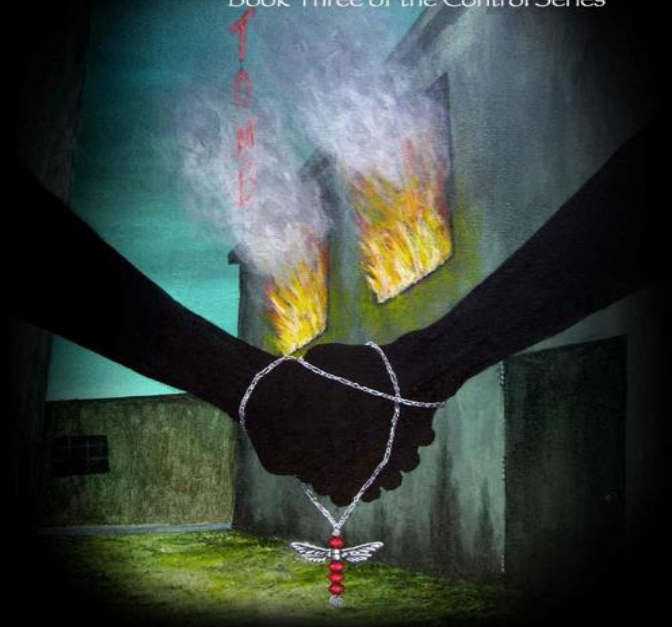


Conquer

Book Three of the Control Series



M S Willis

CONQUER
Book Three of the Control Series

By M.S. Willis

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Control Series

Book One – Control

Book Two – Conflict

Book Three – Conquer

Coming in 2014

Captured – Alex and Ava's Story

Changed – Annie and Logan's story

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Epilogue

PROLOGUE

~~ Daemon ~~

I walked along the narrow dirt road. Dust kicked up around me as my heavy steps met the compacted earth. My jeans were getting covered, but it didn't matter. I haven't been able to wash them for weeks anyway. I wasn't even sure what I was walking into, but I had to know the answer to a question that has haunted me for way too fucking long.

I carried her with me through every one of those nightmares they called 'homes'. I still carry her; through every street, every fight, every

drink, and every stupid whore that gives me an hour or two of her time. However, she shouldn't be there with those women. She doesn't belong with them. She belongs where I shelter her, in my dreams and fantasies. It's actually quite messed up; even when I've imagined how it would feel to hold her, to kiss her, to have my way with every single part of her...I don't even know what she looks like. I imagine there's blonde hair, big blue eyes, but then the rest just isn't there! It's the most frustrating thing, to fantasize about someone who you can't see, who you don't know, who you have no idea why you're fantasizing about them in the first place. What's worse? I can't

even base my image of her on how she looked when I last saw her...

...She was only six.

Sounds sick doesn't it? Well, it is, but not in the way you think.

You see, the sick part is that I can't get her off my mind. It's been almost ten years and I still have this suffocating emptiness within my chest. I carry it around with this old, dirty necklace that, over the years, has kinked and tarnished and become bent out of shape. The damn thing reminds me of myself sometimes; neglected and beaten, but still carrying that essence of her within it.

I held the damn thing in my hand as I walked up to where I hoped I could still find her. Looking down at it, I clenched my hand into a fist around the necklace and then turned my hand over. My skin was dirty and my knuckles were raw from the brawl I got into the night before. I'm sure my opponent's blood was still on my skin and I probably should have cleaned up before making my way out here, but I didn't have time. When I woke up this morning, it was like a light had turned on in my mind. I was suddenly and completely driven by the need to come find her, to find out if she remembered me, to find out why I couldn't shake her from the very essence of my being.

Plus, I had a promise to keep...

The rhythmic thud of my boots kept time with my breath. In, out...thud, thud... Occasionally, the long, quiet walk would be interrupted by the call of a bird, or the wind as it careened through the tree canopies in the forest that surrounded me. I was lucky enough to catch a ride down the state road, but my luck ran out at the beginning of this long, dirt strewn path. Guess the guy didn't want to test his shocks on the many dips and holes that littered this road. Can't say I blame him. I wondered why he took the time to pick up a dirty street kid and I was nervous that he was one of those sick bastards who like to take

advantage of teenage boys.

He ended up being a decent guy. I felt bad for swiping his wallet, but a kid has to eat, you know?

I finally found my way to the driveway leading up to The Center. It wasn't much different from the road leading up to it, just more dirt and rocks. You would think that after all of these years, they would have paved the damn thing. However, making this left turn meant something. It meant I was closer. To her...

The silence out here was deafening. I was so used to the sounds of the city; sirens, and people talking,

shouting and laughing, the sounds of engines from the cars that passed and music escaping the doors of the clubs and bars. I wasn't used to hearing... nothing. Not a damn thing, except for birds and bugs and the wind that kept blowing against me, like it was trying to knock me back from finding her. But I wouldn't be deterred. There was something so special about this girl that I couldn't forget her after all this time. It was about time I find out why.

When the building came in to view, I stopped suddenly. I haven't seen this place since I watched it disappear out the back window of my mother's car. Her friend had driven it to pick us up that day and she promised me she

would bring me back to see Paige. Mom was so happy to be leaving, to be returning...to him. He ruined everything. Every fucking thing he touched was ruined and even that last promise made to me by my mom as we left this place was ruined...by him.

My fists clenched tightly as I thought about my father. The blood within my veins boiled and I could feel the throbbing through my neck and temples from the increase in my blood pressure. I wish that bastard hadn't taken the easy way out. I wish I had been the one to put that bullet in his brain. I had to shake the thoughts of him as I approached the building, the last thing I needed when I saw her was

the anger he'd made sure to scar me with when I was younger. I needed to get my fucking head together before showing up dirty, bruised and bloody on her doorstep.

As I approached the building, my eyes took in the large entryway doors. Still the same. Dark and ominous, the wood had weathered through the years but you could tell those doors were still solid and sound. Much like this place. I remembered when I first arrived here with my mom. She'd made me feel hopeful, like, for once, she'd made the right decision. And she had...until she decided to return to the man who would eventually destroy her. Mom was right though. I did find hope and beauty

behind those doors...and it came in a cute little blonde package that annoyed the living crap out of me while, at the same time, made me smile more than I ever had in my life.

Would she remember how I hurt her? Has she forgiven me if she does?

I started walking towards those large entry doors, but then stopped when I noticed the camera tracking my path from the corner above them. That's new. I backed away and moved to go around the building to the back yard. Knowing Paige, she would be out there soaking in the sun. Maybe I'll find her in a tree, or sitting amongst the tall grass. Or maybe, I won't. Do

teenage girls still enjoy the activities of their youth? Maybe I should have checked the mall.

The facility is massive and I was surprised to realize just how big it was. It could have grown since I was young, or maybe I just don't remember the specific details from my youth. But I'll remember that back yard. It's the place where I spent the most time with my best friend.

I reached the end of the building and looked out over the wetlands. It was just as I remembered it. The trees had grown taller and there were new trees in places they hadn't grown before, but it was the same. The

sunlight rolled along the tips of the swaying grasses and dragonflies buzzed about the marsh and fields. The branches of the trees creaked and groaned from the wind blowing through and my eyes wouldn't stop moving to take in its beauty.

I laughed when I looked at the camphor trees and I remembered those damn climbing matches I had with Paige. I never could win against her little form. She weighed so little back then that she resembled a squirrel crawling up into the tops of the canopies. I never pointed out the reason she always won. She needed something to be proud of. I mean, really, I was better at everything else.

My eyes swung out closer to the water's edge and, like a shot to the chest, I stood stunned and motionless. The necklace dug into my palm of my hand as my grip tightened and my heart felt like it was trying to beat its way free from my chest.

Among the grass, sat the most beautiful girl...no...young woman...I had ever seen. Her long blonde hair cascaded down behind her and the sun would glint off bits of it, making it sparkle. Her face was tilted up into the warmth of the sun and her face...god...her face. The expression on her face was one of pure contentment. There was no pain, no strife; there was no hint of wicked thoughts and she didn't

wear the inch of makeup that was now stylish with girls her age. She was pure. She was more than I could have ever imagined. It was like she was part of the sunlight itself, radiant and glowing. Seeing her again only cemented these confusing feelings I had about her. She called to me in ways that I've never felt before. I was drawn to her so strongly, it was as if my very soul was attempting to reach out to touch her.

My feet started moving toward her of their own accord and my cheeks hurt from the width of my smile. Paige... she's still here...

I was half running to get to her

when a hand suddenly grabbed around my arm and pulled me back.

“Why are you here and where in the hell do you think you are going?”

I ripped my arm away and turned to face the man who was speaking to me. My body went into an instant fighting stance and I was ready to tear apart anyone who got in my way.

“Buddy?!” “Oh my goodness, Buddy is that you?”

Paige’s father stood in front of me. He’d grown older and it felt off to stand taller than him now. I cringed at the sound of the nickname my mother had given me so many years ago. I

didn't want to have to answer to him, so I simply opened my hand and held out the necklace. He looked down and gasped when it confirmed that I was who he thought I was. He looked back up and smiled, but I could tell there was something else going on behind those kind eyes.

"My name is Daemon." I let out a breath to calm down before saying, "I came to see Paige. I promised her I'd come back."

Mr. Stone nodded his head in understanding. He reached out to grab my arm again and started pulling me towards the building. When I hesitated, he turned to me and said, "Son. I know

you are here to see my daughter, but as her father, I have the right to tell you 'no' and you need to respect that."

My chest constricted at the thought of not being allowed to speak to Paige. I tried to remove my arm from his grasp again, but his grip was much stronger this time. I shook my head and looked back out to see if Paige had noticed me talking to her father. She was no longer where I saw her and I wondered if she had seen me and left, or if she had simply laid down to look at the clouds and was now obscured by the grass.

"Come with me, Bud...Daemon. We're going to get you help boy, but

you need to listen to me if you don't want to go to jail for trespassing."

My head shot back to Mr. Stone and my heart tightened a little bit that he would threaten me. He must have seen the shock on my face because his expression softened before he said, "I want to help you, son. But you have to respect my wishes when it comes to my daughter. Come with me. I won't send you back to foster care. I know somebody else who can help you and you won't be back in the system. Will you trust me, please?"

My stomach growled from my hunger and I looked down at the dirty and torn clothing that covered my

body. Going back into foster care was out of the question, but if he knew somewhere I could go that kept me away from that nightmare on the streets, I was willing to give it a try. I was tired and beat down from having lived on the streets for almost a year and I was willing to try anything that would save me from the shit my life had become.

“Will you trust me and come inside to talk, Daemon?”

I looked into his honest eyes and saw that he was earnest about his offer. My breath huffed out of me and I turned back to look for Paige one last time. I couldn't see her and my heart

fell when I realized we wouldn't be reunited today as I had hoped.

But that didn't mean forever...

My eyes met Mr. Stone's again and I nodded my head at him. "Yeah, okay, let's go inside."

Chapter One

~~ Paige ~~

The truck rocked slightly as Daemon pulled down the long dirt driveway of the Center. The rain was pounding against the metal and glass and the sound was deafening as we drove. Daemon turned onto the dirt road leading away from my parents' place and I watched as it disappeared in the distance. I felt disjointed and unsure of myself after discovering that Daemon was Buddy....that he had returned...that he had kept his promise...and that my parents were to blame for the years that I had gone without him. It was perpetual heartbreak, a constant longing, and an

emptiness that, until now, never stood a chance of being filled. And it was all caused by the two people who had never lied to me before...I should correct that statement; the two people who lied to me the most.

My head fell back to rest against the seat. I was soaking wet and muddy and I was glad that the seats were leather. Had they been cloth, I would have ruined them in the condition I was in. Okay, so maybe sitting in the middle of the woods during a thunderstorm wasn't the brightest idea, but when your world comes tumbling down around you, good decision making doesn't normally follow.

I spun my head to look in Daemon's direction. It was so dark in the vehicle that I could barely make out more than his silhouette as we drove down the dirt road. I was astonished and still in shock over the revelation of who he was, who he had been to me. A million questions ravaged my battered mind, each revealing itself only to be quickly lost to the next.

“Why did it take you so long?”

Daemon's gaze flicked to me before returning to the road. “So long for what?”

“To tell me who you are. Or, I guess I should say, to *admit* to me who

you are. Would you have said anything if I hadn't found the necklace?"

Daemon let out a long resigned sigh. His gaze quickly flicked to me again. He seemed to be running through many thoughts in that beautiful head and I instantly wondered why he needed to ponder his response. It should be simple enough to answer my question, but he appeared to be struggling with what to say.

Daemon cleared his throat. "I... uh...a couple different reasons, I guess. I'm really not sure how to explain it. I had every intention to tell you, Paige. It just seemed like it was never the right time with everything that was going on in

your life.”

An indignant snort escaped me. “You’re right. I mean, obviously, the times we were talking about Buddy, er, you, weren’t the best moments for that little disclosure. I’m definitely glad you waited to let me find out on my own. Surprises are awesome when they are life altering.” He smiled in response to my obvious sarcasm.

His voice was defeated as he finally answered. “Damsel, I just didn’t know how you would react. It really just comes down to that. When I first figured out who you were at Tomb, I didn’t know if you hated me. I saw you fight off Chris and the anger in you

concerned me. I left you alone because I was under the impression that you had a boyfriend and were happy. I didn't want to fuck that up. Then you came back two nights later. I tried to stay away, but I just...couldn't. I was so confused when you first told me about Buddy, about what you remembered. It was like you placed me on a pedestal or something and, in all honesty, I was shocked. I didn't understand why you remembered things the way you did.”

My head rolled back forward and I looked out over the road ahead of us. The rain was letting up and it no longer hammered against the car. “So after that? What? Your reasoning doesn't make sense, Daemon. Why didn't you

tell me when we were at The Center?”

“I spoke to your parents at the hospital when you were unconscious. You should have seen their faces when they walked in...the shock between seeing you in the condition you were in and then seeing me...” He paused a beat as he remembered that day. “...It’s like they questioned whether I was involved. Then we talked and they calmed down. They told me about you, about how you didn’t remember what I was like when we were kids. Your mom begged me not to say anything, she knew you would find out the truth and she was worried what that would do to you...mentally.” That last word was spoken carefully. I wondered if Daemon and my parents

thought I was psychologically unbalanced.

I opened my mouth to inquire further as to what my parents told him, but was interrupted by Daemon's phone. He pulled the phone from the center console and looked at the caller I.D. His expression instantly darkened before he put the phone to his ear and gruffly answered. "What?"

Daemon's hands tightened on the wheel and I grabbed the dash when the vehicle swerved. He hit the brakes and pulled over as he listened to whoever was on the other end of the call. "What the fuck do you mean he came back? Where the fuck is he now? How the fuck

did he get in? Where was my fucking security?!”

With the amount of F-bombs being thrown, I had a feeling whatever Daemon was being told was not good news.

“Yeah, I’m on my way now. You’d better round up ALL of the bouncers and explain to them that if that psychopath gets inside my club AGAIN, it will be their jobs!!” Daemon ended the call and threw the phone back down into the center console. I jumped a little at the force of the throw and looked to him in question.

A resigned sigh escaped his lips

before he turned to me and said, “Chris was apparently in Tomb again. Once again, Logan spotted him and once fucking AGAIN, he got out before Logan could get to him! I need to head over there.”

“Well, then I’m going with you.” My voice was matter of fact as I spoke.

“The hell you are...”

I put up my hand to stop Daemon from continuing his little alpha male rant. “Not this time, Daemon. You can’t tell me no. You just finished promising me we would be *partners* in this thing with Chris. Last I checked ‘partners’ indicated that we would do this

together. I'm not allowing you to turn this into a hypocritical situation where you get to act alone and I always have to wait for you before I'm allowed to make a decision. That is bullshit and SO not happening."

Daemon raised his hands and then brought them back down forcefully on the steering wheel. His palm accidentally hit the center and a little 'beep' sounded from the truck. "Dammit Paige! No! I refuse to let you go anywhere near him!"

My mouth turned up into an arrogant smirk. "That doesn't sound like *partnership* to me Daemon. Guess this means I don't need to run things past you

after all.” My arms crossed over my chest and I turned my head slowly in his direction. If his eyes could shoot lasers, I would have been zapped into oblivion at that moment. His normally beautiful mouth was turned up into an angry grimace and his eyebrows were sharply furrowed down the center of his face. I smiled an innocent smile because, for once, I had the advantage with him. It felt good to corner him.

His hand came up and grabbed me by the cheeks. He held my face in place and my mouth was forced into a little ‘o’ from the force of his fingers. His eyes burned into mine. I couldn’t quite tell, due to the shadows, but I think his face was turning a deep shade of scarlet. He

was mad and I was annoyed that he thought he could take it out on my face. I tried to jerk out of his grasp, but I was unable to pull away. Damn, he had some strong hands.

His authoritative voice sounded when he asked, “Why...must you be...so fucking stubborn?” He let go of my face and I rubbed at my cheek with my hand. “Seriously, Paige. You don’t need to be anywhere NEAR that club while Chris is running around.”

I held up my finger in his face. “First off, a kid I knew when I was young taught me to never put up with shit, therefore, there will be NO angry face grabbing in this relationship...”

Daemon smiled the minute I chastised him for manhandling me.

“...and second, Tomb is probably the safest place for me to be right now. I mean, you have no one at the apartment to watch me since Alex isn’t around, and Chris could be hiding in wait. Maybe he’s trying to lure you away from the apartment so he can get to me. Hmmm, did you ever think of that? What if you drop me off and, while you are at Tomb, Chris somehow breaks in and kills me.” My finger dropped and I smiled sweetly again. “You’ll have to live with that on your conscience forever, with me being dead and all.”

Cornered him again...I'm feeling

quite proud of myself tonight.

“Sonofabitch!” The fact that Daemon mumbled that explicative was a clear indication that I had won this round. “Fine. I’ll take you with me, but you stay by my side the ENTIRE time and if Chris is spotted, you stay as far away as possible. In fact, if he’s spotted, you are to go lock yourself in the storage room. I had a couch put in there after the last time I dragged you there.” The corner of his mouth turned up into a smirk. “You should be quite comfortable.”

My jaw dropped at his admission and he chuckled in response. “Wow, feeling pretty sure of yourself there,

Daemon. As if I would let you drag me in that storage room again.” I let out a little outraged huff, but couldn’t help my smile.

Daemon threw the truck back into gear and pulled out on the road. My body was thrown back into the seat from the speed he was driving and it took us very little time to get to the club. Daemon parked in a reserved spot in the back and ushered me in through the rear service door. As soon as we entered the club, my breath rushed out of me and I suddenly realized how much I had missed going out. The music was pounding, it was so loud. The club was busy and people were packed together like sardines. A live band was playing

and, although I had never heard of them before, they were actually quite decent. Daemon took my hand and tucked me closely behind him as he navigated his way to Logan's bar. As soon as Logan caught sight of us, he frowned and quickly came over to speak to Daemon. He waved at me before leaning over the bar to speak with Daemon quietly.

With my hand still enveloped in Daemon's hand, I turned to look out over the crowd. I chuckled to myself when I spotted the typical women in their typical club gear. Skin was showing and drinks were being guzzled. The men were in their standard black shirt, blue jean combination. Nothing had changed since I'd been here last. Okay, so it had

only been a couple of months, but it felt like forever since I'd been at Tomb. My eyes continued perusing the drunken debauchery when a familiar face came in to view.

Alex was standing at the guardrails overlooking the pit. A beer was tilted up to his lips and the brim of his ballcap was pulled so low, it nearly touched the bottle. To his right was a shorter, curvy girl with short blond hair tucked underneath a black pageboy cap. She wore a simple, black halter top with a pair of jeans and some decent boots. I was impressed with her appearance and curious who she was. I started to walk over to say 'hi' when Daemon's grip tightened on mine and he pulled me back

in his direction.

Leaning down to whisper loudly in my ear, he said, “Where in the hell do you think you’re going?!”

My eyebrows shot up in response to his curt tone and I indicated in Alex’ direction with my thumb. “I was going to go see Alex. He’s standing near the pit. I thought it would be okay to see him since he’s previously been given *babysitting* status.”

Daemon’s eyes shot over to where Alex and the mystery blonde were standing. A smile peeked out at the corner of his mouth. His expression softened somewhat and he let go of my

hand. “Fine. Go say ‘hi’. I need to go in the back office to meet with the police. Stay with Alex.”

I saluted Daemon before turning on my heel to go discover the identity of Alex’ new friend. I dodged through the thick crowd and eventually made my way over to where he was standing. Alex spotted me as I approached. His hand dropped down to grasp onto the mystery blonde’s hand. He started walking in my direction while dragging his cute date along with him.

Once we were close enough to talk, he leaned down and put his free arm around my shoulder to hug me to him. His head came down so he could speak

close to my ear and be heard over the booming music. “Hey. What are you doing here? Did everything go okay after I left?”

I looked over to Alex’ date fully expecting a jealous sneer to be plastered across her face from Alex’ proximity to me. Unfortunately, I’d had too many run-ins with jealous women when it came to Alex. Thinking back, I guess it was to be expected considering Alex and my previous *arrangement*. I was pleasantly surprised to find his date smiling brightly, appearing anxious to meet me. She didn’t seem to have a jealous bone in her body. I was liking the girl already.

I nodded ‘hello’ in her direction before turning back to Alex. “Yeah. Funny story, actually. Apparently, Daemon is Buddy.” I made that statement nonchalantly, thinking it might lessen the blow of what I just revealed. It didn’t. Alex’ jaw dropped and his arm tightened around my shoulder. I shrugged out of his hold and looked up into a shocked and somewhat pissed expression.

“What?!”

I sighed and decided Alex would need clarification as to my statement. “Daemon is Buddy. As in, they are the same person. As in, Daemon is the adult version of the kid I’ve been thinking

about for most of my life. Buddy is Daemon.” There. I think that broke it down into the basics. No more confusion.

I was wrong.

Alex’ face twisted up into an oddly unreadable expression and he shook his head slightly as if he was trying to connect back with reality. “How the....I don’t...are you sure?”

I chuckled at Alex’ reaction. It was actually quite similar to mine when I found out the truth, well, minus the screaming and crying and falling on the floor part.

I reached up and patted Alex on the

back. “I know. It’s a tough bit of information to swallow, but he’s telling the truth. Not only did I find the necklace, but he also has a picture of himself with his mom. It’s him Alex. It’s Buddy.” I smiled knowingly at him before asking, “So, who’s your friend?”

Alex appeared to shake himself from his shock and suddenly turned to introduce me to his date. “Paige this is Ava. Ava this is Paige.”

Ava reached over and shook my hand. She smiled brightly and she had a friendly demeanor to her. We hadn’t spoken one word, yet somehow, I could tell this girl was laid back and easy to get along with. “Nice to meet you, Ava.

Where'd you two meet?"

Ava looked up at Alex and smiled an infectious smile. Alex scooted closer to her to wrap his arm around her shoulder. He pulled her closer into his body and turned to me. "Ava and I met at that tattoo convention I told you about. She was photographing the event and we just happened to start talking and it went from there, I guess."

Ava chuckled at Alex' story and said, "Well, 'talked' might not be the right word. Alex actually yelled at me for invading his space with my camera; even though I was at least five feet away. You've got one hell of a hothead for a friend, Paige..."

I laughed at her description. Yes. Alex was, in fact, a hothead, but you had to love him for it.

“...Anyways, so after he started blowing a gasket over me doing *my job*, I let him have it for being an asshole.

We didn't speak for the rest of the convention, but ran into each other again when it was over. I had some equipment issues in the parking lot and he came to the rescue, luckily.”

I could tell there was more to this story by the way their eyes kept flicking to one another, but I decided not to pry too deeply. I was instantly happy for both of them, and especially, Alex. Ava seemed to be a down to earth girl and I

hoped that he finally found someone who could be as good to him as I knew he could be to her.

Ava surprised me when she suddenly turned to me and said, “So, I’ve heard a lot about you Paige. Is it true you went after some nut job by yourself today? Alex said you got stuck in a tree.”

What the hell?!

My eyes narrowed and I looked up at Alex. He had a slight grin tugging at the corner of his mouth as he looked around the club while refusing to look back at me. I looked back over at Ava and she had a sheepish look to her face.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring it up if it’s something that bothers you.”

I shook my head and responded, “Don’t worry about it, Ava. Apparently, on top of being a hothead, Alex also has a big mouth...” I paused to quickly glare at Alex. “...But, he was being truthful. I, unfortunately, did have an issue while tracking someone out at one of the preserves today, but, thankfully, everything turned out okay. The man I was tracking escaped, but no one was hurt, so that’s the good part.”

Ava opened her mouth to respond but was stopped by the deafening sound of an explosion. The floor beneath me shook from the blast and I turned my

head in the direction of the loud screams that resonated throughout the club. When I caught sight of the area by the right bar, I saw people running in all directions attempting to escape flames that were starting to consume the bar area and dance floor. I was frozen in place as my eyes took in the pandemonium and chaos that was unfurling while my mind was struggling to grasp what had just occurred. The ringing in my ears was prominent above the screams and cries from the patrons and, like a tidal wave coming straight for us, people poured from the pit as they attempted to reach the exits. I froze in place as I watched a sea of people quickly moving in my direction. Some fell as they tried to

shove against each other and were trampled underfoot while others kept moving in an attempt to escape the smoke filled club.

I felt a hand grasp around my arm and start pulling me in the direction of the front exit, but I was frozen in place as I took in the nightmare that had developed around us. People with blood pouring from their heads and bodies were mixed in with others that had no apparent injuries. When I finally grasped what had happened around me, I felt a stronger pull on my arm and my feet tripped over themselves as I was pulled backwards. I started to lose my footing when I felt one large arm come around my waist to keep me from falling

to the ground. Before I could turn to see who had taken hold of me, I was suddenly enveloped in a wall of bodies as they tried to shove past me towards the front doors. My body started to fall once more from the crush of the screaming crowd, but I was hoisted up and forcefully pulled toward the doors. My head turned in the direction of the person who had hold of me. When my eyes met Alex', I noticed he was screaming something at me, but I couldn't hear what he was saying. Like a rubber band snapping back, reality hit me and I was released from the stupor the chaotic events had created. My feet started moving of their own accord as I was dragged behind Alex. He held me

with one arm, while holding Ava in the other. As we were pushed against the people in front of us, I remembered that Daemon was still in his office. Panic flooded my system and I turned to go find him. Just as I turned, one of the large beams on the right side of the bar broke free from the ceiling. The beam creaked and groaned as it swung down into the fire below it. The screams became louder following the crash of that beam and sparks flew through the air where it landed.

I pulled against Alex' grasp as I tried to run back towards Daemon's office. Alex' hand gripped tighter and I found myself being jerked back in his direction. "Where the hell are you

going? We have to get out of here NOW!" Alex screamed in my ear while he continued dragging me in the direction of the front exit.

"Let me go, Alex!! Daemon is back there, I have to find him!" My struggles were useless against Alex' hold. My hand desperately attempted to remove his grip from my arm. I tried to dig my feet into the ground to stop Alex from moving me towards the front, but I couldn't gain enough traction to halt the movement. I continued screaming at Alex to release me, but he wouldn't respond to my pleas. The three of us were suddenly crushed together by the swelling crowd as it attempted to squeeze itself through the exit doors.

Alex took that opportunity to wrap his arm around my waist. I continued screaming as he half dragged, half carried me outside.

When the night air hit us, I was relieved as the crowd separated and allowed for breathing room. I attempted to break free of Alex to run back into the building. Alex' hold never loosened and he continued dragging me until we were a good distance from the building. “

“Damn it, Alex, let me go!! I need to go find Daemon. He's still in there!” Tears involuntarily fell from my eyes and my body surged with adrenaline. My fists started striking against Alex' chest and he turned his head to keep

from being hit.

“Paige, STOP! You can’t go back in there! The place is burning to the fucking ground! I’m sure Daemon got out. I am not letting you go back.”

My knees gave out and I collapsed to the ground. The sudden movement knocked Alex off balance and he fell to the ground beside me. I watched as people continued pouring from the building. Sirens blasted the air when the fire trucks and ambulances arrived. Police cars shortly followed and I watched as emergency personnel rushed to help those who were injured.

My eyes moved quickly over the

sea of faces seeking Daemon. My panic level rose higher when I realized that mostly everybody had exited the building, yet he was nowhere to be seen. Alex' arms wrapped around me and I felt Ava hugging on to me from the other side.

“Baby girl, I’m sure he got out of there. It’s his club, he would know how to escape.” Alex’ words were spoken with such conviction, I wondered if he wasn’t trying to convince himself of their truthfulness. Ava was softly crying beside me and I reached out to squeeze her hand. She nodded at my gesture and we stayed huddled together as we waited.

The minutes dragged by as my eyes took in the chaos and carnage that surrounded us. People were crying and looking for their friends. Others laid on the ground waiting for medical help. Many were covered in a mixture of soot and blood. I cringed when I spotted a group of people huddled around a person lying on the ground. I couldn't tell if the person was dead or alive, but my fears for Daemon only multiplied at the sight. Every muscle in my body tensed as I tried to remain still, hoping that he would come walking out of that crowd. When I couldn't take it any longer, I turned to Alex and begged to be released so that I could search for him.

“Please, Alex, please let me go. I

won't go in the building. I can't, they are blasting it with water, but I need to go look for Daemon. He might not see us if we remain sitting on the ground.”

Alex' expression gave away just how torn he was over keeping me on the ground and releasing me to go search. Ava remained quiet as I babbled on about how I needed to go. “Paige, I want to let you go, I do, but I promised your man that when he wasn't around, I would keep you safe. I can't let you go. The crowd is still too thick and I'm afraid you'll get lost in the chaos.

Different emotions were pouring out of me, all resulting in tears that continued to cascade down my face. My

arms came around my mid-section as I became ill with worry. My mind was being assaulted with negative thoughts and concerns. Had I just found Buddy only to lose him again? How could fate be so fucking cruel? Losing him once was enough to damn near destroy me, but to lose him twice? My heart felt like it would tear through my chest and my muscles quivered under the weight of my fears. I was suddenly overtaken by exhaustion and I relaxed into Alex' chest. I continued my desperate search of faces, seeking the blue eyes that would free me from the agonizing weight of fear.

A familiar face came in to view and, although it was not Daemon, I was

relieved to see it nonetheless. Logan approached us looking frantic and emotionally haggard. His normally smiling eyes were turned down and defeated. Even the hint of a smile was absent from his expression and my heart fell when I saw him. He appeared to be limping and I noticed that his shirt was torn. When he reached us, he dropped to the ground in front of me.

“Please tell me you all have seen Daemon.” I felt like I would implode at Logan’s words. The tiny spark of hope that I continued to carry was all but smothered under the realization that nobody had seen Daemon. It had been at least twenty minutes since the explosion and the very real possibility that

Daemon didn't make it hung over us like a shadow that blocked all light. An audible sigh escaped from Alex and I heard him mumble some obscenity after Logan spoke. We didn't have to answer Logan's question for him to know that we had not, in fact, seen Daemon.

The crowd started to spread out and thin as the minutes continued to tick by. The silence amongst our small group was emphasized by the continued cries of the wounded. The fire had been extinguished from the club and I watched intently as rescue personnel came walking out the front doors. Smoke continued to pour from the building and settled like a fog concealing the people wandering around outside. My mood

fell farther as I realized that with the amount of smoke in the air, I wouldn't be able to spot Daemon unless I was practically on top of him.

I know it was wrong. I know that I gave everybody a heart attack with what I did next, but they had to understand. Daemon...Buddy...was out there somewhere and I couldn't just sit around and wait any longer. As soon as Alex' defenses were down and his grip around me had loosened, I shot up and sprinted into the smoke filled environment. I could hear Alex screaming for me to stop, but I shoved past people to get lost within the lingering crowd. I approached every form, every silhouette, every figure that could possibly be

Daemon. People yelled as I ran into them, but once I identified that they weren't the person I was looking for, I ran on to seek out the next possibility. I was frantic in my search, grabbing people and spinning them so that I could see their faces. I moved from one to the next, full of despair that I hadn't yet found the one person I needed to survive this.

As I pushed farther away from where my group of friends were sitting, the smoke became thicker and harder to navigate. I turned to go back in the direction of my friends when a hand grabbed my arm and pulled me against a large, strong chest. I spun on my heel immediately, seeking out Daemon's blue

eyes. My breath was knocked out of me at the sight of the evil glare that met me instead.

“About fucking time, whore! I’ve been waiting for you to separate from the rest of your little group since I blew up this fucking place! I was shocked to see you here. Not only did I get to take out your precious boyfriend, but I get to kill you as well.” Chris’ breath rolled along my cheek as he held me to him. I fought against him with all the strength that I had, but his grip was too strong. His fingers dug into the skin of my arm as his other hand came up around me to cover my mouth. He started dragging me back toward the building and turned a sharp left to go around the side of the club.

My feet continued kicking out as I struggled to gain traction. Desperate to be released, I opened my mouth slightly and bit down on one of his fingers. He let go almost instantly and I screamed out a blood-curdling scream. My body twisted and contorted as I struggled against Chris' continued hold on my arm. He pulled me into his chest once more and I threw my head back, catching him on the nose. He yelled out when I impacted with his face and his grip loosened enough that I could break free. I began running at full speed back towards the front of the building. I spotted a policeman setting up perimeter tape and I slammed into him as I escaped from Chris. The officer spun around and

steadied me.

“Watch where you are going, Miss, you need to be out of this area.”

My arm came up and pointed in the direction where I had last seen Chris. “Please! He went that way, he tried to kidnap me. Please!” The heaving of my chest as I attempted to gain control over my breathing made it difficult to talk and the officer stood there looking at me like I had lost my mind. “Go get him now! Chris Baxter, the man who set this fire is around the building. Fucking go!” I’d lost all patience and was forcefully pushing the officer in the direction of Chris. I could see in his expression the moment he comprehended what I was

saying. He grabbed his radio and called in a request for backup before grabbing his gun and running in the direction I was pointing.

When the officer had run far enough into the fog, I lost sight of him. I stood motionless and watched as five more officers ran past me, following the path the first had taken. My chest heaved from the lack of oxygen in the air and I slowly started walking back to where I knew Alex and the rest of the group would be waiting for me. As I made my way through the smoke, I was once again grabbed and pulled against someone. I didn't hesitate to scream this time and my throat was torn raw. A hand came up over my mouth and I instantly bit down

on the first finger I could isolate. I was released almost instantly and I heard a string of obscenities being yelled out behind me. I took off as quickly as I could and didn't turn back to see who'd grabbed me. I heard heavy footfalls pounding behind me as I was being pursued. Dodging past people, I continued heading in the direction of Alex.

When I spotted the group, I picked up even more speed at the promise of safety. Their expressions were odd as I approached and I threw myself into Alex' lap as soon as I was close by. I buried my head in his chest, sure that Chris would not have continued pursuing me this close to where my friends were

located.

