his way into the kitchen where I stood. His brows were narrowed and one side of his mouth crooked up into a wicked little grin. I melted at the sight of the dimple that appeared and my body slightly trembled as he approached. As he neared me, he reached out to rub his hands down the prickled skin of my arms.

“I love how your body reacts when I’m near. Almost like it knows it belongs to me.” He looked up into my eyes and tapped me softly on the head with his finger. “Too bad that other pesky part disagrees.” He smiled such a boyish grin that I couldn’t help but melt right there in front of him. There were so many facets to this complex man and I

enjoyed discovering the new and unique personas that formed him. This particular part was his playful side. This was the bright and charming persona, the one that could convince me to do just about anything, as long as it would please him.

I looked down as I blushed and then peeked back to him from under my lashes. “When I met you, I discovered there was a total disconnect between my head and, well, the rest of me. It’s actually quite aggravating when I’m mad at you and my skin is trying to detach itself from me just to be closer to you.”

His smile brightened and I melted just a little bit more. If he stayed in this

jovial mood for much longer, I imagined I would eventually end up a lumpy puddle on the kitchen floor. My mouth tingled as his eyes studied my lips. Slowly, his head leaned down. He brushed his mouth softly against my lips before touching his forehead to mine. I stared into a set of haunting blues eyes, sparkling with heat and mischief. I held my breath and my body started to tremble. I jumped when his hand came up to grasp my hip and the pressure of his fingers felt exquisite on the sensitive nerves. The hold was possessive and assertive. Daemon could easily overpower me physically, which was oddly exciting. Strangely, it was his ability to overcome me mentally at times

that excited me the most. Thinking back, Daemon has been the only man to put me in my place. I was able to walk all over the others with no problem. But not Daemon. I found it ironic that the first person to interest me in, well, forever, was a dominant man. Maybe that's been my problem all this time...I apparently have a thing for assholes.

Daemon's lips pressed down on mine and my lips were parted by the force of his own. The tip of his tongue flicked against mine and we moved against each other slowly. My hands reached up into his perpetually messy hair and I tugged at the thick mane wrapping itself around my fingers. Daemon let out a seductive little growl

and tightened his grip around my hip.

Pulling away from our kiss, Daemon's mouth traveled over my jaw and down my neck. The heat of his mouth and breath rolled over my skin. My head fell back as my breathing labored. I opened my eyes when, suddenly, I saw a flash of light. Daemon must have noticed it as well because he abruptly stopped what he was doing. Both our heads spun to look in the direction of the living room.

David sat innocently on a chair facing the kitchen. He held his phone in front of him as he texted away on the keyboard. Feeling satisfied with his message he hit send and looked up. "Oh,

sorry. I didn't mean to use the flash.”

Daemon let me go and stepped back a few feet to put some space between us. His face was bemused as he took in the astonished expression on mine.

“David. Can I ask what the hell you think you are doing?”

He looked up at me and flashed me his signature grin before responding. “Matt’s driving over as we speak and when I came out here to let you know he was on his way, I found you making out. I took a picture to send Matt so that he didn’t miss out on any of the action.” He shrugged a shoulder and checked the

response message from Matt. He laughed quickly and returned his eyes to mine. “What?! I was just trying to be accommodating since he wasn’t here to see this yet.”

Laughter burst from Daemon as he left the kitchen to walk in the direction of his room. Once he was out of sight, I scowled at David. “Seriously, David! Can you try to act civilized at least for the first couple of days that you are here.”

David waved me off and laughed. “Oh, please, Paige. Don’t get your panties in a bunch over a little fun.” The buzzer rang from the intercom and David jumped from his chair to go answer it.

Matt announced himself over the speaker and David excitedly hit the call button for the elevator. I couldn't help but grin at how cute he was rushing down the hallway to meet Matt.

Chapter Eight

My face felt like someone had taken their fingers to the sides of my lips and were pulling them apart as hard as they could. Every muscle in my body was on fire and the cramping through my mid-section burned as my body shook violently. Tears freely flowed down my face while the rims of my eyes burned from the constant moisture. I could barely see through my waterlogged lashes as I watched David and Matt reenact scenes from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. My smile was glued to my face and the laughter boiled out of me with no end in sight.

It started innocently enough. At first, David and Matt were only quoting from the coconut scene. Somehow, during the exchange, David located two bowls and banged them together to add sound effects. They both appeared to know the movie by heart and as the wine bottles grew empty, the scenes progressed. They were currently reenacting the black knight scene. So far, David has lost one arm and one leg and screaming something about ‘flesh wounds’. He insisted on hopping around on his *good* leg to stay in character. His ass had hit the floor more than ten times by this time because alcohol does not lead to better balance. Each time he fell, he popped back up immediately and

started hopping again. His hops were so uncoordinated that his body was moving from side to side while his one arm flailed wildly in the air. It was impossible for them to finish the scene because everybody was laughing so hard and the pain the laughter was causing in my body was pure torture. I was doing that erratic hiccup thing you do when your lungs are no longer able to take in adequate amounts of oxygen.

I looked over to Daemon as he stood in the kitchen bemusedly taking in David and Matt's antics. He chose not to drink wine with us this evening, instead opting for bottled beer. I'd been worried that he would magically morph back into angry Daemon again once alcohol was

introduced to his system, but his mood had remained light and jovial. I was delighted with how playful he was and it was impressive how quickly he and my friends clicked. David had been cracking jokes all evening about the medieval décor in Daemon's house, but he meant it all in good fun. Truthfully, Daemon's place was breathtaking.

Painfully, I made my way over to Daemon and clung on to him for support as I continued to laugh my ass off. "Da... Davi...David! Stop....seriously...I can't take...any...more." My voice was raspy from the irritation to my throat.

David finally put his foot down and doubled over while wiping tears

from his eyes. “Holy crap, that was hard! Paige, you should try that. I don’t think it’s possible to stay standing for over 30 seconds.”

I took in large breaths after my diaphragm finally stopped spasming. “No thanks, David.” *Breathe in, breathe out.* I don’t need to break my neck tonight.” Daemon put his arm around me and pulled me closer into his side. He nuzzled his face into my hair and my heart warmed at the contact.

David finally gained control of himself and he and Matt sat down on the sofa sitting in front of the balcony doors. He looked around the room and over to Daemon with a large, sloppy smile

plastered to his face. “Seriously, Daemon. You know I’m joking around with you for fun. Your house really is amazing. Did you decorate it yourself, or did you hire someone to create this masterpiece?”

Daemon cleared his throat before answering in that decadent, deep voice of his. “I did it myself actually.”

David and Matt’s eyes widened as they perused the walls of the living room. “I’m shocked. Gorgeous AND a talented decorator. That’s really impressive. Are you sure you’re not gay?”

Daemon chuckled at David’s

question and shook his head in response. David shrugged his shoulders. “That’s too bad. Sorry, Paige, but you know I have to try.” David’s gaze traveled to the paintings along the far wall. “What’s up with the castle theme, Daemon? Do you imagine yourself to be a knight in shining armor? I mean, you do call Paige ‘Damsel’ all the time.” David angled his head at Daemon waiting for a response.

Daemon grinned. “Honestly, I started calling Paige ‘Damsel’ to annoy her. She’s adorable when her face gets all red when she’s angry.” He turned to me and winked right before I elbowed him in the side. He winced from the hit and turned back to answer David. “Actually, the theme started with one of

those paintings, and it kind of built out from there.” I looked over to the paintings and thought I recognized them from my art classes in college. Daemon walked over to stand near the center painting and his face took on a reminiscent expression as he gazed up at it. “This painting here is called ‘*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*’. It’s painted by John William Waterhouse and based on a poem written by John Keats.

David’s body swayed slightly as he listened to Daemon speak. Naturally, David couldn’t pull his mind out of the gutter and he asked, “So, were Waterhouse and Keats medieval pornographers?”

Daemon's brows furrowed as he looked to David in question. David smiled and explained, "Well, because it's obvious the knight and the woman are about to get it on in the woods. Just seems like old-timey porn to me."

One corner of Daemon's mouth turned up and a dimple appeared on his cheek. My body reacted instantly to the sight of that indentation and I felt woozy from the effect.

"No. They weren't ancient pornographers. Waterhouse and Keats were alive in the 1800s."

David nodded as he processed what Daemon was saying. "So, what's

the story behind the painting? Is that supposed to be Lancelot and Guinevere?”

Daemon looked back towards the painting before responding. “No. Although, the story behind this painting could be considered just as tragic. The identity of the knight is never revealed, but he was found wandering around in a barren land, looking sickly and haggard. A person stops him and he tells them about how he met the most beautiful woman in the woods. He fell in love with the woman and they made love in the fields and spent the day together. In the evening, she took him back to her lair and put him under a love spell and he was left wandering in a desolate land for

the rest of his life.” He chuckled to himself from some private thought. “I guess that’s what you get when you fall in love with a beautiful woman in a field.” He paused momentarily before saying, “The woman ended up being a mystical creature of some sort, who...”

“...who some thought was also cursed to never be able to fall in love herself.” I finished his statement after remembering the story from school.

Daemon turned to me and smiled shyly. His expression was thoughtful as he intently stared at my face. After a few moments, he cleared his throat. His voice was quiet when he said, “They may have been correct about her as

well.”

For a split second, Daemon’s face fell and he appeared distant in his thoughts. I couldn’t understand his sudden melancholy and I searched his eyes for any clue as to what he was thinking.

David absorbed Daemon’s explanation of the painting before asking another question. “So, why that painting? What made it so special to you?”

Daemon’s eyes returned to the painting and his words were clipped when he answered. “I know how the knight feels.”

My eyebrows shot up at Daemon’s

admission. He knew how the knight felt? Daemon didn't strike me as the heartbroken, desolate type and I wondered why he felt a connection to the knight. The fact that I knew so little about Daemon was once again slapped across my face. His mysterious past was an irritating nuisance to me and I wanted nothing more but to solve that mystery tonight.

It was getting late and I could tell David and Matt were starting to wind down. Their eyes were droopy and they reminded me of the way five year old children look when they were fighting sleep. Daemon was stoic and reserved, still standing near the far wall. My muscles stiffened in response to the

burning stare of his eyes. His gaze slowly roamed my body and I could feel his touch through my clothing. Soft tremors rolled through me and I struggled to shake away the desire for the glorious man currently devouring me with his eyes. I needed to find out about him, therefore 'sexy time' had to take a back seat to 'sharing time' this evening. My body protested the decision, but there was no better time than when he was loosened up from drinking. I had to stay true to the mission.

Daemon looked stunning as usual. He wore a button down, forest green shirt, with the sleeves rolled up his muscular forearms. His shirt was tucked into the dark grey trousers that hung just

perfectly from his hips. He looked like a casual businessman mixed with the ultimate bad boy and the combination was captivating and seductive as hell. I wanted nothing more than to walk over to him, wrap my hands in his thick mane and yank those sculpted lips down to mine. Shaking off those thoughts would be difficult considering I had at least a bottle of wine freely flowing its way through my bloodstream, but I had to make the effort.

Taking a deep breath, I made my way over to David and plopped myself down on the couch between him and Matt. My legs lazily sprawled across Matt while I practically sat in David's lap. His arms wrapped around me and

he took me into a warm hug before letting out a contented sigh.

“This has been fun, Paige. We should do this more often.” He nuzzled his nose into my hair and I silently chuckled at the obvious level of his intoxication.

My eyes wandered to Daemon and I detected a bit of possessiveness in his heated stare. He slowly stalked his way over to the couch and my body trembled when he reached down to caress my cheek with his palm. He reached for my hands and pulled me up so that I was standing almost flat against him. The solidity of his chest against the softness of mine was intoxicating.

Daemon looked over my shoulder and spoke to David and Matt. “If you two would excuse us. It’s late and I think I’ll take Paige to bed. The evening has been entertaining and rather enjoyable. Thank you.” The low timbre of his voice caused his chest to vibrate against mine and my knees weakened slightly.

The mission. The mission. The mission. The mission....

I chanted a focusing mantra as Daemon turned and pulled me along with him, making his way to his room. He didn’t bother waiting for a response from David and Matt; his pace was quick and determined.

Once I was safely tucked away in his room, Daemon closed and locked the door. His crystal blue eyes seared into me before his gaze traveled lazily over my body. I stood stock still attempting to gain control over myself. The force of his stare was mystifying and I had to intentionally look to the floor to release myself from the seductive spell he was weaving around me. His feet moved in two long strides before his hand clutched my chin and forced my eyes back to his.

“You can’t hide your eyes from me, Paige. Not in here; and definitely not when I can finally rip those clothes off of you and fuck you until you’re sated and sloppy.” His words were spoken

with a sensual drawl and I instantly dampened in response. My thighs pressed themselves together as I fought against my reaction to him. The sexual tension was palpable and the air was charged with an electric spark that popped against every inch of my skin. I could feel logic and reasoning slipping away from my grasp and I stepped back a step to distance myself and breathe. Daemon oozed eroticism and carnal desire so thick that it wrapped around, overtaking every sense and function of my body. My breathing increased its pace as my heart thundered against my chest. I took another step back and noticed that with each step I took, Daemon took one forward. He was

stalking me, cornering me with the intent to devour me in every way possible. I knew I only had a small window of time to redirect his mood and hopefully get him talking.

My hands went up to halt Daemon's progress. "Um, maybe we could hold that thought and...I don't know...talk for a little while? We really haven't had a moment alone all day, well, except for this morning..."

The corners of his lips quirked when I mentioned our morning encounter.

"...so, we should catch up." That was lame, but it was the only complete

sentence I could formulate at that particular moment.

His head angled and he continued stalking forward while I backed myself further away. Within no time, I'd backed myself into a wall and Daemon's stare grew impossibly more heated when he realized I was trapped. His chest pressed lightly against mine and his head angled so that he could whisper suggestively in my ear.

“What would you like to talk about, Damsel? I'm all ears.” His teeth nipped my earlobe and I shuddered, pressing my palms into the wall for stability. Hair prickled along the back of my neck as his warm breath rolled

across my skin.

My voice was breathy as I answered, “You.” I paused a beat to adjust to the quickening of my heart. “I want to talk about you.”

Daemon leaned away to look at my face. His one brow arched arrogantly and the corners of his mouth turned up in amusement. “I’m about to thoroughly and completely fuck you, and you are asking to talk about me instead?” A humorless laugh escaped him. The amusement left his face and his eyes locked with mine. His voice was low and husky when he said, “I’m sorry, Paige. But right here, and right now, I have absolutely no interest in talking. In fact, I prefer that

you listen to everything I tell you to do.”

Fuck! He was making it impossible for me to continue holding my resolve. The weak grasp I had on logical thought was lost to the desperate reaction of my body to his voice, his smell, his energy...to him. My muscles quivered at his close proximity and a flood of hormones surged through my head and body. I was on fire for the virile man currently pinning me to the wall.

His hand came up around my neck, softly brushing the palm against my skin. No pressure was applied, but the promise was evident. My thoughts rushed me back to that night in the

storage room of Tomb and tremors violently overtook me as I remembered the mind-numbing force of the release he had given me that night.

His voice was whisper soft as he said, “I want to control every part of you. Your heart...your breath...your pleasure and your pain. I want to not only invade, but take over every sense you have. You’ll see nothing but me, hear nothing but me, taste and feel...” His words trailed off momentarily as he lightly ran the tip of his nose down the side of my face to my jawline. “... nothing but me.”

His mouth was suddenly pressed roughly to mine while his hands gripped

around my hips possessively. He was holding me in place, claiming my body as his and I was helpless to the desire to give him whatever he wanted. I was putty to be molded by his skillful hands and every bone in my body had softened into a pliable goo. His hands slid down to the backs of my thighs. He lifted my legs to wrap around his waist before abruptly turning and marching me over to his bed. I gasped when he suddenly dropped me onto the mattress.

“Take off your shirt, Damsel.”

His eyes never left my body as his hands reached down to remove my shoes. I slowly pushed myself up off the mattress to do as he said without

argument. I gave into my body's desire to comply with his instructions and the ease with which I gave in to him completely was startling. He watched as my hands wrapped around the bottom hem of my shirt and those beautiful blues followed that hem as it traveled up my body and over my head. I reached around to undo the fastener of my bra and he shook his head. My brow arched in response.

“I haven't told you to take that off yet.” His response was matter of fact and authoritative, almost as if he expected nothing else but my compliance. A wave of heat rushed along my skin in response to his domineering mannerisms and the

sensation was heady, yet unnerving at the same time. Not only was I enjoying his orders, I was starting to anticipate and crave them. The impatient quality of his curt commands demanded my obedience.

He finished removing my shoes and stood before me. My face was at the level of his abdomen when he reached back to pull off his shirt. Within seconds, the sharp ridges and lines of his cut stomach revealed themselves to me. I licked my lips and clenched my hands into fists to keep from reaching out to run my fingers along the strong grooves of his stomach. If I touched him without first being told to do so, there was no telling what he would do. I craned my neck to look up at his face and my eyes

were met with his burning blue eyes. His sculpted lips were slightly parted and his chest gave away his heavy breathing.

He had me. In this moment, in this encounter, in this room, he had me. I was his to toy with, to use as he desired; a plaything for his sole amusement and satisfaction. I willingly gave myself to him and by doing so, I removed the weight of responsibility that I normally carried on my shoulders. I gave myself to him and, in turn, he gave me freedom.

“Take off my pants, Paige.”

My hands went to his pants without hesitation. I continued looking up into his eyes as my fingers deftly

undid the button and slowly slid down the zipper. I slid the material off his hips and let it drop so that it pooled by his feet. I looked straight forward to find that his boxers strained from the bulge pushing out from beneath them. His mouth curved into a lascivious grin before he said, "I'm going to fuck that sassy little mouth of yours, Paige. It's something I've wanted to do since the first time you told me not to call you 'Damsel.'"

My jaw dropped in shock of what he said and he smiled brighter. "Good girl."

His hands freed his boxers from his body before wrapping his long

fingers into the hair on the back of my head. He was fully erect before me and my eyes briefly caught his before I took him into my mouth. My tongue circled around his tip before sliding along the base. As I took in his length, a low growl emanated from him and his fingers gripped into my hair tighter. The burn on my scalp from the force of his grip was slightly painful and sinfully erotic. I found a rhythm that he must have enjoyed because his head fell back and his chest heaved with his labored breath.

“Fuck! I knew that mouth of yours was going to be my weakness.” His head fell forward to look at me as I licked and sucked at his most intimate part. “Look at me, Paige. I want you looking at me

when I spill into your throat.” His voice came out in a dark drawl and my eyes dutifully peeked up through my lashes. His eyes narrowed before he roared out his release. I swallowed all that he gave me and when he was done I pulled away, only to lick my lips. His eyes held mine as I looked up at him, smiled and said, “Delicious.”

His eyes widened slightly just before one corner of his mouth curved up revealing one of those delectable dimples on his cheek. “My turn, Damsel. Lay back.” When I didn’t lay back fast enough, his hands gently pushed against my shoulders to hurry me along. He reached for my hands and gripped them together in one hand before pinning them

to the mattress above my head. His eyes met mine as he instructed me to stay in such a dominating tone that I had no choice but to follow his instructions. Once he was satisfied that I would remain in place, he reached behind my back to quickly remove my bra. Tossing that aside, his hands eventually found the button of my jeans and, with one swift maneuver, those too joined the rest of our clothes on the floor. The silken cloth of my underwear was removed next and I lay there, bared to him as his eyes raked over my exposed skin. His gaze was possessive and confident, yet soft and worshipful at the same time. My body writhed under the intense stare and my nerve endings ached for his touch;

hard or soft, it didn't matter. I needed every part of him, mind and body, in this moment. My head swam with my need for him and I was unsure if I could ever feel that I'd had enough. I was selfish in my desire for him, only him and all of him.

He stepped back and I started to protest at the loss of his touch. He placed one finger over his mouth to indicate that I needed to be silent. Once I stilled, he said, "Open for me, Paige. Show me every beautiful part of you." My legs trembled as they fell open. My position was submissive and vulnerable as I was laid out and displayed to Daemon.

His eyes slowly caressed every inch of my body before suddenly shooting to mine. His face was feral and seductive as hell. He dropped to one knee and then to both and I felt open and exposed. The candlelight from the sconces gave Daemon just enough light to see every detail of my body, including my most intimate of places. The warmth of his mouth as he pressed his tongue against my folds sent waves of pleasurable tremors through my body. My hips undulated at the contact and as my head fell back, I couldn't contain my cries. His tongue found that bundle of nerves causing me to unravel and lose control. I shamelessly rotated my hips into him, desperate for his touch. He

responded by licking his way down and spearing his tongue inside me. My hands gripped the sheets above me and I writhed in response to his actions. That blessed fire was building within me and my back arched in pure ecstasy. Just as I was within reach of that peak, Daemon stopped just long enough to bring me down from that edge before starting again and driving me back towards it. I cried out in frustration and my hips bucked in reaction to his teasing. “Daemon! Please...please finish. I need you to...*fuck*...just, please?!” I had been reduced to begging; and not just any kind of begging, no, I was reduced to begging with incoherent jibberish. I was so wound up that my poor brain couldn't

even formulate a complete sentence. He was driving me to the point of insanity.

He reached up to roughly grip my hips and hold me in place. “Hold still my sweet Damsel, or else I might have to draw this out even longer.” He softly chuckled before adding, “I can do this all night.”

Daemon began again and tears welled in my eyes from my desperate need for him to finally push me over that peak. My hands hurt from clenching at the sheets above me. I didn’t dare move, knowing full well that Daemon would stop just to get me back under control. I realized in that moment that Daemon had been truthful in what he said at Tomb. He

was controlling me, and he was doing so without the use of any type of restraint or tools of any kind. It was strange how Daemon had overpowered me in every way, only because he was completely in control of himself. I had surrendered everything to him already, and yet, all I wanted to do was give him more.

Finally, when Daemon had driven me to a state of absolute madness, he pushed me over that peak. The violence of the tremors that tore through me caused my body to arch up uncontrollably while my head fell back into the mattress. My fingers were so tightly curled around the sheets above me that I used that grip to level my body against the torrent of pleasure shooting

through me. When I felt like I was about to come apart from the sheer ecstasy of the release Daemon shoved two fingers inside me while using his thumb to toy with that bundle of nerves, causing a second violent wave to wash over me. My eyes rolled back into my head and I thought my throat would go raw at the sheer volume of my cries.

Daemon moved his hand in perfect rhythm with my body as I slowly came down from my climax. Small quakes rippled across me and my breathing eventually calmed from its formerly spastic state. When I had finally lowered to a point of sated bliss, my eyes opened lazily. My body jumped when my eyes met Daemon's raw stare. A trace of fear

developed in me from the obvious intent that was written across his expression. This man intended to continue pleasuring me until I was utterly and completely exhausted. I was still shaking slightly from my last release and my head shook back in forth in weak protest. I wasn't sure I could take much more. I pulled my arms down and started to push up onto them when one corner of Daemon's mouth quirked and that dimple did me in. My body instantly fell back to the mattress and his smile brightened. Two dimples. You could have stuck a fork in me, I was so thoroughly done.

Daemon reached down and guided my body to the center of his massive bed. He crawled over to me, giving me

the most breathtaking view. He truly was art brought to life and I bit down on my lip as he approached. His hands moved up to spread my legs apart and he settled himself against me. His voice was husky and slightly raw when he locked his eyes with mine and said, "I want you to let yourself go now, Damsel. Touch, grab, pull, scratch, I don't care. Just show me what I'm doing to you. Understand?"

My breath hitched at his words. He was not going to go easy on me, I could tell. His voice, his body language, the very energy that rolled off of him onto me told me exactly what he intended to do. And I smiled. I couldn't wait and luckily, I didn't have to. Once Daemon recognized the anticipation

written across my face he filled me with one hard thrust. My hands instantly went up to entangle my fingers in his messy hair. I pulled slightly to move him towards me and a low growl escaped him as his mouth crashed against mine. I held so tightly to him as he powered into me. He held himself above me with one hand while his other found its way to my throat. His grip was strong, but painless, and he took that opportunity to control my breathing. I never struggled for air, but the euphoria caused by the small amounts of oxygen I was allowed only added to the growing explosion within me. He controlled every part of me at this point, the release was so overpowering I wasn't sure I would

survive it. I let go of Daemon's hair and ran my hands all over his rock solid body, gripping at him each time he pushed into me. I wanted to let go, but waited. I'd already learned to let him tell me when it was time.

Just when I thought I would tear apart from the force of the climax Daemon was building within me, he leaned down and whispered in my ear. "Come for me, Damsel. Let me see how good you feel." I was undone by his words. When his hand let go of my neck, oxygen rushed in my lungs and an orgasm tore through my body with such violent intensity, stars burst before my eyes and every muscle within me seized. My throat burned from my cries and I

felt him tense before finding his own release. Sweat ran down his body and glistened over his skin. We floated back down and I struggled to regain my senses. Daemon leaned down and placed his mouth over mine and his kiss was tender and soft.

“You are so beautiful. I will never stop enjoying watching you lose control underneath me.” His voice vibrated from its low pitch and my body shivered at the sensation. Daemon placed one quick peck on my lips before rolling over to release me from his weight. His arms wrapped around me and he nuzzled his face into my hair. We laid there quietly for so long our hearts beat in time with each other. My body was languid and my

eyes began to grow heavy from the utter relaxation and safety I found in his arms. I reached an in between stage and was just barely floating along on the edge of sleep when I swore I heard Daemon speak. His voice was so soft, I could barely hear him.

“I’ve missed you, Paige. I’ll never let you go again.”

Chapter Nine

Three weeks had passed since David arrived at Daemon's and Chris had still not been apprehended. I was becoming restless from the wait so I used my time formulating a plan on how to find him. David and I would hang in my room while Daemon worked from home and we would discuss the details of our mission. We knew Daemon would insist on joining us at the flea market and we decided that David would act as a distraction while I talked to people who worked there.

After our plan was finalized, we

woke up this morning and told Daemon that we were going to the flea market to do some antiquing. Just as David and I had assumed, Daemon demanded on escorting us to the flea market. He also questioned our motivation of wanting to go, but David saved the day when he starting rambling on about his ever growing collection of trinkets and baubles that he has decorating his room. Daemon became so bored with David's explanation that he eventually relented without further questions just to shut him up. I was impressed with David's tactic and noted it for future use.

Fortunately, David settled into Daemon's house nicely and it's been enjoyable having him here. I was

pleased that my boys were able to get along with each other and Daemon was always in brighter spirits when David was around. I've been on my *best behavior* with Daemon and have tried not to argue with any of his ridiculous directives or buck against his dominating personality. He's raised an eyebrow a time or two when I quietly went along with what he said without argument.

I believe my accommodating behavior has worked because Daemon started to entrust me into the care of David two nights a week so he could go check on Tomb. For some odd reason, Daemon believed that if I really wanted to leave, David could stop me. *Ha!* Like that could ever happen. However, in

keeping with my need to convince Daemon I was 'tamed', I stayed home and patiently waited for his return on those nights. On most nights, he worked late and I fell asleep in his massive bed before he returned home. Some nights, I would wake up to him working my body into an absolute frenzy and others I would wake to find myself wrapped tightly in his arms. Oddly, the nights he chose to hold me to him as close as possible were my favorites.