“Paige? What the hell are you running from?” Alex’ voice sounded anxious and relieved all at the same time.

“Chris....Chris was following me. He tried to grab me when I was looking for Daemon. He was chasing me, Alex.” Words poured from me as I attempted to explain my behavior. Alex grabbed my head and pulled my face up to look in my eyes.

“What in the hell are you talking about? I think you confused someone else with Chris.”

“No!” The force of my denial

made me jump. “No! That fucker is out there in the crowd. I know it was him! He tried to drag me around the building.” At this point, I was on the verge of a breakdown. Alex chuckled and I became angry that he wasn’t believing my story.

“Paige. You need to turn around and take a look, babe.”

I wanted to continue screaming at him, but his eyes were staring at whatever was behind me. I pushed myself away from him and turned to follow the path of his gaze.

All my breath was knocked out of me the moment I was met with Daemon’s

beautiful blue eyes. The noise of the crowd was muffled by the sudden sound of blood rushing to me head. In an instant, everything caught up to me. I felt dizzy just as my vision tunneled and blackness overtook me.

Chapter Two

“Damsel?”

A hand was lightly tapping against my cheek as I regained consciousness. “Paige, wake up baby.”

I was confused and disoriented as I woke up on the ground. My head was pounding and my eyes burned even though they were still closed.

“Paige, baby, please wake up. You fainted, Damsel, you need to come back to me.”

I forced my eyes to crack open and I found Daemon hovering over me

tapping my cheek as he tried to bring me back. The concerned expression on his face was made even more pathetic by the smeared soot along his forehead and cheeks. As soon as my brain registered that he was alive and well, I shot up and wrapped my arms tightly around his shoulders. He winced from my sudden hold and I pulled back slightly to look him over. His shirt looked singed in places and torn in others. I backed further away and noticed that his jeans were also torn and stained dark red from blood. I instantly panicked and tried to get a better look at his injuries.

“Oh my god, Daemon, you’re hurt! We need to get you to one of the ambulances.” My words were raspy and

weak due to the raw feeling in my throat. Daemon's hand came up to my face and he pulled my gaze away from his injuries and back up to his face.

“I'm fine, Damsel. The wounds aren't that bad.” Our stares burned into each other and the agony and pain that had earlier consumed me was replaced with relief and overabundant joy. He was alive. I still had him. Once again, I threw my arms around him and, this time, he returned the embrace. “Hey, I'm okay...I'm sorry it took so long to find you. People needed help and I was trying to do what I could to get people out of the club.”

Pride filled me as I imagined

Daemon saving lives but I couldn't help my annoyance at the thought of him risking his life. "I thought I'd lost you...again. I thought ..."

"Shhhhhh, Damsel, I'm okay. I was careful to get myself and the others out of the club safely. I was with three police officers when the explosion occurred. They helped me get people out the rear exit. I couldn't get to you because of the fucking beam that fell. I went fucking apeshit until I remembered that Alex had you and I knew he would be sure to get you out of the building." Daemon's words were said in a manner intended to sooth me. I leaned into him, pulling myself as close as possible. I held onto him tightly for fear that if I let

go, he would disappear again. Daemon rocked me back and forth in an attempt to calm me down. My mind raced through the evening's events and I pulled back from Daemon when I remembered my run in with Chris.

“Did they catch Chris? Please tell me they have that fucker locked up in the back of a patrol car or that he's dead.” My eyes searched Daemon's for an answer to my question, but all I was met with was a confused stare.

“What are you talking about, Paige? It wasn't Chris that grabbed you. It was me. You bit the hell out of my finger.” Daemon pulled his hand to show me the teeth marks that marred the

skin of his middle finger.

I looked up from his finger and back to his eyes. His body shook from subtle laughter as he explained, “I saw you walking through the crowd and I grabbed you to get your attention. When you started screaming I tried to hush you, but was met with some extremely sharp teeth. What do you do to those things? Are you filing them or something?”

I shook my head at his words and laughed a little bit to myself. I couldn't understand why I thought I had seen Chris. I started to believe that I had been hallucinating due to smoke inhalation.

“Why were you trying to drag me around the side of the building?”

Daemon’s body instantly tensed. “What are you talking about?” His confusion was obvious from the expression on his face.

“When you first grabbed me, you tried to drag me to the back parking lot.”

“I only grabbed you once, Paige. When did somebody try to drag you around back?!” His voice had a lethal edge to it. I’m not sure, but I could have sworn I saw Logan and Alex physically tense in response.

“Right before you grabbed me...I

broke free from him and ran to the nearest cop I could find.”

Daemon immediately started pushing himself up off the ground. I reached up to stop him, refusing to let him out of my sight again. Daemon’s hands gripped around my shoulders as he peeled me off of him. “Damsel, I need you to stay here with Alex and Logan while I go speak to the police to find out if they found that bastard. I promise you, I’m not going far.”

When Daemon was having problems removing me from his body, Alex and Logan grabbed onto me to pull me back. Daemon’s expression was sympathetic as he got up and started

walking towards a group of police officers that were huddled near the building. My eyes followed him as he walked over and I relaxed some when he stopped to speak to them, remaining where I could see him.

My eyes wouldn't move from Daemon as Alex spoke from behind me. "You should have stuck around here a little longer, Paige. Daemon found us within a minute or two of you taking off. I thought his head was going to explode when I had to tell him you ran away." Alex chuckled. "For a second, I was worried he didn't care what was going on around us, I thought I was about to have to defend myself from a madman. That is one scary dude you've got there."

I laughed at Alex' remarks as my eyes traveled slowly over Daemon's body. He was a scary person alright, but in ways I would have never suspected. He was the only man that had the ability to completely destroy me; body, mind and spirit. My heart surged with love and admiration as I watched him talk to the group of officers. An aggravated expression covered his face, most likely in response to upsetting news. When he dragged his hand roughly through his hair, I knew that he was beyond frustrated with what he was being told. However, despite the chaotic atmosphere, and despite the exhaustion that was consuming every cell in my body, I smiled brightly while taking in

the sight of the love of my life.

Daemon turned to look back over at me. When his eyes met mine, his mouth turned up in the corner displaying the perfect little indentation in his cheek. Before long, his grin changed into an even brighter smile. Through the smoke, the people and the mayhem, Daemon and I connected on such a deep level when our eyes met. I gasped at the feel of it. For the first time in my adult life, someone held my heart in his hands. I felt naked as he watched me from a distance, like every part of me was bared to him and him alone. It felt like he could touch my soul just by looking at me.

His hand came up to shake the officers' hands before he turned to walk over to me. He reached down with both hands to help me up and I immediately reached up to accept his assistance. He smiled when he noticed that, for once, I didn't slap his hands away and get up on my own. Something had definitely changed between him and I. It was frightening and exhilarating all at the same time.

“It's late Damsel and there's nothing more we can accomplish here. After everything that has happened in the past twenty-four hours, I want nothing more than to go home, take a long bath and fall asleep with you tucked safely in my arms. Are you ready to leave?”

I nodded and Daemon pulled me up into a standing position. Alex, Logan and Ava stood up and we all hugged and said our goodbyes. I was concerned that Ava had to witness the insanity that had become our lives and I leaned down to ask if she was okay. A smile lit up her adorable face as she brushed off my concerns.

“I have to say, Paige, you are nothing, if not interesting.”

We both laughed at Ava's words and I hugged her to me one more time. “Just remember not to judge Alex by that hot head of his. He has a heart of gold buried underneath that tough exterior.”

Ava's bright green eyes looked up at me as she responded, "I know. I'll drag the sensitive side out of him sooner or later." Ava winked and I laughed again. This girl and I were going to get along fabulously.

I moved over to hug Alex and whispered, "She's awesome, Alex. Don't fuck things up with her." I pulled away and shot him a pointed glare. The corners of his mouth quirked as his eyes flicked in Ava's direction.

Alex lightly smacked my shoulder. "No worries, Paige. I've got this." I nodded in response and turned to take Daemon's hand.

The group separated and went off in search of their cars. Daemon and I slowly walked arm in arm as we went around to the back parking lot. “So, what did they tell you about Chris?”

The tick in Daemon’s jaw gave away the irritation he felt. “They didn’t find him. The smoke in the area was too thick, and by the time you alerted the police to his presence, he was already long gone. I don’t fucking understand where that son of a bitch is running off to. He keeps disappearing, but is staying close to the club.”

My arm tightened around Daemon’s and I sighed at the news that Chris was still running around loose. The guy was

like a ghost; appearing when you least expect him, only to turn around and vanish back into thin air.

“He’s got balls, I’ll give him that.” Daemon’s voice was rough with aggravation and exhaustion.

“Well, I doubt he’ll return now that there’s nothing to return to. I suspect it will take a while to get the club up and running again.”

Daemon nodded at my words. “You are correct, Damsel. Unfortunately I won’t know the true extent of the damage until I return during the day to perform the walk through with the police. Regardless, just because the

club is shut down temporarily, we shouldn't relax thinking this is the last we'll see or hear from Chris. I have a feeling it won't be long before he resurfaces.

My gut twisted at the realization that Daemon was right. Chris was just getting started.

~

I dropped my bag on the floor as soon as we stepped foot into Daemon's bedroom. My muscles were suddenly weak and languid at the sight of his large, comfy bed, but there was also a bathtub calling my name. I made my

way into the bathroom and started stripping off my clothes letting them lay where they landed. My hand reached over to flick on the water and my skin prickled. I turned to find Daemon leaning against the door frame watching me as I filled the tub.

I looked over Daemon's dirty and torn up clothing and laughed at the soot and muck covering his skin. "We make one hell of a pair right now, don't we? You should climb in this tub with me and clean up. It might make you feel better."

The corner of Daemon's mouth curled. "Even if you attempted to stop me, there is nothing that could stop me from soaking in that tub with you. I was

just taking in the view before stripping down myself.”

“Well, let me help you with that. It’s the least I can do after making you wander out in the woods twice in one day.” I slowly walked over to Daemon while maintaining constant eye contact. His eyes sparkled with mischief and I smiled shyly in response. When I reached him, my hands moved to the bottom hem of his shirt. I began to tug the shirt up as Daemon leaned down to help pull the shirt up over his head. He straightened up and my eyes took in the definition of his chest and stomach. I sucked my bottom lip between my teeth as I ran my nails slowly down the ridges of his abdomen. His body slightly

shuddered from my touch.

I reached down to undo the button on his pants. After pulling the zipper down, my hands went to his hips to remove the clothing from his body. As I brought the jeans down his legs, I noticed a huge gash above his left knee. “Holy crap, Daemon. You need to get this treated. How did your leg get cut?”

Daemon’s gaze traveled down to the wound on his leg and a long sigh escaped him. “There was something jagged in the club as we were looking for people. The smoke was pretty thick and we were practically walking around blind. By the time the fire department arrived, we were already evacuating

from inside.”

I pulled the jeans off of Daemon’s leg and led him over to the sink. Reaching down, I opened the cabinet door to remove the first aid kit. Daemon’s eyebrow arched and it appeared that he was stifling a grin.

“Paige, I’m about to get in the tub. You don’t need to do that.”

“I don’t think so, Daemon. You are not getting in the water with me without first cleaning up this wound. That’s gross.” My face scrunched up in disgust and Daemon laughed.

He jumped up on the counter and indicated to his leg. “Be my guest,

Nurse Paige.”

My eyes rolled at his statement as I opened up an antiseptic patch. Peeking up through my lashes, I warned, “This might sting.” When I brought the cold cloth down to Daemon’s leg, his body jumped slightly. I chuckled in response. “What’s wrong, tough guy? Can’t take a little antiseptic on your scratch? Just remember, the tears have to stop when the bandage is put on.”

I looked up to see Daemon’s reaction to my jab and I was met with his intense stare. I froze in place and wondered if my jab had actually upset him.

His voice was whisper soft as he asked, “Why did you say that, Paige?”

My shoulders shrugged and I’m sure the confusion was evident on my face. “Because you always used to say it to me when you took care of my injuries. I was just trying to be cute.”

A pained expression threatened Daemon’s features. He was instantly somewhere else, and the memory was chipping at his normally controlled demeanor. Our eyes locked. We remained there, silently staring; each one willing the other to comment further. Daemon took a deep breath and forcefully breathed it out. His nostrils momentarily flared, but then his

expression changed to one of apathy and boredom. He broke eye contact with me and indicated down to the wound on his leg.

“Well, continue. The bath water is about to spill over the rim so we need to hurry this up.

My heart dropped at the distance he had just forced between us. “I don’t think so, Daemon.”

His wide eyes shot to mine. “You don’t think so, what....exactly?”

I broke eye contact with him to feign indifference, but looked up again when I said, “Throwing up a wall when you remember something or I ask about

your past. You obviously know most of the details of mine, yet I still have holes in my memory that need to be filled. Both you and my parents commented tonight that ‘I don’t remember things’. It’s about time you start fessing up to some of those *things* because I deserve to know what triggered the fucking conspiracy against me.”

Daemon flinched when my tone became suddenly angry; but I couldn’t help it. I’d had no time to process the events of the night. In less than twelve hours I’d learned that Daemon is my long lost friend; that my parents have been lying to me for the past fourteen years; and that, apparently, we can add arsonist to the ever growing list of

Chris' criminal behaviors. I don't care who you are...that's a lot to deal with in a handful of hours.

“Damsel...”

“No! Don't you ‘Damsel’ me! All of you acted like you had to tiptoe around me. ‘We should sit down, Paige’. ‘You need to calm down, Paige’. Yet, in all the explanations of why I needed to *calm down*, nobody has yet told me what happened when we were younger. So fess up, already... it's irritating as hell to not be able to confront whatever issue it is that makes you think I'm a nutcase!” Without realizing what I was doing, I pressed the alcohol swab down a little bit harder

than usual, causing Daemon's body to tense. I immediately removed it and threw the swab in the trash before rinsing my hands in the sink.

My hands came down hard on the counter and I my head hung down. I took deep, soothing breaths in an attempt to calm my jagged nerves. The instinct to run was pulsing within my body. Forcing it aside, I continued, "Just tell me what happened that everyone thinks is so bad." My head came up and I looked pleadingly at Daemon. I placed my hands on his chest and his forehead came down and rested upon mine. "Please, just tell me Daemon so I don't feel like I'm being kept in the dark."

Daemon barely shook his head in protest and hesitated before finally answering. “First off, and most importantly, I don’t think you are a nutcase, Damsel, and neither do your parents. There are bits and pieces you seem to have forgotten, which, in all honesty, shocked me. After speaking to your parents in the hospital and hearing their explanation of what happened when we were younger, I understood a little better. They told me that you cried for weeks after...after I was taken.” His voice dropped to a whisper on those last words and I could tell it pained him to talk about that day.

“So then what are the *bits and pieces* that I’m missing? My parents

told me that you hurt me. What did you do that was so bad?" I moved over to the bathtub and busied myself by turning off the water. Although I was being torn apart inside by not knowing parts of my own life, I was nervous to learn about events nobody was quick to talk about.

It was apparent that our conversation was affecting something deep within Daemon by the look on his face. His brows furrowed just before he opened his eyes and locked his stare to mine. "Your mom started seeing little things happen between us. It wasn't every day, just when I had to talk about...things. I would get angry, Paige, and for whatever reason, it made me jealous of you. I thought you had it easy

with two parents that didn't argue with each other or hurt you.

“So, the dreams were true.” My words came out as a statement rather than a question. My mind flashed back to the night Daemon woke me. It occurred to me that what I thought was concern on his face that night had actually been guilt. He knew I was starting to remember things that had happened between us when we were children. “That’s why you told me to take it out on you in the shower. You knew some of those memories were coming back to me.”

Daemon pushed himself off the counter and slowly walked over to me.

Without even thinking about it, I took a step back from him. I wasn't afraid of him, but the weight of his disclosure was enough that I needed to be physically apart in order to process what I was being told.

“Damsel, it wasn't *always* bad. You were my best friend...the only friend I've ever really had. I would hate myself after something like that happened, but it just kept happening. That's why I'm not angry that your parents separated us. I had problems growing up. I wasn't flipped from home to home because of my foster parents. It was because of me. I would fight against them, fight the other kids. It got to the point where they just gave up on

me. The counseling didn't help. I was screwed up.” His head dropped following his confession and it was obvious he was ashamed of his behavior as a child. My heart instantly went out to him. I knew he had a hard life growing up.

I slowly approached him and took his hands into mine. When he looked up at me, I could see pain and guilt swirling within the blue of his eyes and I wanted nothing more than to ease his apprehension. “Let’s get in the bath, Daemon. We can keep talking, but it’s best that we get cleaned up and relax some as well.”

Daemon climbed into the water and

pulled me in to sit between his legs. I leaned back against his chest and my head fell against his shoulder. The water instantly soothed away the tension in my muscles and I sighed when Daemon reached up and started massaging my neck and shoulders. I wanted to just sit there quietly and enjoy our shared bath, but too many questions assaulted my mind and I knew that they wouldn't let up until I had the answers I needed.

“So, all that happened was that *one* time you hit me? That was not bad enough that you needed to be sent away. If that's the worst thing, then I think my parents overreacted a bit.”

Daemon sighed behind me. “How far did you get in that dream, Paige? There was another incident that day that I believe was the trigger for your parents’ concern.”

I thought back to the dream I’d had about that day with Buddy. As usual, parts had become fuzzy over the past couple of days, but I tried to focus on the last part that I could remember. “I went into the library. I was reading a book, I think, and Bud...you...came in.”

“Do you remember what happened in the library?”

“Obviously not. I think you woke me up before it finished playing out.”

Daemon wrapped his arms around me, pulling me closer to his chest. Resting his head against mine, he said, “You wouldn’t talk to me when I went in to apologize to you. I felt horrible after hitting you and I wanted to mend things. When you wouldn’t listen to me, I got angry. I pulled you out of the chair you were in and sat on top of you, pinning you to the ground. You kept looking away as I tried to talk, so I grabbed you to force you to look at me. That’s when you screamed. Your mom came in and....it looked bad, I guess. She thought I was attempting to do other things to you, but I wasn’t. Looking back, I would have reacted the same way if I’d seen a boy laying on top of my

daughter like that.”

I tried to think back to the incident he was describing, but the memory was just out of my reach. “I don’t understand why I don’t remember that. I mean, I do remember you pushing me around, but it was never anything more than normal kid stuff...or at least I thought it was normal. All these years, I just thought you were trying to teach me to stick up for myself. I never imagined, you were actually trying to hurt me. What else happened?”

He was quiet for a moment and I waited patiently for his response. “Nothing. Well, except your mom catching me fighting the other kids a lot.”

“Why? Were you angry with them as well?”

“Most of the other kids were jealous of you, like I was. They would say mean things about you when you weren’t around. I ended up fighting most of them to defend you and I never told your parents why I was fighting them. I was afraid you would find out. But, there were times when I hurt you too. I didn’t think your mom knew, but after talking to her at the hospital, she explained everything.” He paused before saying, “I never intended to hurt you, Paige. I just didn’t want you to be like her...like my mom.”

If my heart could actually,

physiologically, drop to my stomach...it did so in that moment. My arms came up to hug around Daemon's and I squeezed him to me. "Your mom?"

It took him a moment to respond. "Yeah...she cried a lot...when he... Well, anyway, she cried; and so did you when I was mean. It annoyed me that you would sit there and put up with it; that SHE would sit there and put up with it. I couldn't make her do anything to help herself, but I thought I could teach you how to put up a fight."

I didn't think I could stomach continuing this conversation, but this topic needed to be discussed. Without everything being out in the open, there

was no way we could come to terms with our past. “Were there other times where you hurt me badly?”

“No.” He sighed. “All the other times were what you remembered; but I think after what your mother saw in the library that day, she kept an eye out. I don’t know why she never stepped in or said anything. I remember her trying to keep me busy a lot of the time away from you, but one way or another we’d find our way back together.”

A thought occurred to me and I sat up suddenly. After spinning around to face Daemon, I asked, “So, you only really did something terrible on that one occasion in the library?!”

Daemon looked confused by my sudden enthusiasm, but eventually answered. “Yes...no! Paige, I pushed you around all the time. I thought I was helping you, but all I was doing was treating you like my dad treated my mom. I controlled you and did things to you when you wouldn’t listen.”

I shook my head in objection to Daemon’s words. “Daemon, you may have gone about it the wrong way, but you weren’t so awful that you couldn’t be trusted around me. Don’t you see? My memories aren’t completely incorrect. You were trying to help me. You cared about me. My parents overreacted by sending you away. Please tell me you don’t agree with their

decision.”

The sigh that escaped Daemon answered my question for me. He did agree with what they did. He honestly believed that he was an abusive person.

“Regardless of the relationship I had with you, I was a screwed up kid, Damsel. I would have fucked it up sooner or later.”

My eyelids were growing heavy. A loud yawn escaped me, causing Daemon’s chest to rock with silent laughter. “Let’s get you to bed, Damsel. You have had one hell of a busy day. We have all the time in the world to talk about this stuff later.”

I moved out of Daemon's way as he pushed himself up and out of the tub. He wrapped a large towel around himself before reaching down to pull me into a standing position. He wrapped a towel around my body before I had a chance to step out of the tub. His arms came around me and he lifted me to carry me into his room. After placing me on the bed, Daemon removed the towel and replaced it by covering me with a soft blanket. He threw the towels into a hamper before crawling into bed. His arms found their place around me once more as I was pulled tight against his chest. It wasn't long before sleep claimed me.

Chapter Three

~~ Daemon ~~

“It’s okay, Buddy. You need to quiet down now. Mommy is taking care of you. Remember our rule, little one....once the bandage is on, there are to be no more tears.”

Mommy always said that after Daddy hurt me. This time, I had spilled some milk out of my cereal bowl. He got mad and pushed me out of my chair. I hit my head on the floor and started to cry. Daddy got mad at that too. He dragged me out into the living room and scraped my knees along the floor. Mommy just sat there. She

always just sits there. All I could do was huddle into a ball and wait until he was done yelling at me.

It'd been weeks since Mommy brought me back here. She promised me that Daddy had been sick, but had gotten better. She told me that Daddy said he was sorry and that we could go back to living as a family again. I didn't believe her when she first told me we were coming back, and I don't believe her now. He's still the same; angry and mean.

"Can we go back to the Center, Mommy? I miss Paige. You said we could go back to visit." I looked up into my mommy's sad eyes and hoped

that she would finally tell me we could go back for a visit. I promised Paige I would go back to play with her, but Mommy keeps making excuses why I can't go.

Mommy sighed and turned to start putting away the first aid supplies she had pulled from the cabinet in the bathroom. She turned back to me and placed her hands on either side of me on the counter. "Now Buddy, you know your daddy doesn't want us going back there. We need to get back out into the living room before your daddy gets upset."

"He's always upset, Mommy. You said he'd be different...but he's not. We

need to go back. Please, Mommy. Please, can we go back?"

Mommy looked like she was going to cry as I begged her to leave Daddy and go back where we could be safe again. "No, Buddy. Don't ask again. You know we can't." Mommy put her arm around me and walked me back out into the living room. Daddy was sitting on the couch watching T.V. I couldn't help but look at him as Mommy directed me to the chair farthest away from where Daddy was sitting. Even though Mommy couldn't physically stop Daddy when he got mad, she tried to keep me away from him. It was the only defense that she had. He never seemed to notice or care where she put me.

He'd just ignore me until I did something wrong again.

Mommy went into the kitchen to clean up the milk I'd spilled earlier. I wiggled where I sat because I was bored and had nothing better to do. Daddy never bought me any toys and Mommy had no money to buy them for me. Most of my days were spent sitting here as he watched boring T.V. I was supposed to be going to school, but Daddy wouldn't let me. He said I would only get in trouble and embarrass him. He also said I was too stupid. I hated waking up early in the mornings and watching the other kids as they waited for the big, yellow bus. I always wanted to ride on that bus.

After Mommy finished cleaning the kitchen, she came back into the living room and sat on the couch with Daddy. He didn't even look over at her when she sat down. She was always so quiet around him, never wanting him to notice she was there. They were so different from Paige's parents. Her parents always smiled, never yelled, and I never saw Paige's dad hurt Paige or her mommy.

We sat in the living room for an hour, silently watching whatever Daddy decided to watch. When Daddy got up to go to the bathroom, I looked over at Mommy. Her eyes followed him as he crossed the room and closed the bathroom door behind him.

Speaking in a whisper, I said, “Mommy, I’m bored. I wanna go see Paige. I promised.”

Mommy’s eyes shot to mine and her face looked afraid. She silently shook her head and placed one finger against her mouth to tell me that I needed to be quiet. I looked over at the bathroom door and saw that it was still closed. “Please, Mommy. Can we go do something? All the other kids are outside playing. I can hear them. Can I go out with them?”

My whispers must have gotten louder as I continued begging Mommy to let me go play. When the door to the bathroom swung open, it slammed

against the wall, leaving a hole where the knob had hit. Daddy stomped out and I looked up to see that his face was bright red and scary, like a monster under my bed.

“What’s your problem now, boy?! What makes you think you get to go out and play? You can’t even eat without spilling shit! You’re too stupid to go playing by yourself.”

I was sick of Daddy calling me stupid. They taught me things at The Center and I always did real well when I tried. I learned how to read, and how to count and add. I don’t know what came over me, but I was tired of listening to Daddy say mean things

about me. “I’m not stupid. I learned things when Mommy took me away from here.”

I heard Mommy gasp as Daddy lunged at me. He grabbed me by the arm and flung me across the room. When my body hit the wall, my breath was knocked out of me and I stared up at the ceiling. I could hear Mommy pleading with Daddy to stop. He picked me up again and threw me against another wall. I was still trying to catch my breath as he reached for me again. “You little shit! This is why we named you Demon. I knew even before you were born that you would be a useless brat!”

My head turned so that I could look over at Mommy. Tears streamed down her face and I knew that she wouldn't get up to stop him, she couldn't. Just as Daddy was about to reach for me again, someone knocked at the door. Daddy's head spun to look at the door and he motioned for Mommy to take me into another room. Mommy got up from the couch and quickly moved over to me. She picked me up and helped me walk into the bedroom. She closed the door behind us and locked it before turning to grab the phone from the table. As quietly as possible, she dialed a number.

“Maia, this is Kristy. We need help. Please help. He's hurting Buddy

again.”

My eyes widened when I heard Mommy talking to Paige's mommy. She was asking them to come get us. Even though my back hurt from what Daddy had done, I smiled knowing Mommy was getting us out of here. Mommy looked at me as she spoke with Paige's mommy and indicated that I needed to stay quiet. As mommy was giving out our address, I heard the doorknob rattle as Daddy tried to get in the room. When he found it was locked, he started banging against it and screaming for Mommy to open the door. I heard wood splinter from the force of his banging and I trembled knowing that if he got through that

door, he would hurt Mommy.

“Maia, hurry...please!”

~

~ **Paige** ~

Daemon sat straight up in bed, startling me awake. I rubbed at my eyes and noticed that daylight had started streaming in from around the edges of the dark curtains. Turning to Daemon, I noticed a fine sheen of sweat that covered his body. He held his head in his hands and his back moved in and out with labored breathing.

Sitting up, I placed my hand on his

back. I could feel his heart racing from beneath his rib cage. “Daemon? What’s wrong?” My voice was raspy from sleep and I cleared my throat as I waited for him to respond.

Daemon didn’t speak or move for several seconds and I wondered if he had heard me. “Daem...” He moved so quickly that it startled me. His hand came up, covering my mouth, while his large body turned and pressed me back down to the bed. My eyes locked with his and I shuddered in response to the pain and turmoil I saw mingling within the depths of his beautiful blues. When his gaze finally left mine, it traveled down by body. I watched as heat replaced his pain and lust replaced his

anger. My body reacted to the change in his. His free hand found both of my wrists and he pulled my arms above my head while using his legs to force mine apart. The speed at which he had subdued me was staggering, but this nagging part of me fought against my body's desire to go along with Daemon's actions.

From under his hand, my words were muffled. "Daemon, we should talk first..."

Daemon's only response was to tighten his hand over my mouth even more. He nestled his face against my neck and when I felt his teeth clamp down at the junction of my neck and

shoulder, my body arched up, only to relax back down in submission. I gave up the idea of talking and settled back to allow Daemon to do as he pleased.

We had both slept naked and within seconds Daemon was buried so deep within me that the sudden fullness was a shock to my awakening body. Involuntarily, I held my breath as Daemon held still above me awaiting my body to relax around the sudden invasion. Daemon's heated gaze shot to mine, locking me to his stare as he began to rock himself back and forth within me. His hands let go of my mouth and wrists so that he could reach down and pull my legs around him. Tentatively I reached up to run my hands through his

hair, while still maintaining eye contact with him. Desperation and need were written across his expression and I attempted to convey love and approval as I ran my hands softly down his shoulders and back. I had no idea what was bothering him, but it was apparent he needed this intimacy to escape the turmoil within him.

Daemon moved fluidly above me, never releasing eye contact. Thoughts and emotions were being spoken through his gaze and his actions, however he felt oddly distant from this coupling. He held himself up with one hand, while running the other up the length of my body, only to pull away and brace his hands on either side of me. My concern

for him was all-consuming and my body wasn't undergoing the usual build-up to a mind shattering peak that I was accustomed to experiencing with Daemon. He wasn't there. Within a few minutes, he stiffened above me and after finding his release, he relaxed against me before immediately getting up and walking into the bathroom. Never had I felt like such a means to an end, a tool used for one purpose, without thought as to my feelings or needs.

What. The Hell. Was that?!

I laid there staring at the bathroom door. I didn't know if I should get up and go try to talk to him, or roll over and pretend like I'd fallen back asleep. I

sat up, resting back on my elbows trying to make a decision when the bathroom door flung open. Daemon stomped out of the bathroom and immediately headed towards the closet. A few seconds later, he emerged from the closet wearing a loose pair of jeans and threw the bedroom door open to leave the room. I was left there, naked and confused.

Picking my pride up off the floor, I climbed out of bed and walked into the bathroom to get cleaned up. My feet padded against the cool tile as I made my way over to the shower. My hand flicked on the water. I felt oddly *dirty* after that encounter and I mused over the fact that, possibly, I was just grouped with the previous *other women* in

Daemon's life. I couldn't understand why those women would ever be satisfied with being used in such a manner. There was no emotion, no connection, nothing! After the temperature reached a suitable level, I stepped underneath the spray of the water and allowed it to wash away the slime of hurt and rejection that was clinging to my skin. My eyes peeked open occasionally as I waited for Daemon to suddenly appear and apologize for his actions. He never showed up.

I stepped out of the shower, dried off and threw on one of Daemon's large t-shirts and a pair of boxers. It would have been more convenient for me to

move my belongings into Daemon's room, but after that little escapade, I wasn't sure if I should. My mind ran over the events of the night before, and I couldn't think of anything I had done that would have distanced him.

Rounding the corner into the living room, I found David sitting on the couch. Daemon sat in a chair opposite him. I flashed David my signature 'we have to talk' look, but made sure to keep my eyes from Daemon's gaze as I passed. The coffee was already made and I entered the kitchen before swiping a mug from the cabinet. I mixed together my usual concoction and leaned against the counter sipping my caffeinated bliss. My eyes were trained

on the kitchen island and I was saddened to remember what Daemon and I had done on the surface of that island. Well, okay, *that* particular moment wasn't sad in and of itself, but my memory was being hijacked by the dejected feeling from the incident this morning.

Footsteps interrupted my thought process and I looked up to see Daemon standing at the entryway of the kitchen. His eyes were trained to a spot behind me and tension was visible in his shoulders and stance. "I need to leave for a while today to go deal with the investigators at the club. Some contractors will also be coming out to discuss repairs, so it may be a while before I'm able to return home. I've

talked to Alex and he will be arriving shortly to hang out with you and David.”

I turned to see what Daemon could be looking at, but after finding nothing of interest, I determined that he was simply avoiding looking me in the eye. My stubborn side wanted to play along with his little game, because I would be damned to give in first, but, I had no idea what had just happened between us. So, I gave in and asked.

“What did I do to upset you, Daemon?”

His body shifted slightly on his feet and his hands reached up to swipe his keys roughly from the countertop beside

him. A resigned sigh sounded from him. He finally met my stare and his face instantly fell. My heart was beating against my chest as trepidation and doubt flooded my system. “You didn’t do anything, Paige. I apologize for this morning.” Another sigh escaped him. “It was just...a bad dream...and I...I don’t know. It was just a bad dream and I...fuck!” Three large steps and he was by my side taking me into a hug. Pressed against his chest, I could hear his heart thumping away.

This is the part where the old Paige would have planted both her fists into his chest and prevented him from holding her...but I was trying to be *partner* Paige, so I allowed him to hold

me. The sarcasm that followed, however, could not be helped.

“Of course, that actually makes sense. I, too, appreciate treating people like a piece of meat after a bad dream. I’m surprised I didn’t think of that this morning. I should have known.” Contempt dripped from my words and Daemon flinched in reaction.

His voice was whisper quiet as he responded. “I’m sorry, Paige. I had a dream about my parents. It’s been a while since I’ve dreamed of them and...I didn’t intend for it to seem like I used you. I wanted to connect with you, I just couldn’t.”

“You’ll have to explain that a little bit better, Daemon.”

He pulled back from me and held me at arm’s length. His blue eyes bore down on me and I could see regret and guilt within them. “Sex has always been an escape for me. I never connected any emotion to it until I found you again. It was always just a way for me to blow off whatever was pissing me off at that moment so I didn’t put my fist through some asshole’s face.” He appeared embarrassed by his admission, but I could understand what he was saying. Up until finding Daemon, sex had been the same for me. His forehead came down to rest against mine and his eyes closed in obvious frustration. “That

dream was more than I've had to handle in a long time, Paige, and I thought I could just chase it away with my feelings for you. The anger didn't dissipate as I thought it would."

My arms instantly went around Daemon, pulling him closer to me. With my cheek pressed against his chest, I asked, "Will you tell me about it? Maybe you and I can find new ways to work out whatever is bothering us. I won't run anymore and you can start talking about things more. We're partners, remember?"

His arms contracted around me and I felt his head nod above me in response. "I dreamed about the day...

that day...your birthday. It was the events that led up to what my father did. I spilled some milk that day and also asked to go outside to play with the other kids. He was angry and was calling me names and throwing me around. He liked to call me 'demon' and actually thought that was my name. He demanded it when I was born, but my mom added an 'A' on the spelling on the birth certificate without telling him. However, that's why she called me Buddy. She didn't like the fact that, even though she had managed to change it without my father knowing, my name was intended to be an insult from the moment I came into this world. He always called me that."

My heart broke instantly and I wanted to go dig up Daemon's father, bring him back to life, just to beat his ass and place him back in the ground all over again. I shared my parents' abhorrence of abuse, especially abuse of a child. "Why did your mom take you back if he was like that? She'd gotten you away from him, why return?"