I was getting ready for our day out and David lounged on my bed as I choose my clothes. Knowing that I would have to charm people into giving up information, it was important that I appeared innocent and also attractive.

People, men especially, tend to have no problem giving a girl information when she has cleavage clearly visible. I choose a red halter-top sundress and paired the dress with black wedge sandals. I held the clothes up so that David could see and he smiled and nodded in approval.

“That is a perfect look, Paige, except, I thought the idea was for *me* to distract Daemon. It would be difficult enough for me to divert his eyes from you on a normal day. If you are dressed like a red hot siren, it’s going to be that much harder.”

I turned to hold the dress up to myself in the mirror and took my bottom

lip between my teeth while considering David's comment. He was correct that dressing down would help him get Daemon away from me, but on the other hand, I needed to heat up my appearance to loosen the lips of the people I questioned. I decided to go with the dress and answered David. "Well, I suggest you go make yourself extra hot, David, because I'm going to wear the dress. Maybe you should go style your hair, or put on a tighter shirt. It might distract Daemon's eye from my fine self." I winked at David through the mirror.

He laid back on the bed and threw his arm over his eyes dramatically. "I wish and as if! That man is hopeless for

you. I knew you had a strong love spell, my little Paige, but I had no idea it was maximum strength. Between Alex and Daemon, you have entranced two stunning specimens of the male population.”

My face fell a little at David’s mention of Alex and David noticed and quickly apologized. I gave him a weak smile and shrugged a shoulder. “I need to get dressed, David, so it’s time for you to skedaddle. Go make yourself irresistible.”

David pushed himself off my bed and smiled as he responded, “Well, I wouldn’t go that far, Paige. It wouldn’t be fair to all the other people in the flea

market if I made myself look that good. I think I'll keep it toned down and go with looking absolutely enticing." I laughed at his words as he made his way across my room and closed my door behind him.

After David was out of sight, I pulled on my dress and went into the bathroom to do my make-up and hair. I left my hair hanging loosely down my back and I applied cream eyeshadow and a light black liner. I used a hint of red lipstick just to fill out my lips and spritzed on a floral scent.

I made my way into the living room to find Daemon pouring a cup of coffee in the kitchen. He was dressed in a tight black t-shirt tucked into dark,

distressed jeans. A thick black belt held the jeans hanging perfectly off his hips and my mouth watered at the sight of him. My mind was instantly torn between wanting to slowly look over the stunning man standing by the counter and wanting to run to the coffee pot and suck down every last drop. I decided to have my cake AND eat it too by walking over to Daemon, pecking him on the lips and grabbing his cup while he was distracted. His eyebrow arched up at me and I gave him my most innocent smile while walking over to add creamer and sugar to the cup. He walked up behind me and wrapped his strong arms around my waist while nuzzling into my neck. His body softly rumbled as he chuckled

at my thievery.

Daemon eventually let me go and leaned back on the kitchen island. I could feel his eyes sliding over my body and I half turned to look at him. His eyes were heated and he had a small smile revealing my favorite little indentations. I turned towards him fully when my coffee was finished and he shook his head while saying, “I’m not sure I can take you anywhere dressed like that, Damsel. I’ll have to rip any man in half that dares to look at you.”

I sipped from my coffee and peeked at him over the rim of the cup. I placed the cup on the counter and answered. “Oh please, Daemon. You and

I both know that I can handle myself...”

He arched an eyebrow and I sighed.

“...Well, you know, in *most* cases, I can handle myself. There will be no man-ripping while at the flea market.”

Daemon opened his mouth to respond when David came bouncing into the room. He wore a forest green, button up shirt and black jeans and his hair was styled in a perfectly messy way. “Are we ready to do this? I can hear the knick-knacks calling me already.” He walked over to Daemon and I and leaned a hip against the counter. “Oh, Daemon, you can help me find cat statutes to add

to my collection! I'm particularly interest in finding a Russian Grey and a Calico." I laughed at David's suggestion because I knew damn well he didn't collect cat statues. I had no idea what he planned to do with them if he actually bought them.

Daemon pushed up from the counter, walked towards the living room and swiped his sunglasses and keys off the breakfast bar. "Sounds great, David. Really. I can't think of a better way to spend my day." The sarcasm dripped off of Daemon's words and David shot me a quick thumbs up while winking.

I followed behind Daemon as he walked to the elevator and shook my

head as David skipped beside me. He was excited to be part of a “spy mission,” as he referred to it, and he insisted that I give him a code name after he proved himself worthy. When the elevator dinged and the doors opened, we rode quietly down to the garage and were quickly on our way.

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The flea market was busy for a Friday and I hoped that it wouldn't be too difficult to talk to vendors or other employees with the amount of people who were shopping today. The environment wasn't absolute chaos, but it was enough to act as a separator while David dragged Daemon off so that I

could talk to people. When we first arrived, Daemon wrapped his arm around my shoulder and walked me through the aisles. David flitted between tables and examined the odd antiques and other items. Eventually, I removed myself from Daemon's arm and pretended to be looking through a rack of vintage clothing. I kept an eye out for any vendors that looked like they would have been friends with Chris. Remembering that Chris was an obvious prick, I quickly determined that the women would have avoided him, leaving the obvious choice to question the men.

The booths were arranged in long aisles down the length of the market,

leaving plenty of walking room in the middle. I walked back and forth between the right and left sides in an attempt to put some space between Daemon and I. There were so many oddities being sold at the market, I laughed at the little bobble head toys of famous celebrities and political figures and shrank back in fear at the clown doll table. I swear their eyes followed me as I moved along and my step picked up somewhat as I attempted to escape. It didn't help when David came up just behind me as I walked past the booth and started making scary carnival noises causing me to shudder.

After walking through the market and weaving through the maze-like halls,

I spotted a janitor cleaning up a blue slushy that had been spilled in the walkway and a light bulb went off over my head. *Perfect*. Having spotted my first potential information candidate, I quickly turned and grabbed David away from a display of knock-off, designer watches.

“Hey! Watch it, Paige. Some of those look real!” David stumbled over his feet as I dragged him closer so that I could whisper.

I donned my serious voice as I whispered, “Shut up, David. I want to talk to that janitor over there and I need you to distract Daemon.”

We both turned and looked as Daemon played with little, metal perpetual motion toys. I chuckled to myself as he went from each toy and attempted to get it to sync with the motion of the others. He had accomplished getting all toys but two in time with each other and was busily working on the last ones.

“Excellent. David go over there and mess up the rhythm of one of the toys. He’ll have no choice but to start over again and I should have enough time to question the janitor.”

David scowled at me as he admonished me in what was probably one of the loudest whispers I have ever

heard. “Paige! That’s mean. Look at him. He looks so cute over there playing with those toys. Plus, it looks like he’s worked hard...”

“Exactly, David. He is enough of a control freak that he’ll take as much time as he needs to make sure he controls every little aspect of those toys. Once he’s set their pattern, he’ll be satisfied and then he will start looking for me. So get over there and mess up the works!” I eyed David and crossed my arms over my chest.

His eyes widened in realization and he nodded his head. “I see.” He began to turn but then quickly reverted back to face me. “Speaking of control,

how is all of that going, anyway? Have you finally submitted to ‘Man God’?” His brows wriggled and his lips turned up into a crooked smile.

My patience was wearing thin and a groan escaped me. “Damn it! This is *not* the time to be discussing my sex life. Now get over there.” I stamped my foot in his direction to move him along.

Rather than taking the hint that he needed to get a move on, David looked up and put his finger to his mouth in thought. He looked back down to me and said, “I’m going to have to disagree with you on that, Paige. When you are sleeping with a man like *that*, any place and time is the appropriate time and

place to discuss your sex life.” His matter of fact expression would have been hilarious if it wasn’t for the fact that we were losing precious time.

I grabbed David by the shoulders and hurriedly spun him toward Daemon’s direction. Glancing at Daemon, I noticed that he was almost finished with the last toy. I gave David a strong shove. “Go now!”

David shot me a haughty look over his shoulder before flitting over to Daemon’s table. Luckily, his natural clumsiness came in handy when he ran into the table, knocking all the toys over. Daemon’s head shot up and he silently and slowly looked over at David. David

raised up his hands and shrugged his shoulders in feigned innocence before taking a step back out of range of Daemon. I was amused by their exchange but I had a janitor to interrogate.

I turned back to where the janitor was almost finished cleaning up the last of the frozen treat. I started walking in his direction and swayed my hips noticeably with my stride. A fake smile was plastered to my face and when I got near enough to my target, his face shot up and looked confused. I stopped when I was close enough so that nobody could overhear what I was asking him.

“Hey stud.” My hand reached up

and I took a lock of hair between my fingers. Keeping in character, I did the one thing I detest most; I twirled my hair. Not only did I twirl my hair, I did that little thing with my foot where it went up on its toe and twisted back and forth. Oh yeah, I was a professional at this moment. Batting my eyelashes up at 'Mr. Sanitary', I wished I had chewing gum to smack loudly and complete the effect. Having not considered that earlier, I had no choice but to continue, sans gum. Not a perfect game, but definitely close enough.

The face I looked up into was haggard and dirty and the man looked like he had endured way too many years of hard labor. He wore the same blue

coveralls that Chris wore when he attacked me at the coffee shop weeks ago. He held a mop handle in his hand and I could tell he was leaning on it for support. I wondered if he had a back injury, but then quickly shook my curiosity to get to the matter at hand.

While twirling my hair on my finger, I smiled brighter before I said, “Um, I’m just here looking for an old friend. Do you know a guy by the name of Chris Baxter? He said he’s a janitor here.” My eyelashes batted some more and I continued drowning him with my innocent act. Before letting him respond, I turned to check on David and Daemon and found they were working together to put the toys back in motion. *Teamwork!* I

was so proud.

The janitor picked the mop head off the floor and roughly dunked it back in the bucket filled with black water. The liquid spilled over the rim of the bucket and the nasty muck splashed all over my right shoe. I picked up my foot and my jaw dropped in shock and disgust at his actions.

He spit. He *actually spit* on the ground before answering. “What’s a girl like *you* wanting with Chris? Whaaaaat...did he fuck ya and leave ya?” His sneer matched the filthy snicker that rolled out from between his lips. “Well, you’re gonna have to get in line because Chris has a long list of ladies in

his fan club. In fact..." He turned to point to a somewhat pretty, gypsy looking lady who was selling handmade jewelry. "...that bitch over there can tell you ALL about Chris." He snorted out a little laugh before continuing. "Bitch hates 'em, but, in my opinion, she should be glad he gave her even that one night."

My brows furrowed and I'd had enough with this ass. Was it a job requirement that flea market janitors be chauvinist, crass, lunatics?! My finger came up to point directly in his face when I said, "Listen, you rude son of a bitch, I'm not asking for anything more than if you know where I can find Chris. So give me the information I'm asking for so I can get out of here and not have

to breathe in your nasty ass breath any longer.” I didn’t know what reaction to expect to what I said, but I was determined to stand my ground with this prick.

His scowl deepened after I finished speaking, but then his face relaxed and he actually...smiled? He started laughing and slapping his hand against his knee. He turned to me and went to touch my shoulder. I flinched outside of his reach and his hand returned to his side. He finally stopped laughing and said, “You’re alright babe, I like a girl with spunk.”

Apparently, the sweet, hot and innocent character was the wrong

choice. I should have gone with the ‘fuck with me and die’ character from the start. I turned to check on David and Daemon’s status with the toys. They were almost finished and David happened to look over at me to determine if I was done with the janitor. I gave him a pointed look and the panicked expression on his face told me we were running out of time. Thankfully, David took one for the team and bumped the table again to knock the toys out of sync. Without looking at David, Daemon grabbed him by one shoulder and pushed him away from the table before turning back to realign the toys.

I turned back to the janitor and he leaned on the mop for support. He

cleared his throat before continuing, “I hate to break it to ya’, but Chris is wanted by the cops. Don’t know what he did, but there have been a lot of people looking for him. Like I said, you might want to talk with Angie over there. She might know something.”

I highly doubted Angie would know anything about Chris’ location. Unfortunately, I had no other leads and she was my only option. I hoped that Chris hadn’t done something to her and I was opening up an old wound by asking. Without saying another word, I turned around and started walking in her direction.

“Of course, if you can’t find Chris,

you can call me anytime you want, pretty lady.” The janitor’s hoarse voice was suggestive and lewd. I ignored his suggestion and continued quickly toward Angie’s booth.

As I was passing David and Daemon, I noticed that Daemon had all but three of the toys aligned again. David was attempting to approach the table to buy me more time, but every time he took a step, Daemon’s hand shot out and held him back. I chuckled to myself at David’s panicked expression. As usual, Daemon’s face held no expression as he concentrated on his task.

I added a bounce to my step as I approached Angie’s booth. I was glad

the booth displayed jewelry, in case David couldn't distract Daemon longer. I approached the booth and threw on a wide grin and met eyes with Angie. She wore a pretty teal peasant top with a multi-colored wrap around skirt. She had on one of those belts with the little bells hanging on it that jingled when she moved. Her eyes were a warm brown and her hair was long and perfectly straight. I looked around at the jewelry she had displayed and was impressed with the detail and craftsmanship of the pieces. A bracelet with a dragonfly charm caught my eye and I picked it up to examine it more closely.

“That there is one of my favorites.” I looked up when I heard

Angie's musical voice. She had a charming air to her that set you at ease and made you feel like you had known her forever. Her eyes twinkled as she smiled at me and she pointed back to the bracelet.

“Do you know what the dragonfly symbolizes?” Her eyes met mine as she waited for a response.

I smiled and looked between the bracelet and Angie before answering. “When I was young, my mom told me that if you saw a dragonfly, it meant that your deceased relatives were checking on you, making sure you were safe. I don't know that I believe her, but she was adamant in her belief.”

Angie smiled again and picked up a few more dragonfly pieces for me to look at. “Your mom sounds like a smart woman. That is one of the meanings behind the symbol, but there are more.” She laid the pieces out of the little black square of black velvet cloth used to display the jewelry. “The dragonfly is also said to represent undying love, pure love actually.”

My thoughts instantly went to Buddy and the necklace that I had given him. Angie was right. That necklace did represent pure love to me. Even though Buddy had never returned, my love for him would always be undying. My heart ached for him and I wished that I was able to find him when I had searched for

him years ago. I'd asked my parents for his full name and information and they told me that the information had been lost years prior. Their response broke my heart at the time and continued to upset me even now. I still don't understand how they could have forgotten something as important as Buddy's full name, but maybe it really was just me that held on to his memory.

I was ripped from my thoughts by Angie's warm voice. "The dragonfly is also a symbol of power, agility and victory. I wear one almost all of the time because I am proud of myself for having endured some difficult times. Every time I feel upset about the past, I look to my necklace and remember that I survived

and I take comfort in that.” Her face fell for just a second as she remembered something painful from her past. My curiosity was piqued and I wondered if it had something to do with Chris. I had to find out, but in a way that didn’t open up any old wounds.

I continued my perusal of the different pieces she had laid out for me and nonchalantly asked, “What happened to you?” I looked up to catch her gaze and decided to confess my past in order to entice her to open up. “My roommates and I were attacked a month or so ago. It was awful. We were hospitalized and one of my friends, Annie, is still in a mental hospital due to the trauma.”

Angie's hand flew to her mouth at my confession. Her eyes became saddened and compassionate and she slowly removed her hand before responding. "I, unfortunately, trusted a man about a year ago and went on a date with him." She looked unsure if she wanted to go into more detail but finally spoke again. "Let's just say, he wouldn't take no for an answer."

I nodded my head in understanding and determined that maybe we were talking about the same person. I needed to dig a little more, but carefully.

"Yeah, I was almost raped, and Annie wasn't as fortunate as me to escape. The police are looking for him

now. Did you call the police on the guy that did that to you?"

Her facial expression looked slightly frightened and she paused before answering. "No. I...I was afraid that they wouldn't believe me and he would attack me again for reporting it." Her head started to shake back and forth in silent remorse. "I probably should have reported it anyway, but I was scared... and embarrassed." Her voice was quiet on that last word and my heart instantly broke for her. I thought about the different women who I'd known at the Center. When I was older, they would often talk to me about how long they went without reporting the abuse committed against them. Some often

blamed themselves for having not reported it when it first happened. Their confessions always touched my heart and I felt pain for them. It wasn't unusual for them to not report it due to their dependence on their abuser, or their love for their abuser. My heart tightened when I realized that even while being abused, those women never wanted to strike back at the person who hurt them.

I looked over to find David and Daemon and panicked when they were no longer at the table with the perpetual motion toys. I scanned the crowd and my muscles relaxed a bit when I saw that David had dragged Daemon over to the lava lamp table. David was intently looking at one of the lamps and his face

was misshaped and magnified by the glass of the lamp he was looking through. Daemon had an impatient expression and looked over to find me. I smiled when his eyes met mine and that seemed to calm him down. He laughed and pointed to David before shrugging his shoulders and turning back to the lamps.

Satisfied that Daemon was sufficiently distracted, my eyes returned to Angie's and I lowered my voice to make sure that nobody could hear our conversation. I had to add detail to my story in an attempt to get Angie talking. "Yeah, we called the police. The guy was actually a janitor here, but I doubt he'll show back up to work while the

police are looking for him. I, uh, love this place, so two of my friends accompanied me, just in case.”

Angie’s eyes grew wide and it appeared she made a connection with what I was saying. She was definitely hesitant to continue, but eventually asked, “What was the name of the man who hurt you and your friends?”

Perfect. Now was the time to get information.

I held her stare when I answered, “Chris. Chris Baxter.”

Angie’s hand flew to her mouth again and I saw tears prick her eyes. She turned away from me momentarily, but

then looked back with a resolute expression. "I'm glad you reported his crime. He's gotten away with too many. He was the one who...hurt me. I'm not the only one. There have been others."

My expression grew sympathetic and I reached across the table to take her hands. She pulled away for a second, but then accepted my hold. I squeezed her hands softly and said, "You can still tell the police. They know about Chris now. They will believe you. In fact, if you know other victims, you need to encourage them to come forward. I know it's hard, but he needs to pay for his crimes."

Angie nodded her head and

struggled to gain her composure. I could see emotions rapidly flicking through her eyes and I held her gaze in solidarity. Finally, she nodded her head with one curt movement and said, “You’re right. I’ll tell them. Some may not want to come forward, they would rather put the past behind them and leave it there. But I will. I’ll tell my story. He needs to be stopped.”

I smiled encouragingly at her. “Do you have any idea where he might be? Any information at all could help the police find him.”

She was thoughtful for a moment but then you could see when an idea hit her. “Yes, actually. There is a booth

around the corner from here. It's full of survivalist and camping gear. Chris was good friends with the vendor, Eric. You could ask him. He might be able to tell you."

Yes!!! A lead!!

I nodded my head at Angie and asked, "Again, we just met, but, my name is Paige. Would you like me to go with you to the police? I can call the lead detective, she's very dedicated to this investigation. She can help you."

Angie smiled shyly and shook her head. "Thank you, Paige. And my name is Angie, by the way. But no, I don't need you to come with me. I have a

close friend who will go. She's been wanting me to report Chris ever since she found out about what happened. If you could give me the detective's information, I will call her at the end of the day."

I let go of Angie's hold and looked at my phone. I read her Detective Troy's information and she wrote it down on the back of a blank receipt. Goose bumps ran down my arms and I turned to see that Daemon had approached. I put my phone down and smiled at him sweetly.

"Hey, Damsel. See anything you like?" The corner of Daemon's mouth turned up as he walked up behind me and rubbed up and down my arms.

I turned back towards the jewelry display and picked out the dragonfly bracelet I had looked at earlier. I decided to buy it and give it to Annie. If what Angie had said was true, Annie needed this symbol more than anybody else I knew. She was in the middle of a battle to recover and if I could give her anything in encouragement, I would.

Angie's eyes were glued on Daemon and her cheeks slightly reddened when I caught her staring at him. I chuckled quietly and smiled before leaning over to whisper, "Don't worry. Every woman has that reaction to him. Just don't say anything to him. We wouldn't want his head getting any bigger than it already is."

Angie laughed and nodded her head in agreement. I looked back at Daemon and he had a confused expression on his face. I turned back to Angie and held up the bracelet. "I'll take the bracelet. It's beautiful and I have a friend who could use the symbol of strength."

Angie nodded in understanding and turned to grab her small cash register. I didn't have my purse on me and I panicked when I realized I hadn't brought it along. *Crap*. I looked up at Daemon and asked, "Would you mind spotting me until we can get back to the apartment? I forgot to bring my purse."

Daemon laughed and pulled out

his wallet. He handed cash over to Angie and we quickly thanked her before leaving. We found David over at a display of antique photographs. *What the hell?!* As we approached, David turned and held up a single photo that he had found.

“Look, Paige. It’s a clown from the 1930’s. I thought maybe we could blow this up and hang it in your room.”

My jaw dropped and I think I heard a small shriek escape my lips. Daemon started to chuckle and took me under his arm. “You have a fear of clowns, Damsel? I thought you weren’t scared of anything.” One eyebrow arched over his beautiful blue eye and I

could feel my face heat from the embarrassment. I could hear David snickering and I made a mental note to smack him later for having brought up my fears in front of Daemon.

I looked between David and Daemon and then grabbed the photo from David's hand and put it back on the table. "Thanks a lot, David. I'll be sure to broadcast all of your embarrassing moments to everyone we meet as well."

We started walking down the hall towards the survivalist booth where I could hopefully get more information. I needed David to distract Daemon for me and I was getting antsy as we turned the corner and the booth came into view.

The vendor was a large man who was wearing full camouflage. He had a large beard and his skin looked worn from years of sun exposure. I saw a small display of crystal figurines and removed myself from beneath Daemon's arm before heading to the table. I shot a pointed look at David and hoped he would get the hint that I needed him to play interference once again.

David winked at me and I was instantly pleased that he was still on board with the game plan. He continued walking down the walkway but then suddenly shrieked with excitement and grabbed Daemon by the arm.

“Look, Daemon. Cat statues. Oh

my goodness, there are so many! Come help me find the ones that I need for my collection!” David began pulling on Daemon’s arm and I gave Daemon a sympathetic smile before turning my attention back the figurines. I could hear Daemon sigh in resignation and when I peeked back over my shoulder, David had succeeded in dragging Daemon to the table. I was amused as I watched him pick up one of the little cat statues and turn it over in his hands to examine it. He had a disgusted expression, while David had an overly bright smile plastered to his face. I could overhear David telling Daemon exactly what he was looking for and I was proud of him for being so specific. It would take them

at least a half hour to dig through the hundreds of statues displayed on the table and surrounding booth.

After examining the crystal figurines long enough for Daemon to become absorbed in his search for David's perfect cat, I turned and slowly made my way over the survivalist booth. Eric, the vendor, was busily polishing a graphite bow and looked up as I approached. His eyebrows shot up when he saw me, but then quickly turned down into a frown.

I started perusing the assortment of knives, canteens, hatchets and other similar camping accessories before selecting a small pocket knife that had

several blades and tool attachments.

“Can I help you, miss?” Eric’s voice was rough and he had a slight Southern drawl. His look screamed ‘backwoods’ and I was anxious to get the information I needed and get away from him.

I put the pocket knife back down on the table and looked up into Eric’s eyes. Knowing that he was a friend of Chris’, I had to be careful about what I asked as I was afraid he would recognize who I was.

I kept a small smile on my face but then acted like I knew him from somewhere else. “Yeah, hi, you’re Eric,

right. I'm a friend of Chris' and I remember seeing him out with you one day. Do you remember me? My name is..." I paused briefly before coming up with a name. "...Rebecca."

Eric eyed me curiously, but then leaned down placing his arms on the table. "Friend of Chris', huh? Well, I don't remember ya, which is weird because I don't see how I could forget a face like yours."

I quickly determined that the flirty character would work better on Eric than it had on the janitor. Once again, I took a lock of hair between my fingers and...*gasp*...twirled it. My mouth turned up into a bright smile and I peeked

through my lashes at Eric.

“Well, that’s real nice of you to say. I was wondering if you happen to know where Chris is, I haven’t seen him in a while.” I leaned into him a little so that I could keep my voice low while we talked. Eric saw that as an opportunity to stare openly at my cleavage. I winced at his brazen glare but then decided to play on his interest. I placed my hands on the table and used it as leverage to squeeze my arms together to enhance what little chest I had.

Eric’s tongue peeked out from between his lips and he slowly moved his eyes to my face. I smiled innocently at him and his lips formed a sideways

grin that actually made his face slightly more handsome. “Well, I can’t help you there, Rebecca, Chris has been M.I.A. for the past couple of weeks.” He chuckled while running his eyes back down to my assets. “Although, you won’t hear me complaining about that. Just means you’re open to give me a date.” His eyes shot back to mine again and I felt dirty just from him looking at me.

I giggled and quickly turned to peek back at David and Daemon. Luckily, their backs were to me, but I knew I needed to hurry this along before Daemon turned around looking for me. My eyes returned to Eric’s and I vomited a little in my mouth at the lewd grin stretched across his lips. I breathed in a

large breath and continued on with my flirtations.

“Oh. I don’t know about that, Chris can be a little...possessive and mean...when I see other guys.” I eyed Eric’s face for any indication he knew what Chris was doing, but his expression fell and then quickly changed to one of anger.

“Chris ever lay a hand on you?” His voice was somewhat loud when he asked me that question and I became nervous that Daemon could hear. I turned quickly again and felt better when I saw that David was intensively scrutinizing one of the statues, firmly trapping Daemon’s gaze in his direction.

I turned back to Eric and my voice was somewhat rushed as I attempted to move along our little conversation. “Um, no, he’s never hit me or anything like that. It’s just that he can be a real asshole.” A let out a small nervous giggle and then got to business. “So, you have no idea where he might be?”

Eric stood up straight again and eyes me curiously before answering. His hand reached up and stroked down his beard. “Well, I know the law is looking for him. They came by here a couple weeks ago asking about him.” He was thoughtful for a moment but eventually continued. “You know, Chris was big into survivalist training and roughing it in the woods. There’s a nature preserve

a couple miles from here that he might be hiding in, but I wouldn't go looking for him if I was you. It can get rough in those woods and I would hate for a pretty lady like you to meet up with a wild boar or other nasty critter."

A normal person might be intimidated by Eric's warning, I, however, was not. I'd grown up exploring the wetlands and woods surrounding the Center and I knew my way around a lot of different environments. What did concern me was Chris being a survivalist. Those types tended to carry around weapons and I would not be able to deal with Chris if he had access to guns.

I feigned a frightened expression in response to Eric's warning. "So, does Chris have protection against all of those scary animals? I'd hate for him to be caught unarmed if something tried to attack him." On the contrary, I would absolutely *love* it if he was caught and eaten by a wild animal, but somehow I didn't think I could end up that lucky.

Eric laughed at my concern. "Now, don't you worry, your pretty little head. Where he's probably staying, there's several shelters left out for people caught on the trails in the rain. I'm sure he'll be fine. Chris don't have no guns that I know of, but he is pretty handy with a knife."

I bet he is...

I was somewhat satisfied that Chris wouldn't be armed, but I couldn't count on that, knowing that he was hiding from the police. He may have bought a gun when he went into hiding. I had no option but to find him, and I decided that arming myself with at least some knives would be in my best interests.

I realized that I was taking longer than I had intended and I glanced back to look for Daemon and David. Daemon's back was to me and David caught my eye and shot me a look of desperation. I had a feeling Daemon's patience was wearing thin and David was running out of ways to occupy him.

I turned back to Eric. “So, where is this preserve exactly?”

Eric shook his head and responded. “Well, if you are that intent on finding him, go south on the State Road leading out of town and about twenty miles down you will see a large brown sign indicating a nature preserve on your left. It’s the closest one you’ll get to once you get out of the state parks. I’d take plenty of supplies with you, it can get pretty rough back in the Florida scrubs. The bugs are nasty and the animals are nastier.”

I nodded my head in understanding. I could easily admit that I was very adept at traversing different

terrains, but it would be out of character for my current undercover persona. I turned to check on Daemon again and when my eyes met his angry stare, I froze. *Crap!* My eyes shot to David's and he gave me an apologetic shrug.

I turned back to Eric and muttered a quick thank you before heading back in Daemon's direction. I took quick, determined steps as I approached him and he stared at me as if he knew I was up to something. When I reached him, I smiled and wrapped my arms around his waist and pulled him to me. I peeked up at him through my lashes and his face softened slightly while his mouth worked to contain the grin I knew wanted to break out.

“Thinking about camping sometime soon, Damsel?” He wrapped his strong arms around me and kissed the top of my head. Our height difference was always such a relief for me because it felt good to be small sometimes. I had to admit, part of me was starting to enjoy the feigned submissive position I’d taken to Daemon while attempting to make him believe I’d finally given up on finding Chris.

I looked up and placed a kiss on his chin, which was the only place I could reach while he was standing upright. His head came down and his lips softly took mine before he pulled away and looked at me for a response. I looked up innocently and batted my

lashes. “Nope. Just looking. You ready to get out of here? I’m a little tired and think I’m ready to go home.”

Daemon laughed before answering, “Yeah, I’m ready. I can’t take shopping with David much longer. The man has a passion for cat statues, I’ll tell you that.

My eyes went over to David’s and he gave me a large, exaggerated wink from behind Daemon’s back. I smiled at him and nodded. He’d done a good job and I was proud of my partner in crime. Daemon reached down and took my hand and the three of us headed out to return home.

Chapter Ten

We arrived at the apartment in no time and upon entering through the front doors, Daemon immediately grabbed my arm and started pulling me towards his bedroom. My eyes sought out David's, but he was too preoccupied with getting his flea market loot back to his room. Daemon's pace was sure and steady and I found myself being seated on his bed in no time at all. He remained standing in front of me and I had to crane my neck to look up at him. My eyes went to the definition of his biceps while he crossed his arms over his chest. My body instantly buzzed at the sight of him, but

my curiosity as to why he dragged me here overcame my thoughts.

Daemon was obviously attempting to hold a straight face, but I could tell a small grin was trying to break free from his lips. Once he had satisfactorily gained control over his facial expression, he said, “Damsel. Mind telling me why you were talking to the survivalist guy. Should I be worried that I’m not exactly your type?” His head slightly angled and that grin finally broke free from one corner of his mouth. It occurred to me that Daemon was being jealous and I appreciated that he handled it maturely rather than going all *nutso apeshit* like some guys I’ve seen. Daemon’s normally calm demeanor was

impressive, yet intimidating at the same time. He was like a sleeping bull, just waiting for some poor victim to cross his path, or an ambush hunter that sits quietly until you are within reach. His control over his expression and body language could be staggering and offsetting when you were confronted by him.

“You have nothing to worry about. Camouflage isn’t really my biggest turn on.” I chuckled. “I was just checking out the camping gear and pocket knives and stuff.” I laid back on the bed and rested my head on my hands. I smiled up at the beautiful man standing above me and crossed one leg over the other to get into a comfortable position.

Daemon leaned down and placed one hand on either side of my body as he held himself over me. His head came down and he placed a small, soft kiss on my lips before pulling up to smile at me. I wanted nothing more than to reach up and pull him down on top of me, but I knew he would resist until he'd said whatever it was he wanted to say to me.

“I didn’t imagine you as the camping type. Want to give me a better explanation?” After asking me that question, his head came down again but instead of touching his mouth to mine, those warm, soft lips started working their way down my neck. My body arched up to him as he lightly nipped at my skin and I gasped when his teeth

closed over my earlobe.

“I...I’m not sure...how...I’m supposed to think...*fuck*...while you are doing that.” My arms came up to push him away and he chuckled before crawling up on the bed to lay beside me. He laid on his side and his hand started traveling up my thigh, pulling the hem of my dress farther up towards my torso. Those traitorous bumps instantly speckled my skin and his grip tightened around my leg when he noticed. I flinched at his sudden rough grip. He let go and started running his fingertips up farther towards the apex of my thighs.

His face moved down until it was just touching mine. “Okay, Damsel, I’ll

stop, but you need to start talking. I know you weren't shopping for new pocket knives and tents."

My mind raced with what I could say to divert him from my true reason for speaking with Eric. If I've learned anything about Daemon, it's that he will immediately stop a conversation if it turns around to a discussion of him; so that's what I did.

"Well, I thought maybe you would like something from the booth. You still have not told me much about yourself, so I guess I just have to guess at what things you might like. So tell me, Daemon, are you much of a camper?"

His body moved away from mine and he laid down on his back and rubbed his hand over his face. Now that I had brought up the subject of his past, or even current life, he should be quick to change the subject. I was proud of myself for having at least figured out that one little trick to dealing with Daemon. The man did not want to give up much and getting any information was like pulling teeth.

He stared at the ceiling for a moment and I was surprised when he went back up on one arm and leaned over to look into my eyes. "I know I haven't been very open with you about my past. But, trust me, beautiful, it's not a happy story and it would only burden

you to know. You have enough to worry about right now without adding my sad tale on the pile.”

I held his stare and I could have let it go, but damn if I wasn't curious. “Actually, I would like to know where you come from. I know you were in foster care, but that's it. What happened when you got out, how did you end up where you are now?”

He closed his eyes and then opened them again. “Paige, I want to tell you everything, but it's not something I talk about much. When I ran away from the system, I was homeless for about a year. I fought, I stole, I drank myself into oblivion on most nights, and there's a lot

more I can't remember. If it wasn't for... a friend...helping me out, I wouldn't be where I am today. Hell, I don't know that I would even be alive anymore. But, when I turned seventeen, something happened, I had purpose again and luckily, there were people who could help me.”

I searched his face and wondered why he always remained so vague when discussing this subject. Was he afraid I would stop liking him or become disgusted with him? I didn't think there was anything he could say to me that would cause either of those things to happen. But my heart did break for him. I couldn't imagine seventeen year old Daemon fighting to survive. The thought

scared me and I was glad he had someone who could remove him from all that and set him on the right path. But who?

“Who helped you? Who was the friend that pulled you off the streets? If you were raised in foster care, who did you know? Was it one of your former foster parents?” The questions were spilling from my lips faster than even I could keep up with. I was desperate for any information he would give me about himself. I wanted so badly to fall for this beautiful man and sometimes I felt like I was kept at a safe distance while he was helping himself to everything about me.

Daemon let out a resigned sigh and

shook his head in silent objection. “Damsel, some day, I hope to tell you all there is to know about me. But today is not that day. I will tell you that the people who helped me probably saved my life. They were friends of my mother, good people, and they found a place for me to stay. The man I went to live with was an old Marine who whipped my scrawny ass into shape pretty quick. He owned one of the bars that is now mine and when he died, he gave it to me. I built up from there, obviously, but that is how I came to be where I am now. If it hadn’t been for them, I don’t know that I would be here right now, staring at the most frustratingly beautiful woman I have ever seen.”

I smiled at his flattery, but it wouldn't stop me for digging for more information. "I thought your parents died when you were young. How did you know any of their friends? And why did those friends let you go into foster care in the first place?"

Daemon's face lost its amused expression and momentarily became hard before changing back to a blank state. He moved away from me again and started to sit up. He turned his body as if removing himself from the bed and I reached out and grabbed his arm to stop him.

"Daemon. Tell me more about yourself. Please stop shutting me out."

He pulled his arm from my grasp and pushed himself off the bed. While walking around the large bed, his body was held rigidly and he seemed to struggle with what he should and should not say. When he finally reached the foot of the bed, he stopped. He didn't turn back to look at me and his gaze was trained down to the floor. "I can't tell you, Paige. Let's just leave it at that."

My body instantly sat up and anger coursed through my system. I could not understand why he refused to tell me anything. "Why the hell not, Daemon?! It's not like there's anybody here to stop you. If you think I'll stop liking you because of whatever happened years ago, I won't. Just fucking tell me and

stop this bullshit enigmatic act you have going on. It's not fair for you to ask me to give all of myself to you and then hold out when I ask about where you come from!"

I looked down to see that Daemon was clenching and unclenching his fists. He was quiet for a moment, but then immediately began moving towards the bedroom door. When he reached the door, his hand gripped the handle, but he paused. He continued training his gaze away from me when he said, "In time, Damsel, you will know everything. But not here, and not now."

I'd reached a boiling point. This was so unfair! "Well, then, fuck you,

Daemon. From now on, don't fucking ask another thing from me until you are ready to give up information about yourself. This entire situation is so ridiculously one sided. I don't understand how you can't see that. All I want is to know you, to fall in love with you..."

His head fell at those words and I thought I'd finally gotten to him; but no, he simply pushed the handle on the door and let himself out of the bedroom. He closed the door behind him and when I heard the little click of the latch catching, I threw myself down on the bed and smacked at the tears that were pricking at my eyes. I was so sick and tired of being left in the dark with him.

My body rolled over into a semi-fetal position and I screamed into the mattress, letting out all of my frustrations. I had no idea why I was crying and why his refusal was affecting me as much as it was, but I didn't stop letting it all out. I needed the torrent of emotions to leave my body and my mind. I felt like a small child throwing a fit, but it didn't matter. All of this was too much for me; Chris, Daemon, Annie, the investigation, my 'captivity', all of it! I cried until my eyes burned from the lack of moisture left to form tears. When my body started to calm, I stared at the walls, absolutely absorbed in feeling sorry for myself, for the loss of my control, for the chaotic state that my life

had become. I'm not sure when my body grew tired enough to fall into sleep, but it did, and I was soon wrapped in a blanket of slumber so deep, memories that were better left unknown, started to resurface.

~

It was a hot summer day at the Center. As usual, I was outside playing in the backyard, chasing butterflies that flittered about the wildflowers spread throughout the grassy fields. Even though it was early morning, the sun was already beating down on my small body and my skin was sticky from perspiration. I was playing by myself this morning because Buddy had to

take part in another group session with the other children. He had been at the Center for a month now and, normally, he was the best friend I could ever have. But on days like this, when he had to sit down and talk to people about his life before he got here, I'd learned to avoid him as best I could. He always returned from those sessions full of anger. At first, I thought his anger was directed at me, but then I saw him yelling at another kid in the playroom and I realized he was just angry in general.

On this particular day, I was hiding out amongst the grasses hoping that if he came looking for me, I would be hidden in the yard and he would go

somewhere else so I didn't have to deal with him. I loved Buddy with all my heart, but I didn't know how to help him when he was mad. I'd asked Momma about what to do, and Momma just told me to be understanding, that he was going through a lot for such a young age. I tried to be understanding like Momma asked, but on days like this, Buddy would sometimes hurt me without meaning to. He always apologized after hurting me, and would tend to any scrapes or other wounds that he caused, but it wasn't enough that he said he was sorry. It always hurt not only my body, but my feelings when he struck out at me.

Buddy's behavior only grew

worse over the weeks that he was here and I wanted to tell Momma about what he was doing. I didn't though because I was afraid to get Buddy in trouble. I was afraid Momma would tell me I wasn't allowed to play with him any longer and that would break my heart more than anything he could do to me.

While I was chasing a large orange butterfly through the grasses, I heard the back door slam open and then closed. I hunched down to the ground and the grasses and weeds tickled at my legs as I attempted to see who had come outside. Buddy walked around the large camphor trees by the back door and I quickly glanced around to see if there was somewhere better

that I could hide. I wasn't 'afraid' of Buddy, but I didn't feel like dealing with his sour attitude either.

I crouched lower in the grasses and my knees ground into the dirt. I could feel small pebbles digging into my skin, but I didn't dare move in case Buddy saw me. I should have known he would be smart enough to climb one of the camphor trees to look out over the yard. The branches of those trees were thick enough that he could go pretty high without having to worry about the limbs not holding his weight. When Buddy spotted me his hand went to his mouth as he called out.

“Why are you hiding, Paige?”

Didn't you know that I would just find you? We hide in the grass together all the time. It's not like I wouldn't think to look for you."

My breath came up out in a huff, and I was so close to the ground that dust billowed up from the release of air. Some of the dust got in my face and it caused my eyes to water. I pushed myself up from the ground and rubbed at my eyes to try and remove the dust particles. While I was momentarily blinded, Buddy climbed down from the tree and ran over to where I was kneeling. When he approached me, I pulled my hands away from my eyes to find an angry scowl plastered across his face. His little brows were furrowed

down the middle and his stare gave away the fact that he was directing his anger at me.

I pushed myself up into a standing position but kept my distance from Buddy. He took a step towards me and, instinctually, I took a step back to maintain the space between us.

“So, why you hiding, Paige? Did I do something to upset you? Are you mad that you couldn’t be part of group today? ‘Cause you shouldn’t be. That group is boring and they make you talk about stuff, and I HATE it.”

His pace picked up as he was talking and eventually he caught up to

me. My little legs were shaking, but I stood my ground. If I showed any fear or tried to run away, he would just follow me and do something to make me cry.

I held his stare as I said, “I wasn’t hiding, Buddy. I was looking for bugs in the grass and chasing butterflies. And I don’t care that I don’t get to be in the group. Momma explained that it’s not for me. I’m sorry that you have to go. You’re always mean when you get back from there.” I crossed my little arms over my chest and glared at him. His face softened and his mouth curled up into a slight grin.

“Don’t call me mean, Paige. I’m the best friend you have. It’s not nice to say bad things about me. Now come on, let’s go climb trees. I bet I can go higher than you today.”

I eyed him suspiciously, but then shrugged my shoulders and followed him over to the trees. As usual, Buddy climbed up first and reached down to pull me into the apex of the tree branches. We went our separate directions to see who could go higher. I was smaller than Buddy and I was able to climb the thinner branches at the top better than he could. When I had reached the highest point I could, I looked down at Buddy to find him once again scowling at me.

“Ha! I beat you, Buddy. It has to be embarrassing to be beat by a girl!” I stuck my tongue out at him and started my climb back down. Buddy started climbing down on his side as well and eventually made his way over to the low lying branch where we usually hung out most days. I continued gloating about having won the climbing contest and Buddy crossed his arms over his chest.

“Shut up, Paige. You only won because you’re smaller. It doesn’t make you any better than me.” His face started turning red with his anger and I stop my gloating when I noticed.

I turned to him and put my hand

on his shoulder to apologize when he suddenly struck out at me and pushed me backwards. I lost my balance on the branch from the hit and the backs of my legs scraped against the rough bark as I fell off. My body hit the ground with a painful thump and the breath was knocked out of me. I panicked when I couldn't breathe and I my eyes opened to see Buddy looking down from the branch.

“Paige!” Buddy quickly climbed down from the tree and ran over to me. I continued struggling for air and I was starting to breath in small gasps. I could feel blood seeping from the scrapes on my legs. Buddy went down on both knees and started pulling me by

the shoulders into a sitting position. Once I was upright, my breathing became easier while tears flowed from my eyes from the shock. The back of my legs stung and I bent my knees to pull my legs up to my chest. I reached down to inspect the back of my legs and when I pulled my hand back it was stained pink from the bleeding.

Buddy looked at my hand and then quickly ran into The Center. He came running out a few minutes later with the first aid kit and a damp cloth. He rolled me over when he reached me and started wiping the dirt and blood from my legs. He applied antiseptic and bandages to the scrapes and stood up. His hand came down to pull me into a

standing position.

My eyes wouldn't stop watering and Buddy's face went from concerned to angry again. He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me back and forth, causing me to cry harder. "The bandage is on, Paige, you can stop crying now."

His hand came up and slapped across my face. My skin burned from where he had struck me and I started to cry harder. Buddy's face dropped and he quickly pulled me into a hug. "I'm sorry, Paige. I'm sorry. Please stop crying. I don't know why I did that. You were making me mad, and I wanted you to stop crying...I'm sorry...please stop

crying.”

I jerked away from Buddy and wiped at my tears. I was embarrassed, and mad, and hurting and the fact that he was apologizing didn't make it any better. My face stung and my legs hurt and all I wanted was to run as far away from him as I could. I turned my little body away from him and tried to stop crying. I could feel him come up behind me and I flinched when his arms came around to pull me into another hug.

“I'm sorry, Paige. Please forgive me. I was just mad. I just get SO mad sometimes and I do things and I'm sorry. Please...please, stop crying. Please?”

I tried to pull from his embrace but he held me to him. The back door flew open and Momma gasped when she saw us. Buddy pulled me closer to whisper in my ear.

“Please don’t say anything, Paige. Please? I don’t want to get in trouble with your Momma and if you say something, she won’t let me play with you anymore. You’re my best friend, Paige. You can’t say anything.” His voice was panicked and he was speaking so fast, I could barely understand what he was saying to me.

Momma ran up to us and pulled me from Buddy when she saw my face. “Paige? Baby? What happened? Why is

your face red?" She turned me around to inspect me and noticed the scrapes along the backs of my legs. She gasped again and then turned me back to face her. "Paige, tell me what happened." Momma's voice was stern and her eyes flicked to Buddy quickly before returning to my face.

I couldn't look her in the eyes and lie to her, so I looked at the ground. "Nothing, Momma. Nothing happened. Well...I fell while I was climbing and it scraped up my legs, but that's all. I cried because it hurt."

Momma's finger reached over and she lifted my face to hers by my chin. "Paige Stone, are you telling me

the truth? Are you sure you fell, or did something else happen?"

I could sense Buddy behind me and I was worried that if I told the truth, Momma wouldn't let us play together anymore. My eyes looked anywhere but in Momma's eyes. "Yes Momma. I'm sure." I felt so bad for lying to her, but losing Buddy wasn't something I was willing to risk.

Momma's eyes flicked between Buddy and me and she finally wrapped her arm around my shoulder and started leading me back inside. "Well, I want both of you to come inside for the rest of the day. Paige, you need to get cleaned up and Buddy, you have

homework you need to get started on.”

Buddy groaned from behind us as Momma walked us into the Center. She pointed Buddy towards the recreation room and pulled me into the bathroom near the kitchen. Momma re-cleaned all of the scrapes on my legs and placed large bandages over the skin. My mind played over the events of this morning and I trembled slightly at the thought of what Buddy had done to me. Pushing me out of the tree was probably an accident, but hitting me in the face? I couldn't understand why he would think hitting me would make me stop crying. He didn't make sense.

While Momma was finishing up

her nursing, she took the opportunity to speak to me privately. “Paige Stone, I need you to tell me the truth about what happened. Your face is red and you’re all dirty and banged up. I don’t think this was an accident.”

My eyes looked anywhere but in Momma’s and I bit down on my lip to keep from saying anything about what happened. I let out a deep breath and decided to protect my friend. “It was an accident, Momma. I promise.”

Momma’s eyes were filled with disappointment as she turned to pack up the first aid supplies. I didn’t like Momma being unhappy and I decided to avoid Buddy for the rest of the day

so nothing else would happen. He would be fine again by tomorrow but I needed to stay away from him on his group days. I trusted Buddy for the most part, but he frightened me when he got mad. On the days they made him talk about himself, he acted so differently than the playful boy I knew.

Momma finished up and instructed me to go play in the recreation room. I knew Buddy was in there and I wanted to avoid him. I looked up at Momma and flashed her my puppy dog look. "Momma, can I go in the library and read instead?"

Momma looked at me funny but then nodded her head. I quickly smiled

at her and then scooted along to the other end of the building. I entered the library and inhaled deeply. The scent of old books was one of my favorites and the other children always made fun of me for my love of reading. I didn't care, though. Those kids had no idea what they were missing because they never wanted to read. I was young to be reading, but Daddy had made sure to start teaching me when I was old enough to understand how to turn the pages.

I ran to the children's bookshelves and picked out several that I hadn't had a chance to read yet. After making my selections, I crawled up the large, cream colored papasan chair,

curled up and dove into the first story. I'd just finished the first page when my skin prickled and I felt somebody enter the room. I instantly knew it was Buddy and I was nervous and slightly fearful to be alone with him. I didn't turn to look at him and I attempted to pretend that I was too engrossed in my book.

“Paige.” He walked over to where I was sitting while I continued training my eyes on my book. “Paige? Look at me, Paige.” His hand came out and he grabbed onto my shoulder and shook me to get my attention. “Paige... Paige, look at me, Paige...”

“Paige! Dammit, Paige, wake up and look at me. Paige!”

My body shot upward and I felt a large hand gripping my shoulder. I flinched away from the grasp and bent my knees to hold my legs to my body. It was an instant defensive position, but I couldn't stop myself from moving into it. I opened my eyes and Daemon sat beside me, a concerned expression played across his features and his eyes held mine with such intensity, I closed my eyes again to break the stare.

“Paige? What's wrong? Talk to me. I came to check on you and you were crying in your sleep.”

I opened my eyes and blinked them to clear the hazy coating. Once I was able to focus, I looked over into Daemon's face and instantly reached my arms out to pull him to me. His voice was soft and comforting as he whispered random things in an attempt to console me. I was suddenly enveloped in his strong arms and I sank further into him. My heart started to calm down and my breathing slowed while his body heat and scent soothed away my fears. He was silent while he placed kisses on the top of my head and rocked me gently back and forth. His hand came up to smooth down my hair before he pulled me from him to look in my eyes.

“Do you want to talk about it? I

know you were dreaming, Damsel. You said Buddy's name a couple of times. What was the dream about?" His eyes searched mine and I started to cry again. I didn't know what that dream was about. I didn't remember Buddy ever being that mean. I know that he pushed me around some, but hit me? It can't be. Buddy would have never done that.

I shook my head to will away the sudden memory but then the words just started spilling out. Every word I said brought the memory closer to me, made it more real and gave it weight in the confines of my subconscious. As I detailed every part to Daemon, the memory wrapped itself firmly around me and I realized, it was true. Words, and

sounds, and meanings kept pouring out of me and no matter how much I wanted to stop the deluge from escaping, it just kept coming. By the time I was finished and I had told Daemon about the dream, the memory was firmly cemented within my head. It did happen. There were things I didn't remember, there were parts of my life I didn't want to know. What else had I forgotten that would be brought back to me when I was at my most vulnerable?

“...I was so afraid of him. That's what I remember most. But I don't understand. I loved him. He was my best friend. He would have never hurt me like that...” I was rambling, desperately trying to make sense of this long

forgotten moment.

Daemon sat stock still and remained silent as I spoke. He never flinched, never moved, just looked at me with an unreadable expression. His eyes never left mine while I talked, he was always right there with me, but he didn't give away what he was thinking or feeling. My speech finally slowed and there were no more words to be spoken. I had laid it out fully for him to absorb and I looked to him for any thought, idea or interpretation he could offer as to why my mind was suddenly presenting me with this information.

“So, what do you think, Daemon? Have I lost it to only just now remember

this? I mean, I'm probably making this a bigger deal than it needs to be, right? Kids do things like that to each other." As I attempted to convince him, I was actually attempting to convince myself. "It's normal. Yeah, it was normal."

My head continued to shake in objection to my ill placed fear. This whole thing was ridiculous and I was inwardly chiding myself for having freaked out like I did. Of course, children were sometimes cruel. It's been like that since the beginning of time. So what if one solitary memory of my childhood escaped me? I was a fool for having allowed it to affect me as harshly as it did.

After a few quiet minutes, Daemon finally spoke. "Damsel, is there anything else about Buddy you might not be remembering? Maybe you should talk to your parents. I'm willing to accompany you if you want to talk to them." His face was so sad, guilty even, and I felt bad for having dumped my childhood problems in his lap.

My head nodded in response to his question. Talking to my parents would be a good idea. Maybe they could shed some more light on the memory that suddenly assaulted my dream world. Hopefully they could tell me that my mind was playing tricks on me and nothing like that had ever occurred between Buddy and me. I pulled away

from Daemon and was very unladylike at wiping away at my nose from the latest tear filled episode.

“Yeah, we can go tomorrow, if that’s okay. First thing in the morning. I want...no, I need, to get this figured out. I mean, I’m sure it’s nothing. I feel like such a fucking idiot for even letting that bullshit dream get to me.”

My mood was rapidly changing from one of sorrow to one of anger. I was angry at so many things and I think that one fucked up emotion was culminating itself inside of me to a point where it was causing false recollections. It was almost as if the place within me that held my anger was too small and the

emotion leaked into the parts of me that contained my most treasured memories.

I huffed out a breath of air and started scooting my way to the edge of the bed. Daemon's hand grasped around my arm holding me in place and I turned my head to look at him. He looked sad. There was no other word to describe it. For the most part, his expression was blank, except for his eyes which were absolutely flooded in melancholy.

I was too angry to react to his odd expression. I simply removed his hand from my arm and continued to push myself up off the bed. As my feet carried me over to the bathroom, I turned to look over my shoulder at him. "I'm getting a

shower.”

Chapter Eleven

The tile floor in the bathroom was cool on my bare feet as I padded over to the shower. Flicking the hot water on, I moved to the side and took off my t-shirt and underwear. The water heated up quickly and I stepped in and let the liquid sooth the knots in my neck and back. The stress of the past two months was finally getting to me and I needed to bring everything back under control. I felt like I was losing my grasp on everything. Hell, I was even losing my grasp on the memories of my past.

My head fell back under the spray

of the water and it soaked my hair. My eyes were shut against the rivulets of water running down my face. Eventually, I lifted my head to let the water travel down my back and when I rubbed it from my eyes, I opened them to find Daemon standing in front of me. He was completely naked and his eyes seared into mine. I gasped from the intensity of his gaze and my body jumped in reaction to my surprise. Every defined muscle on his body was tense and his hands were clenched into fists. Water continued pouring down my body and I couldn't will myself to speak. I was frozen in place staring at what was probably the most powerful person I had ever known. Both physically and mentally, Daemon

had absolute command over, not only himself, but everything around him. He demanded respect whenever he entered a room and he carried himself in such a way that the potential threat within him did not go unnoticed. Yet, for as hard and authoritative as he was, he could still be soft and compassionate. There was this playful, boyish side to him that lit the entire room around him and all that stood nearby.

With one long stride he moved under the spray of the water with me. The water ran down his tanned skin, leaving little drops that would eventually slide along the outline of his perfect lips, his broad chest and down along the muscles of his abdomen. My

body trembled at his proximity and I jumped at the sudden sound of his voice.