Daemon's chest steadily rose and fell as I waited for him to respond. His hesitancy to answer was a clear indication of his discomfort, but I needed to know this part of him in order to truly understand many of the events of our past. We both carried burdens from our youth that were out of our control. Hopefully, together, we would be able to

bring those burdens into the open to finally relieve the pain that came with them.

“She loved him, I guess. I never understood why. He was always, ALWAYS, like that. I wish I could blame it on his drinking or one of the many drugs he was addicted to, but in the end, it was just him. He was a very angry person. A few weeks after mom and I arrived at The Center, she reached out to him. Even though he had hurt both of us, my mother was worried for him. He made promises to her that she thought he could keep. When we arrived back, it all fell apart almost instantly.” Pain and remorse was seared into every word he spoke and I wanted nothing more but

to reach out to young Daemon and pull him from the nightmare he obviously lived. The more he told me about his time with his father, the more I understood why he was so angry as a child. I couldn't help but think about my parents and the decision they made for Daemon on that fated day. I needed to talk to them about everything, but I wasn't quite ready to forgive them for their dishonesty.

Both Daemon's and my head turned as the buzzer sounded, indicating Alex had arrived. Daemon kissed me on the forehead before saying, "Ah, your *babysitter* is here. We can talk about this more after I return home." He flashed me a crooked smile and I

loosened my hold on him, allowing him to pull away from our embrace. I watched as he walked across the room and couldn't help but admire the way he moved. He hit the button to send the elevator to Alex before opening the front door and returning to stand by me in the kitchen.

“So, tomorrow, I want to take you to my gym to start training. Don't expect anything fancy. Frank took me there after I came to live with him and I was trained there. It's old, and ratty and most of the people there are just as old and ratty as the place, but they are good people.”

An instant smile broke out on my face as I remembered Daemon's promise

to train me to fight. I was nervous and excited all at the same time. I had no idea how he planned on training me, but I was sure a few pointers couldn't hurt. Not that I needed them, of course; but Daemon didn't know that.

“Who's Frank? Is that the person my parents sent you to live with when you came back?”

Daemon smiled as he remembered back. “Yeah. He was this crotchety old marine who wouldn't put up with my punk attitude. He scared the shit out of me when I first met him, but he was an amazing man. Taught me mostly everything I know. He owned one of the smaller bars in town and gave it to me

when he passed. I'm so thankful to him for everything, your parents as well." He tapped me on the nose as a silent hint that I needed to deal with this issue with my parents. I looked up at him sheepishly and shrugged my shoulders in response.

Alex came lumbering through the doors looking like he hadn't slept in the past week. Daemon hugged me one more time. "That's my cue to get out of here, Damsel. I'll see you when I get back later this afternoon."

Daemon met Alex in the living room and did the fist bump thing guys do with each other. It was odd, once again, seeing the two of them getting along and

I was sitting somewhere between joy and annoyance at their sudden friendship. On one hand, I was happy that there were no longer bad feelings on Alex' part, but on the other, I hated that their friendship involved a pact to keep me under control. I don't appreciate being controlled.

Daemon waved goodbye and walked out the front door, softly closing it behind him. As usual, Alex had his ballcap pulled low over his eyes and he was wearing the same shirt and jeans from the night before. My eyebrow arched at his appearance and he responded by flopping himself down on the large sofa by the balcony windows.

Where the hell did David go?

Alex glanced over at me and said, “So, can I trust that if I fall asleep, I won’t wake up to find you out chasing psychotic criminals?”

“Nope.” I remained in the kitchen leaning against the counter as I answered him. I had to hide my smile behind the mug I was holding. “Since you decided to sign up for babysitting services, I guess you are just going to have to suffer the consequences.”

Alex moved his head so that he could look up at me from under the brim of his hat. “You’re a bitch. I hope you know that.” He let out an annoyed sigh.

“Well, at least tell me there is some coffee left in that pot.”

I shifted to the left to block Alex’ view of the half-full coffee pot. “Guess again, big guy, it’s all gone.” I feigned a sad face by sticking out my bottom lip.

Alex sighed and pulled his hat even lower on his face, his massive form taking up the majority of the couch. “Whatever, Paige. I know there’s coffee over there and I’m about to come take it...by force, if necessary.”

“That’s funny, because by the looks of you, you would fall pass out after the first ten laps I made you take as you are chasing me and the pot around the

apartment.”

He pulled his hat back up to glare at me, then replaced it over his face. “Whatever, Paige, just get me a cup would ya? I had a long ass fucking night because *someone* couldn’t choose to piss off a normal psychopath that only murders and shit. Oh no, you’ve got to pick the guy that likes to blow shit up too.”

“Not funny. And definitely not the way to convince me to give up any of my java goodness to you. You, sir, are an ass and you don’t deserve a cup of my liquid paradise.” My nose turned up in indignation.

At that moment, David sashayed himself back into the living room. He smiled brightly at me before stopping dead in his tracks at the sight of Alex. “What the hell happened to you, Alex? You look like you’ve been wearing the same clothes for a week.” David leaned his body in Alex’ direction and sniffed the air above him. “And you smell like smoke. I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to ask you to move over to that wingback chair over there.”

Alex grinned as he peered out at David from underneath the brim of his hat. “And why the hell do I have to move?”

Crossing his arms over his chest,

David gave Alex a sharp look that indicated he thought Alex was a moron. “Because I sit on that couch and I don’t want to be sullied by your putrid hygiene and apparent lack of more than one pair of clothes.”

“Then why don’t you go sit in the chair. I’ve already *sullied* the couch.” Alex settled back and made a show of rubbing his smoky clothes all over the leather. David threw up his hands and walked determinably into the kitchen. He pulled a mug from the upper cabinet and shoved me aside to get to the pot of coffee. Alex looked up as David poured. “What the hell?!”

I peeked out at Alex from the other

side of David and grinned. “HE didn’t yell at me for pissing someone off, so HE can share in my happiness.”

David suddenly stopped in mid-motion. “Who’d you piss off now, Paige?” The apprehension in his voice was obvious and I could have sworn I saw him tremble.

“No one new.”

David nodded and blew out a little sigh of relief. Bringing the mug to his lips, he eyed me from over the rim. “Is he still mad about the woods incident?”

Alex’ laugh echoed through the room. “The woods incident?! Ha! That’s child’s play compared to last

night!”

After turning around to set his mug on the counter, David grabbed me by the shoulders and turned me to face him. “Did you do something stupid AGAIN last night?!”

“No!” I threw my hands up to get David to let me go. “Chris blew up Tomb last night while Alex and I were there and...”

“He did what?!” The color immediately dropped from his face and his mouth hung open in a mixture of terror and disbelief. His head swung around to face Alex. “And you were there?”

Alex groaned while pulling himself into an upright position. “Yep. And, as usual, Paige had to go running away and almost get herself killed...again.”

David’s head swung back to me. “What were you doing there?”

“Daemon and I were driving back from my parents’ place and Logan called to report that Chris had been spotted at the club. We went by so Daemon could deal with the cops.”

“Why were you at your parents?”

“So I could yell at them for lying to me about Buddy.”

His eyes bugged out as a vein

noticeably pulsed at his temple. “Wait... what? Your parents lied to you about Buddy?”

I nodded.

“What...why...” He shook his head as he became more frustrated. I giggled a little over the amount of information a person can miss over the course of eight hours of sleep.

“How did you find out your parents lied to you about Buddy?”

“Daemon.”

“Daemon knows Buddy?”

“Daemon is Buddy.”

David froze. Literally, froze. His muscles didn't twitch, his eyes didn't wander. I was concerned because it didn't appear that his chest was moving with his breaths. At that moment, he was a mannequin whose expression was a mixture of shock and disbelief, with a sprinkling of confusion thrown in for good measure.

Alex chuckled and pushed himself up to walk into the kitchen. As he approached, he reached out and patted David on the back. "I know, man. That was my reaction when Paige told me at the club."

David stood there mouth agape. I jumped slightly when he finally spoke

again. “What did your parents lie about? How did you find out Daemon is Buddy? How are you acting so calm about this? How is Alex so calm about this? Did Tomb really blow up? How are you two even alive if you were there?”

A sympathetic expression played over my face as I watched David attempt to process what he had just learned. His never ending barrage of questions was staggering. He was like a computer that short circuited from too much input. I probably should have broken all of this to him little by little, but I had to admit it was more fun watching him flip the fuck out. “There, there, David, let’s go to the couch and I’ll explain everything.”

My arm went around David's shoulder and I gingerly walked him over to the sofa. We sat down and as I settled into the soft, cozy leather, I heard a distinct clink of glass against metal. My head spun to the kitchen and, sure enough, Alex was stealing the last of the coffee. My brows furrowed as I glared in his direction. Alex turned to look at me while pouring out the last of the contents, his lips turning up into a large, shit-eating grin.

The bastard!

Chapter Four

Over the course of the next several hours I explained everything that had occurred while David was sleeping the night before. Okay, maybe *explained* is the wrong word. Rather, I *dissected* every little detail and nuance until David felt satisfied that, even though he slept through the events, he knew enough to feel like he had actually been witness to everything. At some point during my story-telling, Alex had returned to the couch and I received a thorough talking to from both of them for venturing out into the woods during a lightning storm. Apparently, I'd made some doozies of dumb decisions in the last twenty-four hours. But who could blame me? My

world had been turned upside down, shook around, dropped to the floor, kicked around like a tin can, and then handed back to me to deal with the crumpled and tattered version of my life.

The afternoon dragged on as Alex slept on the couch and David and I sat around bored out of our minds. The only entertainment in the place was the TV in Daemon's room, so David and I eventually found ourselves snuggled up on Daemon's bed, watching old movies. Eventually Alex joined us and our two man pity party became a threesome as Alex quickly fell back to sleep. I'm not sure when exactly David and I fell asleep, but I can imagine it didn't look

very good when Daemon came home to find the three of us cuddled together on his bed.

Daemon cleared his throat which caused me to instantly wake up. I went to sit up but found that David's head was on my shoulder and his leg was tossed over mine. I pushed his head aside and...was that drool? Ew. After removing his leg, I turned to remove Alex' arm from around my waist. Scootching off the bed, I stood up and shuffled over to wrap my arms around Daemon as he continued standing in the doorway. Resting my head against his chest, I said, "It's not what it looks like."

Daemon's chest vibrated from

silent laughter, which was replaced by his low voice. “It looks to me like you fell asleep with two of your friends while watching TV.”

I looked up at him just as his head lowered to place a kiss on my lips. “Like I said, it’s not what it looks like. We were actually making wild monkey love with each other. A couple of circus performers were involved, but they had to go home early.”

Daemon smiled and shook his head as he took my hand to lead me back out into the living room. He dragged me into the kitchen and grabbed a beer from the fridge. Popping the top, he leaned against the counter and I could see the

exhaustion weighing down on his shoulders.

“How’d it go today?”

“Good, I guess. I found out that no one was killed last night as a result of the explosion or fire. Apparently, Chris was able to somehow plant the device in the storage room, which basically sheltered most of the main portion of the club from the blast. Detective Troy was out today and she was concerned about our safety here at the apartment. She’s ordered that three officers constantly patrol. One will be located in the garage and the other two will monitor the perimeter of the building at all times.”

“So, I take that to mean they haven’t found Chris.”

“Precisely.”

A long heavy sigh sounded from me and I walked over to Daemon to cuddle into his large frame. “How bad was the damage at Tomb?”

“Pretty bad. It will take several weeks to get it up and running again. Luckily there was no structural damage so it will only be a matter of rebuilding parts of the interior, but luckily, most of the costs are covered by insurance.”

“We’ve got to find Chris, Daemon. This can’t keep going on. He’s only getting worse.”

Daemon was silent for a few minutes. I was concerned that he would object to my statement, but eventually I felt the tension in his body release as his arms came up around me. “I agree with you, Damsel. What can we do to find him?”

My investigator instincts kicked in and I decided that we would have to go about this in the same manner as I had before. Talk to people. Find out as much as we could and follow up on any leads or information that we could pull from those who knew Chris. “I’ll pull a background report on him. We can talk to whoever appears to be connected to him; family, friends, old roommates if there are any. Maybe, he’s worked other

places and some of the employees might remember something about him.”

“Pull the report. However, you are not going anywhere alone. Alex or I will accompany you at all times. Agreed?”

“Yeah,” I grudgingly agreed. This sucked. Even though I appreciated that he wanted to make sure I was safe, I still hated feeling like a child who needed someone to watch over me.

Daemon chuckled and kissed me on the forehead. “Good girl. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to go kick the two men who just slept with my girlfri... oh wait...can I call you girlfriend now,

or are we still not doing labels?” His head cocked to the side in amusement of having put me on the spot.

I wavered. I mean, sure, I was committed to him, but the word “girlfriend” felt like a commitment to that commitment. That was like a double commitment and I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. It’s not that I didn’t want to be Daemon’s girlfriend, but I’d lived so long not really being anybody’s anything. It was a security blanket that I kept tucked tightly around myself. If there was no commitment, there were no expectations. Expectations made me nervous. I’m not good with expectations. I usually end up falling short of them with my newest wild

scheme.

I could feel Daemon's laughter at my silence rumble through his body. "Either way, I need to go kick those two out of my bed."

I moved aside to allow Daemon to exit the kitchen, but followed along to assist him in removing my friends from his bed. When we entered the room, I startled at the sight of Alex and David cuddled up together. A broad smile took over my face and I had to cup my hand over my mouth to keep from audibly laughing. Daemon's lip quirked up into a grin and I nudged him before indicating that I wanted him to hand me his phone. His shoulders bobbed up and down as

he attempted to stifle his own laughter. He handed me his phone and I quickly snapped off a couple photos. I held up my finger to Daemon to indicate that I needed a minute. My fingers moved deftly over his keyboard as I texted the photo to both Alex and David's phones. Quickly moving back out into the living room, I spotted both of their phones sitting on the coffee table in the living room. I grabbed each phone, opened the texts, and saved the photo as their home screens. Giggling to myself, I placed both their phones back where I found them and ran back to the bedroom.

Daemon turned to me and said, "Did you want to wake them or should I?"

I looked over at my friends. They looked so innocent and content, like two little boys curled up together after a long day. No...wait...that imagery wasn't exactly normal, was it? I shrugged my shoulders and walked over to the bed before climbing on and jumping up and down at their feet. "Rise and shine boys!"

They both startled awake and opened their eyes to find that their arms and legs were twisted together like pretzels. Alex jumped immediately when he realized his close proximity to David and he rolled over and OFF the bed after his discovery. He hit the ground with a heavy thump before popping back up off the ground to survey

his surroundings. “What the hell?!”

David let out a big yawn and resembled a cat as he stretched his long lean form out of its previously curled position. David finally opened his honey brown eyes and looked around to find me standing on the bed above him, a confused Alex kneeling on the floor next to the bed, and a snickering Daemon standing at the foot of the bed. “Well, hey guys. What’s going on? Why’s everybody staring at me?”

Alex huffed out in exasperation while pushing himself up into a standing position. “Apparently, you decided that I was your new cuddle buddy.”

David smiled a satisfied grin just before he stopped suddenly. He brought his shirt up to his nose and his face twisted in obvious disgust. “Sonofabitch! I’ve been sullied! Seriously, Alex! Go home and shower and change. This shirt cost a lot of money and now....” David lifted the shirt to his nose again. “Now, I’m going to have to...” He ripped the shirt off of himself and tossed it into a trash can by Daemon’s bedside table. After shooting a disgusted glare in Alex’ direction, David crawled off the bed and stomped out of the room. Alex’ booming laugh competed with Daemon’s. I climbed off the bed and sniffed the sheets.

“Holy crap, Alex, David wasn’t

kidding. Seriously, you need to change.” I started peeling the sheets off the bed as Alex glared at me.

“Well, it’s not like I’ve had a hell of a lot of time to go home. I’d intended to change this morning if I wasn’t called over here to babysit your ass.”

Daemon’s face had turned red by this point and I worried about his oxygen levels being depleted by his uncontrolled laughter. He finally made his way over to help me strip the sheets from the bed as Alex marched out of the room.

“Is it always like this around them?”

I looked up into the face of my man and smiled. “Yeah, mostly.”

We finished removing the sheets and Daemon walked them out to go place them in the wash as I pulled new sheets from his closet. After making the bed, I strolled out into the living room to find Daemon speaking with David and Alex in the living room. All three sets of eyes widened at the sight of me and they suddenly became quiet. Confused by their reaction, I inspected myself to make sure that I hadn't grown a third arm or leg. Having found that everything was normal and where it should be, I looked up in question. “What?”

Alex and Daemon laughed and

shook their heads.

“Alright man, well, I’m going to get out of here. I need a shower and a change of clothes. What the fuck time is it anyway? Alex grabbed his phone from the table to check the time. As soon as his thumb swiped across the screen, his eyes widened again, before his face took on a slight shade of purple. “What the fuck?!”

I puckered my lips together to keep from breaking out into a grin as Alex looked over the picture of his phone. His eyes caught mine and narrowed. “You did this.” David peeked around to look at Alex’ phone and squealed in delight. “Oh, how cute! Alex, you

should leave that.”

Alex moved quickly to erase all evidence of his cuddlefest with David, while David searched his phone to delightedly find that he too had the shot. After correcting the offending screen image, Alex began to stomp in the direction of the front door. “Whatever, Paige. I’ll see you all later on.”

~

Daemon breathed deeply as he slept next to my side. We were cuddled up on his large bed, now with clean smelling sheets. He fell asleep watching some stupid war movie while I pounded away on my laptop keyboard in search

of Chris. The hunt was not going well and it was apparent that Chris kept himself off the radar more than most people. I'd pulled his background report earlier to discover only a few scattered addresses through the years, one or two stints in jail for petty thefts and about four vehicle registrations. Much like when I pulled Daemon's report months ago, there were no relatives listed, no possible acquaintances and his history read more like a visitor to this life, rather than a resident. He had no credit cards, no property in his name...nothing. The report did include two obsolete phone numbers that were so old, I imagined they now belonged to new people who

were clueless to the fact that their number was once used by a psychopath.

Breathing out in frustration, I pounded every little bit of information I could into my Google search engine, scouring for any clue that might lead me to Chris. I was damn near about to give up when I decided to search the phone numbers in the report. The first number came up with no results, but the second...well that number was attached to an old 'for sale' ad. The ad was for a beat down truck that looked like it had been dragged through the mud a few too many times, only to end up being used as a bumper car, with its many dents and dings marring the rusted out paint job. I compared the description of the truck to

the registered vehicle history in Chris' report, and lo and behold, it matched. Chris would have been about sixteen when he owned the truck, but the information was better than nothing.

Quickly, I flipped back to the sales ad and it gave an address located in a beat down mobile home park that was located about forty-five minutes outside of town. Eureka, I'd found something.

I jotted down the address and slammed the top of my laptop shut. The likelihood of Chris being at that address was slim, but I might just be lucky enough to run across a neighbor or two who knew something about him. It was a long shot, but a shot nonetheless.

My eyes shot to Daemon and I contemplated waking him to inform him of my discovery. His arms rested above his head as his massive body was stretched out entirely on his back. Even stretched out, his muscles bulged and rippled across his body, my hand itching to run along the many grooves and lines of his chest and abdomen. I refrained. His face was so content and relaxed that I couldn't bring myself to wake him. He'd had a rough couple of days and, sadly, I was the cause of the drama.

Placing the laptop on the side table, I swung my legs over the side of the bed and pushed myself up slowly so as not to disturb Daemon. I made my way out into the living room and surveyed the décor

of the room. As usual, the only illumination in the room were the flame sconces on the walls. The old world feel to the room, made up of medieval and renaissance artwork and other replicas, was cast in dancing shadows and glowing light. I glanced at the long wall that ran along the right side of the room and my eyes caught on the center painting on the wall. Stepping closer, I took in the painted scene of a knight bending down to kiss a woman as she sat in the woods. Knowing this Knight would be doomed following that kiss, my heart panged when I remembered Daemon's admission that he understood that type of fate. I hadn't realized Daemon's true identity at the time of his

admission, but now, knowing that he was my lost friend from days past, the painting took on new meaning. When I found out that Daemon was Buddy, he'd made a point to look at this painting, to point out that, at least to him, this painting represented us.

At the same time a large, shaky breath escaped me, I heard a throat clear. My head shot in the direction of the hallway and there stood Daemon. His hair was in its usually messy state as it framed the chiseled jaw of his face. The masculine lines of his cheeks were only accentuated by the flickering light of the sconces. My eyes traveled down his body and I sucked in a breath at the sight of his broad shoulders that

narrowed down into a tight, V-shaped abdomen. His jeans hung casually off his hips but were filled out again by his muscular thighs. When I looked back to his face, his sculpted mouth was slightly parted as if he could feel my desire for him as much as I could feel his for me. Our eyes locked and I was momentarily lost in a pair of blue eyes that had haunted my dreams for so many years.

Daemon's steps thudded across the floor as he approached me. "What are you doing, Damsel? I woke up and you weren't where I left you." The corners of his mouth turned up into a crooked grin.

I couldn't help but smile in

response. “You looked so peaceful sleeping. I didn’t want to wake you. I came out here and, well...” My eyes shot back to the painting before returning to him. “...I was just thinking about things.” His steel arms slid around my mid-section as he stood behind me and pulled me into him. Like a protective sheath, he wrapped himself around me and my entire body relaxed into his hold.

“I think I may have found a lead on Chris. It may turn out to be nothing, but I located an address in an old mobile home park where we might be able to find some information. He’d sold a truck there several years back. Someone might remember him.”

Daemon let out a humorless laugh. “Yeah. The guy is kind of hard to forget. Well, I planned on taking you to the gym in the morning. We can go out there afterwards if you would like.”

I nodded in agreement. I had no idea what, if any, information we could find about Chris, but it was worth taking the chance. “Should we call Detective Troy? She wasn’t too pleased the last time I withheld information from her.”

Daemon was silent as he considered my question. “No. I agree that you seem to be able to get people to open up more than the police have been able to. They may have already been out there and walked away with nothing.

However, if there is a chance someone will open up to you, we should take it.”

We stood silently staring at the painting. Daemon’s chest rumbled with his deep baritone voice when he finally said, “I found this painting when I turned nineteen. Frank had taken me to a store that was advertised as a world market. He wanted to see if there were any Celtic tapestries he could hang up at the bar. He always wanted the place to have an old Irish feel. When I stumbled upon this, my mind instantly went back to the day I saw you sitting behind the Center when I returned.” Daemon grew quiet for a beat. “You were so beautiful. More beautiful than I’d ever imagined you would become.”

I thought back to the night Daemon explained his fascination with the painting. He empathized with the knight and believed that both subjects were cursed and tormented. The painting became more fitting knowing who Daemon was, who he imagined the woman to be. A whisper of sad thoughts played through my mind, while at the same time, fear started to blossom within my heart.

“When you talked about this painting before, you mentioned that you agreed that the woman was cursed not to fall in love as well. Maybe you were right. Tragedies seem to happen whenever we’re together. Come to think of it, you were there for the most tragic

events of my life. It seems like we want to love each other, but events keep forcing us apart.” My voice quieted as I asked, “Are we both cursed Daemon?”

His arms tightened around me as he rested his chin on the top of my head. Taking a deep breath, his chest expanded before the air push back out from between his lips. “Tragedy forced us apart, yes. But it was also tragedy that put us back together, Paige.” His hand came up to stroke softly down my hair. “Fate had a different plan for us, Paige. Not that I’m happy about what happened with Chris, but I have to admit that without his actions, we might not be standing where we are right now. I wouldn’t call us cursed, Paige.... just

sidetracked.”

Unable to meet his gaze, I looked down at the floor. “I don’t know what we are, Daemon. I don’t know if we really have been forced back together. It is still so damned hard for me to openly commit to this even though there is no way in hell I will ever let you go. Something is wrong with me, something ripped me to shreds on the inside and I’m afraid I can never truly be whole again. I don’t understand why you put up with me. I’m no good when it comes to this.”

Daemon tensed at my words as his finger came up under my chin. He lifted my gaze back to his as he said, “I’ve told

you before, I'll wait for as long as you need, Paige. I don't care what you call us now, Damsel, as long as one day you will call yourself my wife."

My heart stopped for a moment and I may have physically flinched at his statement. Wife? I hadn't even considered that, someday, Daemon would want that. I mean, sure, that's the normal direction a relationship can lead, but I never imagined that my life would ever end up there. My chest constricted and my face must have shown it because Daemon's grin brightened until both dimples flashed out at me. Oh god... was he proposing?!

Please don't drop on one knee...

please don't drop on one knee...

Daemon's face twisted up into an amused expression. "You okay? Should I call an ambulance or something? All the color just drained from your face."

I knew he was trying to make light of this conversation, but the more I thought about us, the more panicked I became. "Do you really think it could work, Daemon?" His smile instantly faded at my question. Pain boiled within the shifting blues of his eyes and I felt bad instantly for having asked. However, it was a question that needed to be asked; one that couldn't be ignored in favor of a desperate hope for *happily ever after*. Both of us had been dragged

through the mud in one way or another. Both of us had lost our innocence way too soon. Most importantly, both of us had been trained to hide the most vulnerable parts of ourselves in moments when we should be handing our heart over on a silver platter.

“Damsel...”

“No! I’m serious, Daemon. We’re hardened and screwed up. Our lives have been bent up and butchered so many times over that we don’t know what’s real anymore. Yes, it all started with what your father did, and it spiraled out of control into what my parents did, what you did, what I did. We made choices and we endured, but when have

either of us ever just let go? I've never loved anyone but you. I don't know what to do with that or even what it means! How do I know that we won't go into this together only for one of us to flip out and break the other one all over again?!"

I wasn't sure where all those words were coming from but they kept spilling out of my mouth without a foreseeable end. Here I was worrying about what would happen when one of us flipped out, not realizing that one of us already had.

Daemon grabbed my face with both hands and roughly held me in such a way that I had to make eye contact with him.

“Where is this coming from, Paige?!”

“I don’t know! My heart...it fucking hurts. You keep trying to walk me deeper and deeper into this...” I gestured between us with my hand. “... But I’m so afraid that if I let go and follow, that somehow you will be ripped from me again. I won’t be able to take it a second time, Daemon! I can’t go through it again. I’m not distant because I’ve grown cold through life. I’m distant because I’m scared shitless of being left broken by life. I’m scared of, once again, being shown, in no uncertain terms, that my life is not within my own control!”

His lips brushed across mine

before he pulled back to lock his eyes with mine. “It’s not, baby. It’s not in your control. It never has been. Even if we don’t get to control it all, it doesn’t mean we don’t get to control certain parts. Right here and right now, we get to make the decisions, not our parents, not the State, not anyone but us. However, you need to calm down, Damsel, because if anything is in control right now, it’s those emotions you are allowing to take over your thinking. If anything can push us apart again, it’s your fear.”

I knew what he was saying was true, but something about that word “wife” triggered panic within me. My entire life, I’d avoided emotional ties,

commitments of any sort, by refusing to voice or acknowledge anything more than friendship with anybody. It was as if refusing to speak the words aloud had somehow sheltered me from the emotional entanglements that I'd seen destroy people throughout my life.

Daemon's voice took on that slow, controlled tone as he spoke next. "Tell me you love me, Paige. Admit to yourself and to me what is going on inside that head of yours. You've spent way too many years running, and now it's time that you stop and face the one thing you appear to be the most afraid of....just say it, Damsel. You've said it before...don't tell me you were a braver person at six than you are now."

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I looked up at the one man who could shatter me if he ever walked away. He was right. I never hesitated to tell him how I felt when we were younger, never thought twice about making promises to him that tied me to him for as long as it took me to find him again; but that was before. Before he was taken from me, before my heart and soul were torn apart by not knowing if he would ever return, if he even remembered me. This was all happening so fast that it was impossible for me to quiet the chaotic and tumultuous emotions that raged within my body. I looked up into his face. The serenity, the calm that reflected from his expression and I wondered how it was

even possible for him not to be as terrified as I was.

“Say it, Damsel. Tell me how you feel. For once, stop hiding, stop running; just stop and face the very thing that scares you the most.”

Ugly sobs escaped me as Daemon’s gaze burned into me. Memories of Daemon when he was young, of his face in the rear window of a car that was taking him from me, of the days I would wait outside hoping to see him walk out to find me, battered against the walls of my heart. All the years of not knowing, of wondering, of being ripped apart from the inside out were crashing against my skull and three words swirled within the

depths of all of those memories. One truth. I love and have always loved the man who stood before me. I loved him as a child, I lost him as a child. I now love the man he became, but could I survive the possibility of losing him again?

“What if I lose you again, Daemon?”

His arms pulled me to him and I could feel the vibrations ripple along his chest as he spoke. “Fate doesn’t have that in store for us, Paige. It brought you to me as a little annoying kid, all pigtails and big words, and it delivered you back to me as the most beautiful woman I have ever imagined could exist. We

promised each other to always find each other, and we did. There is nothing in this world besides death itself that is strong enough to rip us apart from one another again. Even if momentarily parted, I will fight against any person or anything to find my way back to you. You have to believe that, Paige. I have given you every part of myself there is to give and I know you've given me everything in return. I just need you to admit it, not only to me, but to yourself. You'll never stop fearing it if you can never face it. I promise you, Paige, you will never lose me again."

I opened my mouth to reply, but quickly slammed it shut again. Fear consumed me. It ate at every part of me

that wanted to reach out and grab hold of Daemon's words and believe they could be true. Daemon's eyes searched mine for a few seconds before he huffed out a breath, wrapped his arms around me and picked me up. Carrying me to his bed, he laid me down and crawled up to lay beside me.

“Close your eyes, Damsel.”

My eyes shot to him and I know they narrowed as I glared at him with skepticism. “What are you doing, Daemon?”

He smiled and reached up to run his hands over my face, forcing my eyes closed. He let go and nudged my head

so that I was facing the ceiling. “Just trust me, Paige. Now, with your eyes closed, imagine you are outside in the backyard of The Center. You are five years old and you are laying in your favorite spot, surrounded by the tall grass. Imagine the sounds of the cicadas, the wind blowing through the tree limbs and the frogs.”

I knew what Daemon was doing and it wasn't going to work. Many shrinks had attempted to hypnotize me when I was younger but quickly found out that I was not the type to be easily put under. I fidgeted in place and felt Daemon's hand brush down my body as he attempted to still my moving limbs. “I can't be hypnotized, Daemon. You

might as well give up.” One eye peeked open and I turned to look at him again. “Shrinks couldn’t hypnotize me and they were trained to do it. What makes you think you can?”

The corner of his mouth quirked as he attempted to hide his smile. “I’m not trying to hypnotize you, Paige. Just trust me on this. Take a deep breath, let it out, shut that stubborn mouth of yours and close your eyes.”

I gave Daemon one more skeptical glare, but then did as instructed.

“Now, you are five years old, you are in the backyard and you are watching the clouds as they roll past. The sunlight

is warming your skin and a cool breeze is blowing over you.”

I imagined myself where Daemon was trying to place me. A smile crept over my lips as I remembered back to those lazy summer days. As I thought back to those special times, my heart rate slowed and my breathing became deep and even. I could feel Daemon’s hand as it rested against my stomach, his fingers moving back and forth, creating a rhythm for my breaths to follow.

“Now imagine you hear that back door slam open and closed. Footsteps creep up behind you, and the grass rustles at your side.”

My smile grew wider. He was talking about the days where we would just lay quietly, side by side, happy to be together.

“You open your eyes, Paige. You look over and see your best friend lying there. Laughter erupts from us both just to be in each other’s company. What do you feel, Damsel?”

“Love.” I didn’t even have to think about it, my heart swelled with the emotions I felt for him as a child. Even with the knowledge that there were days when bad things would happen, no matter what, I loved him. Pure and innocent, my love was strong and unquestioned.

“Now remember when we made promises to each other, Paige? Promises that we would see each other again?”

I nodded, but my smile began to deflate. Those promises were made when times started to darken for us, when the events would happen that would alter our lives forever.

“Open your eyes, Paige.”

I opened my eyes and his gaze instantly locked with mine. The crystal blue of his eyes reminded me not only of the friend from my past, but also of the man who had become the *everything* of my present. “I’m right here, Paige. Against all odds, those promises were

kept. Regardless of what happened between my parents, the decisions made by your parents, and the time we were kept apart, we still found our way back.” His hand came up to brush along my cheek. His eyes burned brighter as the seriousness of his message was conveyed. “I will always, ALWAYS, find my way back. You never have to fear losing me, Paige, because no matter what, I will find you again....I promised you then, and I’m promising now. We will always be together. But, baby, you’ve got to keep up your end of this promise. If you keep fearing everything, if you keep letting panic rip you apart from me, we can never truly find our way back to those days. You have to let

go, you have to let me in, and you have to trust that I will fight against any obstacle to make sure that I never lose you again.”

His warm mouth met mine as tears streamed down my cheeks. The salty taste of my tears mixed with the taste of him as his lips moved over mine. Years of pent up frustration, anger, and sadness poured out of me while Daemon continued molding himself to me, holding me close, kissing away every sob that escaped me.

A dam broke within me. The culmination of the past couple of days, the past few months, and the long years of pain came pouring out of me. Each

event, every emotion, each memory and demon that broke free of me somehow involved this man; losing him, missing him and then finding him again. Daemon had somehow put to words, the fears that consumed me.

He pulled up to look pointedly in my eyes, almost as if he was making sure I knew he was here with me...not just physically, but emotionally as well. His hands came up to cup my face as he used his thumbs to wipe away my tears as they streamed down my face. "Paige, the only things that matter right now are where we started and where we ended up. All that crap in the middle means nothing." His mouth came to mine again, but this time his kiss was rough, forceful

to a point where he was taking from me the emotions that battered against my shell. My tears eventually stopped and were replaced with a longing for the man braced above me.

It took everything I had to break free of his kiss so that I could speak the words that had long ago been silenced. My swollen eyes shot to his as I whispered, "I love you, Daemon. I've loved you almost my entire life and nothing scares me more than the way I feel about you. It'll take time for me to trust that our worlds won't come crashing down again, so please, don't give up on me."

His eyes went wide, but his face

softened as he processed what I had finally been able to say. Bringing his mouth to my ear, a jolt shot through my center at his deep, baritone voice. “Those words are music to my ears. I’ll never give up on you, beautiful. I never have and I promise you....I never will.”

A violent shudder ran through my body and it was as if both of us could not get close to each other fast enough. Within seconds, Daemon had my clothes tossed to the floor. His hands and mouth were greedy. They ran over my skin as I reached down to undo the button of his jeans. With one smooth move, he helped free himself of the material that separated our bodies and my head fell back as he filled me with one swift

move. The combination of the emotions that flooded me and the pleasure his body was driving into me was like an aphrodisiac. My breath was hard but shallow and my heart raced causing my head to spin. He powered himself into me, while his hands gripped and pulled at my skin. His fingers dug in to the flesh of my hips, lifting me so that I could take him deeper within me. His mouth was warm as it traveled over me and when I felt his teeth bite down at the junction between my neck and shoulder, I lost myself to the moment. Frozen in place, I screamed out his name. My body tensed and pulsed around him just before he joined me in his own release. This was not only about physical

pleasure, but about rejoining two souls that, until recently, had been lost by their separation from one another. Thoughts were absent, only feelings and emotions existed. My mind and body felt drunk and disoriented from the onslaught of passion his touch created within me. This was love. Not just sex, not just another man who would attempt to fill a void that for so long had remained empty; but love with a man, the only man, who would ever be able to touch the true depths of my very being.