“Take it out on me, Paige.”

My brows pulled together in confusion at his request and he stepped closer before explaining. He was barely brushing up against me when he said, “Your anger, your frustration, your pain...take it out on me. Let me be your outlet.”

I was knocked back by his words. What did he want me to do? I didn't understand the strange request he was making and I remained quiet as I tried to make sense of what he was saying. His close proximity put me at eye level with

his smooth chest and I had to look up to catch his eyes.

“I don’t understand what you want me to do, Daemon. Do you want me to fight you? Somehow I think that could be dangerous while we are both naked and soaking wet in the shower.” My voice was husky and raw and my body was absolutely on fire for him. Just staring at the water as it streamed along the ridges of his muscular body was igniting within me such desire, that the anger and frustration that had earlier consumed me was being smothered and extinguished.

Daemon reached down, grabbed my hands and placed them flat against his rock hard chest. I could feel the

strong, rhythmic beat of his heart. He held my hands in place as he said, “Scream at me, hit me, scratch me, kick me, fuck me...it doesn’t matter as long as I can help take some of that pain and frustration out of you. I don’t care what you do to me, Paige, just as long as you’re with me. Use me anyway you need, just never leave.” He leaned down to place a kiss on the top of my head. His forehead rested on mine when he continued. “Promise me, Paige, that you’ll never let me go. I don’t think I could survive it.”

My eyes closed at Daemon’s words and I moved my head to place it on his chest between my hands. Among the emotions that have ravaged my

system for the past few weeks, was a growing love for the man who wanted nothing more but to rescue me from myself. I couldn't understand how he understood me as well as he did within the short amount of time that we've known each other. He had managed to tear down every wall that I had, and yet, I still knew nothing about him. With my love came frustration and fury at his continued mystery. My mind was torn between wanting to let go and give him all that I had and continuing to keep my distance until he met me somewhere in the middle. Tears pricked at my eyes again from my confusion and my knees buckled beneath me. I kneeled on the floor of the shower and Daemon moved

with me to the ground.

I opened my eyes to find him kneeling in front of me. His eyes searched my face for any response to what he said. I didn't know if he could tell the difference between the tears falling from my eyes and the water dropping from the shower head. He grabbed my hands and once again placed them over his heart.

“Please, Damsel. Let me take on some of the burden you carry. Open up to me and let me in so that I can relieve you of your nightmares.” His voice carried the sound of a person on the verge of panic. His body was still and he held my hands to him like he feared I would try

to run. I didn't know what to say to him, didn't know how to give him what he wanted.

“What do you want me to say, Daemon? I don't know how to let you help me. You're not the source of my anger and frustration.” I shook my head in silent objection to his request. “I should be apologizing to you for dragging you into the fucked up mess that has become my life, not taking out my pain and frustration on you. I don't know what you want me to do.”

“Love me, Paige. Trust me. Take everything that is tearing you up and turn it into something tangible, give me everything you can...” His finger came

up under my chin to lift my face to his.
“...that’s what I want you to do.”

His mouth suddenly pressed down on mine and I parted my lips to allow him entrance. His tongue slipped along mine and the force of his kiss pressed my lips against my teeth. The slight pain was welcome. His hands traveled up along my body and found their way to my breasts. His fingers delicately pulled at the taut tips until my chest was pressing into him for more contact. He grabbed my hips suddenly and pulled me onto his lap. I could feel his hard length pressing between the apex of my thighs and I let out a small cry at the sensation. His fingers dug into my skin as I slid my hands along the delicious wetness of his

skin. His smooth skin was such a contrast to the rigidity of the muscles beneath and we moved against each other as if we couldn't get close enough to be satisfied.

There was no patience in this encounter, no teasing or tempting, just a desperate need to be near each other, within each other. He grasped at my hips again so that he could lift me and spear into me with no apologies for his roughness and speed. My head fell back and I cried out from the sudden fullness within me and my body started riding him without shame or hesitancy. With every rotation of my hips he drove deeper into my core, taking away the pain, and anger and frustration I had

been bottling up inside me since we met. I lost myself in the sensation of his force and I felt those emotions that I could no longer contain turn into a release so violent, it was like a volcano coming alive again after spending centuries dormant. That familiar tingle started within my core and swiftly grew into an explosion that could easily tear me apart from its intensity. It came on so fast and so hard that I screamed out my release. My body continued to drive him even deeper than I'd felt him go before.

“Fuck....Paige....you feel so fucking amazing.” His fingers dug into my skin as he allowed me to use his body to chase off every last bit of the aggravation and infuriation I carried

within me.

My body momentarily slowed after reaching my peak, but when I opened my eyes to find his heated glare taking in every last inch of my body, I sped up my rhythm again. My hands moved into his hair and I pulled his mouth to mine. Daemon maneuvered our bodies so that I was laid out across the shower floor and he pounded into me.

An orgasm built within my body again and it shot through me like lightning. As I screamed out my pleasure, his mouth found mine and I felt him thrust deeper and faster until he joined me with his release. He pushed in one final time and the grip of his fingers

on my hips caused a fantastic pain on my skin. The water continued to beat down on us and my fingers slid around the sides of his abdomen. I pulled him to me, holding him still against my body as our mouths moved in a continued effort to devour each other. Once our breathing had slowed and my heart no longer pounded at the walls of my chest, Daemon broke from our kiss.

He lifted his head so he could look down into my eyes. The corner of his mouth quirked up and one of his dimples appeared on his cheek. A small chuckle escaped him before he said, “Feel better?”

Oddly, yes. I did feel better.

Rather than wallowing in angst and self-pity, I was now sated and languid. I was floating on a dopamine wave and my cares and concerns ran down the drain along with the now tepid water of the shower.

I cleared my throat and started to answer him but he placed a finger over my mouth to silence me.

“You don’t need to answer that. I can tell just how much better you are feeling by the look on that beautiful face of yours.”

His mouth broke into a full watt smile and he started pushing himself off the ground. He stood above me before

reaching down to pick me up and cradle me to him. My hand barely had time to reach out and flick the water off as he carried me out of the shower. He placed me on my feet next to the bathroom closet and pulled out a large towel to wrap around me. His hands moved the towel over me until I was sufficiently dry and he turned the towel on himself. Dropping the towel on the ground, he scooped me up again and carried me into his room to lay me down on his bed. He crawled in beside me and pulled me so close that I was practically on top of him.

His voice was barely a whisper as he said, "From now on, when you're mad, can we just skip the walking away

part and go straight to the working it out part?”

A chuckle escaped me before I said, “I wasn’t walking away because I was mad at you.”

He kissed the top of my head. “I know, but I kind of really like the working it out part. It really doesn’t matter why you’re mad.”

This time a laugh burst out of me and it felt so good to smile. I nodded my head in agreement before saying, “Okay. We’ll try it your way next time.”

Daemon’s hand smoothed down my hair as he said, “Can’t wait.” I playfully smacked at him in response

and for the first time in a long time I fell asleep with a grin on my face and joy in my heart.

~

“So, do you think the dream was a real memory, or just your subconscious screwing with you?”

David sat on the bed in the guest bedroom where I continued to keep my clothes and other personal effects. I was getting ready to go to my parents place with Daemon and, as usual, David followed me. When it came to nudity, David knew no bounds and I'd gotten used to having to dress in closets to keep from giving him a free show.

“I’m not sure. It felt real, but I honestly don’t remember Buddy ever being that cruel. I mean, sure, he was moody at times, but he never purposely hurt me. He picked on me and pushed me around, but I just can’t remember him ever hitting me.”

David nodded as I talked. I was excited yet nervous to talk to my parents about Buddy and find out what they remembered, if anything. I hoped they would tell me that the dream wasn’t real, that it was just a nightmare brought on by the stress from the past couple of months.

“What will you do if they tell you that the dream was real?”

I was in the process of applying mascara when he asked me that question. My hand stilled while I thought about what I would do if that were the case. I knew it was normal for people to have false and spotty memories of their childhood, but I couldn't believe I would forget something as significant as that.

I looked over myself in the full length mirror and nodded approval at my choice of black shorts and a royal blue v-neck t-shirt. I topped the outfit off with a pair of black Converse and 'barely there' socks. My legs looked shapely and cute and my hair was pulled up into a loose ponytail.

Turning to look at David, I shrugged my shoulders and said, “I’m probably making a bigger deal about this than I should. It’s ridiculous actually. I’m sure my parents will tell me I’m nuts and that will be that.”

David nodded in agreement and I turned to walk out the bedroom door.

Daemon was standing on the balcony when I entered the living room. With the curtains blocking his view of the city, I wondered why he still spent so much time standing out there.

He moved to come inside when he saw me and closed the door behind him as he stepped into the living room. His

eyes traveled over my body and a slight smile played on his lips. I eyed him curiously and angled my head in question.

His smile brightened before he said, “You look so young and innocent. I almost feel sleazy for thinking about what I want to do to you right now.” His feet carried him to me with a quickness and before I could react, I was swept up in his arms, pulled tightly against him and being spun around. I’m not sure what it was about last night that suddenly tore down all my barriers, but I was completely open to him now and thoroughly engrossed in the love that I had for him.

I heard a loud sigh behind me. Daemon and I looked over to find a weepy eyed David standing off to the side of the room. He waved us off with his hand when he said, “Oh. Don’t mind me. That’s probably just the sweetest thing I’ve ever seen.” He made a little choking sound as if he was tearing up. “I’m just so proud of my little Paige.”

I rolled my eyes and smiled wide while Daemon’s face took on a somewhat confused expression.

“Trust me, Daemon, you don’t want to know.” I laughed it off and grabbed Daemon by the hand to drag him to the front door. He let go of me to walk back and grab his keys and my phone

started ringing from my bag. I pulled my bag from my shoulder and had to fish around to find the ringing device. Finally wrapping my hands around it, I pulled it from the bag and checked the caller I.D. I didn't recognize the number and considered letting it go to voicemail. My curiosity got the best of me and I answered just in time.

“Hello, may I speak with Paige Stone please.” The female voice on the other end of the phone had a slight southern accent and the pitch made her sound cute and childlike.

“This is Paige.”

“Hi Paige. My name is Jessica

Carter. I'm one of Annie's doctors and she has asked me to get in touch with you. She would like to see you. Would you be available to come by sometime in the next couple of days?"

My jaw dropped and my face must have given away my shock. Both Daemon and David took steps towards me to find out what was causing my reaction. I shook myself out of it and answered. "I can be there in thirty minutes. Will that work?"

Dr. Carter laughed kindly and said, "Of course. Annie will be relieved to know that you are coming."

I hung up the phone without even

saying goodbye. I would have to apologize for that if I spoke to Dr. Carter again, but, at that moment, I was in too much of a rush to worry about manners. I looked to Daemon. “That was Annie’s hospital, she wants to see me.”

David gasped and Daemon turned to grab his wallet and keys. I looked to David. “Are you going to come with us?”

David nodded his head and quickly traveled across the room towards me. Daemon walked over and opened the front door. We were heading out the door when I suddenly remembered something and said, “Hold up. I need to get something.”

I ran back to the guest room and threw open one of the bureau drawers. Inside sat the dragonfly bracelet I had purchased from Angie at the flea market. I'd found a small box to put it in after I bought it and I was excited that I could finally give it to Annie. I shoved the box into my bag and walked back to David and Daemon.

The trip to Annie's hospital was silent except for music playing softly through the vehicle's speakers. Personally, I was excited to see Annie again, but I was nervous at the same time. I could tell David was also feeling anxious about this reunion. I wasn't sure if Annie would want to see David as well, so when we arrived the hospital I

asked him to wait with Daemon while I went in to see her first.

The building was a large, five story facility. Mirrored windows surrounded the outside and the sun shown off the glass causing a brilliant light to engulf the top floors. We walked through the large glass doors in front and entered into a crisp, white waiting area. Soft, soothing music played from the speakers and there was a large rounded reception desk directly in front of us. A waiting area, consisting of blue high back chairs was to our right and on our left were some vending machines and a coffee machine. Instinct took over almost immediately and I found myself traveling in the direction of that machine. Daemon

grabbed my arm and dragged me back in the direction of the reception desk.

He chuckled when he said, “Let’s check in first, Damsel, then we’ll get you your fix.”

We approached the desk and a silver-haired, elderly woman looked up from her computer monitor. Her face was lined with wrinkles, but the placement of those lines on her face made you realize they were from years of smiling. The skin crinkled around her eyes and her bright grin was infectious. She wore a silk button up coral shirt that tied at the top and her hair was pulled back into a simple bun.

“Hello. Can I help you three?”

I couldn't help but smile back at her. She reminded me of someone's grandmother, the type that would have milk and cookies waiting for you every time you visit. “Hi, my name is Paige Stone. Dr. Carter called me a little bit ago and told me that my friend, Annie Marks, is waiting to see me.

“Ah, yes, Dr. Carter called up to let me know we were expecting you.” She picked up the phone on the desk. “I'll just let her know you are here. You can take a seat over there. You are welcome to coffee or water while you wait.” She smiled again and then was busily dialing a number. She didn't have

to ask me twice about coffee and once again and I was headed in the direction of the machine.

I grabbed one of the little Styrofoam cups and started putting together my usual mixture of creamer and sugar. I poured in the hot, black liquid and brought it to my lips for my first sip. As soon as the coffee hit my tongue, I was instantly energized from the refreshment. I momentarily pondered if my addiction was a problem. I imagined myself standing before a crowd of people, confessing to my love of all things java. *“Hello. My name is Paige and I’m addicted to coffee.”* I chuckled at the thought and then took a seat by Daemon and David.

Within a few minutes, a short, black haired woman came walking out of some double doors by the reception desk. She wore a white lab coat and her heels clicked along the tiled floors as she walked. She turned in our direction and a kind smile played across her face when she saw us. Assuming she was Dr. Carter, I stood up and met her halfway through the reception area.

She reached out and shook my hand. “You must be Paige. It’s nice to meet you. Annie has told me a lot about you.”

I nodded my head in response and it felt awkward not to be able to return the sentiment. I haven’t spoken to Annie

since the attack and I knew nothing about the doctors or nurses that cared for her in the facility.

Dr. Carter started leading me back to the double doors from which she entered and I glanced back over my shoulder. Daemon gave me an encouraging smile and David looked like he was about to pass out from his nervousness. My heart went out to David. I know how anxious he was for Annie to recover.

The halls of the facility were quiet for the most part and we were only occasionally passed by staff people as they came and went from the patient's rooms lining the right side of the hall. I

looked around the facility as we walked and Dr. Carter surprised me when she suddenly spoke.

“I’m glad you were able to get here as soon as you did. Due to privacy laws, I can’t give you too much information on Annie’s current condition, but I can tell you that you will be pleasantly surprised by her progress. She’s a strong woman and I think she will be ready to leave here in the next couple of weeks. She mentioned that your parents had a facility in the panhandle that she would like to be transferred to after leaving here and I was hoping you could give me their contact information before you leave today. I’d like to get in touch with them

and find out more about their facility to ensure that it will be a good fit for Annie.’

I cleared my throat and said, “Um, yeah, of course. I’ll give you my mother’s contact information and she can get you all the information you’ll need. They’ve been running the facility for a little over twenty years now and they’ve developed several different programs for their residents. Those programs are tailored to the needs of the resident, obviously, but she can explain all of that to you.”

Dr. Carter smiled and suddenly stopped in front of one of the doors on the right. “Well, here we are. The room

is private, so you and Annie should be able to talk without interruption. I'm going to check on some other patients, but I'll be back within the hour. If you need anything, Annie is familiar with making requests from the nursing staff. Thank you again for responding as quickly as you have. Annie is in need of a strong support system and I'm pleased to know that she has friends who are willing to jump when she calls."

I smiled at her but my smile faltered when I turned to open the door. My hand came down on the handle and I took a deep breath before pushing down on the lever and letting myself inside the room. The walls of the room were painted a light yellow and the general

ambiance was happy yet soothing. There was a small bed in the middle of the room with a plain white comforter strewn across it. On the walls were photos of different types of flowers and other nature scenes. Annie was seated in a patterned wingback chair near the large window. Her gaze was trained outside as I entered, but she quickly turned to look at me when I crossed the room. I wasn't sure what type of reaction to expect from her and I was taken by surprise when she smiled and held out her hands to me.

I took her hands in mine as soon as I saw her and I pulled her up into a massive bear hug. Tears pricked at my eyes to see that she was doing as well as

she was. We broke from our embrace and she sat back down in her chair. I sat in the chair opposite her and couldn't help but stare at my friend. Her hair was growing back out and life had once again taken residence in her eyes. I was amazed by her progress and wondered if she would even need to go to The Center for additional assistance.

“Hey Annie. I'm so happy to see you. I was so excited when Dr. Carter called that I rushed over as fast as I could. I've missed you and David misses you too.”

Annie's mouth turned up in a slight smile. Her eyes flicked to the window before returning to mine. “I think I'm

doing better, Paige. I'm not anywhere near where I want to be, but I definitely think I'm ready to leave this place. I wanted to see you to talk to you about going to your parents' place after I leave here."

I nodded my head in understanding and replied, "Well, that can definitely be arranged. Momma and Daddy would love to have you and you are already familiar with The Center, so it should be an easy transition for you."

She grinned again but then her gaze returned to the window. It was quiet and I waited for her to continue this conversation on her own terms. I didn't want to bring up the obvious, but

wanted to give her the opportunity to tell me anything she needed to say.

Her eyes never left the window as she asked, “How’s David? I heard he got...” Her voice cracked as moisture began to pool in her eyes. “I heard he was really hurt that night.” A single tear rolled down her cheek and she swiped at it as if it angered her for having escaped.

“He’s back to his usual self. He’s staying with Daemon and I while the police continue to look for...”

Her hand came up to stop me from finishing my thought. “Don’t say his name. Please. I can’t hear his name still without...” Her head dropped down into

her hands and her small body shook as she resisted crying.

“Okay, Annie, I won’t say his name. I’m sorry I said anything about him at all.” I suddenly felt like absolute shit for not having been more sensitive. I knew better than to bring him up, but I was so excited to be talking to her, I didn’t think before I spoke.

Her head shot up and her eyes caught mine. “Can she fix me, Paige?”

My brows furrowed for a second from the confusing question. “Can who fix you?”

“Your mom.” Her voice was calm and matter of fact while her eyes were

filled with a mixture of desperation and hope.

I shook my head in silent objection before saying, “*Momma* doesn’t fix you Annie. *You* fix you. Momma just tells you how.”

Annie let out a humorless laugh. “I’m too broken to fix myself. You know, like the stupid nursery rhyme with the egg on the wall. All the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put *Annie* back together again.” Her voice was bitter and distant when she repeated her version of the rhyme.

My heart fell at her words. “Annie, you’re not broken. You are

displaced, but never broken...”

“Really?! Because that’s what you always called them, the women at The Center. You said they were *broken*, and now, I’m one of them.” Her fists clenched as her head swung to look back out the window. “Why am I so different that you wouldn’t use that word to describe me?”

I was stunned by her words. Annie was correct in her accusation, I had always referred to those women as broken; but now, having been exposed to someone close to me in the same condition, I realized the description was unjust and pitiful. I’d never considered my error in my use of that word and it

opened my eyes to the bitterness and apathy I'd carried most of my life. The realization was a slap to the face and a wake-up call. I'd always been so closed off, so damn stubborn and protective of myself, in refusal of becoming like those women. But my view of them as broken was a deluded conclusion of finality in their condition. I'd forgotten that all of them would once again be whole; not just whole, but stronger and more alive than they had ever been. It humbled me to realize my error, my judgment of what I'd seen, and the behavior and personality traits that I had adopted as a result. Momma's words once again rang in my head as I remembered that we are all victims. Every person who has come

in contact with abuse or violence, no matter in what way, is affected.

I shook myself from my disappointment and decided to save the self-reflection for another time. Without speaking, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the small box. Reaching over, I placed it in Annie's lap. Her eyes looked down and slightly widened at the gesture. Sitting back in my chair, I smiled and said, "I got that for you. It's handmade. I thought you could use it right now, for strength."

Annie opened the box and she pulled out the delicate, dragonfly bracelet. The light streaming in from the window danced off the multiple colors

in its metallic wings. A corner of Annie's mouth quirked up and she looked to me for an explanation.

I let out a huff of air before admitting my mistake and my reasoning for the gift. "I was wrong, Annie. Those women...you...are not broken. You just became lost momentarily. But you can, and *will*, come back. I met a woman, a woman like you, like us..." I arched a brow in hopes she would make the connection I was trying to convey. When her eyes widened, I knew that she understood. "...She made the bracelet. When I was looking at it, she told me that dragonflies represent power and victory. She said that she wears one as a necklace and looks to it to remember that

she survived.”

Annie’s eyes looked up from the bracelet and met mine.

“I bought it, hoping to be able to give it to you as a reminder that you will survive, that you are strong enough to overcome everything that has happened. Momma and I will be there with you every step of the way, Annie, but when we’re not, I want you to have the bracelet to remember that you are stronger than you know.”

Tears shimmered in Annie’s eyes and she pushed herself up from her chair. She walked the few steps over to where I was sitting and reached down to grab

my arms and pull me up into a hug. A feeling of gratitude and relief flooded through me and I couldn't help chocking up at the contact.

Annie's voice was soft as she said, "Thank you, Paige. I promise you that I'll wear it all the time."

I pulled from the hug and held her at arms length to look at her. "Of course you will." My mouth turned up into a sarcastic smirk. "Because I'll kick your ass if you don't."

Her head fell back and she laughed. The laughter was beautiful and melodic and I couldn't help but smile brightly at the sound.

When she finished, she looked at me with a renewed twinkle in her eye. “Is David here? Can I see him?”

I was pleasantly surprised by her request, but I quickly nodded my head ‘yes’ in response. “He is. I’ll go get him for you.”

My feet carried me quickly out of the room and I practically ran down the long hall to get back to the waiting area. I burst through the double doors and asked David to join me. His eyes widened at my request and he smiled when he realized Annie wanted to see him. We raced back to Annie’s room and I pushed the door open for him to enter.

David's steps were rushed but careful as he approached Annie. I could tell he was nervous, much like I had been when I first saw her. Annie stood up from her chair and he rushed over to embrace her. Tears streamed down her cheeks and I was awash in happiness and relief at the sight of them. I smiled at Annie one more time and waved goodbye as I closed the door to give them privacy.

My feet carried me back to the waiting room once more, but at a slower pace. I pushed through the doors and Daemon stood as he saw me enter the room. I smiled at him and couldn't help the tear that escaped my eye to roll down my cheek. He quickly crossed the room

and pulled me up into a heartfelt embrace. My feet were completely lifted from the ground and I threw my arms around him to snuggle my face into the side of his neck. We stayed that way for a minute or two and then he placed me back on the ground. Taking my hand, he led me over toward the chairs. As we passed the coffee machine, I pulled back and held my finger up to indicate I needed a second. Daemon smiled when he saw me head over to machine and quickly fix myself a cup. I looked over and smiled a guilty grin and went back over to retake his hand.

After sitting down, Daemon watched as I lifted the little Styrofoam cup to my lips. “Is it safe to assume that

she's better?" His voice was concerned but carried a hint of hope.

I sipped the hot liquid before answering. "It is. She's requested to be transferred to my parents' place soon. I'm excited for her."

He nodded his head in understanding and his mouth turned up into a relieved smile. We sat silently and before long, David came through the doors to join us. He smiled as he approached and I stood up to meet him. His arms came around me in a hug and when we pulled apart he looked at me and said, "She's going to get through this, Paige. I just know it. Now let's get out of here and go home."

Daemon stood at David's words and we waved goodbye to the little old lady at the front desk. Our conversation on the ride home was casual and relaxed and we talked and joked about unimportant topics. In the middle of our conversation, Daemon looked like he suddenly remembered something. His eyes looked to me briefly before focusing back on the road.

“Damsel, I forgot to tell you. I need to meet with several people tomorrow and go to my businesses to deal with some things. I won't be around for most of the day if you need to go somewhere, so did you want me to stop somewhere now to get you anything you need?”

I shook my head and answered, “No, I think I’m good. So, you’ll be gone for how long, exactly?”

“I’ll leave first thing in the morning and probably won’t be back until six or seven in the evening.”

I kept a straight face while he told me his plans, but inside I was teeming with excitement. I felt guilty as all hell for it, but I knew his absence the following day would be a perfect time to go find Chris. I decided to wait until later in the evening to run my plans past David. I would need to borrow Matt’s car to get to the preserve and hopefully, David would agree to help me out in that department. I smiled at Daemon and then

turned to look at David. My expression must have given away the fact that I was up to something, because his eyebrow arched in response. I smiled and shrugged a shoulder and then mouthed the words, “I’ll tell you later.”

Chapter Twelve

“You are so fucking insane.”

David adamantly shook his head and paced the living room. “There is no way in hell you are doing this. I refuse to call Matt, I refuse to let you do this, and, in fact, I’m calling Daemon right fucking now to tell him that you have completely LOST your damn mind.”

It was early morning and Daemon had just left for work. I never had a moment alone with David the night before and I was just now getting the opportunity to tell him about my plan to find Chris.

I looked up at David as he crossed the room. “Don’t make me tackle you again, David. Just hear me out.” My voice was pleading but still carried menace from my threat at physically restraining him.

He turned on his heel to look at me. His finger came up and shook in my direction as he said, “There is no fucking way, Paige, none! I cannot sit idly by while you get yourself killed!”

I stood up and walked over to face him. My hand reached up to push his finger out of my face. “I’m just going to find him and then call the cops when I do. I won’t let him see me and I’ll get the hell out of there as soon as I figure

out where he is.”

David stamped his foot and huffed out an exasperated breath. “Why not just give the cops the information, Paige, and let them go find him? I’m sure they are used to dealing with psychopaths in the woods. In fact, fuck that, I’ll call them.”

David turned to go for his phone and I jumped up to tackle him to the ground.

“What the fuck, Paige?! Get off of me!” We rolled around on the floor and I was eventually in a position where I could straddle him and hold him down.

“No, you won’t, David. I know I can find him and be quiet about it in the

process. What if they go out there on ATVs or with dogs and he escapes again? Then what? I would have to start all over again.” I continued holding him down by his shoulders and soon he gave up wrestling me. David could probably easily overpower me if he wanted, but I had a feeling he was afraid of actually hurting me in the process.

His face went blank as he considered my words. After a few moments of thought, he responded, “Wouldn’t they use that stuff anyway once you call them? He’ll be alerted either way.”

David was right. The police and the forest rangers wouldn’t be quiet

either way, but if I was in the area and he ran, I could at least follow and let the police know where he was going.

“David, I PROMISE, I’ll stay out of sight. I won’t approach him or attempt to fight him. I need to do this, especially for Annie. Don’t you know how much of a relief it will be for her if she knew he’d been caught? Plus, you know how good I am outdoors. I can traverse even the toughest terrains with no problem. I can do this and not get caught. I just need a vehicle to get there.”

David sighed. I knew he would eventually go along with my plan, but I also knew that deep down he needed to feel like he had put up a good fight. I

continued sitting on him until his shoulders relaxed to the ground. The corner of his mouth turned up in a sneaky little grin. “Fine, Paige. I’ll call Matt. But I’m going with you.”