Daemon pulled out of me and I groaned from the loss of fullness within me. Flipping me over, he pushed me up on to my knees before pulling my body up flat against his. His chest, slickened

with sweat, heaved against my back from his labored breathing as his hands came up to cup my breasts. He pinched the tips between his fingers and I cried out as the pleasure mixed with pain ran down the thread connecting my breasts to my core. I arched my body to push myself harder against his hands.

His words were breathless as he spoke into my ear. “You need to understand, Damsel, that from this day forward, you are the only woman that I will bury myself within. No matter how often I have you, it will never be enough. Even if you attempted to escape me, I will hunt you down and drag your stubborn little ass right back to my bed.” His teeth closed over my earlobe

causing my head to roll back from the sensation. He let go of my earlobe and chuckled softly behind me. "Give in to me, Paige. Let go of all your grief, your fear, your anxieties about the future and let me fill the empty spaces created within you from the loss of all that unnecessary bullshit. You can fight against me all you want, but you should know that there is nothing in this world that will keep me from having you in every way that I want." His right hand traveled down my abdomen, finding its way to the apex of my thighs. When his thumb met with that wonderful bundle of nerves, my legs quaked as a shudder rolled over my body. His long finger found its way within me causing me to

tighten around him as my mouth opened to let out a silent cry. Like a toy he wound me up until I didn't think I could take anymore. His hand moved from my breast to my throat as he continued his southern assault. Just as his fingers closed, lightly preventing my breath, he pushed me forward so that he could fill me again. Within seconds I was floating within a hormonal cloud, feeling like I had lost touch with the physical plane. My body floated back down from its peak, only to be taken back again; over...and over.

I lost count of how many times Daemon drove my body to the peaks of ecstasy that evening. All I could remember, all that mattered was the last

thing I remember Daemon whispering as my body finally gave way to sleep. “I’m here with you, Damsel...always and forever.”

Chapter Five

~~Daemon~~

“Come inside for a while, Buddy. It’s hot out there and you need to rest up and get some water in you. Paige, you should come inside as well, baby girl.”

My mom’s head was poked outside of the back door of The Center. Her eyes were turned up to the branch of the tree as Paige and I grumbled while making our way down as instructed. We’d spent the day playing in the backyard, chasing dragonflies and exploring the woods. Same thing we did every day, but it never got old. I jumped down into the bottom of the

large tree and looked up to help Paige. I spotted her sitting three branches above me, trying to get her footing on the branch below her. A smile broke out at the corners of my mouth and I chuckled watching her attempt to climb down. She never had any problem making her way up the limbs, but ever since that day I pushed her out of the tree, she always hesitated on her way back down. I felt bad for having done that, causing her to fear something she never feared before. I couldn't help but laugh though. She looked real funny wrapped around the limb like she was.

Paige's eyes narrowed when she caught me laughing at her. "Need some help?" Her eyes narrowed even

more at my question and I could tell she would rather stay up in the tree than admit that she needed my help getting back down.

“No!” Her cherub face screwed up into a stubborn little scowl causing me to laugh even harder. “Stop laughing, Buddy. It’s not funny. My legs aren’t as long as yours. It’s harder for me to reach the next branch.”

I stared up at Paige. She kept swinging her foot out, attempting to step on the lower limb. Her foot never quite made contact because her arms had a death grip on the branch she was on. My patience was running thin so I started climbing up after her. “Come

on, Paige. You have no problem getting up, you should have no problem getting down.”

When Paige’s foot couldn’t make contact with the limb below her, she panicked and pulled herself higher onto the branch above her. I became nervous for her and noticed that she was becoming more upset. “You need to climb down to me, Paige. I’m right here if you slip. You only have to make it down another branch to get to me. Just try for me, please. I promise you, Paige, I won’t let you fall.”

Paige’s face turned to look at me and I saw a single tear roll down her cheek. I knew she was embarrassed, so

I tried to keep my face as blank as possible to keep from making it worse.

Her little arms finally started to relax, lowering her body enough that her foot firmly landed on the lower branch. She slid slowly down to the limb below her and I was able to reach up and steady her as she climbed down to the branch where I was waiting for her. As soon as she reached me, I wrapped my arms around her and held her until she started to calm down.

Forcing her little face up to look at me, I reminded her, “You have to stop being afraid of falling, Paige. You’ve never fallen before, except for that one time, and that was my fault, not yours.

You're a good climber and you need to remember that. You don't need me or anyone else to get you down. Understand?"

She nodded her head once but refused to look me in the eye. I knew she was being headstrong so I choose to ignore it this time instead of poking fun at her like I would normally do.

When we finally reached the ground Paige started running towards the back door. I easily caught up to her and reached out to grab her shoulder. Once I got ahold of her, I shoved her back so that she landed on the ground with a heavy thud on her bottom. Almost instantly, her arms crossed over

her chest and she looked up at me with that cute little scrunched up face.

“Well, what are you doing just sitting there? Get up, Paige. You’re not going to be able to do anything about it by sitting on the ground like that.” When she didn’t move, I sighed and walked over to help her up. I had every intention of shoving her back down again because she knew better than to wait for me to help. I would keep doing this with her until she finally learned that the only person who would pick you up when you fall was yourself. As soon as I got near her, I reached my hand down to help her and chuckled as she reached up to accept my assistance. Just before our

hands joined, her little leg kicked out and caught me in the knee. I fell to the ground and my hands instantly went to my leg from the pain.

Paige jumped up from the ground, not waiting for me to push myself up. She ran to the back door and opened it. Before walking inside, she turned around and stuck her little tongue out at me.

I laughed as she disappeared inside the building. It was about time she started defending herself. I was proud of her. If she kept that up, she would never end up like my mom.

I walked inside and headed back

to the room my mom and I shared. I could hear the radio playing some old Southern rock and mom sat on the bed humming along with the music. She looked happy and I wondered why her mood had suddenly turned. We'd been here for almost three months and up until recently, she never seemed to smile. As soon as mom caught sight of me, she opened her arms, inviting me in for a hug. I walked over to her and she pulled me in for a tight hug. Holding me to her, she started singing the lyrics of the song before stopping and asking, "Do you know who sings this, Buddy?" I shook my head and looked at her funny. I'm seven. How am I supposed to know who sings some random song?

She laughed before saying, "This is Lynyrd Skynyrd. Song's called 'Simple Man'. It's one of my favorites." Her hand came up to ruffle my hair. "Reminds me of you little buddy."

I looked up at her in question and she smiled brightly. "It's what I want for you. I pray every day that you'll grow up strong, fall in love, get married and be happy. So many people spin their wheels out there trying to get rich, or control the world, but they're never happy." Her face fell as she thought back on some distant memory. "Your daddy, well, he's never satisfied. When everything goes bad he turns to drinking and drugs and that's why he gets like he does."

My face twisted at the mention of my father. Mom just kept rocking back and forth to the beat of the song. “You know what I think? I think you’re sweet on Paige. Maybe she could be your wife someday. You’d be lucky to have her. I bet that girl is going to grow up to be a beauty. But, Buddy, no matter who you end up marrying, you treat that girl like a queen. Every girl deserves to be loved and cherished. Don’t become like your daddy. Don’t fill up with so much hate that it poisons you. Nothing good comes from it and everyone around you would end up getting hurt. I don’t want that for you, baby.”

When Mom had stopped talking

she turned me around to look me in the eye. “You be a simple man, Buddy. You get married, you love your girl, you make babies if you want, but you better make sure to look out for them.”

I squirmed at what she was saying. “Mommy, I’m not marrying no one, and especially not Paige. She’s annoying.”

Mom laughed a deep belly laugh at those words. “You might say that now, Buddy, but mark my words; one day that girl is going to turn your head like no one else. I can already see it between you two. Don’t know what to call it, but you are two halves of one whole and I think God, or fate, or

whatever you want to call it has plans for you. Keep looking out for her Buddy and stop pushing that girl around.” Mommy shot me a pointed look. “Don’t think we don’t see you doing it. Paige’s momma is about to whoop you good for it. But, I talked to her. She knows you care about that girl, so she hasn’t done nothing...yet.”

I twisted out of my mom’s hold and folded my arms across my chest. “I’m not trying to hurt her mom, I’m just teaching her not to cry, not to sit around and take it.”

My mom’s eyebrows furrowed in concern. “That’s a bad way to teach her, don’t you think? Why do you think

you need to teach her that, anyway?”

“Because nobody taught you that, and look what happened. Daddy hurt you over and over again and you never did nothing about it.”

Mommy cried and folded in on herself at my words. I felt bad and reached out to take her hand. Choking back sobs, she looked at me and finally said, “I know I haven’t been able to do much to make things better, but things are going to change, Buddy. Don’t you worry. Someday...things are going to change.”

~

~~Paige~~

I stood in the full length mirror putting my hair up into a bun. Today was the first day of training with Daemon and I was excited to show him that I could kick his ass with my eyes closed if I wanted to. Laughing to myself, I adjusted my shorts on my hips and pulled my tank top into place. I could hear Daemon in the living room listening to the radio.

Is that Lynyrd Skynyrd he's playing?

After I was finished dressing, I walked into the bathroom to wash my face and came back out to find Daemon's large form leaning against the doorway of the room. His hair was still wet from

the shower he'd taken earlier and I had to brace myself to keep from running to him to lick away every leftover drop of water that slowly slid down his skin. His chest glistened from the moisture that still adorned his body and my eyelids suddenly felt heavy and hooded as I took in the lines of his abdomen which dipped down to the top band of the cotton shorts that hung off his narrow hips. Holy crap, the man was a masterpiece if I've ever seen one.

“You look ready to go.” The corner of his mouth twisted up into a grin and I melted a little where I stood when that dimple on his cheek popped out.

“Well...I was.”

His head tilted slightly as he looked at me for an explanation.

I let out an exasperated huff of air before saying, “If I have to kick your butt today, I’m going to need you to put on a shirt, Daemon. I can’t concentrate very well, with all of you showing like that.”

Daemon laughed and sauntered over to me. Taking me in his arms, he leaned down and placed a kiss on my forehead. “Number one, Damsel, I will be putting on a shirt and number two... you won’t be kicking my butt.”

I looked up at him and smiled innocently. Batting my eyes, I said, “Oh, you have no idea, Daemon. You have

yet to see my ninja skills in full force.”

He chuckled and reached down to take my hand and push me towards the door, slapping me one time on the ass as I passed by. “Go wait for me in the living room, Damsel. I’m going to throw on a shirt, and maybe some padded gear, just in case those ninja skills are as scary as you claim.” He winked at me and then turned to walk into his closet. I threw a few eye daggers in his direction before making my way out into the living room. Eventually, Daemon joined me and we walked down to the garage.

The gym I was being taken to was thirty minutes from Daemon’s apartment. I flipped through the iPod

plugged into the car, finally settling on a fast beat song. My eyes scanned the scenery through the window as it flew past while I was practically jumping up and down in my seat, excited to see what Daemon had in store for me.

“Now remember, Damsel. This isn’t a state of the art gym we are going to. The place has seen better days and most of the people you meet there will be somewhat crotchety.” Daemon’s eyes briefly flicked my direction before settling back on the road.

“I’m not worried about it. You said before that Frank used to take you there, right”

“Yeah.” His voice was quiet, but the hint of a smile could be seen on his lips.

“What was he like? How did my parents know him?” I was genuinely curious about the mysterious man that I never had the opportunity to meet. Come to think of it, I never really met many of my parents’ friends growing up. They were always so busy with the Center that on the rare occasion that we were able to get away, there was only time to visit with relatives. After my grandparents on both sides passed away, my parents didn’t seem to ever leave The Center.

“He was a rough old Marine. He was as old-fashioned as you could get,

strong as an ox, and didn't put up with my shit.” Daemon chuckled as he remembered back. “The man scared the shit out of me when I first met him, and I spent that entire first night contemplating escape. His accent was so thick, you could barely understand what he was saying. First thing he said to me was, ‘Boy, now you and I will get along, as long as you don’t act like a stupid punk kid.’ He sounded kind of like Foghorn Leghorn from the Bugs Bunny cartoons.”

I laughed as Daemon attempted to imitate a thick Southern accent. Needless to say, his imitation needed work.

“I stayed with him, though...only

because I had nowhere else to go but the streets. He was a good man, Paige. He whipped my ass into shape. Every time I did something stupid, or I started acting like a hothead, he had some random, menial task for me to do. Cleaning, fixing shit at the bar, working on old cars with him, it didn't matter. Surprisingly, though, those tasks seemed to calm me down. He always told me that I needed to stop letting the shit I couldn't control bother me, and instead, focus on the things that I could control, such as my actions and emotions. He took me to the gym to 'work out' my aggression. Said there was nothing wrong with fighting, as long as it was done legally."

I smiled as Daemon continued

telling me his memories of Frank. He sounded like an interesting character and I was somewhat dismayed that I'd never been given the opportunity to meet him. "So, where does the control thing come into play with women?"

Daemon smirked as he eyed me from his seat. "What makes you think that has anything to do with anything?" His eyes flicked back to the road before I could formulate a response.

"I dunno. It just seems like it would. Is it an aggressive thing or what?" My foot suddenly became interesting as I attempted to avoid looking directly at him. For some reason, I was nervous about what his

answer might be and it was easier if I didn't look at him while I waited for his response.

Daemon sighed before saying, "Honestly, Paige. I'm not sure what it comes from. A lack of respect, maybe... possibly an attempt to remain emotionally distant? I've thought about it often, but never came to any conclusions. All I know is that it turned me on; but then I met you and things changed..."

My eyes shot to him. "Changed?" A humorless laugh escaped me. "*I'm going to control you, own you and possess you,*" I deadpanned. "Sounds like nothing changed to me."

He barked out a laugh in response to my statement. “Yeah...well...that was the plan initially. However, when we got to that point, I couldn’t stop myself from worshipping you. Don’t get me wrong, Damsel, I thoroughly enjoy when you submit yourself to me entirely. It’s hot as hell. But, unlike other women, I don’t feel a need to control you. I want you there with me, completely, and not just on a physical level.”

He flashed a sheepish look in my direction and I grinned. I remembered the one evening with Drunk Daemon and a chill ran through me. I was still in shock that other women had agreed to be treated in such a manner. There was no emotion, no mental connection, just a

physical encounter. For some, that's all that is needed, and that is fine for them... to each their own. Hell, technically the same thing could have been said for my relationship with Alex, even though I cared for him deeply, it was physical only. With Daemon it was different, he touched not only my body, but my soul as well.

As we pulled up to the gym, my expression changed. 'State of the Art' was not the way I would describe this place. In fact, the terminology I would use to describe the gym was 'condemned.' The exterior of the building looked like an old warehouse that had been converted into a strip of shady business offices. The white paint

was peeling, revealing the grey color of the metal paneling underneath. The roof was flat and the rain gutters that ran along the perimeter were falling down in some areas and entirely missing in others. Glass doors were evenly spaced across the front portion of the building. Some of the doors had stick on logos, whereas others lacked any type of identification at all. One door had what appeared to be a handwritten sign on a sheet of notebook paper. My eyebrow arched as I looked over our destination. “Uh...I know you said the place was run down, but I didn’t know you actually meant to say *falling* down.”

Daemon laughed as he threw the truck into park. “I tried to warn you.

It's not as bad inside as it appears.”

We exited the vehicle and Daemon took my hand as we made our way inside. Once inside, I noticed it was an open space that was split into different areas. On our left were several older looking weight benches, an antiquated treadmill, and what I believed may have been an elliptical machine in its better days. However, with the seat resting on the floor and the handles bent and mangled in odd directions, I was pretty sure the machine had no other beneficial use except for as scrap metal in a junkyard. On the other side of the space was a fighting ring. My eyes widened and I may have jumped up and down a little upon sight of it.

Daemon turned to look at me. “Why are you dancing?”

“Because I get to kick your ass in a fighting ring. I’ve always wanted to do that. Do I get to jump off the ropes, and bounce you off of them and stuff?” The smile that took over my face undoubtedly gave me the appearance of a person who could use some time in a padded room. I didn’t care, however, because I was about to kick butt in style.

An amused grin broke out on Daemon’s face as he began pulling me in the direction of the ring. Once we passed the center partition of the space, I noticed that we weren’t alone. In the back of the room, were four older

gentleman whose faces lit up as soon as they spotted Daemon and I walking in. They put out their cigarettes (yes, smoking was apparently allowed inside of this gym) and moved forward to shake Daemon's hand.

“Daemon! So good to see you boy! It's been a while since we had some young blood around here. I was getting tired of always having to look at the same ol' ugly mugs every day. Who, may I ask, is your lovely friend here?” He reached out to take my hand as he said, “I believe you are in the wrong place, my dear. There are other gyms that may be more your style back in the city. But since you're here, let me introduce myself. The name's Joe.”

I reached out to shake Joe's hand. His grip was like steel as my hand disappeared in the bear paw he called a hand. "Good to meet you Joe, my name's Paige."

The other three men came up to introduce themselves as well. Each one was strong and surly, and you could barely understand a damn thing they said due to their thick southern twang. Each man looked like he'd been put through the wringer a time or two, but they appeared to be genuine and friendly. These were definitely the types that would make a person shit themselves if they ever met these guys on bad terms. Each one looked like he'd just come off of a hunting trip or were taking a break

from their stint with a motorcycle gang.

Joe took Daemon into a huge hug, patting him on the back hard enough for an echo to sound throughout the building. I winced at the sound, but laughed when Daemon returned the sentiment. “Hey Joe...I know it’s been a while, old man. I’ve been busy with the bars and this little woman right here. She’s a handful.” Daemon turned to wink at me before looking back at Joe.

‘Little woman’? What the hell?!
My eyes narrowed in Daemon’s direction.

“Most women are, Daemon. We tried to warn ya when you were younger,

but I guess warnings won't do shit when you're dealing with a gal as pretty as this one. Hell, if I was a younger man, you would have a run for your money on who she left this gym with." Joe started laughing a deep belly laugh, but then started hacking up a lung from the effort. Smoking will do that to you and I was worried he would collapse on the floor right there in front of me. The other men banged on his back to get him breathing again.

Once Joe was upright and breathing normally, he turned to me and said, "Sorry, beautiful, but a man my age, who has been smoking as long as I have... well...let's just say the ol' airbags aren't what they used to be." I smiled politely

as Joe turned back to Daemon. “So, what are you here for boy? You lookin’ to get your ass whipped by me today?”

Daemon pulled me closer as he replied, “Not today, Joe. Learned my lesson with you years ago.” Joe smiled proudly in response to Daemon’s statement. “I brought Paige to teach her a few things about defending herself against men. She has a tendency to piss off the wrong people and I want to make sure that if I’m not there to protect her that she’ll be able to get away, if nothing else.”

Joe thought about Daemon’s words, but then I swore I saw recognition light up those ancient eyes. “Wait, wasn’t it

your club that caught fire the other night? They said it was arson in the papers; was she somehow involved?" Daemon nodded and Joe turned to me. "Well, who the hell you been pissing off, little lady. Shouldn't you be home cooking or cleaning or something?"

What the fuck?!

If Joe wasn't a senior citizen, I'd knock him back a step or two for making such a chauvinistic comment. I know that older Southern men grew up in a different time, but damn! He had to know times had changed. I mean, if a woman enjoys cooking or cleaning, more power to her; but it shouldn't be a requirement. I opened my mouth to let

him have it when Daemon squeezed my hand and answered for me. “Joe, she’s not the type. Trust me when I tell you, the last thing you will find this girl doing is cooking and cleaning.

Joe thought about Daemon’s statement and chuckled at some private thought. “I’ve heard some women nowadays ain’t of that breed..I get that. Little things want to prove themselves in worlds that normally were reserved for men.” I may have physically flinched at his statement, only causing Daemon to pull me closer to his side. Joe continued on without noticing my reaction. “Well, then you two best get to it. Dave and his boys are coming in about an hour to take over the ring. I’m here to act as referee.

Come to think of it, you might want to stick around, Daemon. Dave's boys are little punks that could learn from you. Maybe you could whip their asses around the ring a time or two and teach them they ain't as tough as they imagine."

"I'd love to, Joe. But we'll have to save that for another day. Paige and I have places to be after we leave here, but we'll be back often in the coming weeks. Tell Dave to schedule another day for me to spar with his kids. It'll be fun." Joe nodded and Daemon began pulling me towards the ring. I was curious why they would have Daemon sparring within a bunch of kids.

“Why do they want you to beat up on children, Daemon? Seems like it wouldn’t be fair, given your size and all.”

Daemon chuckled. “By ‘kids’, he meant people our age. Joe and his friends don’t look at us like we’re adults, Paige. We don’t get that honor until we have one foot in our graves.”

When we approached the ring, Daemon lifted the top rope so I could climb through. “Oh no! Uh, uh. I don’t need your assistance, Daemon. If we’re going to be fighting as equals, then I should be climbing in there by myself just like any other opponent. I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t be lifting ropes for a

man, so you can go ahead and climb in, and I'll follow behind you."

Daemon's hand released the rope as he turned to look at me. "Number one, we're not fighting, Paige...and number two..." His voice trailed off as a grin spread over his lips. "Never mind. I'll let you do things your way."

He climbed in the ring and moved to the center to watch as I made my way in. I balanced myself on the edge of the raised floor and started to pull up on the top rope. Holy crap! The rope was not as flexible as Daemon had made it appear. I looked up to Daemon as I tried to lift it with two hands and I grimaced when I noticed his arrogant smirk had

graced his lovely features. I couldn't give in now without looking like an idiot so I pulled up on the rope with as much force as I could manage. It barely budged. I decided to attempt another approach by climbing the ropes up and over. The bottom rope was wobbly, but I was able to use it to raise myself enough to climb over the top of the highest rope. Just as I placed my body weight on the top rope, it lowered down unexpectedly and I went headfirst into the ring. I rolled, feet over head onto my back and was laid out supine, staring at the ceiling. I could hear Joe and his crew chuckling from where we'd left them and I laid there embarrassed as hell until Daemon's smiling face came into

my line of sight.

“If that is any indication of the ninja skills you will be using on me today, I have to tell you, Damsel, I’m not that frightened. Can I help you up, or are you still being stubborn?” He reached his hand down and I grudgingly accepted. *Sonofabitch.* Daemon chuckled as my cheeks turned red and pulled me to my feet.

Pulling me to the center of the ring, Daemon stood as his eyes raked over my body. I felt heated from his gaze and my eyes flicked to ‘Joe and the Gang’ to see if they had taken notice. All four men stood silently smoking their cigarettes, paying apt attention to what was about to

go down in the ring. I looked back to Daemon and noticed a crooked grin peeking out from the corner of his sculpted lips. “You ready for this, Damsel?” I nodded hesitantly in response. “Good. Now, I want to see what those ninja skills of yours can do for you. You stand there, and I’ll attack. Show me how you would normally defend yourself, okay?”

“Fine, Daemon. However, I can’t promise I won’t hurt you in the process, so don’t blame me if you leave this place limping. In fact, you might want to put on a cup or something to protect your manhood, because I would hate....Ahhhhh!” Before I could finish my sentence, Daemon lunged forward,

managing to grip both my wrists. He tugged me forward, while at the same time placing his foot in front of my feet, tripping me as I tried to steady myself. I went forward into the mat as Daemon brought my arms to my back and locked them to the middle of my spine with one hand. His other hand came down between my shoulder blades as he straddled my lower half, using his weight to hold me in place. Joe and the Gang instantly broke out into hoots of laughter and I turned my head to see them slapping their knees and each other's backs. My mouth was forced open into an 'O' from the mat pushing up against my cheek.

Daemon leaned forward, his mouth

softly brushing against my ear as he spoke, “Your first mistake, Damsel, is that you talk too much. While you’re busy distracting yourself with your own voice, your opponent will be watching and waiting for the moment when you let down your guard.” His voice lowered an octave and seductive tendrils dripped from his words as he said, “If I wanted to, I could take you from behind right here and right now, and there’s not a damn thing you could do about it.” His teeth nipped at my earlobe causing an involuntary pull within my core and a whimper to escape my lips. I believe drool may have dribbled a little from the corner of my mouth, causing Daemon to chuckle wickedly. “Keep that up and I

might be asking our audience to give us some time alone.” My body trembled in response to his statement.

Releasing my hands, he pushed himself up, before reaching down and helping pull me to my feet. My balance was unsteady at first and I was still feeling heady from my encounter with Daemon on the mat. I shook off my hormone-induced stupor before placing my feet in a fighting stance and bracing my posture ready for his attack. Daemon’s eyes raked over my body again, this time slower, burning with obvious dirty intentions. I steadied my breath and kept my focus locked to his arms and legs awaiting any movement that would give away his attack. When

he didn't move, my eyes traveled up to his face. His eyes were hooded and his bottom lip was pulled between his teeth. The cocky expression over his face was the final nail on my coffin. I couldn't help but react.

“Daemon, we are fighting, not having sex so you can wipe that seductive fucking grin from your face before I...” *Shit!*

Once again, Daemon came at me quick as a snake. Before I registered what was happening, he'd taken both my hands into his, swept my feet out from under me using his foot, and had taken me to the ground with a loud thump as we landed. The ceiling was in my line

of sight while Daemon's body was prone over mine. He quickly switched my wrists into one of his hands before lifting and pinning them above my head. That particular move must have impressed our elderly audience, because a low whistle and some lewd murmurs sounded from their direction.

Daemon's mouth came to my ear. "Have I ever told you how much I enjoy that sassy mouth of yours?" His tongue flicked out, pulling my earlobe between his teeth. I gasped and my hips bucked a bit from the sensation. My cheeks heated when I suddenly remembered we were being watched. His mouth released my ear before he said, "I'm reconsidering what I told you on the ride

here. Apparently, things have not changed as much as I thought. I do believe I'm controlling and owning your sexy little ass at this very minute; and to be completely honest, the only thing keeping me from ripping your clothes off and having my way with you is the peanut gallery standing within fifty feet of us." His warm mouth caught mine, leaving me breathless when the kiss was over. "Now, are we done fighting so that I can actually teach you something, or did you have more *skills* to show me?"

"You're an arrogant twit, Daemon, you know that right?"

He snickered at my question while

pushing himself upright. “I know, Damsel. I know.”

Not giving up the good fight, I taunted Daemon into a few more sparring matches. On my third attempt, he flipped me back to my stomach, kicking my legs apart and bracing himself above me. Howling laughter erupted from our audience and the embarrassing moments just piled on from there. I tried to dodge and attack on my fourth attempt, ending up swung and bounced off of one of the corner cushions. I threw myself back into the fight and was graciously bent over and held still over the perimeter rope of the ring. I was nervous for Joe and the Gang as their faces turned purple while they

clutched at their sides from the uncontrolled laughter. My hair had escaped the bun on the back of my head, finding its way to becoming plastered to my face. Air huffed out from between my lips, blowing the hair away momentarily, before replacing itself across my eyes. Daemon jerked me back, replacing me in the center of the ring.

That's it. Ninja time now!

I waited for Daemon's move and kicked out at him when I saw him suddenly lunge in my direction. He caught my foot easily and flipped me onto my back. I grit my teeth from the impact with the ground before pushing

myself once again into a standing position. Attempt number six didn't go much better. I lunged at Daemon, only to have him grab my hands and use my forward momentum to slam me against the ropes, bouncing me onto my stomach on the mat. My frustration intensified as I attempted to right myself, only to have Daemon continuously shove me back down before I was upright. When I finally gave up and laid there, he lowered himself to the mat, taking my face into his hands.

“We done now? I'd love to stay here and own your ass all day, but we're running out of time and will have to give up the ring soon.” He pushed up into a standing position over me. “Get up,

Paige. Until you learn to protect yourself I'm going to keep introducing you to the mat. Laying there, doing nothing won't help you." My mind instantly raced back to my childhood with Buddy. The words he'd just spoken were similar to the ones he'd spoken when we were young in the backyard of The Center. A smile graced my face as I realized that those days had come full circle. Once again, he did what he could to teach me to take care of myself. Despite his aggression as a child, Daemon never let me give up when I was younger, and it appeared that theme carried over into our adult life. If ever there was a thing as redemption, it was this moment. He may have hurt me before, but the lessons he tried to teach

me then and now more than made up for any pain he would have caused. Holding strong to those thoughts, I finally pushed myself up and retook my position opposite Daemon.

My chest heaved from the exertion of our fighting. I noticed Daemon hadn't even broken a sweat from his efforts, causing me to grow annoyed. I wanted to continue my attempts to take his ass down, but the time limitations he's reminded me of made me reconsider. "Fine. Don't get a big head over me conceding *this time*. If we didn't have a time limit, I'd wear you down eventually."

My arms crossed over my chest as

Daemon's roaring laugh vibrated the mat. "Okay, Damsel. However, if the fact that you can barely breathe is any indication, I'd say you are damn near close to wearing yourself out before I even become winded." My eyes narrowed at him, causing his dimples to pop out from his grin. "Now, stop your stubbornness and let me show you some things." He took his offensive stance once again before saying, "We'll go over the basics today and then, tomorrow, we'll start working on your endurance and strength. If that was enough to cause your breathing to become so erratic, you'll need to get used to extended physical activity before you ever think of protecting yourself against someone like

Chris.”

I rolled my eyes before responding, “Zip it and let’s get this over with.”

“Okay, Damsel...first thing you need to realize is that, more likely than not, you’re not going to be able to beat or escape a man of my size in a hand to hand fight. Whereas the chest and arms of a man are his strongest feature, a woman’s strongest feature is in her legs.” Daemon’s eyes slid down the skin of my exposed legs, before he brought his gaze back to mine. “Although, those stems of yours are hot as hell, we’re going to need to work on strengthening them. I’m going to lunge at you. I want you to try kicking up at me,

catching me in a knee.”

“I don’t want to hurt you, Daemon.”

He smiled. “No worries, Paige. You won’t hurt me.” His shoulders bobbed from silent laughter, causing me to glare in his direction. Huffing out another breath, I waited for him to lunge forward. As he instructed, I kicked out, aiming for his left knee. He easily grabbed my foot and held it as I bounced and balanced on the foot I had on the ground. Daemon chuckled and released my foot. He took his attack position in front of me and nodded. “Again.” As instructed, I kicked out when he lunged forward, only to be caught and knocked off balance. Daemon caught me before I

hit the mat and he righted me only to demand that we try again. We worked through that motion another ten times before I gave up.

“This is ridiculous, Daemon!” I was embarrassed and humbled by the fact that I couldn’t get in a single strike against him. Daemon’s face was overtaken by a smug grin, which pissed me off.

“Paige, the more we practice, the faster you will become. We also need to work on your leg strength and I have something fun in mind for that.” His eyebrow arched wickedly on his face. “Let’s work on some escape moves before calling it quits for the day.”

He reached out, taking my arms before spinning me and holding me to his chest. After crossing and pinning my arms across my chest, he leaned down to speak in my ear. “Lucky for you, Damsel, you are a tall girl, so nine times out of ten, you will be close to the same height as most men. That puts you at an advantage if taken from behind and held. Let’s pretend I’m your attacker and this is the manner in which I’ve caught you. How are you going to break free?”

I pondered Daemon’s question and considered the times in which I’d been grabbed from behind, or really, any time that I’ve been forced to fight. Although the precise memories were blurry, I

remembered that I acted on instinct, rather than thinking out my actions. I decided to employ that technique against Daemon, using my body to buck back at him as I forced my weight against his arms. My efforts were about as useless as pushing against concrete. He didn't budge.

“Remember what I told you, Paige. You're most likely NOT going to be able to overpower a man who's using his arms and chest to hold you. You need to think and figure out what his weakest point is in every position in which you are held. In this instance, my weakest point is my nose and face. Your advantage in this position is the back of that hard head of yours. Due to your

height, if you were to throw your head back suddenly, there's a good chance you would catch your opponent in the nose. If you hit hard enough, you will gain a few seconds where he is stunned enough to release his grip. Let's try it."

Daemon stilled while holding me to him. I threw my head back, but he moved his head to lessen the blow. He simulated having been caught off guard and loosened his grip giving me seconds to wriggle down out of his grasp and turn around to face him. "Good. Obviously, Paige, I knew what was coming and was able to move out of the way, but in the instance of an actual attack, your opponent may not anticipate that move. If he does, then you need to

follow it with another advantage you have...your legs and feet.” Daemon took me back into the hold. “If your opponent is able to protect himself from the initial attempt you make with your head, follow with your foot. You’ll need to step back with your heel and attempt to catch the top or arch of his foot with yours. Once you make contact with your foot, instantly bring your head back up and try to catch him off guard.”

Having gone through that maneuver four or five times, Daemon grabbed me again, this time holding me to his chest facing towards him, with my arms secured between us. “Now, if a man is holding you so that you are facing him, the head trick will still work. However,

if a man is taller than you, you may not get the opportunity to hit his nose. If that is the case, your next target will be a man's throat."

I looked up him questioningly. "What am I supposed to do to your throat?"

Daemon smiled. "This is going to sound gross, but when it's a matter of life or death, you have to be willing to get past being squeamish. If a man holds you in this manner, your teeth and legs become your best advantage. Use your feet similar to the way you did in the other hold, but this time, when your opponent is busy protecting himself from that attack, use your teeth to catch his

Adam's apple. If you're able to catch it between your teeth, bite down as hard as you can, Paige. You may be lucky enough to crush it, giving you the opportunity to break free and run. I want to run through that move with you a few times, but do me a favor, and don't bite down all the way. I enjoy the ability to talk."

I mused over his request and momentarily considered teaching him a lesson by biting down. However, I decided against it when I remembered that it would upset me if he was mute and all.

We went through the move several times and finally took a break when

Daemon felt I'd mastered at least the basic maneuvers. Stepping back from me, Daemon's chest heaved slightly from our activities. A small, smidgeon of pride welled up inside me at having at least started the process of tiring him out. That pride was instantly banished as soon as he grabbed me again, holding me backwards to his chest, but this time, leaving my arms free. "If your opponent is smart, Paige, he...or she...will always bind your arms in some manner. However, in moments of actual combat, and if you are dealing with someone inexperienced, you might be lucky enough to have use of your hands. If this occurs, it doesn't matter if you are being held to face your opponent, or not. Use

your hands to once again go for their weakest point...their face. In an instance such as this, go for their eyes, Paige. Use your thumbs to jab at the inside corners of their eyes and push with all the strength you have. Hold your thumbs there until they release you and then use their momentary blindness to run like hell. Let's practice a few times, however, please be careful not to blind me." His head moved down so he could whisper in my ear. "Life wouldn't be worth living if I lost my sight and couldn't devour you with my eyes any time I please." Goosebumps broke out over my arms at his remark and I felt Daemon chuckle at their appearance.