My jaw dropped and I instantly shook my head in response. “No way, David. It’s too dangerous.”

He gave me a pointed look. “Then you probably shouldn’t be going either, being that it’s *dangerous* and all.”

He had me cornered and I searched my head for any other excuse for why he couldn’t accompany me. When I found that excuse, I hurriedly explained. “You don’t get along with

nature, David. And the preserve he's at is the Florida scrub. It's hot, it's dry, there are nasty snakes and bugs, and if you're not used to hiking it, it'll wear you out quick. You might end up slowing me down, or getting hurt or bit by something."

He started to sit up and I crawled off of him and sat next to him on the floor. Crossing his arms over his chest, he said, "Sorry Paige. If you go, I go. I'll consider my footwear this time." He smiled at me and winked.

I realized I had no other choice and nodded to relent to his demand. It would be tough getting him to stay quiet, but I think we could pull this off.

I'm sure my face was sour at having to agree. "Fine. Call Matt."

~

Matt arrived in no time and was waiting in the living room when I was done getting dressed for the trip. I'd chosen a simple black tank top, some tan shorts and my hiking boots. My hair was pulled up into a bun on the top of my head and I didn't bother with makeup and jewelry. When I was out in the wilderness, I liked to keep things as simple as possible. I had a knife strapped to each leg and I packed a hiking bag full of essential supplies, such as water and trail mix, rope, a flashlight, trail maps I printed from

online, a first aid kit and some other odds and ends. There was no telling how far Chris was hiding out in the scrubs and it was imperative that David and I were properly prepared for the hike.

I gave a Matt a quick hug in greeting and looked around for David. Matt must have noticed because he quickly said, “He’s still getting dressed. Said something about having to be prepared.”

I smiled and was not only impressed, but proud of David for thinking ahead. Apparently, my negative thoughts about David’s forethought were misplaced. When he finally exited his room and turned the corner, my jaw

dropped. David came out into the living room wearing head to toe black. Black shoes, black pants, black shirt, black shoe polish smeared under his eyes, a black cap on his head. He looked like he just walked off the S.W.A.T. team minus the protective gear.

“Um, no. David, you are not going out there dressed like that! You’ll sweat to death. Do you realize how arid the scrub is? Seriously, you need to change into shorts!”

David straightened up his shoulders and looked at me with disdain. “What?! I happen to think I would make an excellent spy. I look fabulous!”

I walked over and grabbed his arm to lead him back into his room. “Seriously, David. It is one hundred degrees out there. You need to change into clothes that won’t suffocate you. At least put some damn shorts on, I can’t have you complaining about the heat and slowing me down.”

His face fell when he realized I was right and he grudgingly turned to change his outfit. I walked back into the living room to wait. When he reemerged, he’d changed into a pair of cargo shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt. He still had the shoe polish under his eyes and I chuckled at how silly he looked.

We dropped Matt off at his place

and told him we would pick him up on the way back. The car ride to the preserve was uneventful and David and I listened to music and enjoyed the scenery. There was no telling what would happen when we found Chris and I hoped that it turned out as I planned. If we could just locate where he was camping, we could get far enough away to keep an eye on him, while calling in the authorities.

I remembered the survivalist guy's directions and turned left into the first preserve I found once I left the state park areas. We traveled along a curvy dirt road and dust and rocks were kicked up by the tires of the car. The drive into the preserve took about five minutes, but

eventually we arrived to a rustic parking area. The only other vehicle in the area was a forest ranger's truck with an empty trailer that would have carried an ATV. It made me feel better to know that there were rangers around in case we got into any trouble.

I pulled into a makeshift parking spot and let out a deep breath before turning the car off and opening my door. David bounced out of the car and I wondered if he would behave properly on the hike. The man was incredible to have around when you were having fun, but he wouldn't be my first pick as a partner in a serious situation.

I came around the car and threw

my pack over my shoulders. I looked David in the eye and tried to convey the seriousness of what I had to say. “David, I want you to listen to everything I say out there. If somehow we get caught, I want you to run and get help. I don’t know what’s going to happen and we need to make a pact now that if something happens, I’ll distract Chris while you call for assistance.”

David’s face puckered into an unhappy expression and he was definitely perturbed with my instruction. “Why would *you* have to distract Chris? I’m bigger than you, Paige, I’d be able to fight him off better.”

He was right about being in a

better position to fight, but I was being smart. “You may be right on that, David, but Chris would kill you immediately. He has different plans for me and I would at least be able to survive long enough for you to get the cops over here.”

David’s jaw dropped further at my explanation. He straightened his stance and crossed his arms before saying, “That’s the most fucked up, delusional thing I think I have ever heard you say. You think it would be better if you got caught because he would keep you alive long enough to torture you?! What the fuck, Paige. This is bullshit!”

David’s face was turning red with

his anger and I knew I needed to quickly diffuse this conversation. “Listen, we’ll just make sure we keep quiet and keep a good look out. As long as we do that, we should be able to find him without worrying about torture or death. We don’t even know that he’s out here, so we may be sitting here arguing about nothing.

David sighed and turned to direct me to the first trail. His arm went out in the direction of the entrance and I quietly passed him to start our trek. The trails started out padded with grass that was packed in from the multiple hikers who come through these trails on a daily basis. I intended to follow the trails for a while, but then veer off once we started

hitting the more closed in areas of the preserve. I assumed Chris would be smart enough to stay off the beaten path, but also remain in an area where there was water accessible. I knew one of the trails led to a creek that flowed through the preserve and I decided that once we hit water, we would follow the creek from that point onward.

As we walked through the curvy paths, I looked around and genuinely enjoyed the environment. We were in an area heavily lined by trees and other vegetation and the shade provided by the canopies of the trees was welcoming. It was still early in the day, but the heat in Florida could be unbearable even in the early mornings. Luckily, there were

some storm clouds in the sky and the weather was providing a decent cool wind to keep the temperature in the preserve at a comfortable level. The preserve was so silent that it was somewhat disconcerting not to hear the white noise of the city. There were no car sounds, or crowds of people and the silence of the area made our footsteps that much more noticeable. Occasionally, you would hear a bird call or a large insect would buzz past you, but mostly you heard the lulling sound of the breeze blowing through the brush. We had been walking for about an hour when we finally reached the creek bed. It flowed lazily to our left and I cut off the trail and started walking through

some low lying weeds to get to an area where we could follow it. David stumbled along behind me and I chuckled to hear that he was already out of breath.

“Do you want to rest for a bit?” I pulled off my pack and retrieved a bottle of water and some trail mix. I offered David the water and he took it gratefully and handed it back to me. He took the trail mix and ate a few handfuls before handing that back as well. We sat along the creek bed and silently took in our surroundings. I was thankful to have left the trail because at the point we had reached, it was mostly sand and difficult to traverse in the glaring sun. It was getting close to noon and I knew that the

sun would be baking down on us before long. Luckily, the vegetation along the creek was dense and it would provide plenty of shade to protect us from the sun's rays. While we sat there, my phone chirped from my bag. I pulled it out to discover a text message from Daemon.

Daemon: Hey beautiful. I'm checking in to see how your day is going. My day sucks and it will only be better when I can finally get home to see you again.

I instantly felt guilty again knowing that I would have to lie to Daemon about what I was doing. I decided to admit that I wasn't at the apartment, but make him believe that I

was over at Matt's place with David.

Me: Sorry your day sucks and I look forward to seeing you tonight as well. I'm over at Matt's with David, so don't freak out if you get home early and I'm not there.

Daemon: Be careful and stay at Matt's. I worry about you running around without me when Chris is still loose. I'll see you later.

I laughed to myself a little over his statement. He was worried about me being at Matt's and I knew he would go absolutely nuclear if he knew what I was really up to. I had to find Chris and get

this over with quick. Daemon would eventually find out what I did when I had to explain how Chris was apprehended, and I hoped he would understand and not be too angry once everything was said and done. I was hoping for pure luck in finding Chris and I knew the likelihood was slim to none due to the size of the preserve, however I had no other choice but to try.

I slipped the phone back in my bag and stood up to brush the dirt off the backs of my legs. David eventually relented and pushed himself off the ground to start walking again. The banks running along the creek were more difficult to cross because large roots stuck up from the ground and the low

vegetation tended to get pretty thick. Branches stuck out across our path and we would have to push them back when crossing along. Unfortunately, David had to learn the hard way that if I pushed a branch back, he needed to stand out of the way when I let it go. He already had a nice red mark that ran across his forehead from when he took a whack from one of the swinging branches earlier.

I looked at the other side of the creek and noticed that the area on the opposite side was clear for the most part and it looked pleasant to walk along. I couldn't understand why we should continue on the side we were on and I looked into the creek for a means of

crossing. The creek wasn't that deep and I could have easily walked through it, but I didn't want to get my shoes soaked in the process. These boots were heavy enough on their own without being completely soaked. Eventually we came to an area where larger rocks formed a natural bridge across the creek. They were placed close enough that if you jumped just right, you would be able to make it across without ever touching water. I turned to David to instruct him on how to cross.

“We need to cross the creek to get over to that meadow. It will be easier to travel than the path that we are on. The best way to cross will be those rocks right there. Try jumping from one to the

next, but go slowly and be sure to catch your balance each time you land. The rocks will be slippery and if you go too quick, you'll slip and fall into the water."

David eyed the rocks and nodded his head in reluctant agreement. I jumped to the first rock and took my time preparing for my next jump. Once I made it safely to the second rock, I turned and motioned for David to follow behind me. He leapt to the first rock and looked like he was having difficulty catching his balance at first. Once he got the feel for it, I jumped to the next and he followed behind. It took us a few minutes to finally make it to the other side, but we were able to cross without any mishaps.

I walked out to the field and noticed that the ground was slightly soggy, but not enough to worry about getting our boots wet or worse stuff like sinking sands. The sunlight flooded into the field through the storm clouds above us. I was concerned about those clouds letting loose, knowing that the rain could ruin our chances of finding Chris. The filtered sunlight gave the meadow an almost mystical feel and I could tell David was mesmerized by its beauty. We both absentmindedly walked out to the center of the field to bask in the natural wonder around us. As we almost reached the center, David stopped and grabbed me by the arm.

“Do you hear that?”

I looked at David in confusion and then listened hard to see if I could hear what he was talking about. At first it was only a slight buzzing that I noticed, but before long the buzzing grew louder and the air around us was filled with thousands of insects.

“Oh shit. David, we’re in a mosquito nest. We need to run, NOW.”

The mosquitos came out in hoards and David I ran quickly across the field. We were slapping at our bodies as we ran and I stumbled a few times on errant rocks that were hidden in the grasses. David eventually overtook me and was approaching the creek in front of me. He stopped to start jumping across rocks

when I pushed ahead.

“There’s no time to use the rocks, David! Just run through the water. The little fuckers are after us!”

We splashed across the creek and turned right to continue our original path. We were still engulfed in a cloud of the little blood sucking creatures and we hurriedly jumped over roots and other obstacles as we ran. I saw that we were coming to a clearing at the end of the tree line and I picked up my pace to get out into the sunlight. As we traveled farther from the meadow, most of the mosquitos had stopped following, but there were still enough that were relentless in their pursuit.

Once we reached the clearing, the cloud had all but cleared away, however our bodies were still covered by the insects that had attached themselves to us. We were furiously slapping at ourselves and then turned to each other to slap away any insects that we could find. I'm not sure exactly how crazy we looked standing in the open slapping at each other for no apparent reason. Thank goodness no one was there to witness our little episode.

Once we felt that we had killed off the rest of the stragglers, David and I fell to the ground out of breath from the heavy running. I shoved my pack off of my shoulders and was relieved to have the added weight off my back. We caught

our breath and then looked at each other and laughed. David's face and arms had small welts developing from where he had been bitten. I'm sure I didn't look much better and it was slightly entertaining now that it was all over. I knew we would be hating life later on when the itching set in, but it wasn't anything a little Calamine lotion wouldn't fix.

I reached in my bag and pulled out a bottle of insect repellent. Now that we had already been bitten, it would sting when it came in contact with those areas, but at least it would keep any additional bugs from wanting to get near us. I sprayed down my face, arms and legs and looked up to find a sour expression

played across David's features.

“So, you’ve had bug spray this entire time and you didn’t think to put it on until AFTER almost getting eaten alive by the mosquitos?!” David snatched the spray from me and starting dousing himself in the liquid. He flinched each time it came into contact with his bites and the smell of the spray became overpowering due to the amount he used. I snatched the bottle back from him and eyed him.

“You’ve used enough, David. Crap, now I don’t think even a human could approach you.” David smiled sweetly before turning to look over the open area that we had come to.

He grabbed my arm suddenly and motioned to a point off in the distance. “Hey, Paige, look! Is that smoke over there?”

I quickly turned to look at what he was talking about. I was concerned about smoke being visible because the scrubs were known for uncontrollable fires. Luckily, it was a small stream of smoke out in the distance and I realized that it could have been coming from a camp fire.

“Holy shit, David! That could be from a campfire. It could be Chris!” I started to push myself up and had David not grabbed me again, I would have hauled off in that direction in pursuit.

“Okay, Paige. Stop and let’s think for a second. If that is Chris, we can’t just go barreling in there. He may be armed and we have to be smart about this. Let’s walk slowly, lay low and see if we can find him. As soon as we do, we need to get out of there and call the authorities. Agreed?”

I was momentarily shocked at David’s reasonable thinking and it took me a second to nod my head in agreement. We picked ourselves up off the ground and headed out across the field towards the smoke.

After reentering a wooded area, we were careful with our footsteps to try and stay as quiet as possible. We didn’t

speak and fell into a pattern of communicating with one another via hand signal or facial expression. It was another forty five minutes before we found another clearing and noticed that the smoke trail was considerably closer to us. Instead of heading out across the open area again, I turned right to follow along the wooded areas. David trailed after me and eventually, we reached another opening in the vegetation.

We began to approach the area where we had seen the smoke. I looked through the tree lines and I became nervous that it was difficult to see through the dense brush. David remained close behind me and his steps fell into perfect timing with mine. We were

breathing heavy, but trying to remain as quiet as possible. My heart felt like it would come through my chest, I was so anxious about our situation. I hoped we would spot Chris from a far enough distance that we would be able to escape without being caught.

Another clearing was dead ahead and my heart picked up at the fact that we would lose the tree line to help keep us hidden. The brush was becoming thicker as we approached that clearing and we had to move carefully so as to avoid getting tangled in the large spider webs that were spread along the branches. I saw one large spider sitting in the middle of its web and I about passed out when I realized it was the

same size as my hand. I heard David gasp behind me when he caught sight of it and we went way out of the way to make sure that we avoided it.

We eventually moved back on the path and neared the clearing at the end of it. When we reached the end of the tree line, I threw my arm to halt David. I peeked out from around the trees and couldn't see anything that resembled a camp ground. The smoke was so close that I knew we only had a couple hundred feet to go before we were right on top of whoever had started the fire.

My voice was barely a whisper as I said, "We're really close now, David. Let's follow the tree line again to try and

stay out of sight. Once we reach the other side, he could be anywhere, so make sure to keep a good look out and try not to make any noise.”

David nodded in agreement and we set off. Keeping in the shadows, we moved slowly and our heads rotated back and forth as we looked for any signs of activity around us. At one point, a small animal that was hidden in the bushes suddenly ran off and the noise caused me to jump several feet in the air. My hand went to my chest as my heart beat quickened from the sudden scare. David was equally as scared and we looked at each other and laughed once we realized it was just a critter running through the brush.

We started our journey again and approached the opposite side of the field. I looked within the tree line and didn't see anything moving, so I slowly entered and kept low while walking along the path. The wooded area wasn't as long this time and once again, we approached another, smaller clearing. When we reached the end of the tree line I finally saw where the smoke was coming from.

A camp site was set up in the clearing complete with a medium size tent and a folding chair. The campfire was contained within a ring of rocks that looked like it had been constructed to last. Whoever set up this site knew what they were doing. A bag containing

unknown objects was hung from a branch and I remembered that hunters and campers would hang up their food to keep animals from getting into it.

There was no activity around the site and I started to back up to hide behind the brush. David crouched down with me and we waited to see who would return. I don't know how long we remained in that position, but it had to have been a while because my legs were burning from the position I was in.

I was starting to give up, when David suddenly grabbed my arm and pointed to his ear to indicate he heard something. We peaked around the brush hoping to catch a glimpse of the camper

when I heard the distinct sound of a rifle being cocked.

“Well, if it isn’t the whore and the faggot. How nice that you would come out here for me to kill you, rather than waiting for me to come to you.”

Our heads shot around to find Chris standing behind us. My body froze and I felt David stiffen beside me. Chris waved the gun up and down indicating that he wanted us to stand. My legs protested as I rose from my crouched position and I held my hands up in the air to acknowledge my surrender. Chris waved the gun again and we turned to walk in front of him to the campsite.

Once we entered the clearing, we both turned to face Chris again. My adrenaline started pumping and I scoured my mind for any idea to get us out of this mess. I made up my mind and shot out into a quick sprint in the direction of Chris. I took him by surprise and grabbed onto the barrel of the gun in an attempt to wrestle it from his hands. David continued standing there and I screamed out to him. “David... RUN....NOW!!”

Chapter Thirteen

David hesitated momentarily at my instruction, but then took off when he realized I had Chris distracted. The gun fired and hit a tree near where David was running and I kicked at Chris' legs to distract him from his shot. David disappeared into the tree line and I panicked when I realized I was alone with Chris. He could easily overpower me and I knew firsthand, he wasn't opposed to kicking the shit out of me.

He kept trying to jerk the gun from my hands, but I held on with everything I had. If he was able to pull it away from

me, I was a goner. However, if I could keep fighting him and making sure the gun was pointed away from me, I stood a chance. Chris suddenly jerked upward on the gun and my feet were hanging above the ground. This was a bad position to be in considering I had run out of options. If I let go of the gun to reach the ground, I was screwed, and, lifted up, I had no way to ground myself for added strength.

“What’cha gonna’ do now, whore? Can’t go nowhere if you don’t let go of the gun.” Chris started shaking the gun and I was losing my grip. My hands were sweating and my skin slid along the smooth barrel. I made a quick decision and used the slickness of my

hands to swing myself out for momentum. I had one shot to get at Chris before I lost my grip, so I swung out as hard as I could and came back at him with my knees bent and legs out. I connected with both of his knees and forced his legs into a backward angle. The force of the kick wasn't enough to do any real damage to his knees, but it was enough to knock him off balance.

He fell back and I was taken down with him. I landed on top of him with a thud and immediately used the gun as leverage to push myself up. Chris must have taken a harder hit and his grip momentarily released from the gun as I came up. The gun was in my hands alone. It was one of those slow motion

moments, where you look down to discover that you have the advantage, while your enemy discovers his weakness at the same time. We looked at the gun, then each other, and then in perfect unison we both acted. I flinched backward to get away while he attempted to grab me as I rose. I was on shaky legs but I took off in a sprint as soon as I was upright. It took Chris a bit longer to push himself off the ground, so I gained a decent head start in the chase.

With the adrenaline pumping through me, I was running like a skilled hunter. My eyesight was better, my reaction time was faster and I was sure footed in my stride. I had no problem leaping over top roots and avoiding

other obstacles that littered the path. I was able to turn on a dime when the path suddenly changed direction. Luckily, speed was my advantage over Chris and I put everything I had into keeping a fast pace. It concerned me that we were going so far outside of the campsite that even if David could get help, they might not be able to find us. I made a decision to try and loop back to the site and I cut left through a game trail into the denser vegetation. The added obstacles slowed me down considerably, but at least I wouldn't be alone with him in an unknown location.

I must have lost track of where I was headed because I was suddenly met with brush so dense, there was no way

of getting around it. I recognized that I had no other option but to turn back, and there was no getting past Chris. Frantically, I looked around trying to find a means of escape. There was a large oak tree within forty feet of me. I fucking hated the idea of having to climb it, but in those circumstances, I had no other choice. The base branches were low enough that I could easily climb up the middle to pull myself to the higher branches. Chris was still a distance behind me and I hoped that I could climb fast enough that I could hide.

I threw the gun over my shoulder by its strap and pulled myself into the tree. I let out a deep breath as I reminded myself not to look down. My head was

purposely held to look above me and it helped alleviate some of the height anxiety. I remembered my method from back when I was child and systematically tested and choose the strongest branches to work my way up. When I started getting high enough, the branches became thinner, so I stopped and held as still as possible.

Within seconds, Chris ran into view and he stopped dead when he reached the dense brush. He looked right and left and spun backwards to look for me there. He ran back out to the main path and looked to make sure I hadn't doubled back. I held my breath, waiting for him to run back in the direction he had come. Just as he was about to turn

the corner to go back, my foot slipped and I shook the tree in an attempt to hold on. Chris spun around and caught sight of me. His mouth curled up into a lewd grin and he slowly sauntered his way back to the tree.

As he came below the tree, I looked down to keep an eye on him and my fear of heights suddenly kicked in. I wrapped my legs tightly around the branch as I sat with my back pressed against the trunk of the tree. Chris stood directly below me as he looked up and laughed at my situation.

“Why in the hell are you in a tree, Whore? Do you think you’re safe up there? You know I can just climb up

there and get you.”

My heart was racing and I was developing vertigo from the height. My anxiety level was sky high causing my breathing to become shallow and rapid. My mind raced and I quickly remembered the gun I had strapped to my back. I carefully leaned forward and brought the gun around and into my lap. I looked down at the rifle and noticed that it had a bolt and slide. I hated guns, so I was unsure exactly what I was supposed to do, but I held it up at Chris and pretended that I knew how to use it.

I braced my foot against the branch I was sitting on and pushed my back into the tree for added support. I didn't want

the recoil of the gun to knock me backwards so that I fell. I looked down the barrel of the gun and tried to use the little scope to aim at Chris' head. He stood stock still and I wondered why he wasn't running away. He had an arrogant smirk on his face and I wanted nothing more than to put a bullet between his eyes. Slowly, my finger pressed down on the trigger as I pressed myself harder against the tree for support. When my finger had pulled the trigger as far as it would go...nothing happened. The gun did not fire. I brought it down and turned it on its side to examine it. I honestly have no idea why I did that because I knew nothing about guns. If there was a problem with it, I wouldn't be able to

recognize it and I quickly realized the irony of having the weapon, but having no knowledge about how to use it.

Chris snickered from below me. “What’s wrong, whore? Don’t you know how to use a weapon?”

My head fell back against the trunk of the tree and my breath escaped me in one large exasperated huff. I was inwardly chastising myself for having *once again* gotten myself into a screwed up mess of a situation. “Sorry, Chris, but this is my first time being targeted by a psychopath, so I never really found the need to teach myself how to use one of these things. However, if you want to impress me with your knowledge, please

explain how to use the gun and I'll happily end this conversation with you shortly."

I heard laughter bellow out from below me but I didn't dare look down. It sucked that I had to keep my eyes open at all, but I had no choice, considering I had a nutcase below me with every intention to kill me. "What makes you think I would tell you that, bitch?! Just toss the gun down here and I'd be happy to show you how to use it."

Seriously?! Was I seriously having a sarcastic conversation with a fucking lunatic?!

I pulled the gun back to me and

tried to remember movie scenes where I saw someone use one of these things. I knew you had to pull on the little bolt, but I was unsure if that would push a bullet into the chamber or release it all together. Having no other options, I pulled the bolt to find out. As soon as I pulled back on it, a spent casing popped out and I immediately pushed the bolt back into place.

I looked down...*bad idea*...and immediately had to rebalance myself on the branch. I remember being this high while climbing trees as a kid and it irritated me that I was more fearless then than I am now. I looked straight ahead again to try and calm the fear coursing through my body.

“Throw the fucking gun down here, bitch! I don’t have time to fuck around with this shit much longer. If I have to climb up there to get you, I’ll make sure your death is as painful as fucking possible.”

I let out a humorless laugh. I believe the futility of the situation was starting to get to me and my brain was operating on sarcasm and humor to protect itself from the influx of terror that threatened to consume me. I took in deep calming breaths and looked down again. My legs instantly held tighter to the branch and I raised the gun to my eye. Chris’ face wasn’t as arrogant this time and he started backing up as I aimed the gun at him.

Pressing my back against the trunk of the tree, my finger squeezed down on the trigger. Chris began to run and I pulled the trigger as hard as I could. The sound of the gunshot was deafening and it recoiled back into my shoulder causing a wave of pain to run down my arm. Chris didn't go down as expected and a small bit of dirt flew up from the ground behind him. *Shit!* Apparently I was a bad shot.

Chris stopped in his tracks and turned back towards the tree. "You've got two shots left, whore. Considering how shitty you are with a gun, I'm not too worried about getting hit." He laughed an evil laugh and stood waiting for me to reload.

“Whatever, dick! I’ll fucking kill you the next time I fire this thing.” I pulled on the bolt again to release the spent shell casing and push the next bullet into the chamber. I was starting to feel more confident with the firearm and my arms were less shaky the next time I brought it up to aim. Chris began backing away and my finger pulled down on the trigger once more.

The second shot was as loud as the first and my ears started ringing from the explosions. Chris stood in place and didn’t flinch when I fired the gun. A bit of bark exploded off the tree behind him and his mouth curved up into a wicked grin. “Now, you’re down to one shot, bitch! Better make it count!”

Sonofabitch!!! Why did I have to be raised by pacifists?! I was suddenly jealous of kids who were raised by gun nuts. I bet they would know how to use this thing.

I huffed out another large breath and pulled the gun up to aim once more. I attempted to steady my shot, but my arm was pounding with pain from the first two. My legs gripped the branch and my back was pressed into the trunk. My finger started squeezing down on the trigger and yet again, Chris did not bother to move. His arrogance was absolutely annoying. The gun fired again and the tree behind Chris took another hit. Bark exploded from its trunk and I felt bad for having hurt the tree. *A*

hunter, I was not.

Chris laughed even louder this time and started walking back towards me. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a handful of bullets. "I've got some more ammo down here if you want to climb down and get it. Or better yet, why don't you just throw the gun down here and I'll demonstrate how to use it." His sneer was plastered across his face and I wanted nothing more than to bash the stock of the gun into his skull.

I pulled the bolt to release the casing. Even though Chris claimed there was no more ammo in the weapon, I decided to try once again. I mean, who the hell believes anything a psychopath

had to say?! I pulled the gun back up to my eye and pulled the trigger.

Click.

Damn, he was telling the truth.

My shoulder was on fire and my arm was starting to feel numb from the pain. I rested my head back against the trunk of the tree and tried to breathe through the pain shooting through me. Chris paced on the ground below and I gritted my teeth from the absolute frustration coursing through me.

“What’s it to be, whore? Are you coming down here, or are you forcing me to come get you?” Irritation and impatience rang from his voice. I wanted

to look down to determine the messages given off by his body language, but I didn't dare due to my fear of heights. "If I have to come up there, your trip down will be a free fall, bitch. It might kill ya, which would suck for me, but I'm not opposed to fucking the shit out of ya while you are dead or dying."

This guy was a sick fuck, but I guess I already knew that firsthand. My voice was hoarse as I screamed down to him. "I got your pictures, Chris. Did you really feel the need to prove that you are a demented bastard? Seriously man, I figured it out the first night I met you. What's wrong? No normal woman will give it to you willingly?" I was starting to get punch drunk from the various

emotions wracking my body and I started laughing. “Let me guess, you either have a really small dick, or you can’t get it up...oh wait...yes, you can get it up. Guess that leaves me having to believe you just have a really small one. Is that the problem, Chris? You know, they have new medical procedures that can help you out with that.”

I was rambling at this point, but keeping him talking was the best way I had to gauge where he was below me. Not being able to look down at him was causing my fear levels to soar, but if I could hear him, it would alleviate the fear of not knowing.

“Guess you’ll find that out when I

get my hands on you, bitch!” The venom dripping from his words was terrifying. I was most definitely pissing him off. I didn’t feel bad about it either. He didn’t have me gagged this time and I had every intention to let him know what I thought.

“You’ll have to catch me first, you piece of shit! I know you like them unconscious from what I saw from your photos. Do you want them passed out so you don’t have to hear them laugh at you for that small dick of yours?” I continued purposefully egging him on, but remembering the pictures was also serving to piss me off even more.

“I’ll give you one more chance to come down from there, bitch. If I come

up, you are taking a short cut down, I can promise you that.” Chris was speaking slowly and in a low voice. I’d pushed him to his limit with what I was saying.

“Fuck you, dickhead!” I reached over and pulled some leaves and acorns from the branches below. I lifted my arm and threw them down below me blindly, hoping I might hit him.

“What the fuck?! Are you throwing acorns at me you dumb bitch? Are you a fucking squirrel now or something?” There was laughter in his voice and my face turned up into a scowl at his mocking tone.

I reached over and grabbed

another handful and flung it down. “It might hurt if it hits you in the fucking eye, asshole!”

Chris didn't respond and when the trunk of the tree started shaking, I knew he was on his way up. I peeked down and couldn't see him. I knew I wasn't high enough to be out of his reach, so I pushed myself up into a standing position, threw the gun back over my shoulder, and started testing branches so I could climb up higher. My one shoulder ached from the recoil of the gun, but I pushed past the burn and pulled myself onto the next highest branch. I was getting high enough that the branches were becoming thinner and less stable and I crawled out far enough

onto a medium sized branch to keep myself out of reach. I grasped around the branch on my belly and wrapped my arms and legs around to secure myself in place.

My breaths were puffing in and out of me and my heart was at a breaking point in its speed. I could hear the rustling of the branches as Chris pulled himself up closer to me. I forced myself to open my eyes and Chris' large form came into view. He was several feet below me still and the branches were starting to crack from his weight. He'd gotten to the highest point he could and his hand was able to reach up far enough to grasp the branch that I clung to.

“Alright, bitch. You’ve left me no choice but to get you out of this fucking tree.” His hand started pulling on the branch and it shook violently underneath me. My arms and legs tightened around it and I clenched my eyes shut and held my breath. Unadulterated terror was coursing through my veins and tears escaped from my eyes. Chris continued pulling the branch up and down, and back and forth, and I was slipping along the side of it. I tightened my arms and legs up and pulled myself back onto it again.

Chris was still shaking the branch when I thought I heard a dog bark in the distance. My eyes shot open and he stopped what he was doing to look out

over the preserve and listen. I gasped when I saw dust being kicked up in the distance and heard the faint sound of ATVs as they approached. Several dogs were now barking and I realized the cavalry had arrived.

“Help!!!! We’re out here!” I started screaming as loud as I could even though the likelihood of them hearing me over the ATV engines was slim. The dogs started barking more in response to my screams and I saw the dust clouds turn towards our directions.

Halle-fucking-lujah!!! I might just be saved!

Chris let out an annoyed breath

and reached up to start shaking the branch again. My grip had loosened up when I heard the ATVs and I was taken by surprise by the sudden movement of the branch. I slipped to the side of the branch and my leg broke loose from around it. I pulled my leg back up towards the branch and scooted myself back up to the topside. I held on for dear life as I listened to the dogs and vehicles getting closer.

Chris eventually swore under his breath and started quickly climbing back down the tree. “Don’t worry, bitch! I know where you, your friends and your little fucking boyfriend are hiding. I’ll get all of you after this little stunt of yours.”

He climbed quickly and jumped the last couple of feet to the ground. I saw him take off in the direction of the ATVs and wondered how he planned on getting past them. My eyes flicked to the ground below me and I suddenly froze in terror at the height. I hugged onto the branch so tightly that the bark was pressing into my cheek.

The vehicles continued their approach and I knew they were close when I heard the dogs enter the clearing.

“Here!! I’m up here!”

The dogs were soon at the base of the tree and I peeked my eyes open to see them barking up in my direction. The

sounds of the engines became louder and I looked over to the opening of the clearing to see three forest rangers fast approaching on their ATVs. Out in the distance, more dust clouds were rolling up in the air and I determined that even more help was on the way.

Thank you, David!!

I continued screaming down to them and I heard them stop and turn off the engines.

“Paige Stone?! Where is Chris?” One of the rangers was calling up to me and his deep, baritone voice gave him an air of authority.

Without thinking I let go of the

branch with one arm to point in the direction Chris had run. My balance shifted on the branch and I quickly returned my arm to it.

“He ran off in the direction from where you just came! You need to turn around and go find him!”

I heard two of the ATVs start up again and pull out back in the opposite direction. The dogs stopped barking and turned to follow the vehicles. My eyes peeked open to see that one of the rangers was walking around the base of the tree. He looked up and held his hands over his eyes to shade them from the sun.

“Are you injured, Ms. Stone?” He sounded like a kind man and I was instantly thankful he hadn’t left me alone up here.

My voice was gritty from my screaming and I tried to speak loud enough so he could hear me. “I’m not hurt. Just scared shitless right about now.”

“Can you get down from the tree?”

I opened my eyes to look down at him and another wave of vertigo rolled over me. I pressed my face back against the branch and squeezed my eyes shut. “No. I’m afraid of heights.”

He was quiet for a moment before

he asked, “How’d you end up in a tree if you’re afraid of heights?”

I could tell he was trying to keep me talking, but I was slightly annoyed with the question. “Oh, I don’t know, it felt like a good day to climb?! Why do you think?! I was being chased by a lunatic and I ran out of options!”

I didn’t mean to sound hostile towards the man, but I was drowning in negative emotions. He became quiet again before calling back up to me. “Well, just hang in there, Ms. Stone. We have more help on the way.”

~

An hour had passed and I was still

getting close and personal with the tree branch. Four rangers and about a dozen cops were milling around below me. From what I could tell by the conversation I overheard between them, they still had officers out looking for Chris. The officers had attempted to talk me down out of the tree, but their words were useless. I was hanging on to my branch with everything I had, and nothing they said would make me let go. Some of the officers had started climbing up after me, but I screamed every time they shook the tree.

I was having flashbacks of the times I had fallen out of trees as a child and tears flowed from my eyes.

“Ms. Stone. Your friend, David, is here. He’s called some people to help us get you down from there.” A female voice shouted out to me and I instantly recognized it as that of Detective Troy. I was embarrassed to have a woman of her caliber witness me in the middle of a panic attack while hugging a tree limb. I’m sure if she was in this position, she’d be climbing back down with no problem.

“Paige?” David called up to me. My body instantly relaxed at the sound of his voice, but it wasn’t enough to get me to attempt the climb down. “Do me a favor and don’t kill me when help arrives, okay?”

My eyebrow arched up at his odd request. Why would I kill him for calling for help? I found out the answer to that question about twenty minutes later.

“Paige?!”

Shit.

I peeked out to see Daemon coming around the bend of the clearing. Right behind him was Alex and they were being escorted to me by another officer. What the fuck was David thinking calling them both?!

“Paige, baby, you need to come down from the tree.” Daemon’s voice bellowed up at me, but I could still recognize the concern in his tone.

My voice cracked as I started to sob. “I can’t, Daemon. I can’t let go. I’m too fucking terrified to let go.”

“I’m coming up to get you, Paige. The tree is going to shake a bit, but you just have to hold on tight.” Immediately after he was done speaking the tree began softly shaking as he climbed. My arms and legs were burning from their continued grip around the branch and I opened my eyes to see if I could spot Daemon. As soon as those crystal blue orbs caught mine, I let out a sigh of relief. I was still absolutely frozen in terror, but Daemon’s presence eased that fear enough to calm me.

When he was as close as he could

get to me, he spoke in a gentle tone. His voice was so soothing and quiet that I doubted anyone below could hear what he was saying. “Damsel, we need to get you out of this tree. I want you to think back to when you were a kid and you would climb up this high. You need to remember how you would climb back down. As long as you remain calm and keep your balance, Paige, you should be able to at least climb down to me. I can get you down from here. Just work with me, beautiful. Please.”

I shook my head “no” at his words. I was too terrified to let go of the branch. I thought about what he said and wondered how he knew about the fact that I was a good climber when I was

young. “How do you know that I climbed when I was younger, Daemon?”

He chuckled at my question and answered, “You told me when we went to your parents place, remember?”

Oh yeah, that makes sense.

“You need to climb down to me, Paige. You need to think back, and remember that you are an excellent climber. You only have to make it down two branches to get to me, just try for me, please. I promise you, Damsel, I will not let you fall.”

I let out another large breath and tried to focus my mind. Daemon was right, I could do this when I was younger

and I remembered exactly how to traverse the canopy of a tree. I attempted to will my heart to slow down and I relaxed my body just enough to be able to move. I slowly started working my way back along the branch to the trunk of the tree.

“That’s it, Damsel. Slow and steady.” The depth of his voice rolled through me and calmed me. I continued scooting back and when I hit the trunk with my bottom, I used my arms to push myself up into a sitting position. I was straddling the limb and I slowly pulled one leg over so that I could reach down with my other foot and feel for the branch below me. Once I’d found my footing, I used my arms and hands to

grasp on the trunk and other branches as I lowered myself down. I made it down another branch and I felt Daemon's arm come up and grasp me around my waist. I turned toward him and threw my arms up over his shoulders and buried my face into his chest. Tears cascaded from my eyes and my body shook from my sobs. Daemon spoke soothing words as he held me to him. I was thankful that he didn't immediately try to move me down the tree and, instead, allowed me a moment to get myself under control. Daemon removed the gun from around me and held it out to make sure the officers saw it, before throwing it over his shoulder.

Eventually, Daemon began

working his way down and he kept a grip on me the entire way. Every once in a while he would say something to encourage me onward and I was impressed with his patience. We reached the base of the tree and I fell to the ground in relief. Daemon sat down beside me and rubbed his hand softly over my back while I caught my breath.

Our moment was soon interrupted by the crowd of officers rushing up to us. I looked up and saw Detective Troy coming through the crowd. She was wearing her usual business suit and I chuckled a little at the sneakers she wore on her feet. I was used to seeing the woman in heels, but I guessed she understood the need for appropriate

footwear for the wilderness.

“Are you hurt, Ms. Stone?” Her voice was controlled and authoritative. I also believe I picked up the slightest hint of annoyance in her tone.

My voice came out weak and mouse-like in response to her question. “No. Except my shoulder hurts a little bit from firing the gun at Chris.”

“Did you hit him?” Oh, yeah. Her voice was definitely filled with annoyance.

“No.” My head hung down and I picked at the rocks beneath me.

“Well, I saw that you could use

your arm to climb down, so I'm sure it's just bruised. Since you are not hurt, I don't feel bad for asking this...what the fuck do you think you were doing going after Mr. Baxter on your own?!"

I jumped at the anger in her tone and looked up to find her eyes full of fury. Before I could answer, she added, "David has filled me in on the fact that you've known where Chris was for the past two days. Why did you not call me and inform me of his location? We might have apprehended him if you'd done that. However, YOU decided to take it upon yourself to find him and almost got yourself killed in the process. What do you have to say for yourself, Ms. Stone?"

Shit. She was pissed. I had no reasonable explanation to give her except for the fact that I had absolutely no faith in their ability to find Chris. It has been months since the attack at my apartment and they had run out of leads. “I didn’t think you would be able to approach him quietly in the woods. You haven’t found him since the attack and you weren’t able to gather the information that I discovered in one day of investigation.” My voice started to raise up in anger. “I’ve lost faith that the authorities will catch him and I decided to take matters into my own hands.”

I glared up into Detective Troy’s eyes and challenged her to respond back to what I was saying. Her face went

blank and she straightened up her shoulders. “If everybody could please give me a moment alone with Ms. Stone, I believe we have some issues to discuss.”

The officers turned to back away from the tree and Daemon began to push himself up to leave us alone. I reached up and grabbed his arm and pulled him back down to me. Looking over at Detective Troy, I said, “Anything you have to say to me can be said in front of Daemon.”

Detective Troy nodded her head once and responded. “Fine, Ms. Stone. I understand your frustration with the length of time it is taking us to locate and

apprehend Mr. Baxter. Trust me when I tell you that you are not alone in those feelings. However, Mr. Baxter is a dangerous man and there are protocols that need to be followed in his capture. You have put your life in grave danger by attempting this little stunt in the woods. Had you called us, it would have been rangers that sought him out initially. We also have other trained professionals who are familiar with settings such as this and could have located him in the same manner as you. I don't appreciate hearing that you were independently investigating Mr. Baxter's location, but I ask that in the future, if you come across information regarding his whereabouts, you deliver that information to me. If you

had acted intelligently, instead of attempting a dangerous stunt on your own, Mr. Baxter might be behind bars as we speak.”

I flinched at the truthfulness of her words and shame enveloped me where I sat. I didn’t dare look over at Daemon. I didn’t need to see him to know that he was just as angry as Detective Troy, if not more so. I nodded in response to her words and let out a deep sigh.

We remained in the area for another hour while the officers and rangers grilled David and I for information on what had happened. Once they were satisfied that they had all the information they needed, they allowed us

to leave the scene and offered rides on the ATVs. We reached our cars quickly and Daemon requested that David return Matt's car while Alex followed him to give him a ride back home.

When David and Alex left, I braved looking up into Daemon's face and I was met with his usual blank expression. I looked back down at the ground as I walked around his car to the passenger side. He opened the door for me and I climbed in and put on my seatbelt.

Daemon was silent as he climbed into the driver's seat and remained that way the entire ride home.

Chapter Fourteen

We arrived to Daemon's apartment and continued our silence as we took the elevator up to his floor. He opened the front doors and moved aside so I could pass through. He wasn't playing his usual game of brushing his arm against me or leaning down to brush his face against my hair. His distant behavior was killing me and it just added insult to my already painful injury of the day.

Once we'd entered the apartment, Daemon carefully took my arm and started pulling me in the direction of his room. My head dropped and I groaned,

knowing exactly the type of lecture I was about to receive. When Daemon walked without speaking or looking at me, I started to worry that, maybe, I had pushed him too far today.

He entered the room and let go of my arm. He turned to close the door and locked it before barricading it like he had those times in the storage room. I chuckled at the memory but was silenced when I saw the look on his face. His normally blank expression was angered. His brows furrowed down the center and his stubbled jaw ticked underneath the skin of his cheek. There was no hint of a smile on his lips and his eyes boiled with rage.

He gestured to his bed and I quickly moved to sit down on the edge of it. He stood silently for a period of time and I hung my head in shame. When I saw his feet take large strides in my direction, my body jerked in reaction. Despite the negativity in the air, my skin still prickled at his proximity and my body hummed as he approached.

His voice was deep and controlled as he spoke to me. "I'm at a loss for words, Paige." I flinched at the use of my name and knew he was angry due to his use of it. "I've thought this over since I first received a phone call from David letting me know that you were stuck in a tree in the middle of a nature preserve. I had to leave an

important business meeting and drive out to the middle of nowhere to once again *rescue* a silly, little girl that thought she could take the law into her own hands...” My teeth clenched at his description. Little girl?! Who the fuck did he think he was calling me that?!

He softly snickered at my obvious irritation. “Does that annoy you; my reference to you as a child?” I looked up at him, and my mouth opened, about to let him have it, when he beat me to the punch.

“BECAUSE YOU WERE FUCKING ACTING LIKE ONE WITH YOUR LITTLE STUNT TODAY!”

My mouth clamped shut at his words. *Oh shit.* Angry Daemon was in full force.

His hands clenched into fists at his sides and he began pacing in front of me. I wanted to argue my side, but considering the results of my ‘little stunt’, I recognized that I had no room to talk or argue back.

When Daemon turned back to me, his face was expressionless once again. I flinched at the sight because I knew that when he went ‘blank’, I was in for a world of shit. He stared at me for what felt like an hour before walking over to grab me by the arms and pull me into a standing position.

His voice was dripping with menace as he said, “There is something you need to learn, Paige. Unfortunately, it appears I’m going to have to be the one to show you.”

Before I knew what was happening, Daemon spun me around and used his foot to pull my feet out from under me. I went down onto the bed just as he grabbed my arms and held them pinned behind my back with one of his large hands. With his other hand, he reached forward and held my face against the mattress. The position was exactly the same as the one Chris had used when he attacked me at my apartment. As soon as my mind and body made the connection between the

helplessness of that night and the position Daemon now held me in, I freaked and started fighting against him.

His hold wasn't painful, but it was forceful enough that even fighting, I was unable to break free. Daemon didn't make a sound as I fought and he remained still as if my struggles were nothing to him.

"Let me go, Daemon!" I had to turn my head to keep from being smothered by the mattress below my face. I bucked and attempted to kick him away from me, but he held me in a way that prevented my legs from being able to move. I was completely powerless to break free from his grasp and tears started pouring from

my eyes. My heartbeat suddenly increased from fear and I choked on sobs as they escaped my body.

“Stop struggling, Paige.” His words were controlled and without obvious emotion. His body moved over me and his mouth came down to brush across my exposed ear. Speaking in a whisper he said, “You need to learn that you are not unbreakable. I know you think of yourself as a badass, but you couldn’t be further from the truth in your thinking. When you stop struggling against me, I’ll let you go, but until then, I will hold you like this. Do you understand?”

I attempted to nod my head in

response, but I wasn't able to move due to the position he held me in. Tears continued pouring down my face and I was in shock that Daemon was handling me in such a rough manner. "Let me up, Daemon, please. Please, baby, I can't stand being held like this. That fucking bastard held me like this. Please, let me go!"

I was shocked by the absolute terror coursing through my system. I realized instantly that, without my knowledge, I had been more affected by that night with Chris than I had believed. Being placed back in this position was bringing the emotions from that night to the forefront of my mind and I felt like I was being transported to a place I had

fought so hard to forget.

“Please....please...” I’d been reduced to begging while I still struggled against him.

“Paige, do as I say and stop struggling and I will let you go. Get yourself under control and you will be freed, but not until you stop fighting.” He was matter of fact in his instructions.

I continued to struggle and within a few minutes I finally started to calm down. I took in large breaths while I fought to get my body and mind under control. I stilled under Daemon’s grasp and remained quiet as I waited for him to finally set me free.

Once Daemon was satisfied that I'd stopped fighting against him, he released me and took a step back. I rolled onto my side and curled into a tight fetal position. My head was swimming with different emotions and I couldn't figure out whether I was more upset about the terror flooding through me, or the fact that Daemon had been the one to ignite it.

Daemon stood above me and patiently waited for me to stop crying. I peeked up at him from behind my tear soaked lashes and his face still maintained a blank expression. His eyes, however, were full of compassion and guilt.

“Don’t look at me like that, you bastard. Don’t act like you are sorry for what you did.” I continued crying, but my tears now flowed as a result of the anger that was starting to build within me. I couldn’t believe that the one man who I had finally allowed within my walls would be so cruel in his treatment of me.

He was silent as he continued to stare down at me. After a few minutes of watching me, he spoke. “I’m not sorry for what I just did. I did it on purpose to show you just how vulnerable you are.”

I rolled over and started to push myself off the bed. Fuck Daemon! If he thought he had the right to put his hands

on me in anger, than he apparently had no fucking clue who he was dealing with. I was not the type to be manhandled and continue sticking around for it to happen again. As I was shoving myself up into a standing position, Daemon's hand came down on my shoulder and he pushed me back on the bed. I started to fight again when he said, "Paige, stop. If you fight against me again, I'll put you back in that position."

My body froze and I looked around for any manner of escape. I knew damn well that Daemon could overpower me, so I sought out any distraction I could find that would give me the opportunity to run.

“You’re not leaving this room, Paige. So stop looking for a way to escape. You need to hear me out.”

My eyes shot up to his and I glared at him with all the anger and hatred I could manage. “Fuck you, Daemon. You just put me in the exact position that Chris held me in on the night he almost raped me! You’re a fucking asshole and I’m leaving this apartment right fucking now!”

I started to get off the bed, only to be shoved down once again. When I started fighting, Daemon crawled over me and grabbed my hands and held them above my head. He used the weight of his body to hold the rest of me in place.

His face was close to mine and his eyes burned into me.

“I am well aware of the position I put you in, Paige. I saw the pictures that lunatic left behind. I realized that if he controlled Annie in such a manner, that he probably attempted to control you in the same way.”

My eyes widened at his statement and I became even more furious to discover that he knew exactly what he was doing by holding me down as he did. I started struggling once more, but quickly realized it was useless. I wasn't going anywhere until Daemon decided to let me go.

Once my body stilled, he continued. “I hated having to do that to you, but one of these days you are going to have to realize you are more helpless than you think. You have a lot to learn about yourself, Damsel, and it’s about time someone took the time to teach you before you get yourself killed!”

I closed my eyes at his words but then suddenly opened them again to find that he was still staring at me. His *lesson* was understood and it irritated me that he forced me to realize my own vulnerability, but did he have to use such a fucked up method? My fury was building at the realization that he had intended to scare me, that he had purposely caused me pain. I could feel

my stubborn will coming alive once again and my fear and anxiety were replaced with scorn and indignation. “In case you forgot, I did some damage to Chris both times he attacked me. I’m not as fucking helpless as you think.”

Daemon’s head angled and a single eyebrow arched up. An arrogant grin came across his face before he said, “Is that so? I happen to think you just got lucky with Chris. Like you, Chris has no fucking control over himself and the situations around him. If he was in control, you wouldn’t have gotten in those *lucky* shots. But you can prove me wrong, if you would like to try. Since you aren’t as helpless as I believe, than free yourself from me now. Show me

just how strong and powerful you are.”

His head came down lower and he trailed his nose down my cheek and along my jaw. Even in the midst of our argument, my body reacted to his touch and my breath shuddered as a result. I could feel myself start to tremble underneath him and I became angry that he could affect me as strongly as he did while I was furious with him.

His body vibrated as he chuckled softly. He made a point to look at my arms and a grin escaped one corner of his mouth at the sight of the goose bumps trailing down my skin. His eyes traveled back to mine and I felt burned by the heat within them. “Such a beautiful thing.

Even now, your body knows to whom it belongs. You react to me so strongly, Damsel. It's probably one of the most seductive things about you."

What the hell?!

"How the hell do you go from being pissed off to being turned on?" The confusion must have shown on my face because he smiled again and quickly pecked me on the lips.

"Have you already forgotten our agreement? We can't walk away from each other anymore when we're angry. You promised me we could go straight to the working it out part. I can tell just how irate you are with me right now, and

trust me when I tell you, I feel the same about you. Knowing that we have to work this out due to our anger, how could I not be turned on?" He paused for a beat before adding, "But that is beside the point, I believe you were going to show me how tough you are. So, go ahead, Damsel, free yourself."

His grin turned into a wide smile and I melted at the sight of his dimples. I inwardly scolded my body for swooning when my mind wanted nothing more than to kick his ass. This was ridiculous. There was no way I was going to be able to free myself from him. My arms and legs were held in place and his weight pinned the rest of me to the bed. I would only be making an ass out of

myself to struggle against him.

“You know I can’t move, Daemon.”

He chuckled. “I know.”

I huffed out a resigned breath before saying, “You know you’re a rotten bastard, Daemon.”

This time he broke out into an actual laugh. “I know.”

I relaxed my muscles to indicate that I was done fighting and Daemon rolled slightly to remove some of the weight from my body. His hand, however, never released my arms. He took the opportunity to run his other hand

up my stomach to just below my breasts.

“You should know that you are currently feeling up a helpless and pissed off female.” The huskiness of my voice gave away my arousal at his touch and my statement wasn’t as convincing as I’d intended it to be.

“I love how you try to convince me how unaffected you are, when your body and voice always give you away. I don’t like to risk teaching you something that might hide those reactions from me, but you need to learn to control yourself, Damsel. More importantly, you need to learn to protect yourself. I intend to show you both.”

His hand finally released my arm and I brought them down from above my head. His thumb rubbed along the bruise on my shoulder and I watched his face as he looked me over.

He sat up and pulled me into a sitting position next to him. Moving behind me, he straddled his legs on either side of my hips and began rubbing at my shoulders and neck. My muscles ached in response to his touch and it was quickly apparent how much strain I had placed on my physical body during the day. He brought his mouth down to my shoulder and starting slowly moving up my neck, alternating between light kisses and soft bites. I quivered at the contact and my head rolled back to provide him

better access.

Despite the wanton desire he was building in me, I was curious about his statement. My voice came out in a raspy whisper as I spoke. “How do you intend to show me those things?”

I could feel the silent laughter rumble through him as he answered, “I’ll teach you to fight, Paige. That will help you protect yourself when you need to and it will also show you how to keep control over yourself physically.” His hands went back to massaging my body. “Controlling your mind, however, is a different story all together and requires a slightly *different* technique.”

“Such as?” I was skeptical of where Daemon was going with this.

He patted me on the back and removed himself from behind me. He stood up from the bed and walked towards the bathroom. “Rather than telling you, my sweet Damsel, I’d rather show you. Plus, we need to start working things out.” He winked and held out his hand for me to follow. “Come, you need a bath and I would like to help make sure you get good and clean.” The suggestive lilt to his voice made my insides tingle.

I laughed at his suggestion, but got up anyway to follow him. My muscles were stiff and burning from the physical

exertion I put myself through earlier, and the thought of soaking in some hot water was appealing. As I started crossing the room, his phone started ringing. He pulled it from his pocket and hit the button to send the call to voicemail. Taking hold of my hand, he led me into the bathroom and placed his phone down on the counter.

He walked me over to the large tub and I was suddenly giddy with anticipation for a shared bath. I stood by the tub as he started the water and added a sensual smelling oil to the water. The smell of the oil invaded my senses as it rolled up with the steam. I felt Daemon's hands start removing the knives still strapped to my thighs and I looked down

to find him examining them before tossing them aside.

He looked up at me and arched an eyebrow. “Hasn’t anyone ever told you not to bring a knife to a gun fight?”

I laughed and said, “Hey, I ended up with the gun, so I guess it didn’t work out all that bad.”

His expression grew serious and he stood up and pulled on the hem of my shirt to remove it. Once the material was off my body he tossed the shirt aside and his eyes traveled over the newly exposed skin. His hands ran up the skin of my abdomen as he said, “I’d like to know exactly how you ended up with

Chris' gun, and when I'm done bathing you, I expect to hear the full story."