After giving me a few more

pointers on self-defense tactics, an older gentleman and three other men, roughly my age or younger, came inside the gym. The older man's eyes flicked to Daemon as a wide smile spread itself across his face. "Daemon! Holy shit, son! I haven't seen you around this old place in a while!" The man made his way to the ring as Daemon climbed through the ropes to jump down and greet them. Upon their approach, the man took Daemon into a strong hug before pulling away. "You're looking good, kid! Where the hell have you been?"

I remained standing in the ring as Daemon spoke with the older man. My eyes eventually shot over to the three younger men. Each set of their eyes

looked back on me with expressions ranging from lust to confusion. The oldest one's eyes darted between Daemon and I making it apparent, he was interested to know why were in the ring together. I didn't want to appear stupid in front of my new audience, so I attempted to pull up on the rope nonchalantly to let myself out of the ring. When the rope didn't budge, I groaned and stood there patiently waiting for Daemon to assist.

“Man, I saw what happened to Tomb in the news. What the hell was that all about? They’re saying it’s arson.”

Daemon shrugged before

answering. “The asshole who did that has a sick obsession with my girl up there.” He turned to indicate to me before continuing. “That’s why I have her here today. I’m trying to teach her a thing or two about defending herself.”

“Well, with a body like that, I’m not surprised. Your girl’s definitely got something going for her.” My jaw dropped and Daemon’s eyes narrowed when the youngest of the three men spoke out. “Tell you what, sweetheart, if you ever get tired of your man, there’s a warm bed waiting in my room for you.”

The short amount of time it took for Daemon to cross the room, pinning the kid to the wall was shocking. Daemon

had the guy nose to nose and the look on Daemon's face screamed 'murder,' or at least a good ass kicking. The kid's father looked over at him disgustedly. "Tony! You little shit! You need to apologize to the lady right this fucking second before I let Daemon take you up in that ring to teach you some fucking manners!"

Tony squeaked out a quick apology before Daemon loosened his hold. Dropping the kid to the floor, Daemon turned and stalked over to the ring to let me out. Once he had the ropes pulled apart to where I could climb through, I quickly jumped down. Daemon reached for my hand and pulled me to the older man. "Dave, this is Paige...Paige,

Dave. He was friends with Frank.”

Dave reached out to shake my hand. “It’s damn good to meet ya, Paige. I’m glad to see Daemon’s gone out and found himself a decent girl for once. We were starting to worry when he didn’t date much when he was younger.” A friendly expression took over Dave’s weathered face and I smiled in response.

We exchanged pleasantries for another ten minutes before saying our goodbyes to the group of men, including Joe and the rest of the peanut gallery. Daemon walked me out of the building and to his truck, but before opening the passenger door, he spun me and pinned

me against the vehicle. “Do you have any idea how much self-control it took in there for me not to strip you down and make you scream out my name?” My knees gave at the lethal quality to his tone, but he braced me up with his strong arms. “I’m going to take you home, strip you down to your skin, and work out my frustrations on that little body of yours.”

My eyes met his from under my lashes and my breath was knocked from me at the sight of the fire burning from behind his stare. My heart instantly sped up, banging against my chest wall. “Daemon, I worked up one hell of a sweat in there. It’s probably best I jump in a shower as soon as we get back.”

He mouth curved into a seductive grin. “Oh, Damsel. I have every intention of starting in the shower. Can’t promise you our fun will stay there, but that is *definitely* a good starting point.” His hand reached down to grip my ass before he pulled me forward to open the door. Once I was secured in my seat he moved around the truck to jump into the driver’s seat. Throwing me one more lascivious smirk, he started the truck and peeled out of the parking lot in the direction of town.

Chapter Six

Daemon made good on his promise to completely ravish me when we arrived home. As he warned, the fun started in the shower, then moved to the bathroom floor, the sink counter, his bedroom floor, and eventually to his bed. I'd lost count of the amount of times the man had me screaming his name and other choice exclamations.

My poor legs began to give out from the constant onslaught of pleasure. The man was on fire, his rushed and rough mannerisms giving away the intense desire our sparring had built up within him. I couldn't take anymore so I broke loose and attempted to flee down the hallway leading to the living room and

spare bedrooms. Daemon easily tackled me at the end of the hall and began pulling me back towards the bedroom. I gasped out when his teeth locked on the juncture of my neck and shoulder, but then startled when I heard someone clear their throat from the living room. Both Daemon's and my head shot in the direction of the sound to find David sitting quietly on the couch. A silly smile was plastered to his face and he unashamedly enjoyed his front row view of the two of us in all our glory.

“Not to stop you in the throes of passion and all, but I thought it was best that the two of you realized I was sitting in the room. I'm not one to object to free porn, so please...feel free to continue.

Paige, I believe this is the part where you say ‘You’re not the usual mailman.’ Excellent...aaaaaaand, action!”

I let out a shocked cry as Daemon chuckled behind me. Nodding his head once at David, Daemon quickly pulled me back to his room. My skin was the color of a ripe strawberry from embarrassment. Daemon attempted to contain his laugh, but eventually lost out and fell back against the door from the movement. His laughter was infectious, causing me to join in within seconds. After getting ourselves back under control, Daemon picked me up to carry me back into the bathroom. He placed me on the ground and slapped me on the ass before heading over to the shower.

Reaching in, he turned on the water and said, “Let’s get cleaned up, Damsel. It appears we have company.”

We cleaned ourselves up and quickly dressed before making our way back out into the living room. David was stretched out across the large sofa, so I took a seat in one of the accent chairs while Daemon went in the kitchen to start coffee. David’s eyes were closed as we entered, but they opened as I sat down. I glared at him for his earlier intrusion, but laughed when all he could return was a shit-eating grin.

“Hey, Paige. Looking good today, baby girl. I take it the workout went well this morning.” He pushed himself

up into a sitting position as he spoke to me.

“Shut it, David. I don’t want to hear it. You should warn us when you come home. How the hell did you get in anyway?”

David smirked. “Daemon gave me a key a few days ago so I could come and go as I please. Matt just dropped me off on his way in to work.”

Unfair!

“Daemon?! Why does David get a key and I don’t?” I looked over in the direction of the kitchen to see Daemon leaned up against the center island. He looked at me lovingly, before smiling.

“He’s not being babysat, Damsel. You are always with Alex or me, so there’s no point giving you a key until Chris is caught. I’m not dumb enough to provide you with a way to sneak in and out undetected.” He winked at me before returning his attention to the brewing coffee.

I pondered what he said before realizing his statement didn’t make sense. “So, how am I supposed to get in if I’m with Alex?” My eyes widened as realization struck. “Does Alex have a key too?!”

Daemon was silent as he busied himself watching the brewing liquid. I realized quickly that coffee brewing was

not as interesting as he made it out to be. The sonofabitch was avoiding eye contact. Jumping up, I marched into the kitchen. Once I was within grabbing distance, I reached up and forced his eyes to mine.

“Does Alex have a key as well, Daemon?” My glare threw at least a dozen daggers as I imagined him flinching from the impact.

“Yes, Damsel. Alex has a key. I gave it to him before he left yesterday.”

Well, there you have it.

The oddity and absurdity of their pact became even stranger.

“Since when are you and Alex

besties?”

Daemon groaned before saying, “Since he saved your ass from a burning building when I couldn’t get to you. I figured I owed the guy a little bit of trust, considering you are alive and all.”

He had a good point. But still...

I threw my hands up in frustration before turning to march back into the living room. Plopping myself down next to David, I reached over and gave him a quick hug. “Did you have fun at Matt’s last night?”

“It was great. We finally got to break in that patient’s smock I took home from the hospital...”

“David!” My hand flew up to cover his mouth. I pointedly looked in his eyes as I said, “PG version. You are to give the PG version only. Understand?” David nodded his head ‘yes’ and I released his mouth.

He reached up to massage his jaw, “As I was saying...we were in *character* when I received a phone call from your parents.”

My eyes widened as he shot me a knowing look. “I know! How rude that they would interrupt our good time. Matt was just about to...”

“David. Stay on task here, buddy. Less sexy memories and more ‘why the

hell did Paige's parents call' memories need to be spoken at this time."

He rolled his eyes and sighed before continuing. "Well, first off, your parents are really worried about you, Paige. They told me their side of the whole Buddy situation and I didn't realize from your version, how badly you reacted. Have you spoken to them since that evening? They saw the Tomb fire on the news and were worried that you were involved."

David's story was aggravating me to no end. "If they were so worried, why didn't they call me to find out if I was alright?"

From the look on David's face, it was safe to say I was the most ignorant person on Earth...or at least, he thought so. "Because, my lovely, you don't currently have a phone. As I recall, it's in a trash can somewhere, shattered into a million pieces. Or have you forgotten your little temper tantrum?"

A short burst of laughter sounded from the kitchen. I glared in Daemon's direction as he continued staring at the coffee. Wait a minute! It should be done brewing by now. What the hell was he staring at? And then it hit me...there was fresh coffee in the kitchen. I jumped out of my seat and somehow instantly appeared in front of the machine with mug in hand. The

mechanics of how I ended up in this position didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was the mixture of sugar, creamer and black paradise that was making its way into my mug.

“David’s right, Damsel. We haven’t had a chance to get you a new phone. We should stop and do that on our way to the trailer park this afternoon.”

I nodded in agreement as I returned next to David’s side. “So, that’s all they wanted; to know that I was okay?”

“No. Actually, they called to let me know that Annie is being transferred to The Center tomorrow. They were

hoping we could stop by to help her get settled in. They asked if we would bring some of her things from home for her to use while she's there."

My heart jumped in my chest. David had just given me the best news of the day. Annie's release from the mental facility was a big step in her recovery process.

"Of course we'll be there! But that means we need to go to the apartment again. Did you want to stay here, or were you planning on going over there with us? I mean, the last time we went there, you didn't do so well with the surprise that'd been left in my room."

David brushed away my concern with his hand. "I'll be fine, Paige. I assume the police have been watching that apartment closely since the discovery of the photos. Plus, my car is there and I need to bring it over here so I can start going to work again. You might be fine living off your savings, but I cannot support the fabulousness that is me without working to earn the dough. Now, if you'll excuse me, there's coffee in the kitchen and I have gone far too long without it. It's been at least..." He looked at his phone. "...four hours. This is a critical stage. I'm nearing empty as we speak."

We stood side by side. Each person with their jaws dragging the ground. The silence that hung between us was thick and heavily laden with one question. How the hell was Chris getting around so well without being caught?

David's car was a sight to behold. Every window was busted. Each tire was flattened and shredded. The side view mirrors? Gone. The interior of the car was worse. It appeared that someone had a good time tossing fish guts, days old road kill, trash, and other unmentionables in the front and back seats.

The creative art work and the

misspelled 'fagot' keyed into all the exterior surfaces was the dead giveaway that Chris had struck....again. I shook my head in disbelief as I began to walk to the perimeter of the vehicle for a third time to take in the damage. I had to give it to Chris. The guy was thorough in his acts of destruction. Not a single surface was left unmarred. I turned and noticed that, much like my bike, David's car was left with the gas tank wide open. I pointed at the gas door while looking over to David. "You might want to have that cleaned before you attempt to start this car." My eyes swept over the vehicle again as I muttered, "Or maybe you should just call a junk yard and buy something else."

David had not yet uttered a sound since we arrived. After shaking off his initial shock, Daemon brought the phone to his ear. I assumed he was calling Detective Troy. I approached David while he continued staring silently at his car. Taking him into a hug, I whispered comforting words. “It’s okay, David, we’ll deal with this. It’s only a car.”

Daemon hung up his phone before heading back in our direction. “The police are on their way. Detective Troy requested that we remain here until she’s had a chance to talk to you, Paige.”

“Talk to me?” I released David from my hug to turn and glare at Daemon. “Why does she want to talk to

me?! I didn't do anything this time!" The guilty look on Daemon's face was all I needed to know that he'd said something to the detective that wouldn't make me happy. "What'd you tell her, Daemon?"

He took two large steps towards me and took me into his arms. I braced my arms between us in case I was so mad at his confession, I needed instant distance between us. It was a good thing I did, because when Daemon admitted he'd told Detective Troy about our scheduled trip to the trailer park, I needed to put at least ten feet between us to keep from tearing him a new asshole.

"What the fuck, Daemon?! Now

she's going to tell me not to go over there and they'll go over and fuck everything up! That was MY intel, my clue...not theirs. You had no right giving her that information without talking to me about it first!"

"Paige, shut the fuck up for a second and let me finish!"

My jaw clamped shut as I allowed him to explain his obvious fucked-up logic.

"She wanted us to come down to the station to talk with her. I explained that we had plans to check up on a lead you may have found on Chris. She agreed to come down and discuss the

lead with you. Being that you are a licensed P.I., she's allowed to let you investigate..."

"But, I'm a victim as well, Daemon. There's no way in hell they'll allow a victim to investigate."

His glare reminded me that I was supposed to be *shutting the fuck up*. I threw him a quick apologetic look and then crossed my arms as I waited patiently for him to continue.

"She was impressed with the information you discovered at the flea market. Realizing that you seem to be able to get people talking more than the police, she wants to get you working

WITH her in this hunt. She thinks this lead is a long shot, so that's why she is allowing it. She admitted that if she thought it would take you too close to Chris, she'd be against it."

I began pacing where I stood. I wanted to scream at Daemon for talking to the detective without first asking me. His idea of 'partners' needed a clearer definition, but at this point, yelling at him wouldn't do anybody any good. I finally just took a couple deep, calming breaths and started moving towards the stairs. Looking back at David and Daemon, I said, "Well, come on. We came here to get Annie some things and I'm not leaving without them. Standing around won't help. It's not like David's

car will be going anywhere, any time soon.” Both men trudged up behind me and, luckily, no surprises were left for us within the apartment itself.

As I packed up some more clothes from my room, Detective Troy came through the door. “Miss Stone. It’s a pleasure to see you again, despite the unfortunate circumstances.”

I was a little surprised to see her dressed in a pair of jeans with a button down shirt. Normally, this woman was dressed like she meant business. She must have noticed my appraisal because she explained, “I wasn’t supposed to be working today. However, I went into the office for a brief period. Daemon

happened to call while I was there.”

I nodded. “What did you need to talk to me about, Detective? I don’t have a lot of time before we have to get out of here. The trailer park is about forty-five minutes away.”

“I understand that, Paige. Daemon’s already told me where the park is located. I’ll just get to the point.

I don’t like you continuing this investigation on your own, Miss Stone. I don’t think you understand the seriousness of Chris’ obsession with you. I can’t understand it myself and I’ve torn through every single piece of his apartment to try and figure it out. Were you aware he was watching you

since your first encounter at the bar?”

My eyes shot to hers. “What? No. He didn’t know anything about me until Annie brought him home. Why do you think it started before that?”

“We found a napkin from Tomb in his apartment. The tag number from your motorcycle was written on it. On top of that, there were several pages in his journal detailing a job you worked for your employer. He had pictures of you sitting in your car, Paige. We called your employer and they advised that the job occurred two days before the attack.”

My skin crawled at the thought of

having been watched so closely. If Chris were not clearly a contender for the ‘psychopath of the year’ award, I would recommend he get himself licensed as a PI. Despite the creeped out feeling, I had to break it to Detective Troy that she was off on her timeline. “I took that job the day after Chris had been kicked out of my apartment. In fact, I’d run into him that morning while buying coffee. I’m not surprised that he followed me. That still doesn’t prove that he’d been watching me since the night at Tomb.”

“Paige, Annie was a setup. I hate to have to be blunt, but I’m going to at this point. He mentioned it in his journals, Ms. Stone. She was never his

intended target. He must have used her to obtain more information on you. How he made the initial connection, I'm not sure. However, he could have used your tag number to obtain your address. You're an investigator Ms. Stone. You, of all people, should understand how easy it is to *Google* a person and come away with everything you need to know about them down to their shoe size."

I snickered at her statement. It was true. People were kind of ignorant about the type of information they post about themselves on a daily basis. With the correct sequence of key words and a little patience, you could more often than not find anyone you wanted on the internet.

“So why do you feel the need to tell me this now, Detective Troy? Are you attempting to warn me; because let me be the first to tell you, Chris has already warned me enough, given his attack on my friends and Daemon’s bar.”

Detective Troy hid behind her signature blank expression as she said, “Ms. Stone, I just want you to be careful. It terrifies me to think what could have happened to you in those woods the other day. If you hadn’t succeeded in wrestling the gun from Chris, I highly doubt you or your friend, David, would be alive today.”

I couldn’t look at her as she spoke. I knew her words were true and I was

ashamed that I'd put David in danger. "I understand your concern, Detective. I'll be careful."

She nodded her assent and turned to let me move past her out of the bedroom.

Her words stung more than she realized. I know she was only attempting to give me a more in-depth understanding of Chris' obsession, but the message carried an entirely different meaning for me. It was all my fault. Everything; the attack, Tomb, my motorcycle, David's car...it was all an attack on me. But why? What had I done to the guy to make him so fixated on revenge?

Detective Troy and I walked out

into the living room, it appeared Daemon and David had already grabbed Annie's things and left the apartment. I led Detective Troy outside, locked the door and made my way to the parking lot. Daemon and David stood waiting by the truck.

As Detective Troy walked to her vehicle, she turned back to say one more thing. "Ms. Stone?" I twisted to look in her direction. "I expect to hear from you tonight with the details of what you discover this afternoon. Even if nothing comes of it, I want you to be sure and call me."

I nodded in response and returned to shoving my bags in the back part of

Daemon's truck. After I had my things safely stowed away, I climbed in to the front passenger seat. The ride was silent as we took David back to Daemon's apartment before beginning our trek out to the trailer park.

Chapter Seven

If the random tires acting as a ramshackle, run down chicken coup didn't give away the poverty of this park, the naked and dirty children running along the dirt roads did. Daemon slowly navigated his truck through the pot holes and deep mud puddles of the roads through the neighborhood. The trailers themselves had seen better days and it appeared the residents had given up maintaining the properties years ago. If I hadn't already seen evidence of human occupants, I would have guessed this place had long been abandoned. Cars missing various bits and pieces littered the front yards of the trailers. It's only fair to note that by

saying ‘yards’, I actually meant dirt squares that appeared to act as partitions between the properties. There wasn’t a single endearing aspect to this place.

Daemon slowed down as he approached a particularly horrid example of one of the more uncared for trailers. Paint was definitely an unknown concept and the front ‘porch’ like thing was riddled with rotten wood which had fallen to expose the ground underneath. A foul odor emanated out from beneath the trailer. I pondered whether whatever had died under there was an animal or human. I’m not a religious person, but I suddenly found myself praying to survive this trip. I believe I may have even promised to

start going to church every once in a while if I made it out of here in one piece.

Daemon took my hand as he walked across the floor boards of the porch-like contraption. We made it to the door unscathed and he rapped his knuckles against the wood of the door. It was silent inside the trailer, so Daemon banged a little harder the next time,

Grabbing his arm, I stopped his knocking. “Don’t bang on it too hard, Daemon. The whole damn thing might fall down.”

Daemon laughed but stopped suddenly when the entire trailer began to

shake. Oh shit...he had knocked too hard. The shaking only got worse as footsteps approached from behind the door. Three or four locks could be heard being unlatched and the door was suddenly flung open. We jumped out of the way just in time to miss being hit. A loud bang sounded as the door slammed against the trailer wall.

“Yeah, what the fuck you people want?”

Holy shit. Standing before us was the poster child for the Floridian who always seemed to make the news when disaster struck. You know the ones I’m taking about. Every time a hurricane, tornado or sinkhole occurs, the media

seeks out the most ignorant asshole they can locate, a man just like the one standing in front of me, to report about his experience in the storm. I kid you not. This man had the look down to the holy and stained 'pull my finger' shirt, which apparently wasn't large enough to cover the rotund belly protruding from his midsection. His shorts were three sizes too small and they clung to every roll of flesh that encased the man's legs. He'd apparently parted ways with the zipper and button long ago, because now the only thing holding the material to his body was a belt made of twine. Considering it hadn't snapped yet, I was impressed that whatever the twine was made of must have been some pretty

tough shit.

While I was glued in place by my shock at the man's appearance, Daemon slowly approached to introduce himself.

“Hey man! Uh...we're friends with a guy that used to live here. We're stopping by to see him if he's around.” Daemon was not smooth in his presentation. I became nervous that the man would know he was full of crap.

The man cleared his throat, coughed up some phlegm, and proceeded to spit it on the ground. *Yuck!* Bile shot up the back of my throat from my disgust at the size of the loogie the man had managed to conjure from the depths of

his trachea. My eyes shot to Daemon to find that his skin had taken on a green tint. I felt oddly better to realize he was equally horrified.

“Well, what’s the name of yer friend? ‘Cause I can tell you, ain’t no one lived around here but me for the past seven years. The man’s eyes finally flicked to me as he did a slow once over my body. My skin crawled from his stare and I inched closer to Daemon. Taking a protective stance in front of me, Daemon responded. “His name is Chris. Do you know him or where we might be able to find him?”

The man’s eyes shot up to Daemon’s. “Why you looking for that

fuck up? You're better off forgettin' about him and staying the fuck away. The kid ain't right in his head..." His finger came up to point at me. "...And you definitely want to keep your girl away from him. I've heard some things about that shit that would make any sane man cringe."

Apparently, the man knows Chris...

I stepped out from around Daemon to speak to the man directly. "How do you know Chris?"

The man's tongue flicked out to wet his lips as he once again looked me over. Daemon began to step back in

front of me, but I squeezed his hand to indicate that things were alright. As soon as the man was done committing my body to memory, his yellowed, bloodshot eyes shot back to mine. “I’m that fucker’s father. Name’s Bill. What’s yours?” His lewd grin was only made more gruesome by the appearance of his nicotine stained teeth.

“Mine’s...uh...Jenny. I knew Chris a long time ago, remembered he lived in this trailer.”

“Yeah, well, he did. Years ago. He moved out a year after his momma went missing.”

“Missing? Or did she just take

off?”

Bill's hand reached down to scratch his crotch and make an adjustment before his focus returned to me. “Don't know what happened to her. Some think the bitch ran off, others think she died of some drug overdose somewhere and ain't no one found the body. Me? Well, I agree the bitch is dead, but I don't think it was no overdose that did it. I didn't think so at first, but, lookin' back, I wouldn't be surprised if Chris didn't have somethin' to do with her disappearance. Bitch deserved it, if he did.”

A shiver ran up my spine at the thought of Chris killing his own mother.

I glanced at Daemon before looking back at Bill. “Why do you think Chris had something to do with it? Why would he want to kill his own mother?”

Bill looked around at the empty trailer park before nodding towards the interior of his trailer. “It’s best you folks come inside if you want to finish this conversation. I don’t need no eavesdropping bitches listening in on what I’m telling you. You see, the women ‘round these parts have a thing for me. I’m sure after they saw you comin’, they’re sittin’ at their windows and doors trying to hear what we’re talking ‘bout. You two want to know more, we best get out of earshot of them nosy bitches.”

I turned to glance around the park. Except for some random trash blowing through the street, and a dog that looked to be half dead walking around, there was nobody to be seen. I looked back to Bill in confusion. “I don’t see anybody.”

“Don’t need to see ‘em to know they are there. Plus, my legs need some restin’. I ain’t as young as I used to be and I don’t like standing ‘round for too long. You’re welcome to come in and finish this conversation, but I ain’t standing out here any longer.” Bill turned to walk back into the trailer. Daemon and I held onto each other as the trailer shook and groaned from the weight of Bill’s footsteps, once the shaking stopped, I figured he must have

found his seat. The last thing I wanted to do was go inside that trailer, but I had no choice. Taking Daemon's hand, I walked in, but indicated to Daemon to leave the door open in case we needed to make a quick exit. There was no telling when this heap of scrap metal would come tumbling down.

As I entered the trailer, the first thing that grabbed my attention was the 1970's shag carpeting that appeared to have been avocado green at one point, however now it was a muddled brown with areas missing in some parts, and slick black patches in others. The walls of the trailer weren't much better. At one time, those walls had sported some impressive wood paneling, however,

now, the wood had rotted and was falling down. The areas behind the paneling were yellowed. When I noticed clusters of black spots that peaked out from behind the paneling, I instantly wished I'd brought a dust mask with me to keep from breathing in the obvious mold. The furniture in the house was almost nonexistent, except for some milk crates that had been turned over to be used as tables, a large orange sofa that was currently occupied by Bill, and two folding chairs. A large ashtray, overflowing with old cigarette butts, sat in the middle of the hodgepodge living room furniture. Old newspapers and magazines, which looked to be at least fifteen to twenty years old, given the

fashion on the covers, were stacked into corners of the room. Some of the papers had apparently become wet and were now a pile of paper mush on the floor.

I examined the folding chair which was set opposite the couch and didn't notice anything obviously wrong with it. I hesitantly sat down while slowly lowering my full weight into the seat. Looking to Daemon, I noticed he too was examining his chair, however he eventually decided to remain standing. I looked over as Bill lit up a cigarette. He took two puffs and placed it down to burn atop the pile of butts in the ashtray.

“So, you were saying?”

Bill looked up at me and nodded his head towards the far left wall. “Them’s pictures of Chris and his momma. Not sure what happened to the bitch as Chris got older, but she went from being a sweet and loving mother, to one of the meanest bitches I’d ever come across. Some believe the drinkin’ and druggin’ got to her, who the hell knows? All I know is that Chris became her whipping boy ‘round the time he turned six. I would have done more for the boy if I could, but I drove trucks for a living and was only around three days out of the month. I never realized how bad it was for the kid, ‘til I moved back and them nosy bitches told me ‘bout it. I mean, yeah, the kid was bruised up a lot,

but most boys are. I just figured he was fightin' other kids."

I sucked in breath in realization of what Bill was telling us. Chris was abused as a child by his mother. My mind started reeling with conflicting thoughts and emotions. On one hand, I still hated Chris with every fiber of my being for the things he'd done to my friends and other people; but on the other, my heart went out to a child like Buddy, who'd endured hatred and pain from the one person who should have been protected him. I heard Daemon shift where he was standing. Glancing up, I noticed that his face had taken on a pained expression. It was so discreet that most wouldn't notice it as being any

different from the blank expression he normally wore. His eyes were the giveaway. Those gorgeous blues would darken and churn whenever Daemon was upset.

Turning back to Bill, I asked, “How bad was the abuse, Bill? Obviously, if there were bruises, it was physical in nature, but did it go farther than that?”

Bill leaned back causing the back of the couch to groan in protest to the added weight. He took a minute to ponder my question. “I don’t think there was any sexual abuse happening, but the women ‘round the park told me that his momma got a special kick out of humiliating the kid every chance she

got. She was mean as a snake, that one. She would scream at Chris, call him names, even push him around in front of everyone. They said that when he was younger, he would cry, and she'd keep on, causing him to cry harder. But as he grew older...well...let's just say, women got scared. They told me the boy became quiet while his momma yelled at him. He was too damn big to push around physically, but that dumb woman wouldn't let up on the other shit. The women 'round here said something wasn't right with him, but never did nothin' about it. Said they would catch him out and about around the neighborhood staring at girls... sometimes taking pictures. Looking

back on it, I noticed a change in that kid when he hit his teens, I just never was around enough to concern myself with it.”

I learned in that moment that one of the most aggravating feelings in life was having your heart break for a person that you couldn't stand. I wanted to think Chris was born evil, but the picture Bill was painting for me was of a small, scared kid that got pushed around and embarrassed his entire life. No wonder he was as fucked up as he was. He didn't know anything different. Regardless, just because Chris was abused growing up, it didn't give him an excuse for the pain he was causing other people. I shook my sadness away to

return to the task at hand.

“Was anybody ever hurt, you know, by Chris, when he still lived here?”

Bill lit up another cigarette before answering. “Not that I know of. But you know how that shit goes. Sometimes people don’t say nothin’. I don’t recall hearin’ ‘bout him hurtin’ no one, but that doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.”

“Do you know where we might find Chris?”

Bill laughed a deep belly laugh. “I couldn’t tell you shit about where he’d be. I suspect his ass is running scared at this point. I saw some shit on the news that police are looking for him. If I was

him, I'd be holed up in the middle of the woods somewhere, or as far from here as I could get. Sorry, but I haven't spoken to that fuck up in years...not since he took off after his momma disappeared."

Daemon cleared his throat to get my attention. "Don't you think it's time we go, Jenny? I think Bill has given us enough of his time. I nodded and stood up.

"Thanks for talking with us, Bill."

"Yep."

As Daemon led me to the door, I remembered the absence of Bill's name on Chris' background report. Curious as

to the reason, I turned to ask, “Hey Bill. Chris never told me he had a father. How is it, I’ve never heard of you?”

Bill cocked an eyebrow at my question. “Reckon it’s because that bitch never listed me as the father on anything for that kid. She didn’t give him my last name and she never married me. All I was to that bitch was a paycheck. I didn’t move in here permanently until after she was dead. Chris didn’t know me too well, either. I doubt that bitch even told him who I was. I’m sure he just figured me to be another one of her dealers or fuck buddies.”

I thanked Bill again as Daemon

dragged me through the front door. We carefully maneuvered the porch contraption once again and were quickly in Daemon's truck heading out of the park.

~

Daemon was distant and unusually quiet on the ride home.

My voice was soft as I hesitantly asked. "Everything okay?"

His expression was a mixture of sadness and anger. I wondered if he was having the same conflicting feelings about Chris after our meeting with Bill. Daemon didn't immediately respond to

my question, so I turned the radio down. Reaching over to touch his arm, I repeated, “Daemon? What’s going on in that head of yours? Everything alright?”

We were stopped at a traffic light and the red glow of the light shown through the windshield, casting his face in ominous shadows. Although the setting sun still lit the horizon, it no longer battled against the shadows that now consumed the interior of the vehicle. Daemon’s shoulders dropped as he let out a long breath and settled back further into his seat.

“Why him and not me?”

Daemon’s question took me by

surprise. “What are you talking about?”

Daemon turned his head to look at me. “Chris. We apparently have one thing in common. Both of us had a really shitty parent. My father was apparently no better than his mother. So why did he become the way he is and not me? Shouldn’t we have turned out the same?” He let out another heavy breath, returning his attention to the road. Once the light turned green, I felt the truck jerk forward.

I was silent as I considered his question. He spoke again before I had the opportunity to respond. “Maybe we did turn out the same, but in different ways. I mean, it’s safe to say I’ve got

one hell of a temper, I fought constantly growing up, even into my adulthood. Plus, the way I treated women...there was no respect there, no concern for the way I treated them. Not until you, at least.”

“Daemon. There’s a huge difference between you and Chris, and I’m a little shocked that you are even attempting to make the comparison. You’ve never forced yourself on a woman as far as I know...” I eyed him in silent question and he smirked and nodded in response. “...and I’m also assuming you’ve never beaten and almost killed somebody...” Eyeing him again, he nodded to confirm my assumption. “...so there’s no

comparison. Not everyone who's been abused is going to turn into a psychopath. Maybe Chris snapped due to the duration of time he went through it. I'm not saying it was advantageous that your dad killed himself and your mom when he did, but possibly that freed you from the abuse. However, even if he hadn't, we still don't know that you would have turned out any differently than you are. So, you've used women in your day. That's not much different than a lot of guys out there. Trust me. Annie's dated most of them. And the fighting? Again, that's not completely abnormal."

The silence between us was thick as Daemon considered my words. He

reached one hand over to grasp mine and I squeezed encouragingly upon contact. “I know, Damsel. I’m not saying that I would ever become as depraved as Chris, I just don’t understand how I’m not more screwed up than I am. I was bounced around so often, barely loved by any of the adults who attempted to care for me. I was difficult as hell, and if it hadn’t been for Frank, I could be dead or locked up in some prison cell.”

“Maybe it’s because you had someone to kick your ass into being normal. You heard Bill. He didn’t give enough of a shit to step in and do anything for Chris, and neither did the other adults who witnessed what his mother was doing to him.” As I thought

about it more, I was taken by a sudden realization.

“I wonder if Chris’ obsession with me had something to do with what Bill was telling us.”

Daemon’s eyes flicked to mine quickly as he remained quiet, waiting for me to continue. “Bill said that Chris’ mom used to publically humiliate him. Well, in a sense, so did I. I mean, think about it. That night at Tomb and then again at my apartment. Both times, the guy was tossed out like last week’s leftovers only after being called every name one could possibly assign to a drunken bigot who liked getting touchy-feely. And whom do you ask was the

cause of all that? Me.”

Daemon looked instantly distressed from my theory. “Paige, you weren’t the cause of that; Chris was. It was his behavior that got him tossed out.”

I shook my head. “I’m not saying that I was at fault, but in *his* head, I was the cause. He must have made a comparison between me and his mom on that first night. That’s why he was following me and using Annie to get to me.”

Daemon’s head shot to mine. “Using Annie? What are you talking about, Paige?”

I rehashed my conversation with

Detective Troy at the apartment. Daemon's face took on an interesting shade of scarlet, prior to his typical blank expression making its appearance.

Great. He's mad.

Fiddling with my fingers, I attempted to avoid looking at him while he processed the information I'd provided. When he finally spoke again, I jumped slightly. "It pisses me off knowing Chris has been following you this whole time. I don't fucking understand how he got your tag number. I followed you out that night to make sure you stayed safe!" His hand hit the steering wheel with a loud thump. Taking a breath to calm himself, he sagged back

in his seat. “Regardless, you may be right about his reason for fixating on you. So, you need to keep that in mind at all times. No more fucking stunts on your own, okay?”

“I know, Daemon. I already promised that to you.”

Nodding his head, he turned the truck sharply into his garage. After pulling into a space, he turned the vehicle off, but didn’t move to open his door.

His eyes remained trained straight ahead as he said, “Damsel, if Chris were to ever get ahold of you again, he’s not going to play around with you anymore.

You've escaped him twice, humiliated him four times, if you count those escapes. It's unlikely he'd wait long before killing you."

His head suddenly swung to look in my direction. The desperate plea in his eyes caused my breath to hiccup. "Paige, I can't lose you, not like that. If I ever have to let you go, I want it to be when we are old and silver. I want a life behind us, memories behind us; possibly kids...who knows? All I know is that I would lose my mind if I lost you before then."

My heart skipped, as my throat closed. Tears threatened my eyes and my nose became stuffy. I never

understood why a heavy emotional reaction felt like an illness, but the symptoms were definitely the same.