I nodded my head in agreement and then gasped as he reached around me to remove my bra. His fingertips traveled softly down my torso before he unbuttoned my shorts and pushed them and my underwear down to my ankles. Kneeling down, he lifted one foot and then the other until he had freed me from the rest of my clothes. Daemon stood back up and took my hand to help me into the bath. The water stung when it first came in contact with my skin and as I sank down into it, the heat instantly began relaxing the tension from my muscles.

I watched as Daemon began stripping off his clothes. He was pulling the shirt over his head and I admired the way the muscles in his arms and stomach flexed with his movement. Just as he had pulled the shirt off, his phone started ringing again. He looked annoyed as he walked over to silence the device. He picked it up and glanced at the caller I.D. and then reluctantly held a finger up to me while answering it.

“This better be important, Logan.”
Daemon’s voice was gritty with irritation.

Daemon’s face went blank again and his free hand clenched into a fist. “Yeah, I’ll be there in a minute. Are you

sure he's gone?" Daemon's eyes shot to mine and he held my stare. "Fine. See you in ten."

My heart sank to hear that he had to leave and I worried that something happened to one of his bars. He ended the call and pulled his shirt back on. He kneeled down next to the tub and ran the back of his hand down my cheek. "I intend to pick up where we left off as soon as I get back." He breathed out a resigned huff and took one of my hands in his. "I'm going to be upfront and honest with you, Damsel; unlike the decision *someone* made today." I felt shameful at his words, but he smiled and reached up to brush his hand along my hair. "Regardless...Logan called, Chris

was spotted at Tomb tonight.

The water splashed as I quickly sat up. “What?!”

Daemon’s hands came down on my shoulders and pushed me back into the water. “Logan saw him near one of the bars inside. He called the police, but Chris left before the authorities arrived. They are scouring the town trying to find him as we speak.

Panic flooded me and reversed all the good work the water had done for my aching muscles. I was instantly tense and frustrated and I resolved to get out of the tub and go with Daemon to the club. “I’m going with you...”

“No.” His response was so quick and forceful. I started to balk when he shushed me and explained, “Chris isn’t there, Damsel. The only reason I need to go is to deal with the police in the bar. I’m sure there will be paperwork and other matters that I need to address. I would prefer that you stay here while I’m gone. Alex should be in the living room with David by now and you will be sufficiently safe in his company.”

*Alex in Daemon’s apartment?
When did I enter an alternate
dimension?*

“Why is Alex in the living room?” I eyed Daemon suspiciously and a sly grin broke over his face.

“When he’s not accusing me of beating you, he’s actually a decent guy. We had a long walk together in the woods today and had plenty of time to work out our differences, thanks to you. It seems Alex and I have one thing in common, we are both determined to keep you alive. I explained to him that you were able to get to the woods because I had to attend to business and could not watch you. Had I been home, I’m sure your little stunt wouldn’t have worked out as well. Alex agreed and he graciously offered to help keep you occupied while I’m away tending to the bars.” Daemon’s smile grew brighter and I saw a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

The sonofabitch! I could not believe Alex and Daemon had made a deal to babysit me together. My head started to shake in objection. “Oh no. That’s not happening. He is not *babysitting* me while you are gone.” The water splashed again as I crossed my arms over my chest. “No way, Daemon. I’m a grown adult.”

Daemon chuckled. “Unfortunately, Damsel, you have left us with no other choice. You stirred the hornet’s nest today by going after that psychopath. As you can see, he has already attempted something, and I find it interesting he choose to go someplace where I would most likely be found. If I leave here, he might come looking for you, so I prefer

that Alex or I stay with you at all times until things have settled down.”

I rolled my eyes but continued listening without arguing. It was useless trying to debate this with Daemon, but Alex was going to get one hell of an earful.

“On top of that, you can’t be trusted and David has proven that he can’t be trusted either. Now, take a long bath, try to get some rest and I’ll be back to pick up where we left off. If your shoulder starts hurting from the bruise, put some ice on it. Okay?”

I leaned my head back on the tub and closed my eyes. “Fine.”

Daemon laughed when he said, “That’s a good girl. We have much to discuss when I return.”

“Can’t wait.”

I peeked an eye open after using Daemon’s line on him and he smiled brightly at me. He pushed himself off the floor and was walking to exit the door when I called out, “Why aren’t you more upset with me for lying to you? If I was in your shoes, I’d be too pissed to talk to you right now.”

Daemon stopped and turned back to look at me. “I am not in a position to be mad at you for not being honest with me, Paige. It’s like I said, we have much

to discuss.” He immediately opened the door and walked out.

I threw up my hands and settled back down in the water. One thing I could say for Daemon, he was an expert with the cryptic statements.

Chapter Fifteen

I climbed out of the bath and wrapped one of Daemon's large bath towels around my body. I realized that my clothes were in the spare bedroom so I made my way out of Daemon's room. When I crossed through the living room, Alex and David were sitting on the couch talking. I shot David and Alex the evil eye as I passed through and David's face instantly took on a guilty expression. Alex, on the other hand, had the audacity to smirk at me as I passed.

Stomping into the room, I shut the door behind me and threw on a pair of

jeans and a black, long-sleeved v-neck sweater. The material of the sweater was light and it clung to my body perfectly. I patted my hair dry with the towel and combed through the tangled mess.

I eventually returned to the living room and took a seat in one of the accent chairs opposite the couch. I stared at Alex and David for a brief period before I spoke. “So, Alex. What the hell is this I hear about you suddenly being on *Team Daemon*? You can’t be serious in this bargain you have going with him to babysit my ass.”

Alex let out a humorless laugh and responded, “Actually, yeah, I am on his

side. What you did today was over and above your normal stupidity, Paige, and it's fucking obvious that you need someone who can protect you from yourself."

My eyes shot to David and I noticed that he was still dressed in his clothing from earlier today. The poor guy looked beat down and I felt bad for him. Unfortunately, I was too pissed off to let my sympathy stop me from asking, "And David? Why did you have to call *both* of them out there today? I think one would have been sufficient, don't you?"

David's shoulders raised and lowered with the large sigh that escaped his body. He looked up at me and his

normally warm, brown eyes were burdened with exhaustion and remorse. “I’m sorry, Paige. I called Daemon first and got his voicemail. I was a little freaked out over everything that happened so I called Alex almost immediately afterwards. Daemon just happened to call back right as I was getting off the phone with Alex and I had to tell him what was going on. The man sounded so pissed, I thought his hand was about to come through the phone to strangle me.”

I opened my mouth to continue chewing David out, but Alex’s voice interrupted my thought process. “Don’t get pissed off at David, Paige. He actually did the right thing *for once* by

calling us. The truth is, he should have called us before agreeing to assist you in your fucked up scheme. What the fuck were you thinking going out there?" Alex's voice got louder with his obvious irritation and I put my hands up to stop him from completely going apeshit.

Opening my mouth again to respond to Alex, I was interrupted by David this time. I was suddenly annoyed by the fact that I wasn't getting a word in with either of them. David stood up from the couch as he said, "I'm getting a shower and going to bed. You two can sit out here and argue until you are blue in the faces, but I sure as hell am not going to sit around and listen to it."

My eyes followed David as he marched off in the direction of his room and immediately shot back to Alex after David disappeared from view.

“I can’t believe you, Alex. You should be on my side in this. Not Daemon’s. I don’t need to be constantly watched.”

Alex rolled his eyes at me and it caused my blood to boil even hotter. It was obvious he wasn’t taking me seriously and I jumped up from my chair to move directly in front of him. Once I was looking down at him, Alex’s silver eyes peeked up from below the brim of the black ball cap he was wearing. I could see his biceps and shoulders tense

underneath his blue t-shirt and he suddenly shifted to get a better look at me.

“Paige, I’m not going to fight with you about this. I’m not thrilled at having to take Daemon’s side, but I realized today that the man is absolutely in love with you. He’s still not my favorite person, but I honestly believe he has your best interests at heart. You, however, don’t appear to give a shit whether you live or die. Chris is a fucking lunatic and you thought it was a *smart* idea to go after him on your own?! Even I wouldn’t try something like that, Paige, and I have at least 100 pounds on you.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and turned my nose up at his words. “Whatever, Alex. He didn’t catch me.” That was a weak argument and I knew it, but I couldn’t stand there and be called a fool without at least some form of rebuttal. I let my arms down and sat down next to Alex. “Okay, fine, *maybe* my actions today were not well thought out, but I’m not the fucking idiot you and Daemon are making me out to be. I made a stupid decision, I’ll accept that, but it doesn’t mean that I’m a moron.”

I was pleading my case with Alex but his body language showed me he was not sympathizing with my plight. “Seriously, Alex, I don’t need a babysitter. You can go and I’ll stay here

like a good girl and wait for Daemon to come home. So, thank you for coming out to assist me, it means a lot, but you can get back to your regularly scheduled life now.”

Alex chuckled at my statement and shook his head. “No way, Paige. I made a deal with your man and I’m sticking to it. Unlike you, when I say I’ll do something, I do it.”

My jaw dropped and I was instantly on my feet again. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean, Alex?! I didn’t break any promises to anyone, I just kept information to myself. I would have had that asshole if it wasn’t for...”

Well, fuck, I had nothing.

Once again Alex smirked up at me because he knew I was out of excuses for my failed mission. Chris bested me once again and I had no option but to recognize and accept it. “Regardless, it doesn’t matter, I’m not a danger to myself and I DON’T need a babysitter. I’ve *learned* my lesson, you don’t need to worry about me anymore.” My voice was ripe with sarcasm as I spoke.

“Obviously, Paige, you didn’t learn shit. The fact that you can even stand here and argue with me about this proves that you still have your head stuck up your ass!” Alex suddenly shot into a standing position and he was

staring down at me. His head angled down so that we were nose to nose and our faces were both twisted into angry scowls. Alex's rage was written all over him as he said, "You are a danger to not only yourself, Paige, but to other people. Because of you and your fucked up decisions, not only were you almost killed, but David as well. How many times do you need to get your friends hurt before you realize the seriousness of this situation?!"

His words were like taking a bullet to the chest. "Low blow, asshole."

I turned on my heel and headed back in the direction of Daemon's room. Slamming the door behind me, I leaned

back against it and screamed. I could not believe Alex said that. I needed to distance myself from him and, since he refused to leave, it meant I had to. Daemon would be pissed off and I would deal with that later, but for now, an entire house wasn't a large enough space between Alex and me. I needed to jump on my bike and take off.

I ran to the bureau and started digging through Daemon's drawers. I felt bad for invading his privacy, but I knew he had the keys hidden somewhere in this room. I stumbled on an extra key labeled "bay door" and cheered a little to have one thing that I needed.

The first drawer didn't have what

I wanted so I moved along to the small drawer beside it. The second drawer was locked and I noticed it had one of those old fashioned keyholes. *Eureka!* I just happened to see that key in the other drawer. What a stupid thing to do. I chuckled to myself as I went back into the first drawer and retrieved the old-fashioned looking key.

I slid the key into the lock and turned it. The drawer popped open and I did a little happy dance at my success. I pulled the drawer towards me and saw what looked like personal mementos. There was some small boxes shoved inside the drawer and old photographs. My curiosity peaked and I reached in to investigate. Just as I started pulling out

the stack of photographs, I heard a familiar jingle. My eyes shot to the corner of the drawer and sitting there in all of their glory were my keys. I hurriedly reached in to pull them out and I accidentally knocked over one of the small boxes. The box looked weathered and old and I reached in to put it back in its place and replace the lid. My hand grabbed around the corner of the box and as I lifted, its contents spilled out onto the bottom of the drawer. Whatever had spilled out of the box was wrapped in a shred of newspaper and it thunked as it hit against the wood of the drawer. I reached in to pick up the item and return it to the box. Before returning the item to its container I pulled a corner of the

paper away to investigate what was inside. The first thing I saw was a thin silver chain that was tarnished and kinked. I pulled on the chain and slowly revealed the pendant of the necklace.

No.

My head started shaking in disbelief. At first I couldn't make sense of what I was looking at. My heart felt like it stopped and everything around me stood still. My eyes were focused solely on the object in my hand and my body started to tremble. As if it would burn me, I quickly dropped the necklace down to the floor. I closed my eyes and took deep breaths as I tried to stifle the tears that were threatening to escape.

This wasn't possible. There had to be some explanation because this couldn't be.

My knees started to buckle and I sank to the floor. I kept my eyes closed for a moment and tried to regain some semblance of sanity. I had to be losing it. I must have not seen it correctly. Having decided that there was no possible way I saw what I thought I saw, I opened my eyes again to look.

It was the dragonfly necklace.

Tears finally escaped my eyes and rolled down my cheeks as I stared down at the delicate piece of jewelry. It was just as I remembered it except it looked

worn and tarnished from age. The tail was slightly bent out and the chain had seen better days, but there was no denying that this was the necklace my mother had given me on my sixth birthday...the same necklace that I had given to Buddy.

I picked it up and handled it like it would fall apart if I was too rough in my movement. How could this be? I didn't understand how Daemon would end up with this necklace. Did he know Buddy? Both would have been in foster care around the same time, so it was possible that they had been in the same house at one time or the other. But why wouldn't Daemon tell me? He had to have known. This very necklace was tattooed on my

back, there was no excuse for Daemon to not say anything.

A deep feeling of betrayal overtook me. I had to know why Daemon had the necklace.

I shot up from the floor and ran out into the living room. Alex instantly stood up and followed behind me as I went to retrieve my phone. I fumbled as I dialed the numbers to call Daemon and I became irritated and threw the phone across the room. It shattered into a hundred little pieces and I sank back to the ground as my sobs overtook me.

“Hey. Hey, hey, hey. What’s wrong, Paige? Shit. Paige, what

happened?” Alex sank down on the floor with me and wrapped his large arms around me. He pulled me against him and held me there as he waited for my response.

My vocals chords felt like they were paralyzed and I couldn't get out the words to tell Alex what was happening. I gave up on talking and finally just opened my hand to show him the necklace. Alex gasped when he saw it and he instantly reached out to take it from my hand.

“Where did you find this, Paige? What the hell is going on?”

All I could do was shake my head.

I'd lost all ability to communicate. Alex sat with me on the floor for a few moments before saying, "Cry it out, baby girl, then you can tell me what happened." He gently rocked me back and forth as I cried my heart out. Daemon obviously knew something about Buddy and I couldn't fathom why he hadn't told me.

After another half hour, I cried myself into an almost catatonic state. So many ideas ran through my head as to why Daemon would have the necklace. Did Buddy lose it or leave it behind? Did Daemon steal it? Or worse yet, had something happened to Buddy and that's how Daemon ended up with it? I needed answers, but I was too overcome with

emotion to do anything but wait for Daemon to return home.

Alex stood up after a while and picked me up. He carried me to the couch and held me in his lap. He remained silent as I laid my head against his chest. My eyes stared out at nothing in particular and I felt trapped within my own head. The physical and emotional exertion from the day finally got to me and I fell into an in between state; not really sleeping, but not fully awake.

~

I'm not sure how much time had passed before Daemon finally returned home, but I was pulled out of my

withdrawn state by the deep baritone of his voice. “Alex, would you mind explaining to me why Paige is sleeping in your lap?”

I peaked up to see Alex scowl at Daemon. “Sure, as soon as you tell her why you have...” I reached up to cover Alex’s mouth to silence him.

I struggled to open my eyes fully and my head slowly turned in Daemon’s direction. He stood at the front doors, obviously tense at having found Alex holding me. I pulled myself up into a sitting position and slowly moved off of Alex’s lap.

My eyes met Daemon’s and I

noticed a pent up rage within his stare. His anger at discovering me in Alex's arms was apparent, but I was unaffected by it. The sight of him caused my chest to constrict as I remembered the necklace I still held in my hand. Pushing myself off the couch, I slowly made my way over to Daemon. I stood in front of him and held out my hand to him. A confused look came over his face and he reached to take what I was trying to give him. When his hand was below mine, I unclenched my fist and the necklace fell into his palm. I kept my eyes locked to his so that I could witness his immediate reaction to what I'd discovered.

His face dropped instantly and his eyes immediately shot back up to mine.

“Paige....”

“Why do you have this necklace, Daemon?”

Daemon huffed out a breath and then ran his free hand through his hair. His eyes shot to Alex as he said, “I’m going to have to ask you to leave, Alex. I have something to talk with Paige about and it’s best we speak in private.”

I heard Alex get up off the couch and walk up behind me. He leaned down to whisper in my ear. “Is everything okay, Paige? Do you need me to stay?”

I shook my head in response to his question and he nodded at Daemon before walking out the front door. My

eyes still had not left Daemon's face as I waited for an explanation.

“Paige, I think we need to sit down.”

Daemon moved to step around me and I moved to block his path. “Sitting down isn't necessary, Daemon. What you need to do is explain to me how you ended up with that necklace. Did you know Buddy? Why haven't you told me about this since you saw the tattoo on my shoulder?!” My voice raised up in response to the rage that was starting to flood my system.

Daemon reached out and wrapped his hands around my shoulders and

moved me aside. He walked over to sit on the couch and looked up in invitation for me to follow his lead. I finally walked over, but chose to sit in the chair facing him. “Explain, Daemon.”

He looked down at the necklace in his hand and his fist clenched around it. Without looking back up to me, he said, “I didn’t know Buddy, Paige...”

“Then how in the hell do you have that necklace?!” I wasn’t quite screaming at this point, but I was close.

Daemon let out another huff of air before continuing. “As I was saying, I didn’t *know* Buddy.” His eyes shot up to mine. “I am Buddy.”

I was glad that I was sitting down at that moment because if I hadn't been seated, I would have just collapsed onto the wooden floor. My heart felt like it fell in my stomach, and my head shook in disbelief.

Laughter started bubbling out of me and I felt like I was losing my grasp on reality. He had to be lying. There is no way that what he was saying could be true.

“No. That's impossible. Why the fuck are you lying to me, Daemon?!” Tears started pouring from my eyes again and I swiped at them to stop them in their path.

Daemon's voice was quiet, almost a whisper as he said, "I'm not lying, Damsel. I'm Buddy. I'm the kid you knew from The Center."

I was instantly back in a frozen state at Daemon's confession. My breaths were coming to me in quick gasps, I was lost in a cloud of confusion and doubt. Thoughts raced through my mind so fast that I wasn't able to muddle through them in order to form a logical sentence. My body suddenly felt cold and I trembled in my seat.

After carefully placing the necklace down on the table in front of him, Daemon got up from the couch and moved to kneel in front of me. He

attempted to take my hand in his, but I pulled away.

“Paige, I’ve wanted to tell you who I am since I saw the tattoo on your shoulder at Tomb. But every time I tried, I couldn’t do it.” His eyes locked on to mine. “There are...things...you don’t know. I had every intention of telling you everything tonight. Hell, I tried to tell you yesterday when we were going to your parents’ place...”

My eyes widened at his words. My parents. Have they been as blind to this as me?

My head dropped into my hands and my head shook back and forth.

“How is that possible, Daemon?” I brought my head up to look him in the eyes as I asked, “Your name isn’t the same, your hair color isn’t the same... you asked me about him.” I remembered Daemon specifically asking about Buddy the first night at his house and when we went to see my parents. “Why did you ask about him if you are him? I don’t fucking understand what is going the fuck on!” I was getting upset and Daemon attempted to calm me by touching me. I flinched as far back into the chair as I could and he pulled his hands back to his body.

Daemon waited for me to relax again, before explaining, “My name was not actually ‘Buddy’ when you knew me.

My mom didn't like my actual name, so she used to call me her 'little buddy.'" His frustration was made obvious when he ran his hand through his already messy hair. "Eventually, 'little buddy' was shortened to 'Buddy' and by the time we arrived to the Center, that's the name I went by."

I listened attentively as he continued his explanation. "I asked you about him...me...fuck." He was becoming flustered as he spoke. "I asked you about what you remembered because I wanted to know how you felt about me then. It was wrong and selfish of me to do, but I just had to know."

It still hadn't sunk in that I was

sitting here with Buddy, with the person I had been pining for since I was a child. The entire situation felt surreal. “Buddy had blonde hair...” I stopped and studied his eyes.

Oh my god.

His eyes were the same crystal blue that I remembered. I’ve spent so much time in the past few months staring into a set of eyes that I should have recognized instantly. My body jerked from the shock and it became hard to breath. My head pounded from the rushing blood and my eyes burned with unshed tears. The shock had completely overtaken me and I couldn’t make sense of the sudden revelation.

“My hair darkened as I got older, Paige. I’m the same person you remember, I’m just that person in adult form.”

I was being torn apart by the conflicting emotions racing through my head. I wanted to throw my arms around him and ball my eyes out with tears of joy for having found him, but at the same time I was so angry because he lied to me. His cryptic message from earlier suddenly made sense. Of course, he couldn’t be mad about the fact that I lied to him, he’d been lying to me all along.

I began to push up from the chair and Daemon moved to prevent me from getting up. I glared down at him as I

said, “Please let me up. I need to move around and think. You’ve been lying to me this whole time! That is so fucked up, Daemon. How could you do that to me?!” Daemon moved and I shot up from the chair.

“Paige, we both have lied.”

I turned to face him and pointed my finger in his face. “No! That is not fair. You lied about your entire identity. I lied about what I was doing today. There is a HUGE fucking difference between those lies and you know it! Do not even try to deny it!”

Daemon’s face went blank and I knew I had touched on a nerve. His

entire demeanor became more lethal and predatory. “You lied about more than your *day*, Paige. You also lied about the fact that you were risking your life!”

I started pacing the floor, but stopped when one question suddenly came to mind. I turned on my heel to face Daemon when I asked, “Why didn’t you come back?”

His body froze and his gaze remained trained to a spot behind me. I turned to look and found that Daemon was staring at his favorite painting. I looked back and was startled by the intensity of Daemon’s eyes. His stare was almost palpable and my heart rate quickened.

“Paige, maybe we should call it a night and pick this back up in the morning....”

My voice grew louder to interrupt him. “Why didn’t you come back, Daemon?”

He let out a resigned sigh and took a step towards me. My muscles tensed up as he approached and he refrained from reaching out to touch me. “It’s not what you think, Paige. I want to tell you everything, but you need to calm down before we talk.”

“Please, Daemon. That question has been bothering me for fourteen years. Please, just tell me why you

didn't come back. All the other crap doesn't matter right now. All I want to know is the reason you didn't keep the promise we made to each other." My voice was cracking from the sobs I was trying to prevent from escaping.

His voice was so soft that I barely heard him when he responded. "I did."

My brows furrowed in confusion. "What?! I think I misheard you. What did you just say?"

His eyes flicked to the floor and back to me. He cleared his throat before saying, "I did. I came back. But before I could talk to you, I was stopped."

He came back. All these years that

I thought he'd forgotten me, I was wrong. He came back like he promised. Relief washed over me as a smile started to break out on my face. That smile faltered when I fully processed what he'd just said to me. "When did you come back?"

"About a year after I ran away from foster care."

Daemon must have noticed that I was calming down because he reached out to lightly run a fingertip down my arm. This was the first physical contact we'd had since he'd returned home and my body reacted as it always had. Except this time, my mind and my body agreed. This was Buddy standing in front of me. The only boy that I ever loved.

Tears began pouring from my eyes once again and I was annoyed at how easily they escaped. I looked up through my tear soaked lashes into the eyes of Daemon...of Buddy...and I was overtaken by the disbelief in this sudden turn of events. My knees buckled and as I collapsed to the floor, Daemon reached out and attempted to catch me but sank down with me to the ground. We sat there for who knows how long, just staring at each other. Almost of their own accord, my arms reached around his shoulders and I pulled him to me into the strongest embrace I could manage. His large arms came around me and he was gentle as he pulled me back against him.

I felt his jaw move along my

shoulder as he said, “I’ve loved you since I met you, Paige. I never forgot about you in all the years that we were apart. I always wanted to return to find you. Often I would fantasize about coming back to steal you away from everything, for it to be just you and me. But it wasn’t until I saw you again that I truly fell *in love* with you.” He pulled out of the embrace so he could look at me.

“You were standing in the backyard behind The Center and the sunlight danced along your hair. Your face was angled up into the light and you looked so beautiful, so serene. When my eyes took in the woman that you were growing up to be, I knew that I would

never stop loving you.”

Daemon made a point to look up at his favorite painting. “You were the mystical woman in the field, and I was hopelessly lost after seeing you again.” He sighed and looked back into my eyes.

“When I was kept from talking to you, it broke my heart, but I understood. I had to grow up, to learn things about life and myself, and I’m thankful that maturity was forced upon me. I had every intention to return to you once more, but then...you found me first. That night on the speaker, I was instantly attracted to you as you walked out into the pit. When you were almost crushed, I was actually relieved that I had a reason

to grab you. I stared at you the entire time we sat on that speaker and those sassy little words of yours continually played through my head. I couldn't understand why you were so captivating to me. Women did not affect me that way, there was never any emotion with any woman that I'd been around. But then, when I watched you get down and I saw the tattoo, I knew exactly why I was so drawn to you. When you verified who you were, I knew that fate had given you back to me; that fate meant for us to be together."

He grew quiet and his confession ran through my mind over and over again. His words caused pain, but at the same time, intense joy. My tears dropped

from my face onto my lap. I was so confused about how all of this could be real, but I no longer doubted that I'd finally found my best friend, my only love. I ran his story through my head so many times as we sat there holding each other and questions began flooding my mind.

“You came to The Center?”

Daemon nodded his head “yes”, but averted his eyes.

I was shocked to hear that he had come to The Center and hadn't been able to talk to me. But then, something occurred to me. I pulled away from him so I could look him in the eyes when I

asked, “What do you mean you were stopped? Who stopped you?”

It took Daemon several seconds to answer. His jaw ticked beneath his cheek and I searched his face as I waited for a response. His hesitancy to tell me had me worried and I asked him again. “Who stopped you, Daemon?”

He let out a long slow breath before looking back into my eyes.

“Your parents.”

Chapter Sixteen

The ground felt like it had dropped out from below me. My mind could not wrap itself around the words just spoken by Daemon. I couldn't fathom why or how it was even possible. My parents? They've never lied to me, never done anything that could ever hurt me. I wanted to call Daemon a liar, to tell him that there was no way the only two people I have ever trusted would have lied to me. It wasn't in them to lie. Especially, to lie about something like this. The shock ravished my system and I broke free from Daemon. I scooted my body back so I could lean against the

wall before falling completely to the floor.

My voice cracked with emotion as I looked to Daemon and begged him to tell me he was lying. His eyes were forlorn and pained as he shook his head in response to my pleas. The type of pain that overtook my body was so much more than anything I had ever experienced. It saturated every cell within me and twisted itself within my soul. Tears did not flow from this pain because every single part of my body was frozen in response to the trauma. To say I was stunned, or shocked, or betrayed did not begin to describe the emotions that assaulted my body. Daemon's confession rocked my reality,

morphing and then tearing apart the basic building blocks upon which I understood the life I had lived.