Having no words in response to his, I lunged over. My hands buried themselves into his hair as my mouth took possession of his. My body prickled at the feel of his warmth mouth upon mine and I greedily sought more of him with my tongue. My chest heaved with intense desire, a churning sea of hormones and...love. Needing to be closer, I climbed over to straddle him. I pulled away from our kiss to look deep in to his sparkling blue eyes. When our gaze locked, heat bloomed throughout my body. My hands found the hem of my shirt and I pulled up on the material,

freeing it before tossing it to the floor. Daemon's hands instantly found my breasts, squeezing to the point of pain. Lightning shot through me from where he touched causing me to arch further into his hold. A moan escaped my lips as his mouth found my neck. This man did things to my body that I never knew were possible. He made me feel dirty, but in a way that was only meant for him. I lost all inhibition around him, not caring about what I was saying or doing, as long as it pleased him. When he touched me it felt like my body melted to his, becoming one. His scent and the feel of his hard body against mine was all that was needed to completely sedate my mind, while at the same time

awakening every naughty part on my body.

My hands reached for Daemon's shirt. Lifting it up over his head, my fingers ran across the deep ridges of his abdomen before gliding across the smooth skin of his chest. After freeing his shirt, my hands slid back down to undo the button and zipper of his jeans. Removing my jeans was a little more tricky and required a brief return to the passenger seat of the car. Once I was stripped bear, I straddled him again and freed him from his jeans. I went up on my knees to position the tip of him at my opening.

I placed my hands on either side of

his headrest before looking deep into his eyes. My chest heaved with my erratic breath. Barely whispering, I said, “I love you, Daemon” before taking him deep within me.

We both cried out as he filled me entirely. I took a moment to adjust to the stretched feeling, but then started to circle my hips, pushing him back and forth against my inner walls. Daemon’s hand was suddenly in my hair as he pulled my head back, causing my body to arch forward. The tip of my breast was assaulted by his tongue as he bit down softly causing me to grind down on him, forcing him deeper.

“Fuck! Paige, you feel so fucking

good.” The baritone quality of his voice vibrated every part of his body sending a wave up my core and through my abdomen. I was heady and intoxicated, no longer operating on anything but the need to devour him. My mouth caught his as my hips continued to gyrate on his lap. He kissed me deeply, eventually finding my hips with his hands and forcing me even tighter against him. His fingers dug possessively into the sensitive flesh of my hips and ass. My release crept up on me, causing my muscles to quiver and roll along his length. I was instantly taken over by a peak so intense, stars appeared in my vision and my ears rang from the surging blood in my head. I floated within a

warm soft place for a brief moment, before finally allowing myself to breathe again and come down from pure ecstasy.

My head rolled forward on my shoulders and when I peaked at Daemon from behind my hooded lashes, he growled before increasing the tempo between us. The truck shook slightly as the windows fogged from our heavy breathing. The steering wheel dug into my back, but I didn't care as long as Daemon continued driving me higher and higher, once again pushing me over a peak so steep, my eyes had no choice but to roll up in response. I screamed out again as he found his release, his hands moving roughly over the sweat soaked skin of my body.

“Absolutely beautiful.” His eyes raked over my skin, now marked with light red trails from where his hands had traveled. I was on fire for him, my love, lust and total abandon creating a raging inferno in the deepest pits of my mind, body and soul. My eyes watered from the rush and I was breathless as I fell into his embrace.

We held each other for who knows how long before he spoke again. “Not that I’m complaining, Damsel, but where in the hell did that come from?”

A smile crept over my mouth. “I love you Daemon. I had to have you. There was no time to walk upstairs. I feel like a woman possessed when I’m

near you.”

He grinned up at me and was about to respond when a loud knock occurred on the passenger side window. Our heads turned in the direction of the sound, but we were unable to see anything outside the vehicle due to the fog on the windows.

A disembodied male voice spoke from the exterior of the truck. “Sorry to disturb your...uh...time together folks. But you really need to be moving that upstairs.”

Daemon’s head fell back as his body shook with laughter. “Oh shit, Damsel. I forgot that Detective Troy has

a cop patrolling the garage.”

My entire body blushed a fierce red when I realized we had an audience... again! I climbed off of Daemon's lap, only to fall ungracefully into the passenger's seat. Daemon continued laughing while I quickly pulled on my clothing. Once we were decent, Daemon and I climbed out of the car. I glanced over to find the officer standing against a wall several feet from the car. His mouth was quirked up into a thin line as he attempted to keep from smiling about what he had found us doing. Nodding once in his direction, I felt Daemon's hand come up to the small of my back as he led me to the elevator. Once we were safely inside, I couldn't

contain my laughter any longer. I looked up into Daemon's gleaming eyes just as his mouth came down to claim mine briefly before he pulled back and said, "I'm going to love my life with you, Paige. There's never a dull moment when you're around."

Chapter Eight

David was oddly absent from the apartment the following morning as I readied myself for day two of training. I threw on a pair of spandex shorts and a tight sports bra, which I then covered over with cotton shorts and a tank top. Walking out into the living room, I found Daemon in the kitchen preparing coffee. I quickly took my place in front of the machine as Daemon stood behind me and chuckled. He seriously needed to get past his amusement with my reaction to the black caffeinated nectar. This is an addiction. One which should be taken seriously and not mocked. Little did he know, that without my daily pot of coffee, I wouldn't be able to formulate

complete sentences and my coordination would be so stunted, I'd be toddling around like a one year old learning how to walk upright. I'll be the first to admit it, I have a problem.

“Where's David?” I turned to look at Daemon questioningly as his mouth quirked up into a funny grin. My eyebrow arched at the guilty look on his face.

His arms came around me, pulling me to him before he responded. “Not sure, Damsel. He said something about running errands with Matt before he took off this morning. Speaking of which, after the gym, we need to go out to your parents to drop off Annie's things and

help her get settled.”

My heart dropped into my stomach; but not because of Annie. I was super excited to help my friend get started on the final chapter of her recovery, but I was NOT looking forward to facing my parents for the first time since discovering their deceit throughout the years. I knew I would have to face them eventually, but I was hoping to stall that meeting for another couple of weeks.

“We also need to stop at a phone store on the way to the gym.” Daemon’s words jolted me from my thoughts and anxieties about my parents. He looked down at me knowingly and I smiled up at him, amazed that he could read me as

well as he did. His hand came up to brush along my cheek. “Forgive them, Paige. They were only trying to look out for you by what they did. Their choices were made because of their love for you, and I can’t help but be thankful to them for that.”

I stood silently, having nothing to say. He was right. I understood my parents’ decision, but it still felt like a betrayal. My emotions were apparently not in sync with logic. Shrugging my shoulders, I said, “Let’s get going. The phone store and the gym are going to take a while, and I want to try and get to The Center before late afternoon. I’m not sure when they are dropping Annie off, but I want to get there as soon as I

can to see her.

Within the next hour, I found myself shopping for a phone with Daemon by my side. As soon as we entered the store, Daemon instantly directed me to the biggest and most advanced smart phone available. The damn thing was massive. I believe the screen size rivaled most small computer screens. I was unsure how I could even hold it to my ear. The expression on my face must have given away my hesitancy because Daemon snatched the floor model phone out of my hand to show me the different features.

Ten minutes passed as he bested the sales people. I believe a few gathered

around to listen and learn from his sales pitch. He really was very astute in his knowledge of the device.

“Think about it, Damsel. When you get back to work, this phone could be quite useful. You’ll have the internet at the tips of your fingers, and the screen is large enough that you should be able to navigate .PDFs and other documents with ease. You wouldn’t have to wait to look things up until you were in front of a computer...”

His smile was enough to floor me. He looked like a child asking for a new toy, hopeful, yet still not sure his parent would relent.

“...And there are a lot of useful apps. There is pretty much an app for every possible thing you could ever want. Flashlights, cameras, video recorders, voice recorders, GPS...the list goes on and on.”

My mouth scrunched at the corner. He was like an infomercial. Upbeat and perky and promising me that the item he was selling would somehow solve everything wrong in my life. He was freaking me out a little. Where was the seductive, yet terrifying Daemon I had grown to love?

“If I agree to buy it, will you change back into a normal person?”

His smile faded at my question.

I took the phone from his hand and placed it back in its holder. I looked over to the gathering of sales people. Jerking my thumb in Daemon's direction, I said, "I'll take it, but you need to give the commission to him." Their applause surprised me and replaced the smile on Daemon's lips.

We stepped up to the counter and waited for one of the clerks to run in the backroom to retrieve my new computer...errr...*phone*. Daemon smiled triumphantly and I rolled my eyes in response. Just as the little pimpled face, seventeen year old clerk stepped out with my device, Daemon's phone

rang.

Bringing the phone to his ear, he moved away from the counter to answer the call. I paid the clerk for the phone and patiently listened as he offered protection plans, screen protectors, cases, chargers, camera attachments, and just about every other possible accessory known to man. *Who needs all of this stuff?! It's a freaking phone!* I was able to side step all the miscellaneous offers, but agreed to the insurance plan after remembering the fate of my previous phone.

As I grabbed the bag and turned to walk away, I noticed the blank expression had returned to Daemon's

face. *Oh shit.*

Daemon opened the door so that I could walk outside before passing his phone to me. “It’s Detective Troy. You really need to talk to her, Paige.” Judging by the expression on his face, I knew the news was not good.

I brought the phone to my ear. Before I could utter a greeting, she was talking. “Ms. Stone, I’m seriously disappointed that you didn’t call me last night with the results of your trip to the trailer park yesterday.”

Holy crap. She was calling to yell at me? Okay, so I’d forgotten to call her, but I was distracted. Car sex had turned

into bed sex, and then wall sex, more bed sex, and finally a long bath and sleepy land.

“Ms. Stone, I need to know the name of the person you met with yesterday. More importantly, I need to know what he told you.” Detective Troy spoke in a curt, quipped manner and I grew worried at the implication of her tone.

“I met with a guy named Bill. He told me he was Chris’ biological father but he wasn’t really around as Chris was growing up. He also said something about Chris being abused by his mother. Apparently, she disappeared without a trace and Chris ran off about a year

afterward.”

“Ms. Stone, Bill Ingram was found dead this morning in his home. His death was not pleasant to say the least.”

Holy shit!

Bill was dead? I didn't know what my emotions were doing. Was I sad, scared, or shocked? I didn't know. It could have been a combination of all three. “Are you sure you have the right guy? Who found him? How did you know he was the guy I visited? Are you sure it's the same Bill? ‘Pull my Finger’ shirt Bill?” Words were pouring so quickly from my mouth that even my questions were asking questions.

“Yes.”

“So how did you know I’d been there?”

Detective Troy sighed loudly into the phone. “He was found by a female neighbor who had stopped by to check on his welfare. We interviewed her after arriving to the crime scene and she described a tall blond woman and dark haired man who visited Mr. Ingram’s trailer earlier in the day. She happened to have copied down Mr. Pierce’s vehicle tag number. I was contacted by the investigating officers due to Daemon’s involvement in our investigation.”

The nosy bitch copied his tag number?!

How sad. I sighed when I realized Bill hated those ‘nosy bitches’, but if it hadn’t been for them, his body may have gone undiscovered for months. My eyes met Daemon’s briefly. He looked like a caged tiger as he paced back and forth in front of me. His hands clenched at his sides, causing the veins in his arms to bulge.

I returned my attention to the phone. “Detective Troy, Bill believed Chris may have killed his mother several years ago. Apparently she abused him verbally and physically his entire life. The women who live in that park told

Bill about the things that were done to Chris. I suggest you speak with them. I asked Bill if he knew where we could locate Chris, but he told me he hadn't spoken to his son since right after Chris' mother vanished."

The phone was silent for an extended time and I wondered if Detective Troy had forgotten about me. "Detective? Are you there?"

"Yes." Her instant response startled me. "Is that all the information you gathered?"

I quickly ran through my recollection of our visit with Bill before answering. "Yes."

“Thank you, Ms. Stone. I’ll be in touch.” The phone disconnected and I handed it back to Daemon. I briefly pondered her rush to end the call, but shrugged it off.

“Bill’s dead.”

Daemon nodded before placing his hand on the small of my back to lead me to his truck. I was once again met with his chilling silence as we drove to the gym.

~

When we arrived at the gym, we were met with the same gruff and weathered faces as before. Joe smiled

to see that we'd returned. He approached us within seconds, taking Daemon into a hug right before also wrapping his large arms around me.

“Good to see you kids back so soon.” Immediately, Joe launched into recanting the ongoings at the gym after we'd left yesterday. Apparently, Dave beat on Tony pretty good as a lesson for being disrespectful to a lady. I felt bad. Tony was just being a kid when he'd said what he'd said. A kid my age. Not really a kid. Nevermind...I no longer felt bad.

After talking for about ten minutes, Joe walked over to retake his place among the peanut gallery. Not one

second after arriving next to his buddies, Joe reached into his shirt pocket to remove a cigarette from the pack. Lighting it up, he smiled and nodded his head at Daemon and I, acknowledging that we had free reign of the gym to train. I turned to Daemon and found an odd look plastered to his face.

Hesitantly, I asked, “So what’s the plan for today. Are we climbing in the ring or what?”

Daemon checked the time on his phone and looked around the gym. Apparently he didn’t find what he was looking for so he excused himself to make a quick phone call. I watched as his muscular body walked away. I was

always appreciative of the view of Daemon whether he was coming or going. Both the front and back of his body had features that caused involuntary drool to escape me. The muscles of his legs and butt moved within the fabric of his shorts. I had flashbacks to my hands traveling along the smooth, yet rock hard perfection of his body and my knees suddenly felt weak. I should have cared who he was on the phone with, however that part of my brain shut down as my eyes took in the perfection of his form. I was lost in my admiration when I heard coughing and sputtering coming from the peanut gallery. I was instantly reminded that Daemon and I were not alone, and I had

to shake myself out of my lustful state.

Daemon hung up the phone and moved back to my side. “I have a special surprise for you today, Damsel.” A mischievous grin played over his sculpted lips, which perfectly complimented the gleam in his eye. I cocked an eyebrow knowing that he was definitely up to something. Daemon noticed my skepticism and chuckled before saying, “My surprise is running a little late, but should be here within the next ten minutes. Today, we are going to work on your endurance.”

I didn't know it was possible, but my one eyebrow raised even higher above my eye and was dangerously

close to getting lost within my hairline.
“Why are we working on my endurance?”

“Two reasons. You winded way too quickly while we were sparring yesterday, and if you are ever in a situation where you need to protect yourself, you will need to be able to keep going without wearing out. Secondly...” His eyes hooded and darkened as he leaned closer to my ear to whisper quietly, “...considering what I want to do to you the next time I have you alone, it would be best that your body and lungs are conditioned to withstand physical exertion.” Pulling back, he winked quickly at me. My knees buckled slightly and I reached out

to steady myself. Another chuckle escaped Daemon as his arms came around me to pull us together. “Have I told you lately, how much I appreciate your body’s reaction to me?” His voice had that smooth, seductive pull as he spoke. A few hoots sounded from our audience and my cheeks heated in response. Daemon’s face took on a smug grin. He had the remarkable ability of making me feel naked in public and he knew it...he enjoyed it. A few suggestive words, mixed with a sensual and baritone drawl, and poof...I became a lump of clay ready for his skilled hands.

Two could play this game.

After quickly formulating a plan, I asked, “So what are we waiting on? How *exactly* were you planning on warming me up?” I turned so that my back was to him. I stripped off the tank top I wore over my sports bra, held my hand out and unceremoniously dropped the shirt on the ground. My head twisted to peak at Daemon from over my shoulder. His eyes dared me to continue. He knew it was unlikely I would, especially given the presence of Joe and the Gang. I was intent on proving him wrong. My intent was only fueled as the corner of his mouth twitched giving away his attempt to hide his knowing grin.

Slowly, I removed the cotton shorts

that covered my spandex. More coughs and sputters sounded from the peanut gallery, but I didn't care. This was game on and I couldn't afford to be modest. The sports bra and spandex were enough to cover my skin, but so tight that they left nothing to the imagination. I felt exposed.

Reaching down slowly, I brought my hands to my ankles. I peaked up at Daemon from between my legs and smiled. "Perhaps we should stretch first?"

Daemon's mouth was slightly open, his eyes burning as they locked on my ass. I bounced my knees a little. His eyelids hooded.

I've always been a flexible person. I never had to practice to achieve that flexibility. It was a product of my klutziness. I've tripped and slipped and fallen so many times, sometimes landing in painful positions, the ligaments and tendons within my thighs had stretched throughout the years. Using this unknown talent to my advantage, I righted myself only to slowly slip down into a full straddle. Once again peeking over my shoulder, I said. "Come on, Daemon. Don't you want to help me stretch?"

With my legs still split impossibly wide, I lowered my upper body to the floor. From Daemon's angle, everything was exposed by the spandex hugging my

body. He didn't move and I inwardly high fived myself. My challenge was not accepted and I viewed that as a win.

Righting myself, I pushed myself back into a standing position before turning back to face him. His eyes ran up my body, stopping in key places, before continuing their path to meet mine. My chest flushed from anticipation. He was fucking me with his eyes. I knew that look. I was absorbed by that look.

To be fair, I gave his body a good look over as well. A sheen of perspiration appeared in the dip at the base of his neck. Although barely noticeable, his chest expanded just a bit

more with his increased breathing. His hands were clenched at his sides and... oh! Judging by the beginnings of a tent in the front of his cotton shorts, I'd say Daemon was participating in some stretching exercises after all. I chuckled triumphantly and looked back up to his eyes. They were crinkled in the corner and the different blue hues swirled together. I bit my bottom lip, causing his eyes to widen.

Taking two steps forward, I pressed my chest against him. My neck craned as I looked up. We were so close I could hear his heart beating against the wall of his chest. Mine knocked back in return. I held my breath, waiting to see if he would break his resolve. His

hands found their way to the back of my head. I kept my face turned up to him. Bringing his head down, his mouth brushed against mine. I was intoxicated by his scent. My tongue poked out from between my lips to taste the salt left behind from his brief kiss. He brought his face down to touch my nose with his. Parting his mouth slightly, his hand fisted in my hair and he pulled me...

“What the hell is that?! Boy, I think you are in the WRONG gym.” Joe and the Gang cackled from their corner. My cheeks heated again. I’d completely forgotten they were there. Daemon had that effect on a girl. Our heads shot to the front of the gym to find David standing by the front door holding a

boombox.

Oh. My. God.

David...was dressed...like
Richard Simmons.

There were no words.

He wore white sneakers with white socks pulled halfway up his calves. His long legs were exposed by the embarrassingly short red striped shorts that barely covered his ass. His heart shape bedazzled tank top dipped low to reveal most of his chest. The look was completed by the rainbow striped sweatband that adorned his head. In all honesty, it looked like a little girls closet threw up all over him. He stood there

with a silly smile on his face and an impish look in his eye.

Daemon suddenly broke out into booming laughter. Releasing me he walked over to greet David. They did the male fist bump before Daemon turned to me and said, “Damsel...meet your aerobics instructor.”

As David walked over to where I was standing, I noticed that the peanut gallery had grown unusually quiet. I glanced in their direction. Each man stood open-mouthed, a burning cigarette balanced precariously on their dropped bottom lips. *How in the hell did they do that?* Returning my attention to David, he sashayed his way to my side and

stopped in front of me, bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet.

“I hear you need to get yourself in shape, Paige my dear. Well no worries, because I am here to help you move!”

This was not happening. Not only was he dressed like Richard Simmons, he as acting like him as well. My eyes flicked to a grinning Daemon. His expression gave away his amusement at the situation. I knew the bastard had set me up.

“David, you don’t do aerobics. As far as I can recall, you’ve never exercised a day in your life.” I eyed my friend, wondering who’d stolen him and

replaced him with the exercise pixie of the 1980s.

David brushed away my question with his hand. “We’re not *exercising* Paige...we’re *Dancing to the Oldies!!*” His voice raised about two octaves as he excitedly announced his plans. Placing down the boombox on the floor, David moved to stretch out his long, lean body. While bent over, David peeked up at me. “Paige, you’re going to want to stretch out so you don’t get any muscle cramping while we dance.”

Daemon’s hand suddenly landed on my ass, followed by a low whistle from our audience. “No worries, David. Paige stretched before you came.”

Daemon winked at me. “If you need me, babe, I’ll be standing over there with Joe.

I glared in his direction as he sauntered his way over to the spectator’s side of the gym, chuckling the entire way.

David popped back up from his stretching. “You ready?”

“No.”

“Too bad! Let’s do this, girl!” He reached down to push play on the boombox.

“Jitterbug.....jitterbug....”

My eyes widened in realization of

the ‘oldies’ David had in mind for our dance session. “Is this Wham?!” My voice was one of shock and disbelief. This was not happening. I closed my eyes tightly and opened them again, hoping with everything I had that it was all a dream and I would somehow awaken just by the mere motion of my eyelids. It didn’t work.

“Yes! Come on, girl! This is a classic! George Michael is so freaking hot!” David was bouncing around waiting for the song to get moving.

“I’m not dancing to *Wake Me Up*.” I crossed my arms over my chest, shaking my head in protest to his chosen music. “No way, David!”

As soon as Mr. Michael started into the fast beat, peppy music David was shaking his ass to the rhythm. He maneuvered his way behind me and placed his hands on my hips, forcing my body back and forth to the song. “Oh yes you are!”

I swore I heard mumbled explicatives coming from the direction of the peanut gallery. I twisted around to find that Joe stood motionless, his expression one of utter horror and shock. The other men shared in his dismay. Daemon, however, stood with his arms crossed over his chest, an amused grin playing over his lips. I took a second to admire the definition in his arms before my attention was jerked

back to David.

Rocking back and forth, his hands swung in the air over his head. He was thoroughly enjoying the song without a thought to the grouchy old rednecks who watched on in disbelief. My jaw dropped when his hands dropped to his hips and he started gyrating his hips in large circles. The man had no shame. When his eyes opened and he noticed I wasn't moving, he let out an exasperated sigh before reaching down to pause the music.

“What’s wrong, Paige?” His hand reached out dramatically in my direction. “Dance with me!”

I shook my head in refusal. “Nope. No way. There is no way I’m dancing to that song. Pick something else.”

David opened his mouth to respond but was interrupted by Daemon’s booming voice. “Damsel, don’t be scared. Show me how that little body of yours can move.”

Son. Of. A. Bitch. I could spit fire I was so pissed off that he put me in this position.

David smiled at Daemon’s insistence that I join in on the ‘80s dance-fest.

Fine. Daemon wants to see me move, I’ll show him how this body can

move. I knew those shorts of his couldn't hide his excitement, so I decided to embarrass him right back. Once again...game on.

“I'll dance, David, but you need to pick a different song.”

David beamed when I agreed to dance. His hands clapped together as he said, “Excellent! All I have is my ‘80s CD.” He handed me the case so I could choose a song. My hands scanned the craptastic choices offered and I settled on *Sweet Dreams* by the Eurythmics. I wasn't the best choice given the abuse theme of the song, but it had the most seductive rhythm compared to the others.

“I’ll take track number twenty.” I was speaking to David, but my eyes were locked on Daemon.

As soon as the synthesized music starting playing, my hips began moving to the beat. I started with smaller sways of my hips, gradually increasing to a rotation of my lower half in perfect sync with the music. Daemon’s eyes narrowed and a grin peeked out from the corner of his mouth. Annie Lennox began to croon the lyrics and my arms went above my head, my hips moving even more fervently. I kept my eyes on Daemon intently watching his reaction. The muscle in his jaw started to tick. I looked at him as if he were lunch, mentally projecting my thoughts into his

head. Seduction, lust, need...everything I could toss in his direction. When his hands began to clench, I stepped it up a notch. I turned in a circle while still swaying my hips. Daemon received a full one eighty degree view of my body in motion. Turning back to him, I noticed that every muscle in his body had gone tense.

I brought my arms down, only to raise one hand and crook my finger at him daring him to come closer. It was a challenge and he knew it. At first he remained still, his eyes raking over every part of me. Eventually, I saw him step forward....another step...a few more....another...and we were face to face. Chortles and gasps sounded from

our audience, but I ignored it, pretending Daemon and I were the only people in the room. I turned so that he was standing behind me and pushed against him. Moving slowly, our bodies ground into each other. My hands reached behind me to grab his hips and pull him even tighter to my body. He placed his large hands over mine and started moving against me as well.

Challenge. Accepted.

My knees buckled slightly from the heat rising between us. With my eyes closed, I leaned my head back on his chest. His hands traveled up my body and I gasped when they met the bare skin of my midriff. Crap! My game was

being turned around on me. Needing to gain control, I thought about anything besides turning around and ripping his clothes off...smelly sneakers, spiders, clowns. I shuddered. The clowns did the trick.

I continued moving, consciously driving myself against him. When I felt something hard poke against my behind I knew I'd succeeded in my plot...and just in time. The music stopped and the gym went quiet. Had we been outside, I'm sure we would have heard crickets, it was so silent. Daemon's lips tickled my ear as he whispered, "Please tell me you plan on walking me to the bathroom. I'm having a slight issue because of you." He lifted his head and I peeked up at him

from over my shoulder.

My lips twisted up into a wicked grin. “Nope.”

I lurched forward, leaving Daemon exposed to the group of men in the room. Howling laughter came from the peanut gallery and I swear I heard David gasp then sigh. I turned to stare at Daemon smugly. His lips were pulled into a tight line, but I could see a smile trying to escape.

I grinned and batted my eyelashes innocently before saying, “You said you wanted to see me move.”

The smile finally escaped his lips. “Touché, Damsel.” Pulling back his

shoulders, he held his head high as he moved past Joe and the Gang on his way to the restroom. The men were laughing so hard, several had gone into coughing fits while the others beat on their backs.

Feeling satisfied in my triumph, I turned back to David and held out my hand to him with dramatic flourish.

“David...let’s dance.”

Chapter Nine

The ceiling tiles were stained and falling down in areas. Large brown circles hinted to a roof leak and the possibility that this ceiling could eventually fall down on top of our heads if left unfixed. My chest heaved up and down as my body vacillated between tingles and pain. The rhythm of my heart was concerning, but it calmed as I continued to lay there contemplating the maintenance issues of the building.

Four hours. Who knew that a flaming gay man dressed as Richard Simmons could actually keep moving for four long hours. I'd been transported back almost thirty years in history to a time of synthesized music, bright neon

colors, clothing and accessories made of plastic, and the most comical and strange hairstyles I have ever seen.

Dancing to the '80s. I'd been floored from dancing to the '80s.

Every song drove me faster and dangerously close to a deep coma.

Six letters...S.A.F.E.T.Y....There was nothing safe about those letters, about that dance. Men Without Hats lied.

Tony Basil lied as well. Mickey was not fine...Mickey was a bastard who needed to be punched in the face.

Ninety-nine red balloons? Yeah...

if I had a pin, I would have popped each and every red balloon Nena was singing about, laughing maniacally while doing so.

“Damsel, you okay?” My eyes searched for the source of that mocking voice. Sure, it’s easy to laugh at the woman laid flat on the ground, but he didn’t just dance for FOUR hours. I’d been excited when the CD ended the first time. My heart dropped when David gleefully started it again from the beginning. The torture continued through four cycles of that CD. I was the one to finally end that CD. After its last hideous conclusion, I jumped in front of David as he tried to hit play again. Ripping the CD from the boombox, I

threw it across the room like a Frisbee. It hit the far wall, light bouncing off it as it clattered to the floor. I cackled like a woman crazed and promptly fell to the ground utterly exhausted.

Daemon's face came into view. His expression was amused, yet concerned. My eyes narrowed. HE did this to me. I thought I was going to die right here on the grubby ground of a decades old gym with David and the peanut gallery looking on with humor. They thought this was funny. I thought I needed an ambulance.

Daemon kneeled down beside me. "Paige, baby, we need to go see Annie. You can't lay on the floor forever."

Ha! Who was he kidding? I could happily lie here forever, never moving, never again hearing music. The floor was my friend. The only thing that wasn't trying to execute me by forcing me to move even an inch from where I landed. Me and the floor, we were fast becoming close.

Daemon reached his hand down to help me up. Annie. I needed to see her. I decided to attempt movement. I willed my arm to raise up to accept Daemon's assistance. It didn't move, not even a twitch as my brain helplessly sent signals down the paths of nerves attempting to elicit movement from my muscles. My body was in full revolt. I'd become a helpless puddle of goo.

Every now and again, a muscle spasmed and twitched.

“I can’t move Daemon. You’ll need to go on without me. Tell Annie I love her and miss her.” My voice was weak, my breathing still erratic and strained.

Daemon chuckled. “Quit being dramatic, Paige. It wasn’t that bad.”

Wasn’t that bad? Sure, we could go with that. Although I was now convinced that if Chris was watching and somehow saw this little incident, he would know exactly how to kill me. All he had to do was show up wearing short striped shorts and badly bedazzled

shirt, carrying a boombox blasting music from a decade that I barely escaped being born into and I would be a goner for sure. The torture had already been exacted by my friends. All Chris had to do was finish me off.

“I can’t move, Daemon,” I repeated.

He chuckled again. “Sure you can. Look, you are moving your jaw to talk, and your chest is moving up and down from breathing. The ability is there, Damsel, all you have to do is will your arms and legs to lift themselves up from the floor.” Daemon sighed, finally realizing that the floor and I would not part unless assistance was given. His

arms came under my legs and back and he lifted my deadweight, attempting to put me into a standing position. My legs collapsed, but he caught me as I started to fall backwards. I hoped he would pull a muscle in his back from catching my weight. It would serve him right. He attempted to kill me today by siccing David on me, armed with a boombox and '80s music.

Daemon gave up finally, picked me up and carried me as we said our goodbyes to the peanut gallery. He promised to return soon. I apologized that I would never see them again. Their laughter followed us out the door as we left.

When we reached the truck, Daemon attempted to place me in a sitting position in the front passenger seat. My body kept sliding down to the floor board. I couldn't hold myself upright no matter how hard I tried. I was tired. Daemon shrugged finally and decided to lay me down in the back seat as David climbed into the front. Within seconds, we were on our way back to Daemon's apartment to get cleaned up before heading to The Center. David played around with the radio and joyfully shrieked when he discovered an '80s station.

Fuck...My life.

As Madonna sang out "Like a

Virgin,” I cringed. Although, after a moment, I resigned myself to agree with her. I felt like a virgin; one who had just had sex thirty times on her first night. My legs hurt and I was in pain. I could see Daemon’s shoulders bounce from the laughter he was trying to contain. David’s energetic hands snapped and swayed in front of him as he continued dancing in his seat. Having no fight left in me, I groaned and endured it the entire length of the trip back home.

I was carried upstairs, stripped down and placed in a warm bath. Daemon’s hands massaged my body, starting with my shoulders, moving down, until ending with my feet. I was beginning to regain the ability to move,

especially excited after first relearning to wiggle my toes. I was in the warm, healing water for thirty minutes. My pride swelled as I pulled myself from the water to allow Daemon to wrap a towel around me to help dry me off.

His laughter bubbled out of him. “Feeling okay now, beautiful? I was worried about you for a little while there.”

Taking control of the towel from Daemon, I said, “It was touch and go for a little while. I was worried myself.” I turned to him to glare into his eyes. “Never again, Daemon. Never again release David on me without warning. That man can be deadly if given the

proper weapons.”

Daemon laughed. “Actually, Paige, David gave you one hell of a workout. I don’t think that guy ever tires out. I would have fallen over after the first three hours. I was shocked you kept going. A couple more days of that and you’ll be able to run a marathon without any problem.”

“A couple more days?!” My eyebrows climbed high on my head. My eyes widened so much, they hurt. “You can’t do that to me, Daemon. He’ll kill me. I won’t last through that again.”

Daemon’s hand came down to my lower back as he ushered me into the

bedroom. “Well, I have something else planned for tomorrow, but there will be a few more days of dancing planned after that. You’ll be fine, Damsel. The more you dance, the longer you’ll last. It gets easier, I promise.”

Daemon sat me on the bed before walking over to his closet. He’d secretly moved some of my things into his room and I now understood the wisdom in that idea. He walked back out carrying a pair of jeans, some underwear, a green shirt and my boots. I eyed the boots warily wondering if I would still be able to lift my legs to walk with the added weight. “You’re going to need to wear these today. Your bike is still at your parents’ place and

you need to ride it back. David and I will follow behind you in the truck.”

I nodded my head. If I would have to ride home, I needed to conserve my energy to be able to hold up the weight of the bike. Daemon approached me and placed the clothes next to me on the bed. His eyes twinkled with some private thought. “Now, I’d like to remind you of the little game you played with me in the gym today...” His gaze caressed the exposed skin of my body. “...I believe paybacks are in order.” His hands easily removed mine from the grip I held on the top portion of the towel. Slowly, he unwrapped me, allowing the towel to fall to the bed. Goosebumps prickled over my skin and his gaze heated with

devious thoughts. I shook my head.

“Sorry, Daemon, but no can do on that idea. I’m exhausted and you deserve to be punished for your actions today. No sex for you.”

He grinned revealing those lickable dimples on his cheeks. “Punished? You intend to punish me? Oh, Damsel...” His eyes darkened and hooded, his voice dropped impossibly low. The sound of his words vibrated through me, threatening to destroy the resolve I’d just built. “...I’d love nothing more than to be punished by you. In fact, let’s make a little wager on who can punish who more. You do remember our days of being *roommates*, correct?”

Oh, shit.

“I told you I was going to help you learn to control those emotions of yours, so this actually works out perfectly. I accept your challenge yet again, Paige.”

“Uh...what?” My brain couldn’t come up with a better question than that. I know...it’s pathetic.

“I’ve noticed that you are weak when it comes to resisting me. Although I take it as a compliment, it will be fun to watch you attempt to deny my advances. So that’s the game, Paige. I attempt to seduce you, and you resist me.”

My eyebrow arched. “I’ve resisted

you before.”

His eyebrow arched.

“Okay, maybe not.”

He chuckled. “In part, the test will be resisting me, but also, I want you to keep from letting me know how difficult it is. Control your emotions and physical reactions as well, Paige. Don’t let me know my effect on you. Your three biggest problems are your fear, your anger and your lust. Okay, well, that last one isn’t so much of a problem, at least when I’m around. Regardless, if you can gain control over those three, there should be no problem controlling everything else. Part of defending

yourself, Paige, is keeping your opponent guessing when it comes to your thoughts and feelings.” He winked as his arms crossed over his chest, pushing out his biceps. I think I may have drooled at the sight. “So far, you’re not doing so well. I don’t think you’ll be able to do it, Damsel.”

I pulled myself from my admiration of his body. Fuck him. I could control my reactions. No problem. He is an arrogant bastard and I was going to prove him wrong.

“Okay, Daemon. I’ll play along.”

He nodded. “Good. Now get dressed so we can get going. I need to

take a quick shower and I'll meet you in the living room momentarily." He sauntered in the bathroom as I began pulling on some clothes.

~

The ride to The Center was uneventful. Daemon and David were mostly quiet during the trip. My mind raced the entire way as I bounced between excitement for Annie and trepidation at having to face my parents. As soon as the large building came into view, my heart sped up as panic ensued. It was strange to feel this way. Never before had I ever felt anything but peace and tranquility upon arriving here.

The truck lurched to a stop and my parents stepped out through the front doors waiting for us to approach. Daemon threw the truck into park but sat back with his head turned in my direction. “You ready for this?”

“No.”

“Paige...” Just as Daemon started to speak, David’s hand came slapping down on my shoulder. My head whipped around to look at him.

“Paige, you’re going to forgive your parents. They love you, you love them. That’s all that matters. All the other bullshit is in the past and, quite frankly, I won’t allow you to continue in

your stubbornness.” Having said that, David scooted himself to the side of the truck, opened his door, came to my side and pulled me from the vehicle. I tumbled out, barely keeping myself from falling to the ground. David closed my door behind me and I turned to see that Daemon had also exited the vehicle. They walked on either side of me as we approached my parents. I wasn’t sure if they were trying to provide me strength, or if they were escorting me to make sure I didn’t cut and run.

Momma’s face looked tired when we reached her. I know that she’d been upset for the past couple of days and I felt slightly guilty for not having dealt with this earlier. Daddy also looked

exhausted, but threw on a brave smile as I neared them.

“Baby Girl!” His arms opened up, welcoming me into his embrace. David and Daemon’s hands came up to my back, pushing me in the direction of my father. I took hesitant steps at first, but then I huffed out a breath and walked over to allow my dad to wrap himself around me. “We’ve missed you, Baby Girl.”

My anger at my parents began to dissolve as I recognized the pain and defeat in my father’s voice. “It’s only been a couple of days, Daddy.”

He sighed. “I know, Paige; but it’s been a long couple of days. Too long.”

Daddy squeezed me tightly before handing me off to Momma. Just like the last time I'd seen her, her hands twisted over themselves. I reached out and placed my hands over hers. "We have a lot to talk about, Momma; but you don't need to worry. I love you. Nothing will change that."

A single tear escaped her eye as she smiled weakly and pulled me into a hug. I choked up from the contact, but pulled myself together not wanting to let her see my reaction.

"Has Annie arrived?"

Momma let me go to hug David and Daemon. "Not yet, Paige. She should

be here within the hour. Doctor Carter is driving her over as we speak.”

Momma and Daddy led us into the back recreation area. David moved over to the children’s area taking his usual place as jungle gym. While David was distracted, Momma and Daddy requested that Daemon and I follow them out to the back veranda.

I gasped at the beauty of the back yard as we exited the building. The sun was an hour or two from setting and had just begun pouring faint streaks of red and gold over the horizon. It was during this time that every detail of the yard and the wetlands beyond were shown in such magnificent clarity. Dragonflies buzzed

about getting in their last activities prior to settling in for the night. Birds sang and the cicadas and frogs battled it out with their songs. A warm breeze floated along, picking my hair up and blowing it back.

Momma and Daddy sat down on one of the outdoor loveseats and Daemon and I took our place in the chairs facing them.

Daddy spoke first. “Paige, your Momma and I have been worried sick, and quite frankly, hurting over the past few days. I want you to know that we know what we did was wrong. We should have been honest with you when you were old enough to understand. It

was our fault and we deserved your anger. Baby, please forgive us. We were only trying to protect you. That's not to say that if we had to, we wouldn't make the same choice. We were right about keeping you from Daemon; where we screwed up was continuing to lie to you about it."

I was silent for a moment as I gathered my thoughts. Daddy was wrong. They hadn't made the right choice. They had the wrong opinion of Daemon as a child. He was a misunderstood kid who was only trying to protect me, but was made to believe he was bad because of it. I didn't want to hurt them further, but it was best that we all lay it all out on the table. The

truth needed to come out.

“Of course, I’ll forgive you. I understand why you did what you did. It just upsets me to know that you two thought I was so fragile, I wouldn’t have been able to handle knowing about this when I was older.” I took a deep breath before revealing the rest. “What also kills me about the whole situation is that both of you were so wrong in what you believed about Daemon.”

Both sets of their eyes widened as I continued.

“Momma, I know that you saw Daemon pushing me around when we were kids, and I get your hesitancy to

keep him around after his parents died; but you misunderstood what you were seeing.”

Momma looked from me to Daemon and back again. “What are you talking about, Paige?”

Daemon’s hand came to rest on my knee, gently squeezing upon contact. “When you saw him pushing me around, he was only trying to teach me not to be like his mom who would cry when she was hurt and not get away or fight back...”

“But...”

“...And when you saw him fight other kids around the Center, he was

doing so because they were making fun of me. He was *defending* me mom, not just being a bully or an emotionally troubled kid.”

Momma gasped and folded her hands together. Daddy’s eyes locked to Daemon. “Is that true, Daemon?”

Daemon nodded.

Daddy’s face fell. “But...you kept fighting son. We followed your progress while you were in foster care. That was the biggest complaint of all of your foster parents.”

Daemon cleared his throat. His eyes traveled to the ground before looking back up at Daddy. “Uh, yeah. I

did keep fighting, but most of the time, it was because I was being picked on by the other boys. I never fought any girls. The other boys, well, they enjoyed making fun of the fact that I wore a girl's necklace. The one Paige gave me."

My eyes shot to him as my jaw dropped. He'd never told me that part.

Daemon continued. "I put it on almost immediately after she gave it to me. I didn't take it off again until I was about thirteen or so." His head and shoulder dropped as he remembered back.

Momma and Daddy were quiet momentarily, before Momma finally

asked, “Daemon, honey, why didn’t you tell anybody what was really going on?”

Daemon shrugged his shoulders and looked back up into Momma’s eyes. “I don’t know. I guess when you’re as young as I was, and enough people tell you that you are bad, you start to believe it. I stayed that way until you two sent me to live with Frank.” He chuckled. “I think you both already know his opinion on the matter. It didn’t take him long to straighten my head up.”

Daddy smiled. “Yeah, rest his soul, Frank was one hell of a man. It’s a damn shame he couldn’t have stuck around with us a little longer. The world lost a great person the day he died.”

“How did you know Frank, Daddy? Why did you send Daemon there?” I couldn’t help my curiosity about the man my parents chose for Daemon.

Daddy sat back in his chair, sighing loudly as he did so. “I knew Frank from high school. When I was a sophomore, he moved to Florida with his mother. His father was apparently just as abusive as Daemon’s dad, but Frank had endured it longer. Frank’s mother eventually left his father and moved here to be closer to her family, bringing Frank with her. He was very much a loner when I met him, but we got to know each other when I tutored him in math. Eventually, he admitted to me the things

his father had done to him over the years. He had a lot of anger inside of him, but kept it together so that he could help support his mother. We remained friends through high school and he joined the Marines the day after we graduated.” Daddy looked serious as he said, “Frank is one of the reasons I wanted to start The Center. We kept contact over the years through letters and he eventually returned to Florida after ten years in the military. He was a changed man when he returned.”

Daddy turned to look at Daemon. “I’m sure you know most of that already, Daemon. I chose Frank because I knew he was strong enough to deal with your rage, but I also knew he would

understand what you'd gone through growing up. From the looks of you, it appears I made at least one right decision."

Daemon nodded. "Yeah, Frank told me about his childhood." He chuckled before continuing. "He never would hear my excuses for being angry. He said it didn't matter what happened in my past. The only thing that did matter was what I did with the rest of my life."

Daddy smiled. "Like I said, I knew he'd be the right choice for you, son."

We grew quiet again. Daddy finally broke the silence when he asked, "So what happened at the club,

Daemon? They've reported that they suspect Chris of arson because of what happened."

Daemon launched into the story, explaining about the fire at Tomb and also the information we discovered about Chris' youth. Daddy cursed quietly when Daemon told him about Bill's unfortunate ending.

Momma remained abnormally reserved as we discussed the details of the past few days. I finally looked over at her and asked, "Momma? Is everything okay?"

She looked up at me and the redness of her eyes gave away that she

had been silently crying. Wiping at her face to remove the evidence of her tears, she said, "My heart is broken, Paige. I didn't know any of those things about Daemon." She choked back a sob. "And then to hear about Chris' history... I mean, nobody helped that poor boy. I'm so angry that nobody stepped up to stop his mother from her abuse, but then I just grow angry with myself because I'm no better than they were. Daemon needed help and I failed him. Oh, god, Daemon, you could have turned out just like Chris." She lost the battle to keep herself composed as tears flowed down her face. Her chest and back heaved with her sobs as she attempted to hide her face in her hands. Tears sprung from

my eyes and I started to stand up to go and comfort her. Daemon's hand fell on my leg and I looked over as he stood up to walk over to Momma.

He knelt down in front of her, gently pulling her face up so he could look at her. When her bloodshot eyes finally locked with his, he said, "You didn't fail me. You made a mistake, yes, but don't *ever* think that you failed me. If it hadn't been for you and Mr. Stone, I would have been lost and forgotten in the system. If it hadn't been for you, I would have never found Frank, I may never had straightened up. It was *your* actions that did that. Sure, they weren't the most informed decisions, but they were the best ones that could have been

made at the time. You did save me.” He his eyes flicked to Daddy’s before returning to Momma’s. “You both did.”

Momma’s arms were suddenly around him and I started crying as a result. It was way too much emotion for me to handle, but I threw myself over to them, taking them both into a hug. Daddy eventually joined in while we hugged and cried and forgave...together.

We were still wrapped around each other when the back door slammed open and David was heard crying out. “What the hell?! There’s a family hugfest going on out here and I wasn’t invited!” He sniffed. “I feel so unloved. Momma? Daddy? I thought I was the favorite.”

We let go of each other and our heads turned to look at David in unison.

Crossing his arms over his chest he squared his shoulders and look down his nose at us. “I’m sorry, Daemon, but I can’t allow this. Paige, we need to sleep together so that I can be the favorite again. Daemon has an unfair advantage.”

My jaw dropped as my cheeks heated. I looked over to find a pained expression of Daddy’s face. I know that the man would believe I was a virgin until the day I got married. Momma and Daemon’s faces weren’t much better.

My eyes shot back to David. “Shut

up, David! My parents don't want to hear that!" I screeched.

He chuckled. "Oh, whatever, Paige. Your parents had to know *something* would happen between the two of you. Soul mates can't sleep under the same roof without a little nookie happening every once in a while. Anyways..." He rolled his eyes. "I came to tell you that the intercom went off just a second ago. Annie and Dr. Carter are at the front doors."

My heart leapt into action, beating happily in excitement to see one of my best friends. Daddy pushed himself up and reached down to help Momma to her feet. Her hands brushed down the front

and back of her dress before she said, “Daemon and David. I’d like for you both to stay outside or in the recreation area while we bring Annie in to get her settled. The only person she has requested to see at this point is Paige, but I’ll be sure to ask if she feels she’s at a point where she wants to see the two of you as well.”

“But Momma, she’s already seen David. He went with me when I visited her at the hospital, “I protested.

Momma had her business face back on; the effects of the talk having disappeared completely. “Now, Paige, you know the rules around here. Nobody visits the women or children

who live here unless I've been told that it's okay with them. I'm sure Annie will have no problem seeing the boys. Dr. Carter advised that she's made excellent progress and just needs some fine tuning at this point. However, I'm sticking to my rule."

I nodded my head in agreement.
"Okay, Momma, you're right."

"Now let's go open those doors. It's rude to keep her and Dr. Carter waiting.

Chapter Ten

I stood back as Daddy swung open the large doors at the front of the Center. Sunlight invaded the darkened foyer, backlighting Annie and Dr. Carter as they walked through. Daddy reached out to grab a suitcase from Annie's hands. My breath caught as I was reminded of the day I watched Daemon and his mother enter through those doors. Annie looked nothing like Daemon's mother. Her time in the mental facility had all but erased the physical marks of Chris' attack. I knew, however, that the emotional injuries were still very much present within her.

Once Daddy closed the doors, we led Annie to a small sitting and

receiving area situated to the right of the foyer. Momma and Daddy spoke quietly with Dr. Carter as Annie moved across the room to take a seat on one of the chairs. I followed her across the room and sat down in the chair next to her.

“Hey, Annie. Long time, no see.” I smiled brightly at her, trying to convey my absolute joy at her arrival.

To my surprise, she returned the bright smile. “Hey, Paige. I’m so freaking happy to be here. No offence to the place I was just at, but mental facilities are really depressing and creepy when you are no longer a basket case.”

I laughed and jumped up to give her a hug. My hand came up to ruffle her hair. “You’ll have to tell me all about it later. I’m sure you probably heard or saw some strange shit there.”

Annie nodded in response just as Dr. Carter and my parents moved to join us. “Now, Annie. Don’t go telling Paige about all the patients at my facility...but if you happen to mention the exceptionally odd cases, just remember to keep their names private, okay?” Dr. Carter beamed pridefully at Annie.

“Will do, Doc.”

We spoke as a group for about an

hour and then Momma asked me to show Annie to her room. I'd pulled some strings and convinced Momma to make sure Annie's room was private, unless Annie decided later on that she preferred to have a roommate. Normally the private room were reserved for women with children, but Momma conceded to allow Annie a private room as long as a mother and child didn't arrive in need of it.

After walking Annie back to her room, I sat and watched as she put up the things I'd brought from the apartment. I noticed that she'd continued wearing the dragonfly bracelet that I'd bought for her and my chest swelled with pride that she'd liked it. It wasn't much, but it was

all I could do for her at the time. Annie's beautiful red hair was growing out and was just long enough to drop below her shoulder. Sunlight shining in through the window danced along her hair causing the golds and reds to shimmer. When Annie turned to look at me, I smiled to see her beautiful green eyes sparkling back at me once again.

“So, Momma was going to ask, but I might as well while we are sitting here. Would you mind seeing Daemon and David? They are in the recreation area or the backyard and I'm sure they would love to see you.”

Annie smiled. “Of course, I want to see David. Are you kidding me?!

The man is a walking ray of sunshine...well, that or a court jester. I haven't made a decision on that one yet."

I laughed at Annie's levity. She really had made progress and the girl I knew and loved was seemingly back. As Annie put away her clothes, her brows furrowed as she frowned. "Paige, could you do me a favor?" She turned to me with a few of her shirts in hand.

My eyebrows raised up. "Sure, Annie. What's up?"

She handed me the shirts and then turned to grab some other items to give to me. "Would you get rid of those

clothes? I don't really need much while I'm here, but once I get out, I'm going to need to go shopping for a new wardrobe."

I looked down at the clothes she'd handed me. Most of them were practically new, having been purchased shortly before the attack. "Yeah, no problem, Annie, but if you don't mind my asking, why do you want me to get rid of these."

Annie looked hesitant to respond. "Because I want to start dressing more conservatively. Those clothes are way too revealing and it attracted the wrong kind of attention to me. I'm starting over, Paige. I need to start over. So the

first place I'm going to do that is my appearance."

"Annie, you can dress however you want. What happened wasn't in any way your fault. Your choice in clothes can't be blamed for the actions of another person."

She smiled. "I know that, Paige. I don't in any way blame myself for what was done to me. That was the act of a depraved person. I'm going to move past that, Paige. I have to; but I also need to work on other problems I have as well. I believed a lot of stupid things about myself before...you know...before. I had a lot of time to think while I was at Dr. Carter's facility. The

counseling sessions helped me figure a lot out about myself as well. I didn't respect myself enough. That's why I kept going for the same types of men and it's also the reason I put up with their disrespect. I want to change my life, Paige. I don't want to keep making the same mistakes over and over again. I wasn't happy, not truly anyways. I deserve so much more than what I was getting. I deserve everything I dreamed about as a child; a loving husband, kids, a white picket fence, the whole thing. My former beliefs prevented me from finding that, and I'll be damned to fall back into the same pattern. Things are going to get better and I'm sure that with your mom's help, and yours, I'll walk

out of this place with my head held high and I won't take shit from anybody ever again." She paused briefly and smiled. "I'm excited, Paige. For once, I'm really excited about my future. It sucks that it took...well, that I had to go through the things that I did, but for once, I have something to really look forward to." She nudged me with her shoulder. "Who knows, maybe I'll even give the big and bad Paige a run for her money on who can be the toughest chick."

I couldn't contain my smile. "Annie, you already are giving me a run for my money. Hell, I think you've surpassed me as the toughest chick. I can't believe how well you've pulled through all of this. It's amazing. You're

amazing.”

When she winked at me, I couldn't help but laugh. I loved Annie to death, and I was looking forward to meeting the new and improved version of herself I knew she would become. I also understood that she would need a lot of guidance, but I couldn't have been more proud of her for her strength and perseverance. She made me proud. I hated that it took something so dramatic to finally make her see the error in her ways. However, I couldn't be more happy to know that from here on out, she would be a stronger woman. When Logan suddenly popped into my thoughts, I chanced asking her about him.

“So, Logan is still wanting to eventually see you again, Annie. He knows it won’t be anything more than as friends, but in the short amount of time he knew you, he grew to care about you immensely.”

She flopped down next to me on the bed. She kept her eyes trained on the bracelet she was spinning around her wrist. “Logan was a really good guy, Paige. I liked him a lot; but I don’t know that he wouldn’t end up disappointed with me if I did agree to speak to him or see him again. I’m far, FAR, from ready to even think about dating, and I’d hate to hurt him by refusing anything other than friendship. I’d feel like I was leading him on if I started talking to

him. I don't want him to get the wrong idea. Plus, I still have nightmares...and panic attacks. I...I'm not ready for anything more right now."

I nodded my head in understanding. I knew that Logan cared for Annie as a friend, but I wasn't sure if it wouldn't end up hurting him to be kept at arm's length by her. "Tell you what. Why don't I talk to him and let him know how you feel? If he can handle just being friends, I think it might be good for you, Annie. You can use all the friends you can get right now and Logan is an awesome guy."

Her eyes came up to meet mine. "Sounds good, Paige, but it will take

some time. Let me get adjusted here and if he still wants my friendship, I'd be happy to talk to him on the phone at some point. I know I need to regain my life and I have every intention to do just that. Dr. Carter said it was okay, and maybe even better for me to do so in small increments. Baby steps, you know?"

I reached out and squeezed her hand in agreement. "Of course, Annie. Whatever it takes to put things back together for you. You just let me know when you are ready and I'll give him the number to The Center so he can reach you." She smiled in response.

We sat silently after having finished

conversing about that difficult topic. Annie eventually let out a long breath and turned to me to ask, “So, Daemon’s here? Things must be going pretty good between you two. What’s it been, a few months? Tell me what’s going on.”

I smiled brightly, causing Annie to gasp. “That good, huh? Geez, Paige. I don’t think I’ve ever seen your face light up like that over a guy. He must be something special.”

“You have no idea, Annie. Well, first I guess I should tell you some background information before you hear about it when we go back out there. Ummm...so Daemon is actually Buddy.” I peeked up at her from under my lashes

hoping she would remember the stories I'd told her about my childhood. As soon as I caught sight of her eyes, recognition came over her face.

“Holy shit! You mean Buddy from here? The kid whose mom was killed?”

“Yep. The very one. There's a long story behind it and why he didn't immediately tell me when we first started seeing each other, but I couldn't be happier to have him back in my life.”

Annie giggled. “I should have known. Well, I mean, there was no way that any of us would have guessed that, but I remember the way he looked at you that night in our apartment.” She paused

momentarily, but continued when she saw the questioning expression on my face. “When he came over the night your bike was trashed, he looked at you like there was nothing else that mattered in the world. I was confused, honestly, considering everything was so new between the two of you. However, now that you mention his background, I completely understand it. Wow, Paige. Talk about ‘meant to be’, I think you two should be the poster children for that phrase.”

I felt my cheeks heat as she spoke. “I know, Annie. I think I’m in love with him, but not just because of the fact that he’s Buddy. He’s amazing. He puts up with my shit, he takes care of me, and

I'll admit this...he's the first guy to ever really be able to put me in my place. For some odd reason, that means something to me."

Annie's eyes widened at my confession. "Crap, Paige. Do you think you'll end up marrying him?"

"He wants to. Well, he hasn't asked me officially or anything, but he's mentioned the desire to do so in the future. I don't know. It feels weird to think of me as a wife. What if he wants kids?! I'm not sure I'd be a great mom."

Her arm came up around my shoulder as she pulled me against her. "Oh, whatever. I've never seen you fail

at anything you set your mind to do...”

I cringed. She had obviously missed a lot of my most recent fuck ups due to being in the mental facility.

“...Paige, I have no doubt that you would be the best mother. Those kids would have to walk a tight line, I’m sure of that, but you are extremely loving and affectionate when you want to be. Plus, look who you had as examples. Your parents are fabulous. I can’t think of a better set of parents than yours.”

Yep...she missed a lot. I opened my mouth to tell her the role my parents had played in Buddy’s absence from my life, but reconsidered after looking at

how her face shown with happiness. I didn't want to burst her bubble with unhappy thoughts, so I just smiled and went along with what she was saying.

“No doubt, Annie. Well, it's getting late and we'll need to be going soon. Do you want to go out now and say ‘hello’ to everyone?”

Annie stood up and reached down to pull me up alongside her. “Let's do this, Paige. I haven't been more ready for anything. From here on out, things are going to change.”

I squeezed her hand and we made our way out into the recreation area. David and Daemon were nowhere to be

seen so I led Annie out to the backyard in search of the boys. When we stepped outside my eyes immediately caught sight of the two of them.

You have GOT to be kidding me.

“Dammit, David, hold still so I can’t get you out of the mud!” Daemon’s booming voice echoed throughout the back yard. Leaving Annie on the veranda, I ran out to assist Daemon in freeing David. When I approached, David looked over at me and rolled his eyes.

“Don’t say it, Paige. All I can tell you is I’m never, NEVER, walking around back here again. I have no idea

how you and Daemon didn't go missing when you were kids. I swear to all things high and mighty that this backyard is a death trap waiting to happen!"

As Daemon worked on pulling David's foot out of the muck, I bit my tongue to keep from laughing. "Please tell me those weren't three hundred dollar shoes, David."

His face flashed with anger and annoyance. "No. I learned my lesson the last time, thank you very much. I bought some bargain shoes after the last time just so that I could wear them the next time I came over here."

"Why were you out here anyway,

David? I've warned you about the marshes."

"Whatever, Paige! I followed Daemon out and tried to make sure I stepped where I'd seen him step. You two must have magical abilities or something when it comes to all things swamp."

Daemon finally freed David's foot. "Hey look, I still have my shoe! Ha! Guess this swamp only likes eating designer things." He turned to look at me. "I take back my earlier statement. You and Daemon don't have magical abilities...just bad taste in fashion. That must be why the swamp hasn't eaten you."

“Ohhhhhh Kaaaaaaaay. Well anyways, David, Annie’s up on the veranda. You should get up there and see her.”

David looked over at Annie and took off in a sprint to get to her. “And watch your step on the way up there,” I yelled after him.

Daemon moved to my side as we walked to the veranda together. “Are you going to be ready to head home soon?”

I nodded my head ‘yes.’

He took my hand and placed a kiss in the center of my palm. “Good. Then let me be the first to say, ‘Game on.’”

My face fell as Daemon winked at me.

Fuck. This was NOT going to be a fun night.

~

After staying for another two hours and eating dinner, I climbed on my bike as Daemon and David climbed in the truck to return home. We had a great time catching Annie up on all of the events of our lives while she had been away. Annie especially enjoyed hearing about my training at the gym. We left out the reason behind the training, instead opting to let her believe it was a physical fitness thing more than a

survival thing. Everyone was careful not to bring up anything related to Chris and I was absolutely thrilled to see Annie socializing and joking with my family and friends.

My parents had kept my bike under a tarp for me so that it wouldn't sit out too much in the rain. I giggled some when my father proudly unveiled how the bike had remained dry while in their care. He was so proud of himself that I played along letting him believe he was the most brilliant person on the planet. I didn't have the heart to tell him that the bike got wet often and with good maintenance it wasn't really a problem.

I kicked my bike into gear and

revved the engine. The sound echoed through the tree lines and I shivered a little to hear it. I loved my bike. It was an ultimate freedom to me. Crashing against the wind, the lack of a metal box, the ability to go wherever I wanted to go, whenever I wanted to go there... those were what the things that made me love it so much. Cars were okay for getting around, but they would never compare to my bike.

Kicking the bike into gear, I drove down the long drive out to the dirt road beyond. When my tires finally hit cement, I accelerated quickly, tearing down the highway in the direction of my house. I heard a horn honking a distance behind me and I looked down at my

speedometer, quickly realizing I was high above the recommended....okay....*required* speed limit. I slowed down, allowing Daemon and David to catch up.

It'd grown dark on our ride home and as we were winding through the thick tree lines of the national forest, Daemon started flashing his brights at me. I immediately slowed down and pulled along the edge of the road to find out what he wanted. He pulled up beside me and spoke to me through the passenger side window. "Paige, we need to go to the police station as soon as we get back in town. Detective Troy called and said it was urgent that she meet with us."

My head dropped down. Sonofabitch. Lately, when Detective Troy called, it was never good news.

They wouldn't be able to hear me through my helmet unless I screamed, so instead of straining my voice, I simply gave Daemon the thumbs up to let him know that I understood. He waited for me to pull out in front of him before continuing onward.

We arrived at the police station within a half hour. I was pulling off my helmet as Daemon came up and wrapped an arm around my waist, taking my helmet from me with his other hand.

“Did she tell you anything about

why she needed to see us when she called?”

Daemon chuckled. “No. In true Detective Troy style, she kept her demand short and sweet. We were basically ordered to show up.”

“Uh oh. That can’t be good.”

The police station was a large brick building that appeared somewhat menacing and foreboding. It carried an air of ‘law’ about it and made even an innocent person feel nervous to enter. As we entered the large glass doors of the station, we were dumped into a beige hallway, which led to an open waiting area. Chairs were lined up on one side

of the room, and to their right stood some vending machines and coffee makers. A delighted squeal escaped me cueing Daemon to strengthen his hold around me. “Damsel, let’s at least let them know we are here before you run off to get your fix.” He paused for a second before a crooked smile broke out on his face. “You know you’re an addict, right?”

I grinned. He had no idea about the true extent of my problem. “Yep. I’ve been researching twelve step programs, but apparently there are no coffee support groups in town.”

“Well, you guys go ahead and let them know we’re here. I’ll just be

going...” And with that, David was off to grab a cup of MY coffee. I attempted to break free from Daemon’s hold, but it was useless fighting against the steel band he called an arm. I glared at David as he approached the table. He grabbed a cup, poured himself a cup and turned back to stick his tongue out at me. I plotted his demise quickly before turning back in the direction Daemon was dragging me.

As we approached the desk, my eyes met with the friendliest set of honey brown eyes I had ever seen. The front desk lady was middle aged and really quite pretty. Her doe eyes perfectly complimented her round cheeks, giving her a cherub-like appearance. Her

brown hair was nicely complimented by the butter yellow top she was wearing.

“Hello. My name is Daemon Pierce and this is Paige Stone. Detective Troy called and asked that we meet her here.”

The receptionist looked away from me and did a double take when her eyes finally landed on Daemon. It took her a second to find the ability to speak. “Um, yes sir. I’ll call down to her office to let her know you are here. Please take a seat in our lobby and I’m sure she’ll be out as quickly as possible.”

As we walked away, I leaned into Daemon to whisper, “Doesn’t that annoy

you?”

“What.”

“How women get all flustered and nervous around you. It’s got to be annoying after a while.”

Daemon smiled and I felt his body shake with soft laughter. “To be honest, I never noticed, Paige. Lately, the only woman I’ve paid any attention to is you. Trust me when I say that I would not use the words ‘nervous’ or ‘flustered’ to describe you.”

That statement made me curious. “Oh yeah? What words would you use to describe me?”

Daemon thought about it for a moment before answering, “moody, stubborn, insufferable...have I mentioned moody?”

My elbow somehow connected with his side. I have no idea how that happened.

After chuckling at my failed attempt to hurt him, he said, “And incredibly fucking sexy.”

Okay. So that made up for the moody comment...sort of.

We made our coffee as we waited for Detective Troy to come fetch us. When the double doors slammed open, her little form moved through as her

heels clicked rhythmically across the terrazzo floor. “Excellent to see that all three of you could come. If you’ll just come with me, we can talk in my office.”

I’m not sure what I expected to see when she walked us through the double doors of the back area of the police station. I guess I imagined there would be a big room with desks where police officers interviewed and booked prostitutes and drug dealers before shipping them off to the county jail. I was surprised, and a little disappointed, to find that it was just a regular hallway, with regular doors set at equal distances which led to bland offices. It was nothing like the T.V. shows made it out to be. We walked quite a distance before

finally coming to a larger office at the end of the hallway. Detective Troy led us in and I stilled suddenly when I noticed Alex and Ava sitting on a couch near the windowed wall.

“Please take a seat. There’s plenty of room for everybody.” Detective Troy walked over to sit behind her desk while Daemon, David and I choose chairs near where Alex was seated.

“Now that I have you all here, I want to explain that Mr. Baxter has escalated yet again. While investigating Mr. Ingram’s death, we couldn’t determine for a fact that it was Chris who had committed the murder. Although, it was presumable that Mr.

Ingram's death was caused by Mr. Baxter; here at the police station we need little things called facts to prove such a suspicion. Unfortunately, he'd left us no such evidence at the scene, however, he kindly provided it to us this morning whether he realizes it or not.

Okay, that got my attention.

“This morning we received a package delivered by a local courier company. The package was addressed to me. Upon opening the envelope, I found several photographs of Mr. Pierce and Ms. Stone entering Mr. Ingram's trailer.”

“So the nosy bitch sent you more

photos?”

Detective Troy glared at me for my interruption before continuing. “These photos were not taken by the same camera Ms. Stone. Additionally, the angle of the shots are significantly different. It appears two people were photographing your presence at the trailer park yesterday.”

“So, what does this have to do with Chris?”

“If you could contain your questions until such time as I have finished what I’m telling you, Ms. Stone, you would know what this has to do with Mr. Baxter.”

I shut my mouth.

“As I was saying, the images from the outside of the trailer show a very much live version of Mr. Ingram standing with the two of you by the front door. Together with those photos were some additional images of the interior of the trailer, after Mr. Ingram had expired. I provided the photos to my forensic team to compare to the photographs we had gathered of Annie. The paper type was the same. Now, that’s not enough evidence to convict Mr. Baxter of his father’s murder. However, given the information we all know to be true, it’s enough for us to know positively that Mr. Baxter has escalated. He is now a murderer on top of a rapist and arsonist,

Ms. Stone.”

Not knowing if I as allowed to talk yet, I raised my hand.

Detective Troy breathed out in obvious exasperation. “Yes, Ms. Stone. What would you like to say?”

“Not to appear ignorant by asking this, but what does this have to do with all of us? I don’t understand why you needed us to come immediately to the station.”

“Actually, Ms. Stone, that is a very good question. We suspect Mr. Baxter has been watching you since the night you met at the club. Being that you are currently living with Mr. Pierce, I

wondered if Mr. Baxter had laid off his pursuit. These photographs prove to me he has not. Additionally, it appears Mr. Baxter was attempting to set you up for the murder of his father. That's the only reason I believe he would have sent us these photos. Unfortunately, if we hadn't already spoken to a witness that saw you leave while Mr. Ingram was still breathing, the police in that county would have no choice but to list you as a possible suspect."

"What?! Why? You know I wouldn't go off and kill someone!"

"Ms. Stone, circumstances make the situation appear bad for you. You were beaten and almost raped by Mr. Ingram's

son. You were supposedly the last people to have visited Mr. Ingram's trailer. Any good investigator would attempt to connect the two events. However, Mr. Ingram's neighbor was credible in her account of having seen him alive after the two of you left. Regardless, that's neither here nor there. The point I am making is that Mr. Baxter is, in fact, still following you. As a result, I need to know where you have been going for the past couple of days so that I can determine whether I need to have officers stationed at the places you frequent most. It's highly likely Mr. Baxter will attempt to harm any friends or family you may have visited since the incident in the woods."

Oh my god. Annie!

“Um, yes. In fact, we were at The Center today to visit Annie. She was finally released from the mental facility and transferred there. Crap! Detective Troy, you need to get someone over there right now. My parents are there and there are a lot of women and children that live in that facility.”

I gave Detective Troy the address for The Center and she quickly excused herself to make some phone calls. Apparently, due to The Center being in a different county, she needed to request assistance by another police department.

I was nervous that something may

have already happened, so I borrowed Daemon's phone to call my parents. Daddy answered on the second ring and I informed them about what we had learned from Detective Troy.

“Don't you worry, Paige. You know I have this place wired to prevent intruders, but I'll keep the building armed at all times for the next couple of days just in case.” Daddy sounded confident that he would keep Momma, Annie and the rest of the residents safe and I ended the call. Walking back over to the group, I noticed that Ava looked upset.

“Hey, Ava. It's good to see you again. Why do you look so glum?”

Ava started crying and Alex answered for her. “Well, that brings us to the reason Ava and I are here. Ava’s car was trashed this morning in front of her apartment. I remembered the description of the damages Chris had done to your bike and David’s car and I know for a fact that sick lunatic is the one who fucked up Ava’s car. I came here to report the incident to Detective Troy and she asked me to wait until the three of you arrived so we could figure out what to do about it.”

Wow. Chris was apparently a very busy man last night.

My head fell into my hands. This was getting out of control. People were

putting themselves in the crosshairs just by being associated with me. Chris was doing a stand up job of single-handedly ripping my entire life apart.

Looking back up, I asked, “So what are you two going to do? Ava, can you stay with Alex for a while until we figure out what to do about Chris?”

Once again, Alex spoke. Ava didn’t appear to be annoyed by his refusal to let her answer, although I certainly was. “I’m taking Ava out of town for a while, Paige. I’m going to go to my parents’ house in St. Pete for a few weeks. I’ll keep in touch. Hopefully, if Chris is caught soon, we can come back early. I’ve let everyone at the shop

know to be on the lookout, but I can't risk staying in town and something happening to Ava because of all of this."

I nodded. There was nothing to say. I felt fucking terrible that my friends were being forced to flee because I had to go picking the worst possible person to piss off in the entire state of Florida. Well, wait, Florida is known for some pretty nasty serial killers. Ted Bundy and Aileen Wuornos, to name a couple. Hell, Jeffrey Dahmer was even said to have spent some time down here. Okay, so *maybe* there were worse people I could have gone and pissed off.

Detective Troy reentered the room

as quickly as she had exited. “Alright folks, I was able to obtain assistance from another police station and a patrolman will be monitoring The Center at all times. Ms. Stone, they should be in contact with your parents shortly to arrange for their presence. I have no doubt that you all have had a chance to talk, so you should be caught up on Mr. Baxter’s other activities last evening, namely that of destruction of property and vandalism. Now that we are all on the same track here, is there anything else we need to discuss before you leave?”

Daemon spoke next. “Actually, yes. Paige and I have also been going to a gym located outside of town. Would it

be possible to have someone in the area checking up on it as well?”

“I’m sure I can arrange that, Mr. Pierce. Just leave the address with me and I will handle it. Anything else?”