“I need to know what happened, Daemon. My parents wouldn’t have done something like that. They know how important you are to me. They knew I was waiting for you to return. They wouldn’t have done that!” My body suddenly released itself from its frozen state and, like a deluge, tears poured from my eyes. I was helpless to stop the violent sobs that shook every part of me. My thoughts raced in an effort to formulate a feasible explanation for what Daemon was claiming.

My head shook in protest. “It’s not

possible, Daemon. My parents looked for you, they tried to adopt you. They wouldn't have sent you away. I don't fucking understand!"

Daemon scooted closer to me and took me in his lap. I buried my head into his shoulder and fought the urge to scream. I was taken prisoner to anger, grief, betrayal, and disbelief, all at once. My muscles quivered under the force of the warring emotions.

Speaking in a hushed tone, Daemon tried to sooth me and calm me down. His hand stroked along my hair as he said, "Damsel. There are things you need to understand. I know you're upset, but everything that happened was for the

best. We're together now, we would have been together regardless. I had every intention of finding you when it was the right time. But as usual, you decided to do things your way and found me first." He let out a weak laugh and pulled me closer to him. I could feel his chest rumble as he continued talking. "Tomorrow we will go to your parents' place. We can all sit down and talk about this."

I needed to talk to my parents. But, not with Daemon.

This conversation had to take place in private. The feelings I was experiencing were not something that directly involved Daemon. They were a

result of a tie being severed, the only anchor I had to the life I knew. A deep sense of loss assaulted me as I lost the only two people that I never had a reason to doubt.

“I need to go to my parents’ house, Daemon. I need to go now and I need to go alone.”

“No, Paige.” His response was instantaneous. He had no intention of letting me go to do what I needed to do.

“Daemon, please. I’ll take my bike and I’ll come straight back here after I talk to them, but I need to go.” I was pleading with him to understand.

He physically tensed underneath

me as I begged. “Paige, no, damn it. Chris is still out there and even if he wasn’t, you do not need to be driving in the condition you are in.”

But that was exactly what I needed. The speed and collision with the air were the perfect outlets for me to release the pent up emotions ravaging my system.

I went to stand up and Daemon’s arms tightened around me. “Daemon. I know you are worried, but this isn’t negotiable. I’m going to take my bike and go see my parents. I’ll drive carefully, but I have to do this. The ride will help calm me so I can think before I talk to them. If you are worried about

Chris, than you can walk me down to the garage and wait until I'm gone. I'll call you when I return so you can wait in the garage to walk me back up. I don't care. But this is not something I can put off. I need to go and I need to go now."

I looked up into Daemon's blue eyes and saw a deep-seated pain within them. "Damsel..."

"Please, Daemon. Trust me on this."

Daemon's arms finally released me and I stood up from the ground. The muscles in my legs ached from having been in a crouched position and I stretched them as I walked to retrieve

my keys from Daemon's room. I walked over to his bureau and felt bad when I remembered having gone through his things. Even though my discovery brought about the very thing I've wanted for the majority of my life and delivered Buddy back to me, the violation of Daemon's privacy was not right. I groaned as I moved to replace the items in the drawer but couldn't help myself in picking up the stack of photos. I flipped through the stack and stood stunned when I found a worn photo of Daemon... Buddy...with his mother. He was around the same age in the photo as he was when I met him. His bright blues eyes shown in the sunlight and his hair was so blonde, it looked white. His mother

kneeled down beside him and had her arms wrapped around his little waist. Both of their smiles were so bright and genuine; my heart broke to know what ended up happening to them. I was so absorbed in the image that Daemon took me by surprise as he walked up behind me. He reached around and took the photo from my hand. He looked so lost as he stared at the image and I could see several emotions playing over his features.

“This is the only thing I have left of her. I carried this photograph and the necklace with me through every foster home, through my time on the streets, through...everything. They were and still are my most valued possessions.” He

moved to stand next to me and he placed the photograph back in the drawer. He then placed the necklace back in the drawer and closed it.

He picked up my keys from the top of the bureau and held them out to me. I opened my hands to accept the keys, but before dropping them in my palm, he said, "Please be careful driving out there, Paige. I don't like the idea of you going alone and I wouldn't be allowing this if I didn't understand how important it is for you to work this out with them."

The keys hit my palm and I closed my hand around them. With my other hand I reached up and grabbed the back of Daemon's neck. I pulled him down to

me and placed a kiss on his lips. “I promise you, I’ll be careful. I’ll call you before I leave so that you can wait for me to return.”

Daemon nodded once in response to my promise and turned to walk into his closet. He walked back out a moment later holding a large, hoodie sweatshirt in his hands. He crossed the room to stand in front of me and held up the shirt. “I want you to wear this for the ride. Storms have been threatening all day and it’s cold outside as a result. If you get caught in the rain, I want you to pull over and call me so that I can get you. I do not want you hanging around anywhere long by yourself. You are being watched, Damsel, and you need to remember

that.”

He lifted the shirt and placed it over my head. I pulled my arms through the sleeves and laughed when I saw how the material swallowed me. I remembered having thrown my phone in the kitchen earlier and inwardly kicked myself for having done so. “There might be a problem with me calling, Daemon. My phone is currently in a million pieces on your kitchen floor.” I looked up at him sheepishly while confessing.

Daemon sighed and walked over to bureau on the other side of his room. He opened a drawer and pulled out a small phone. He moved to hand the phone to me. “This is a spare phone I

keep around for my employees' use when they need it. You can use it tonight and we will go out tomorrow to replace your phone." He hesitated for a beat and asked, "Do I even want to know how your phone got broken?"

"No."

He chuckled. "I didn't think so."

Daemon placed his hand on the small of my back and walked me out of the room. As we entered the living room, I held up my finger to indicate that I needed a minute. I ran back to my bedroom and grabbed my backpack and then returned to the living room. Daemon was standing at the entrance of the

kitchen looking down at the remnants of my phone. He looked up at me as I entered the room and shook his head in exasperation.

Taking my hand and leading me to the front door, he said, “Damsel, starting tomorrow, we are going to work on getting your emotions under control. That poor phone didn’t stand a chance.”

I laughed softly and said, “That had nothing to do with my emotions, Daemon. The phone was looking at me funny. It had it coming.”

Daemon sighed and hit the button to call the elevator. We traveled down to the garage and Daemon walked in front

of me to open up the bay doors. The door clinked loudly and echoed throughout the silent garage. My eyes widened at the sight of my bike, once again in perfect condition. My helmet sat on top of my seat and I hurried to get over to it.

My focus on the bike was broken when Daemon said, "I've been coming down here to turn the engine on every couple of days. Your bike should run with no problem." He moved up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist from behind. His mouth brushed against my ear as he said, "Please remember to drive carefully, Paige. If something happens to you, I'm not sure I will be able to stand it. You carry both

of our lives in your hands, whether you realize it or not.”

I nodded in response and was moved by his statement. My heart warmed at his words but quickly dropped again when I remembered where I was going and what I was going to do. I hoped that there was a perfectly good explanation for what happened and that, somehow, my parents would be absolved of the deceit they had committed against me.

I climbed on the bike and started the engine. It purred underneath me and I revved the engine to warm it up before riding. I turned to look at Daemon one more time before I pulled the helmet on

and kicked the bike into gear.

~

The drive to The Center was exhilarating. It had been months since I'd experienced the feel of freedom from riding and crashing against the wind. I was driving at a higher rate of speed than I should have been as I wound along the roads through the state parks. Daemon's request that I drive safely played through my head and I grudgingly slowed down.

I pulled up to The Center and heard thunder in the distance. I was pleased that I arrived prior to a rainstorm and I pulled around to the side

of the large building to the private entrance of my parents' apartment. I killed the engine and noticed that there were no lights on. Realizing it was late, I felt bad for waking my parents, but I had no choice but to talk to them about what Daemon had told me.

I banged on their door until I noticed a light flick on behind the windows. The door opened and my father stood in front of me in his pajamas and a robe. "Paige?"

My mother soon came up behind my father and a worried look was on her face. My parents moved out of the doorway so that I could step inside. Lightning cracked in the distance as I

entered and it caused me to flinch from surprise.

My father hurriedly closed the door and followed me as I walked into the living room. My mother turned on one of the side lamps and it bathed the room in a soft light. My parents sat down on the couch and motioned for me to follow, but I shook my head and choose to pace the floor in front of them.

I finally built up to nerve to speak and asked, “Is there something the two of you need to tell me?”

Their expressions instantly dropped at my question and the reaction verified that what Daemon told me was

true. I stopped pacing to stare each of them down. Momma looked up at me when she asked, “What did Daemon tell you?” Her voice sounded like she was trying to hold back tears and I wanted to feel sorry for her pain. The only problem being that I was too angry to care.

“Well, he told me who is he, for starters. He also told me he came back for me and that you stopped him. I’m a little confused as to how that can be true considering you’ve been telling me that you couldn’t find him.” My voice had an edge to it and I crossed my arms over my chest as I stared down into the guilty faces of my parents.

Daddy opened his mouth to talk

but was interrupted by a loud crash of thunder outside. The wind picked up and you could hear the rain pelting against the windows of the house. The sound of the storm mixed with the low light of the room gave this meeting a clandestine and ominous feel.

Daddy waited for the thunder to stop before saying, "Paige. Please sit down. Your mother and I will tell you everything, but I prefer that you are sitting for this conversation."

"I don't need to be sitting for you to tell me what the fuck is going on! My ears work perfectly fine regardless of the position my body is in. Now tell me the truth!" My anger was apparent in my

voice as I screamed at my parents. Never in my twenty-two years had I raised my voice to them; but then again, they never gave me a reason to be mad. This was uncharted territory and my heart broke apart, piece by piece, with every step I took closer to the truth.

Momma spoke up next. “I don’t know how to admit this to you, Paige, but...” She hesitated as she let out a long breath. “...events in your past didn’t happen quite as you remember them. Your father and I had to make some *decisions* in order to protect your interests.”

Oh god.

Where was she going with this? Her hands continuously wringed around each other in her lap. I knew Momma well enough to know that when she wrung her hands, it was a sign of nervousness and pain. I wanted to cover my ears and not hear what she was about to tell me, but I held my place and never stopped looking her in the eyes as she spoke.

“Yes. Daemon is Buddy. Your father and I have been aware of that this entire time. I was shocked to see him in your hospital room after the....*incident*.” She paused again. It was obvious how difficult this was for her to tell me. “Daemon came back when you were fifteen. He was walking around back to

go talk to you when your father happened to walk outside. When he found Daemon, he redirected him inside and we dealt with it from there.” Her eyes grew remorseful as she spoke. “He was a street kid, Paige, and you have to understand that we couldn’t have that type of person around you. We had to protect you from people like him.”

My jaw dropped at her statement. I’d never heard my mother talk badly about anybody, no matter what the circumstances. She’d spent her life helping people in bad situations, and she had the audacity to turn Daemon away because he didn’t have a home?! Who was this person sitting in front of me? My reality crumbled a little further as

Momma continued.

“We made a decision when you were six to protect you from Daemon. Even then he was emotionally unstable. Baby girl, your memories of him are not exactly accurate. You’ve forgotten so much as you’ve grown and it scared your father and me. Daemon showed back up when he was seventeen and we helped him, but in a way that kept him separate from you.” The words were spilling from her mouth in such a way, that it was apparent that she was confessing to their past actions while at the same time, begging for forgiveness.

I absorbed her confession and processed every detail she was

revealing. Her words played through my mind and I picked up on something she'd said. "What decision did you make when I was six?"

Momma and Daddy quickly looked at each other and then back to me. Daddy spoke up this time and he sat on the edge of the couch as if it was difficult to remain sitting. They were both obviously tense and it felt like they were tiptoeing around me as they spoke.

"Paige, I'm just going to be blunt about this..." Daddy was interrupted again by the sound of thunder and Momma's soft sobs. "...We had the option to take Daemon when he was a child. Due to his behavioral issues, we

chose not to take him because we wanted to protect you. Now, I'm sorry for having lied to you about our decision, but I'm not sorry for the decision that I made. You are our daughter and I acted in a way that any responsible father should. We would have been honest with you about it, but you developed this odd obsession after the event with his mother. We were told it was normal for you to fixate on him after a trauma and that it would be best if we were to just let you believe that there was nothing we could do. So that's what we did. I'm sorry, Paige, but we never expected that you two would find each other again. We never thought you would find out."

His words were like a hard blow to the stomach. I physically jerked back from the impact of what he was saying and my head spun in confusion. They had the option to take him? I didn't have to go without him all of these years, but my parents made the decision to do that to me? All my pain, loneliness and hopelessness at his loss had been their doing. My eyes burned with unshed tears and I stood motionless for a few moments.

I was flooded with a feeling of the worst kind of betrayal. The kind that twists you up to a point where reality no longer makes sense. Not only had my parents lied to me, they had been the cause of one of the most painful

tragedies of my life. I thought about the life Daemon had lived. As a child he was kicked from home to home, never finding a real family to call his. He was forced to live on the streets at a young age and had no one and nothing for so long. My feeling of betrayal was smothered underneath the building anger I had for what my parents had done to Daemon. His life could have been different, it could have been better, if my parents had chosen to keep him.

“How could you?! You two, the saviors of all things oppressed, turned your backs on a child? And not just any child, you turned your backs on my best friend! You abandoned someone who needed you and lied to me in the

process! I cannot fucking believe this!”

My mother flinched back in response to my anger, but my father jumped up to look at me, eye to eye. “We did not abandon Daemon. We kept tabs on him the entire time he was in foster care. We helped in any way we could. We recommended counselors, we helped his foster parents out financially, and we hired people to look for him when he ran away. We never turned our backs on him!” My father’s voice was raised in anger and I was surprised to hear him speak in such a manner. Sure, I was a hothead, it wasn’t unusual for me to lose my cool, but not my father. I’d never heard him speak in anything but a calm manner...until now. He appeared to be

surprised by his demeanor as well, because he took a second to calm himself down before continuing. “Paige, you don’t remember what a problem Buddy was when he stayed here. He fought against everybody; adults, other children, it didn’t matter. The boy needed individual attention and care that we did not have the time to give him. Watching him would have been a full time job, and...damn it!” My father ran his hand through his thinning hair. He looked like he was trying to catch himself from revealing something and I stepped forward to urge him along.

“What? And what? Just tell me what you were going to say!”

My father's eyes flicked down to my mother before returning to me. "He hurt you too, Paige. Your Momma witnessed it on several occasions, and we were concerned that not only did you never say anything, you lied to cover it up."

My eyes widened in response to my father's words. I started thinking back to the most recent dreams I was having about Buddy. Sure, he'd been cruel at times, I was starting to remember that, but not enough to warrant sending him away. "He was just a kid." My voice was raspy from the emotion once again assaulting my body. I turned away from my parents and heard Momma's sobs grow louder in reaction

to mine.

“Paige, we did what we had to do so that you were safe. He wasn’t kicked from home to home because the foster parents didn’t love him. He was emotionally troubled, Paige. He was violent and out of control at times and the entire situation was difficult for everyone involved. We were worried sick when he ran away in his teens. When he showed back up here, we found a place for him to go. One of our friends took him in, and quite frankly that was the best thing that could’ve happened for him. He straightened out after that and he made something of himself. It scared the hell out of us to discover that he was back in your life that day at the hospital.

But we had the opportunity to talk to him, to see that he had finally grown up and calmed down. He understood why we did what we did, why can't you?" My father's voice cracked from his restrained emotion and I was desperately trying to understand what they had done. Unfortunately, I just couldn't make peace with it.

I started walking to the front door. As I went to open the door, I felt my father's hand grasped around my arm. "Where are you going, Paige?"

I turned on my heel and glared at him. "I'm leaving!"

His grip tightened on my arm.

“You are not going anywhere in this storm, Paige. It’s dangerous!”

I ripped my arm out of his grasp and opened the front door. “Don’t worry about me, dad, I’m a grown ass adult now. Neither of you have the right or the ability to make decisions for me anymore. And I’m thankful for that, because you’ve apparently never understood what I needed. I could have avoided all these years of pain and loss if you’d just taken Buddy in when he needed you.”

With that, I turned and walked out into the storm. Thunder continued rumbling above my head and lightning lit up the sky as sheets of rain poured down

on top of me. I reached behind my back to pull the hood of the sweatshirt over my head and then I took off in a dead run away from the building.

“Paige!”

I ignored my father and kept running. I needed to get away from them, from everything and be by myself to think. I didn't have a particular destination in mind as I ran, so I just entered the woods at the back of the property. Even at night, I knew these woods like the back of my hand and I was able to find my way to a small clearing that I used to play in as a child. The rain pelted down on my body and I was thoroughly soaked within seconds,

but the last thing I cared about at that moment was my physical comfort. The storm was a perfect outward reflection of everything I was feeling inside and I sat down at the base of a large oak tree that stood in the middle of the clearing. My body was racked by uncontrollable sobs and my eyes and throat hurt from the emotional rollercoaster that the day had turned into. I was vacillating between anger, grief and feelings of utter loss and betrayal as the rain continued to pour over me. I was so caught up in my despair that I didn't care that a large puddle had formed around me. The physical discomfort was welcoming because it distracted me from the tortuous emotions that were tearing me

apart on the inside. I closed my eyes and lifted my face to the rain. My body jumped in response to the loud claps of thunder, but I absorbed the storm, became one with the chaos that was stirring the atmosphere around me.

The storm never calmed as I sat in that clearing and I lost track of time. The rain was so loud and so heavy that you couldn't see or hear anything around you. I was taken by surprise when I was suddenly grabbed and pulled up from the ground. I jumped in surprise and was instantly on the defensive. The hood of the sweatshirt was waterlogged from the rain and it covered my eyes blocking me from seeing the person who had grabbed me. I struggled against the hold, but,

despite my struggle, I was pulled against a large chest and wrapped within a large set of arms.

“What the hell are you doing sitting alone in the woods in the middle of a storm, Paige?”

Daemon’s deep voice startled me, but then I instantly stopped struggling in response. I suddenly felt guilty for what my parents had just told me and tears escaped my eyes. Regardless of the guilt, I was relieved to have him near me and my arms went around his waist.

I laid my head against his chest and words started pouring from my mouth as I confessed everything that had

been done to him. “They abandoned you, Daemon. They pushed you away and refused to help you because of me...” My voice was muffled by the hood over my head and Daemon pushed it back in order to hear what I was saying.

I looked up to find a hard expression on his face. Even in the darkness, his eyes were crystal clear and I was frozen in reaction to his stare. Guilt, sadness and anger battled it out in those beautiful eyes and I gazed up at him, silently begging him for forgiveness for what my parents had done. He stood in front of me, soaked from the rain and it was probably one of the most beautiful sights I’d ever seen. His normally messy hair was plastered around his face and

drops fell from the tips. Rivulets of water trailed the curve of his jaw and his mouth. His shirt and pants were also plastered to him and every muscle was defined by the material.

“...My parents screwed up your life, Daemon, and it was my fault!”

Daemon's expression softened at my words and he pulled me even closer against him. He rested his head on top of mine and I felt his chest move back and forth from the large sigh that escaped him. “Damsel, I know what your parents did. We had several days in the hospital to discuss what happened and, I'll admit, I was angry at first. But I thought about who they were protecting and I couldn't

stay upset with them.”

He pulled me away so that he could look down at me as he said, “If I had to turn my back on every single person in this world in order to protect you, I would. I don’t blame your parents for having made that same decision. In fact, I can only respect them for having taken steps to protect you. I’m thankful they did what they did. You need to forgive them; I have.”

“But you were just a child. And on top of that, you were an abused child. They are supposed to help people like that, not turn their backs on them. Because of me, my parents ruined your life!” I began to cry harder and I felt

ashamed. I buried my face in my hands, but was quickly corrected when Daemon placed a finger under my chin to turn my face back to him.

“First off, Damsel, my life was not ruined. I run successful businesses and I have you; those are the only two things I will ever need. Second, your parents were not the cause of any difficulties I faced when I was young. My father was that cause. Quite frankly, I should be apologizing to you. If it wasn't for his actions, none of this would have ever happened. His abuse affected not only me and my mom, but you and your parents as well. You lived your life pining for a best friend that was stripped from you and you became hard and

closed off as a result. Your parents had to make a decision that went against everything they believed in. But their decision was wise and well-founded. I was a screwed up kid, Damsel. There's no telling what could have happened between us if your parents hadn't made that decision. I could have ruined things permanently and I never would have forgiven myself."

"So you don't blame me?" My voice was whisper soft, but somehow Daemon still heard me over the pouring rain.

"No, Paige. I don't blame you at all. You are not at fault for anything, and neither are your parents."

I looked into Daemon's eyes and saw that he truly meant what he was saying. He'd forgiven my parents for their decision and actually appreciated what they had done. It would be foolish for me to continue holding a grudge against them for what their actions did to him; but could I forgive the fact that they betrayed me in the process?

"We need to sit down and talk about all of this Daemon. There is still so much I don't know that I want to know about you..." Daemon's placed his finger on my mouth to silence me.

"I promise you, I will tell you everything there is to know, but now is not the time." He removed his finger and

placed a kiss where it had once been. “Paige, I love you with every fiber of my being. What’s important for you to know now is that I never forgot about you. I never gave up hope that someday I would have you again. You know I tried to come back for you, but the time was not right. I needed to grow up and your parents did me a favor by sending me to the man who could finally show me how.” His hand reached up to brush the hair away from my face. A mischievous grin broke out on his face as he said, “So, I’m going to return the favor.”

I was confused by his statement and my face must have shown it because he chuckled before saying, “You are out of control, my dear. Twice today, I’ve

had to rescue your beautiful ass from the woods. And the only reason those rescues were necessary was because you let your emotions control you and you made decisions based on those emotions.” His expression suddenly became tender as he said, “You have to stop running, Paige. You can’t keep doing that every time you are angry or hurt. You also need to stop making rash decisions because you are being stubborn. You’ve done some pretty stupid things today, Paige and I’m now determined to break that stubborn streak in you once and for all. I’ve gone easy on you up until now. We are going to put a stop to that starting tomorrow. In addition to getting you under control

emotionally, I also intend to train you physically.”

I wasn't sure how Daemon intended to get me under control mentally, but the physical training sounded fun. I gave him a weak smile and sniffled loudly before saying, “Why would you train me, Daemon, if you don't want me fighting? I mean, what's the point if you won't let me go after Chris?”

Daemon laughed a deep belly laugh and then placed a soft kiss on my lips. “Because you have a unique ability of pissing people off. It's best you know how to *actually* defend yourself. Lucky hits aren't always going to save you. On

top of that, the physical training will help with the emotional control. It's how I was taught to keep myself under control and now I'll be the one to teach it to you."

Daemon's thumbs came up and wiped the tears from my cheeks. The gesture was sweet, but somewhat useless. The rain was still soaking us and I chuckled at the wasted effort.

"I want to help you end this with Chris, Paige. I'm worried about your safety with that jackass running around free and I honestly believe that if we work together, we can find him and hand him over to the police. I agree that the authorities are taking too long, and I

want to help you do what you need to do about him. But you have to promise me, Paige; if I train you, if I stand by your side as your *partner*, you will do as I say and not do anything else without running it past me first. Can you promise me that?”

I was instantly calmed and comforted by his offer. Rather than standing in my way or making me stand on my own, he wanted to stand by my side in the hunt for Chris. I was a little annoyed that he wanted me to do as I was told, but I was sure there were ways to get around that. I mean, what could he do? Lock me up?

I nodded my head curtly in

acceptance of his offer. When he registered the fact that I had submitted to his wishes, his head came down and his mouth crashed against mine. My lips instantly parted to allow him entrance as his hand wrapped around the back of my head to pull me closer into the kiss. My body, mind and spirit soared in this moment. I had my Buddy back, even if he was now known to me as Daemon. Regardless of the name he went by, that void inside my heart was once again filled and I felt like I could fly from the emotions that were built within me.

Daemon broke our kiss and took my hand. "Can we get out of here now? I'm really not enjoying the weather."

I laughed and nodded my head in agreement. As we made our way out of the woods I asked, “So how did you find me anyway? Did my parents call you?”

Daemon stopped in his tracks and turned to face me. “Your parents did call, but I was already in my truck driving over here. When the storms started, I knew you wouldn’t be able to drive home on your bike, so I wanted to be here for you when you were ready to leave. I wasn’t very happy to find out that you had run off into the middle of the woods during a thunderstorm. Once again, you could have gotten yourself killed.”

I balked at his statement and

released his hold so I could cross my arms over my chest. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Daemon. There’s nothing unsafe about these woods, even during a storm. I know them better than anyone else.”

Daemon opened his mouth to respond when lightning struck a tree about a hundred feet behind us. The tall, thin tree cracked and exploded where the lightning hit and came crashing down to the ground with a loud thud. Daemon and I looked at the tree and then each other and a single eyebrow arched on his face. “Not dangerous? I beg to differ. Let’s get the hell out of here and go home.”

He took my hand again and as we half walked, half ran down the path back to the Center, I was still in a state of shock at how my world had been completely turned upside down in a matter of hours. There were changes that happened that made me elated and grateful, but others that would take time for me to process and accept. I was nervous about the training Daemon promised he would put me through, and I was absolutely frightened about his insistence that I ‘obey.’ I was also unsure if I would be able to give up that much say in my life, but I was willing to try... for him. A small part of me felt relief at the possibilities of what my future would hold with Daemon, while other parts of

me were terrified that everything could come crumbling down at my feet. I laughed to myself when I realized that Daemon had once again won the power struggle between us, but I was also impressed with his strength and his ability to better me at our game.

As we ran out of the woods, hand in hand, it occurred to me that by losing my game with Daemon, I had gained a competent ally in the one I played with Chris. That game was still left unfinished and I was determined to be the victor. But I felt more assured, and I was more confident in my ability to succeed with Daemon by my side. Maybe Momma had been right when she said that there is power in numbers.

Alone, I had screwed up and given Chris the ability to hurt not only me, but my friends as well. But that was all about to change because Daemon and I were in this together.

We passed by my parents' apartment and climbed into Daemon's truck. I felt bad for soaking his interior, but I wasn't ready to stop and ask for spare clothes from Momma. I couldn't face them after what they'd done. Not yet. Eventually I would have to talk to them, to sit down and try to find understanding and forgiveness in my heart for the decisions they'd been forced to make. I didn't remember the same version of Buddy that everyone else seemed to know and I knew that I

would also have to talk with Daemon to gain a better understanding of the circumstances and events that I had long forgotten. I was excited to train with Daemon, and even more excited to finally put our pasts behind us and be able to look toward our future. I knew it wouldn't be easy, but I was ready to move forward with the man Buddy had become. Much like the road to recovery Momma had always talked about, I knew I had a path that I would now be forced to walk along.

As we drove along the rain drenched roads, my mind drifted back to that circle of women at The Center from when I was seventeen. I smiled when I remembered their joined hands and their

fortitude and determination to overcome the abuse and oppression at the hands of others. Like them, I had a battle to face in order to gain back my freedom and my life. This time, I had to stand up and make the decision to let go and trust the people who were trying to help me. I had to learn to forgive and I had to learn to let people get close. It wouldn't be easy, but I was determined to finally shake the demons that had always plagued me.

This time, it was my turn to fight.

**Paige and Daemon's story concludes
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M.S. Willis

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