When we all remained quiet, Detective Troy nodded her head to excuse us. One by one, we stood up and made our way to the door leading to the hall. Just as Daemon and I were about to exit, Detective Troy called out. “Mr. Pierce, Ms. Stone, one more thing before you return home for the evening.”

Daemon and I turned to face the Detective. A small grin played on her lips. “I want to once again stress that

there is a high probability that you have a psychotic man watching your every move. As a result, I ask that you please do me a favor and try to keep all bedroom activities contained to the upstairs. You gave my patrolman quite the show last night. Now my men are arguing over who gets to watch the garage for the next week.”

My jaw dropped and Detective Troy winked at me before chuckling.

Well...Crap. That's embarrassing.

Chapter Eleven

As soon as we arrived home, David told us he was tired and walked back to his room to go to bed. I remembered Daemon's *game* he wanted to play and I quickly made a beeline for our room. He caught up to me in the hallway, grabbing and pulling me against his chest. His head lowered as he whispered in my ear, tickling me with his lips. "Where are you going, beautiful?"

"The bathroom and then I was going to jump in a bath...alone...and without assistance." I was determined to keep my reactions neutral so as not to reveal how Daemon affected me.

“Tsk, tsk, Damsel. You wouldn’t be attempting to avoid our game tonight would you?”

My shoulders sagged with my sigh.
Damn.

“Nope. Not at all. I guess you’re *invited* to join me in the bathroom, Daemon.” My teeth ground together as I attempted to hide my dismay that he was actually holding me to the challenge. It pissed me off that he felt I had such little control of myself. Okay...I’ll admit to the anger part...but not fear and definitely not my ability to resist him. I had to try and be mad at him. If I could convince myself that I was pissed, which I was a little, than I would win this

game. I had to remember that he was playing me and I had to stay angry about it. Quickly deciding my course of action, I started my campaign.

*Daemon's an arrogant ass.
Daemon is a jerk. I hate Daemon right
now.*

“Don’t sound so thrilled.” His voice was filled with humor as his hand found the small of my back. He led me down the hallway and directly to his bathroom, stopping once to turn off the electric lights and turn on the fire wall sconces.

Daemon's a bastard.

Once we were in the bathroom, he

closed the door behind us before opening the cabinets of the towel closet. He turned to smile quickly at me as he pulled out candles and a book of matches. He moved to the bathtub and placed candles along the outer rim. He left the candles unlit as his hand reached to turn on the water. Steam began to rise from the tub. Daemon retrieved some bath oil and promptly dropped some into the hot water. The smell of the sandalwood filled my nose. Of course he would choose sandalwood; it was my favorite.

Daemon's a prick.

He finally lit the candles before walking over to flick off the bathroom

lights. His voice purred as when he next spoke. “Take off your clothes, Damsel...nice and slow.”

Committed to winning this game, I did as he requested. I pulled my shirt over my head and reached behind myself to remove my bra.

“Stop there.” He moved to stand in front of me. “On second thought, I’ll remove your clothes for you, if you don’t mind. It’s like unwrapping a gift on Christmas morning. You have no idea how much I adore your body, Paige. You are my perfect woman.” His voice drove itself through me, igniting every nerve ending under my skin.

Daemon is an insufferable, miserable asshat who smells funny and is horrible in bed.

His fingers tickled along the edges of my bra as he reached around to undo the clasp. Once the material was freed, his hands tickled up the sides of my upper torso. He slipped his fingers underneath the straps and slowly pulled the material from my body. His warm mouth made contact with my skin as he placed light kisses on both shoulders, where the straps had previously been. My knees threatened to give underneath me, but I pulled it together in refusal of losing this game.

Daemon is a...

He started licking softly up my neck, taking my earlobe between his teeth as his hands found my breasts.

...crap. Daemon is awesome. I love Daemon.

More.

Please.

Don't stop.

Apparently my mind was becoming as mutinous as my body. Okay...deep breath...pulling myself together now.

His hands reached down to unbutton my jeans. He moved down my body to pull and tug the pants off my body, lifting each foot to free me from

my clothing. When he slowly removed my panties, I tried to keep my mind trained on mundane thoughts; bills, what I wanted to eat for breakfast the next day, what kind of torture Daemon had planned for me next at the gym. I had to keep myself from thinking about what he was doing to me in order to control my reactions to him. His tongue suddenly flicked across that special bundle of nerves and I lost my resolve, only to quickly regain it. I would win this challenge. I took a deep breath and pulled my shoulders back. This was mind over matter and I was determined to prove myself to Daemon.

He stood up and locked his eyes with mine as he removed his clothing.

My eyes fought to watch his hands as he slowly and deftly undid each button on his shirt. I knew he was holding my gaze to check and see if I would watch him as he undressed. I wouldn't allow my eyes to leave his. My tongue flicked out to lick my lips and I bit down on it to keep that from happening again.

“So far, you are doing very well, Paige. I'm impressed.” He was amused. I could tell by the small smile lines around his eyes. Once he was naked, he turned to climb into the water, reaching out for me to join him after he was situated. I stepped into the bath and sunk down, settling myself between his legs. His large hands came up to massage my neck and shoulders.

“Tell me something, Daemon. Why are you taking so much joy in this challenge? Do you like to torture me?” My question was both honest and sarcastic.

His body softly rumbled from laughter. “Oh, my beautiful damsel, you have no idea how seductive it is to watch you try so hard to control yourself around me. Kind of like when I first saw you at Tomb. Your mouth said you despised me, while your body screamed for me to touch you. It really was quite entertaining.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “Whatever, Daemon. I hated you the first night I saw you at Tomb.”

“Is that so? Fine, than let’s say it’s like the *second* night I saw you at Tomb. It’s hard to believe you despised me as you were moaning into my mouth while I kissed you in the alley.”

I thought about his statement. “You’ve got me there.”

His hands moved up and around the side of my body to take the tips of my breasts between his fingers. He pinched each one causing a shooting sensation to travel down that nerve connected to my core. My hips bucked in reaction and I quickly steadied myself, intent on hiding my reaction. Daemon’s mouth came down to my ear, his warm breath rolling over my skin as he spoke.

“I saw that.” His body softly shook from his amusement.

I squared my shoulders. “A momentary lapse. It won’t happen again.”

His hands released my breasts and slid down the skin of my abdomen. He wore a path down my hips and over my thighs, eventually working his way between my legs. His fingers massaged over the skin of my legs. It felt incredible, yet painful at the same time. “Your thighs feel tight, Paige. You sure you’ll be up to what I have planned for tomorrow?”

“Does it involve David and the

1980s?”

“No,” he said through a laugh.

“Then yes.” I shrugged. “Whatever it is, I’m sure I can handle it.”

His hands found their way to the apex of my thighs. His thumb moved over to massage the one sweet spot as his fingers explored further south. When he dipped one finger inside of me, I bit down on the inside of my lip to keep from moving against him. Holy shit, this really was torture, exquisite torture. My heart started to speed up and my breathing became erratic as his fingers moved in rhythms on me and inside me. His head angled down so he could watch

my facial reactions and I could feel his breath on my skin. My lips ache to find his, but I restrained myself, my nails digging into the palms of my hands.

“So fucking sexy, Paige. I’m almost jealous of my hand for getting to be inside you first.” His voice dropped an octave lower as he cooed, “I’ll have to remedy that soon.”

My body shuddered in reaction to his words. I held my breath to try and steady myself. His hands continue to work itself over me and inside me. The lack of oxygen mixed with the heat of the water help speed me to a point of euphoria. My core trembled and quaked over his finger causing him to insert one

more. I bit on my lower lip, careful to keep it from being clearly visible on my face. This was impossible. There was no way I was going to be able to keep from exploding at any second.

“Let go, Paige. I’ll give you this one baby. Let me see you let go.”

A cry rose through my body, escaping my lips as my head fell back against his shoulder. My entire body spasmed and tingled as a wave of release powered through me. I once again felt freed from my physical body, floating upward on a cloud of ecstasy and bliss. I took in deep gulps of air as my core squeezed around Daemon’s fingers, contracting over and over as he

continued moving in and out. Slowly I came down only to be met with a rushing sound in my head, the blood pumping hard and fast.

Daemon suddenly jerked his hand away, sat me up and spun me around. His jaw ticked and his nostrils flared. He looked dangerous and so fucking desirable at the same time. “I can’t do this, babe. I’ve got to have you right now. I have to have all of you, mind and body, so I’m taking you, Paige, and I want you to show me exactly how I make you feel when I do that, okay?”

He was giving in? Holy shit! I inwardly high fived myself before responding. “So, you’re conceding?”

Daemon chuckled. “Couldn’t let that go, could you? Yes, Paige, I’m conceding. In fact, I’m fucking surrendering...to you.” With that he lifted my hips up only to pull me down while pushing himself inside me. “Fuck! You are like a fucking drug, Paige.” He opened his eyes and stared intently into mine. “You are the only thing in this world that can make me lose my mind. Your sharp tongue, the way you fight against me, it just makes me want to shut you up by shoving myself inside you.” He moved my hips against him roughly, driving himself deeper each time. I brought my mouth down to his, my teeth biting softly along his soft bottom lip. He drove his tongue into my

mouth, working his way along mine. I quickly climbed to another peak and cried out as Daemon found his own release. My body collapsed on top of his and I was lulled into a euphoric state by the rhythmic movement of his chest. We laid there for who knows how long.

I must have started to fall asleep because the last thing I remember was Daemon lifting me from the water, drying me off and slipping me into his bed. I was lost on a wave of hormones and exhaustion, overtaken by slumber as soon as my head hit the pillow.

~

~~**Daemon**~~

“It’s getting pretty crowded in here tonight. Do you think we have enough security?” Logan stood with me off to the left side of the bar as we took in the crowd that had formed within Tomb. Every night it was the same thing; men seeking women, women seeking men. Most of the women who frequented this place were half dressed and drunk within an hour of being here. The men weren’t much better, but they managed to keep their clothes on at least.

“Yeah, we should be fine. I have the normal guys working tonight, but added Jeremy and Mitch. I don’t think we’ll have a problem.”

Logan eyed me before hesitantly responding. “Okay, Daemon, but Mind Crime is known for drawing in a rough crowd. We could end up having some issues in the pit once they get on stage.”

“Yeah. I feel ya. I’ll watch over the pit personally tonight. Last thing I need is another fight breaking out. Mitch was out for two weeks after the last one.”

I waved to Logan as I moved through the crowd to take my normal position on the back speaker of the pit. Logan was always one to worry, the favorite bartender of most customers, the guy really did care about the

welfare and safety of our guests. He'd been working for me for several years now and I was considering boosting him up to management. Truth was, the only thing that man had to worry about was slinging beer, but he was always the first to watch out for any other issues that could occur at the club.

Climbing over the perimeter railing, I jumped down on top of the speaker at the back of the pit. A few other club goers had already taken up residence on the speakers before me, but I didn't mind. I sat myself down, hanging my feet over the front edge. Mind Crime would be coming on within the next 15 minutes and I knew the pit would get crazy once they were on

stage. My view from the speaker was sufficient so that I could watch over everything that was happening down below. My eyes scanned over the hundred or so people that had started gathering toward the front of the stage, men in primarily black clothes and women in dresses so short and tight, it was like an advertisement for a free ride.

I was growing somewhat impatient and bored when my eyes locked on the longest pair of legs I think I have ever seen. Even better was the knee-high shit kickers that wrapped themselves around what I imagined to be a decent set of stems. My eyes traveled up to discover a plain black tank top and...

fuck...a face that immediately had my pants tightening in response. A beautiful blond came down the stairs into the pit, taking two steps at a time as she made her way down. I looked around at the rough and rowdy crowd that occupied the pit and I wondered if this chick was lost or looking for her boyfriend. She was tiny, I mean, tall, but tiny. Long and lean and dressed for comfort rather than for attention. I couldn't peel my eyes from her. What the hell was she doing down here by herself? Guess, it didn't really matter, I planned on making sure she didn't leave here by herself.

I hadn't taken home a girl in over a month. It was always the same thing.

Emotionless sex that led to the awkward moment where I told them they needed to get home and 'no' I won't be calling. Most of the time, the women around here didn't mind the quick night, but there were some that thought a one night stand could turn into something more. I haven't been interested in dealing with it lately, but shit...in walks this chick and suddenly I need a book to hold in front of me.

She looked at the speakers for a second before making her way towards me. I looked away, attempting to appear as if I wasn't mentally undressing her in my head. When I looked back down, I noticed she had taken up a spot directly in front of me,

just far enough away so as not to get kicked in the temple. I chuckled. Smart girl.

I kept scanning over the crowd, noticing it was becoming a hell of a lot rougher as it got closer to start time. My eyes kept glancing down to check on blondie. She looked pretty content standing by her lonesome, knocking back the cold one in her hand. Just as the band started coming on stage I saw a large son of a bitch take a short cut over the top railing, jumping down into the pit. The asshole almost landed on top of her and I wanted to grab her and pull her up with me where it was safe. I was growing nervous as shit as I watched the crowd swell, pushing out

into the back portion of the pit. Blondie took a few steps back to separate herself from the crowd, looking over her shoulder once to make sure she wasn't in direct line of any swinging feet.

“Hey everybody, how are you all doing tonight?!” Mind Crime’s singer spoke into the mic, his voice was grating to me, but everybody else seemed to enjoy it. He took a minute allowing the crowd to quiet down before shoving his face back in front of the mic to say, “For those of you who love us, we’re glad you are here tonight. For those of you who don’t know us, we’re Mind Crime and I hope you like what you’re about to hear.”

The guitars started in and I noticed that the ever growing crowd in the pit was starting to move against each other. As the singer came in to add the unintelligible words, those idiots were slamming in to each other, forcing strays out at the sidelines, only to envelope them back within the mass as it shifted in beat with the music. I looked down at blondie and noticed that her head was moving back and forth, taking in the ever roughening crowd as it surged forward, then back again. When bodies started slamming against her, she shoved back, not doing much damage in the process, but certainly keeping herself from being dragged into the middle of that mess.

The tempo of the song increased, causing the movement of the crowd to accelerate further. I watched as she pushed out with her arms and it appeared as if she was starting to panic. I looked at the crowd around her and noticed there was no way she was able to get around the mess that was quickly forming. When her actions became frantic as she dodged a few elbows and knees, I'd had enough.

She was being forced back against the speaker and I took the opportunity to reach down and wrap my arms around her waist. I immediately pulled her up, depositing her on the speaker, before shoving my arm in front of her to keep her from falling forward. She

steadied herself and then turned her head to look at me from over her shoulder. Her eyes widened when she looked at me, and I sat there stunned as her eyes slowly traversed my body. It was obvious this girl was beautiful when looking at her from a distance, but close up? Fuck, this girl was a knock out. My pants tightened again and I made up my mind that her head would be gracing my pillow this evening. Shit. I might actually call her the next day.

She kept looking at me, but didn't say anything. I couldn't take the silence any longer, so I leaned forward to start the conversation. As I moved closer in to her, the scent of her

perfume hit me. It was a musk scent, possibly sandalwood. Fuck. She was different, alright. Most girls like to smell like flowers, fruit or food. But not this one. I was definitely intrigued.

“Sorry to manhandle you without permission, but you looked like you could use some help down there.” A blush spread over her cheeks as I spoke to her and I decided to employ my full smile to reel this one in.

Her eyes looked over me one more time before she said, “Uh, yeah, thanks for that. It normally doesn’t get that bad down there and I wasn’t expecting to get trapped.” I smiled brighter, satisfied that I engaged her in

conversation. I should have her number by the end of the show. When she turned back, leaving me with a view of the back of her head, my smile faltered.

What the fuck?!

I needed to get this girl talking if I wanted to make sure I'd be buried deep inside within the next couple of hours. I leaned forward to speak in her ear, my lips brushing over the outer rim. "No problem, beautiful, I'm always happy to assist a fair damsel in her time of distress."

Her head shot back around. Bingo. I had my eyes trained on her

pouty, full lips as she said, "Please don't say that."

My confusion must have been apparent. Why was this girl not plastered to me already? I couldn't keep other women's hands off me on the nights I bounced, but this one didn't seem to want anything to do with me. "What?"

Her eyes narrowed and a look of annoyance played over her features. "Don't call me a damsel in distress. It's degrading and I don't appreciate being classified by use of a demeaning stereotype." After saying that, she once again turned back to look at the stage.

Well...damn. I was just put in my place. I have no idea why I suddenly felt an almost overwhelming desire to throw her ass down and teach her that I would call her anything I damn well pleased. The only words coming from her lips then would be my name as she was naked and writhing underneath me. I was at a loss as to whether I should keep trying to talk to her. It was apparent she wasn't interested, only increasing my interest in her. I noticed that her long hair flowed gracefully down her back, the ends damn near brushing up against her hips. She appeared thoroughly engrossed in the music as I sat back feeling defeated. I decided to leave it alone, but I couldn't

stop paying attention to her. My hands itched to reach up into that thick mane of hers, gripping it and pulling her face to mine. I suddenly felt like a fucking caveman and I made an effort to shake myself from this obsession I was developing for her.

The band eventually finished their set, and I realized I'd memorized every small detail of her back, her hair, those hips that moved in beat with the music. I had to separate myself from her...fast. I jumped down, happy to escape what I knew would end up becoming a headache later on. The last thing I needed was a relationship and this girl was obviously not the best choice for a cheap thrill.

I should have walked away as soon as my feet met the floor, but I couldn't help but look back up at her. Her butt was scooted all the way to the edge of the speaker, but she appeared hesitant to jump down. Her head swung left and right, most likely looking for a means to climb. I smiled up at her when I realized the little spit-fire was stuck.

She noticed me staring up at her, her face instantly contorting into a scowl. I don't know why, but she was even more appealing when she was mad. I reached up to assist, deciding to stir the pot a little more. Just because I most likely wouldn't be taking her home, it didn't mean I couldn't have

some fun pissing her off. “From where I’m standing, ‘damsel in distress’ might be an adequate category for you. This is the second time I’ve had to come to your rescue in the last hour.”

That did it. Her face took on a deep shade of pink as her blue eyes glared down at me. It was amusing, to say the least. She reached out and I thought she was going to accept my help, but when she slapped my hand away, I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“No thanks on that rescue attempt. I can get down perfectly fine by myself. Just step back so I don’t land on top of you.”

I laughed again at the mental imagery that statement created in my head. I wouldn't mind if this girl landed on me or under me, just as long as she was touching me. "Oh, the threat of you on top of me is supposed to make me move? Because I can promise you, Damsel, I'm not feeling real motivated to budge even an inch."

It was obvious she hated the term 'Damsel' just making me want to use it more and more. I had no idea why aggravating this chick was so amusing, but I couldn't stop.

"I'll tell you this one more time, Do. Not. Call. Me. Damsel."

I bit my tongue to keep from calling her that again. Stepping back I held my hands out to my sides signaling my resignation. It was going to be fun watching her find her way down. She turned her body, I guess having decided to lower herself down the side. When she dropped over, the bottom hem of her shirt crept up, revealing two small indentations on her lower back. She appeared stuck and I couldn't peel my eyes off the heart shaped ass swinging directly in front of my face.

Fuck. I wanted to leave it alone, but I couldn't resist egging her on. "This is a delightful view. I almost wish I had a camera. Are you sure I can't help?"

Her head turned to shoot me a nasty glare over her shoulder, before she released the speaker and dropped the last foot to the ground. My eyes were glued to that perfect ass, but I forced myself to look up, not wanting to appear as crude as I was. Her hair had fallen over her right shoulder while she was climbing down and I noticed a tattoo on the back of her left.

Holy...fuck.

There is no fucking way.

I recognized the tattoo. It was a dragonfly necklace identical to the one given to me so many years before. I wore that fucking necklace for years,

desperate to return to a friend who did nothing but show me what it meant to be loved. It was a necklace that represented a dream, a fantasy that I feared would never be realized.

There had to be some other explanation. She couldn't be who I thought she was.

Without even thinking about it, I grabbed her shoulders and spun her around to face me. The minute those eyes met mine, a jolt of recognition shot through me. I remembered those eyes.

“What is your name?!”

When she didn't respond I shook

her, trying to speed her along in her response. She just stared at me.

“Your name. What is it?”

She jerked her shoulders out of my grasp and stepped back, still continuing to glare in my direction. “Now why the hell would I want to tell YOU my name?! Thanks for the earlier assistance but you can forget that you know me now.”

She attempted to walk away, but I couldn't let her leave without finding out who she was. “That's fine if you don't want to tell me your name. I'll take your refusal as a clear indication that you wish for me to continue calling

you Damsel.”

She spun back around. Somehow I knew she couldn't resist yelling at me for the use of my new favorite name for her. “If you really think I'm dumb enough to fall for that crappy manipulation tactic, then I should be upfront and honest with you now. You are clearly confused about the type of woman that I am. I am not the type that needs rescuing and I am not the type that swoons over a beautiful face and a deep rumble voice...”

I smiled when it appeared my attraction was not one-sided.

“...and it is pathetic for any

person, male or female, to refuse information about themselves in order to continue some type of crappy pet name.”

I wanted to keep taunting her, but I knew she'd never give up her name if I kept pissing her off. Not knowing what else to say, I tried to entice her into just telling me who she was. “I'll make a pact with you; you tell me your name, and I'll leave you alone for the rest of the night.”

She thought about my statement before responding. “I'm not enough of an imbecile to believe that you mean that. How do I know you will stick to that agreement?”

“You don’t.”

She rolled her eyes as she finally admitted, “Paige. My name is Paige.”

She turned to walk up the stairs leading to the upper level dance floor and I remained motionless where she left me. My entire world felt like it just dropped out from under me. Paige. Holy shit. It is her. Memories of pigtails, climbing trees and days spent in the sun invaded my mind and I just stood there watching as she walked away. What the fuck was I going to do about this? I wanted to run after her to explain who I was. I didn’t know if she’d want to talk to me, or if she would even remember me. She was

only six when I last spoke to her.

I watched her as she headed over to Logan's bar. She disappeared from my sight so I climbed the opposite stairs to go stand on the other side of the club. My eyes were glued to her when, Marcy, one of my other bartenders approached me to let me know we were running low on some alcohol, asking if I would grab her a few bottles from storage. I half listened, not being able to remove my eyes from Paige. Holy shit, she'd grown up to be beautiful. My mom had been right about that one. Paige was discussing something with Logan and it became clear that he must know something about her. As soon as I got

the chance, I would make sure to ask him. Their heads both turned in my direction briefly before turning back to look at each other. Logan looked irritated. What the hell was she saying to him?

After a little while, she walked away from the bar and took a seat at one of the tables. She just sat there, drinking water while watching the crowd. I needed to get closer. I wanted to walk up to her to tell her who I was, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Truth is, after the way I treated her as a kid, I feared she would want nothing to do with me, but I couldn't stay away from her, even if it meant I only had a few more minutes to look her over.

I quickly crossed through the pit and took a position near the area where she was sitting. My eyes scanned the crowd, but kept finding their way back to her. I caught her eye briefly, when three women were suddenly in front of me, laughing and giggling while taking the liberty of running their hands all over me. Annoyed, I looked down to tell the women to take a fucking hike. I tried to play nice at first, but they weren't taking the hint that I wasn't interested. I couldn't exactly shove them away, and it appeared they didn't care much that I should have been working instead of standing around talking to them. When I gave up trying to convince them nicely to leave, I

looked up to find that Paige had left the table. I quickly searched out over the crowd and found her seating herself at the bar on the opposite side of the club.

Paige kept looking over in my direction, apparently disgusted by something she saw. Maybe she did know who I was. I tried smiling at her when I caught her eye, but she just scowled and turned to face the bar. The women in front of me began dancing, but I wasn't really paying attention. Eventually the red head slid her hand up my chest and forced a piece of paper into my hand. I took it and excused myself. Maybe Paige had told Logan she recognized me. Paige looked over as I walked towards Logan,

so I winked, only to be met by another deep scowl. Man, she really fucking hated me.

Logan looked up from the drink he was pouring as I approached. I leaned across the bar and tilted my head in Paige's direction. "What's her story?"

Logan's eyebrow arched and he looked annoyed to be asked about her. "No offense, Daemon, but leave that one alone. She's an awesome girl and she doesn't need to be made into another easy fuck for you. Not to mention, she has a boyfriend. You might as well give up and move along to someone else for tonight."

I glanced back in her direction. A boyfriend. She had a fucking boyfriend. Never before had I hated someone who I'd never met, much less seen. Lucky sonofabitch.

I turned back to Logan. "Did she say something about me? Why are you being so fucking defensive?"

Logan squared his shoulders, obviously pissed that I was asking about her. "Yeah, she said something. She told me you were a chauvinistic prick that couldn't keep his hands to himself. What the fuck, Daemon?! I mean, we know you are a ladies man and all, but I've never heard about you being so disrespectful towards a

woman.”

My jaw clenched while Logan basically accused me of molesting her. I shook it off, realizing this is the reason I trust the guy. He says what he thinks and I know I can believe what he tells me. “I didn’t do anything wrong. She was about to get crushed by the crowd in the pit so I pulled her out of the way. Other than that, I didn’t touch her.”

Logan backed down. “Listen, just leave her alone, will ya? She’s not your type.”

That caught my interest. “What type would that be?”

“The type that will follow you home for the night and leave quietly the next morning. Paige is a good person, Daemon, just let it go.”

Let it go. I wanted to fucking lay him out right where he stood, but I had to remind myself he was just trying to protect her. “Listen man, I think I might know her from somewhere. I’m not trying to get in her pants.” Okay, I was at first, but now that I knew who she was, my intentions had changed... maybe. “Just tell me what you know about her.”

Logan huffed out a breath. “All I know about her is that she works for some private investigation company in

town. She comes in here once or twice a week, but she's only interested in the music. Sometimes she comes alone and sometimes she has her friends or her boyfriend with her."

"What's the story with her boyfriend?"

"Couldn't tell you, man. He's a big sonofabitch, I'll tell you that."

Well....good. At least she had someone around that could take care of her. I laughed a little at the fact that she'd become an investigator. I remembered her being nosy as shit when she was little, it didn't surprise me that she carried that into her adult

life. My heart fucking dropped though. It would be pointless for me to approach her after what Logan told me. The fact that she had a boyfriend was one thing, but she thought I was trying to cop a feel. Not good. I didn't want to let her go, but I couldn't think of any good reason why I should approach her again. It was obvious she'd made a life for herself and I wasn't about to interject myself into it, only to screw everything up that she had going.

I looked over to see that Logan had moved to take some drink orders and left me standing alone by the bar. My eyes found their way back to Paige and I noticed someone approaching her

from behind. Must be the boyfriend. He put his arms around her and she turned around to face him. Standing up suddenly, she was saying something to him. He leaned in and I closed my eyes so as not to have to watch him kiss those perfect fucking lips of hers. I opened my eyes again to find that she appeared to be struggling against him. When she started screaming at him, I quickly realized she was in need of help.

I ran over immediately. Nobody was going to fuck with that girl while I was around.

Chapter Twelve

~~Paige~~

“So tell me again why I should bring a bathing suit with me.” I called out to Daemon as he walked to the bathroom to grab a shower. I was still lying in bed, not really looking forward to moving after what Daemon put me through the day before. My muscles ached and I wasn’t sure I would be able to remain upright if I attempted to stand or walk.

Daemon’s head poked out of the doorway. “That’s for me to know, Damsel, but you will be spending some time in the water today, although I’d suggest against a bikini.”

I thought about his suggestion. What the hell did he have planned that would require more than a bikini? I groaned. Whatever it was, I'm sure it wouldn't be good. "I don't own anything but bikinis. Plus, I don't think I brought any bathing suits with me to your place. We may need to stop by the apartment."

Daemon didn't respond. When I heard the water turn on, I laid my head back down on the pillow. I woke up again to Daemon nibbling my ear. Water from his hair dripped down on my face and the smell of his soap overtook me. "Hey beautiful, you need to wake up. We're going to be late." I looked up to notice that Daemon was dressed in a t-

shirt and shorts.

I couldn't help the yawn that escaped me before asking, "Are we going to the beach or something?"

He laughed. "Yeah, something like that." Pulling the covers from me, he lifted me up, carried me over to the closet and placed me on my feet. "Now, get in there and get dressed. Don't forget your bathing suit."

I was amazed to find that I was able to stand on my legs without collapsing. Although they were tight, it actually felt good to stretch them out. "Little problem there, Daemon. I don't have a bathing suit here. I never thought to grab

one.”

Daemon waved off the issue. “Not a problem, we’ll stop by a store on the way. Get dressed. I’ll go make coffee.”

He left the room and I quickly put on some shorts and a tank top. I slipped my feet into a pair of flip flops, then headed into the bathroom to pee, wash my face and brush my teeth.

I walked out into the living room to find David waiting patiently on the couch. A bag sat next to him with a rolled up towel and what appeared to be folded up cardboard sticking up out of the top. David was wearing a plain white t-shirt and some board shorts.

“You’re coming today as well?”

He smiled. “Hell yeah, I’m coming! I wouldn’t miss this for the world.” He clapped his hands excitedly. “Today is going to be fun. You’ll see.”

What the hell?!

I walked into the kitchen and stood next to Daemon. We were watching the brewing coffee when I asked, “So why does David get to know where we’re going and I don’t?”

Daemon put his arm around my waist and pulled me into his side. “Because, I have a thing for surprising you, Paige. It’s one of the small joys I

take in life.” He looked down at me and winked. I just smiled and shook my head. I’d finally learned that there was no use arguing with Daemon when he was keeping information from me. I’d have better luck convincing the President to give me classified government documents.

We sat in the living room for a bit to drink our coffee, but then we were quickly packed in the truck headed towards my surprise destination. We drove for about twenty minutes before Daemon pulled down a small dirt road that led to a hidden parking lot. A lake came into view to my right. I noticed several cars with empty boat trailers parked throughout the lot and my

curiosity peaked when I saw where Daemon was taking me.

Daemon parked the truck and came around to open my door. He grabbed my bag from me, leading me toward the launch dock. It was a good distance to the dock so, while I was able to see the boat, I couldn't quite make out the person standing in it who was presently waving in our direction. Daemon waved back as we approached. I was really surprised but excited as hell to recognize that it was Logan as we got closer.

Letting go of Daemon, I ran the last fifty feet to the boat. I jumped in and threw myself into Logan's famous bear hug. "Paige! Good to see you, babe!

How the hell have you been?" We let go of each other and he smiled brightly at me. "Daemon tells me he's been toughening you up?" Logan took two play swings at me.

"Yeah, I guess. Although, I'm a little confused as to why we're here."

Logan laughed and held out his hands to indicate the boat and lake. "To have fun, of course. Can't be all work and no play, babe. That's not how a person should live, you know?"

Daemon and David climbed in the boat as Logan and I talked. Daemon came up to stand behind me. He reached over my shoulder to bump fists with

Logan. “We all set, man?”

Logan gave two thumbs up. “Yep! Got us some drinks and food in the cooler and the skis and vests are stowed away in their cubbies. Let’s do this!”

“Skis?!” I looked up at Daemon. “What does Logan mean by ‘skis’? I don’t know how to ski, Daemon.”

He smiled mischievously at me. “Well, you will after today, Damsel. Everybody’s got to learn some time. Plus, it will help build up your legs. You need the added strength to get your speed up in the ring. What better way than on the water?” He laughed again and winked.

Fuck. This was not going to be good. I'm a klutz on my own feet. I had no idea how I was going to navigate on TOP of water with only two pieces of wood strapped to me. I turned to look for David. He'd already made a place for himself at the bow of the boat, a broad smile covering his face. I bet the asshole probably knew *exactly* what Daemon was planning today and let me walk right into it anyways.

I looked out over the water. The lake itself was massive, but there were many weeded areas dotting the shores. "I don't know about this Daemon, what about gators and snakes and shit? I'm not sure I want to be in the water. This is Florida, you know there's some nasty

reptile out there waiting to bite me....or eat me.” My eyes continued scanning over the areas where I knew nasty surprises were hiding.

“Fuck, Paige! When did you turn into such a girl? Where’s your sense of adventure?!” His lips came down to kiss me on top of my head. “You’ll be fine, Damsel. I promise, if you get into any trouble, I’ll jump in and save you. Nothing is going to harm you while I’m around.”

I rolled my eyes. Apparently, arrogant Daemon had returned.

“No doubt, Paige. We’ll be way out in the center of the lake. You won’t

find too many creepy crawlies out there, especially not with all the boats speeding around. No worries, babe!” Logan shot me a friendly smile and went to work preparing the boat.

Daemon’s hand came down on my shoulder as he directed me to a seat. “Time to go, beautiful. You may want to stay seated as Logan gets us out to where we’re headed.” He winked at me again and moved up to sit opposite David on the bow. Logan untied the boat and pushed us out from the dock. He jumped in the driver’s seat next to me, threw on a straw cowboy hat, and turned on the boat. “Hang on Paige! Let me show you what my baby can do out there!” His hand came down on a lever to the side

and the boat lurched forward. Once we'd reached out far enough, Logan slammed the lever forward, causing the boat's front end to lift and spray a wake out from behind us. The wind whipped past us and I closed my eyes. The feeling was similar to riding my bike. You couldn't hear a damn thing over the rushing wind and engine of the boat as the world rushed past us. Every once in a while the boat would travel over the wake of another boat, bouncing us so high that I grabbed onto my seat desperately trying not to get knocked out into the water.

Logan appeared familiar with the lake as he drove us out to his intended spot. With the sun beating down on my

face and the wind rushing across my skin, I couldn't help but smile. A feeling of freedom spread through me, making it sadly apparent that I'd been cooped up for far too long. We drove for another ten minutes before Logan pulled up on the lever and the boat slowly came to a stop in the water. "Here we are! This is my favorite spot. We're out far enough that we have a good distance for skiing, but not many boats around to compete with us."

Daemon stood up and walked over to me. "You're up babe." He pulled me into a standing position and then reached down to pull up my seat cushion. He retrieved a ski vest out of the seat cubby and handed it to me. "You're going to

want to wear this. It'll keep you from drowning in case something happens."

Drowning? Oh, I wasn't liking this.

"Listen, Daemon. Maybe this isn't such a good idea. I mean, I have no idea what I'm supposed to do out there."

"It's not difficult, Paige. Just put on your vest and jump in the water. I'll toss your skis down to you after you jump in."

"Seriously, Paige! Just do what the man says. I'm getting sea sick as we sit here. We need to get moving." David shouted at me from his spot at the bow.

Feeling outnumbered, I took off my shorts and top before sliding my arms through the sleeves of the vest. After buckling the six snaps up the front I turned to walk towards the back of the boat. “So what, do I just jump in?”

Daemon’s face was filled with amusement. *How nice.* “You can jump over the side, or there’s a ladder on the back. Your choice.”

I decided to take the ladder. As I stepped down into the water, I imagined what could be waiting for me within the murky blue depths. “Logan, are you sure there’s no gators out this far?”

“You’re all good, Paige. Just be

sure to jump out as far as you can. You don't want to come down on top of the propeller."

Well....fuck.

I let go of the ladder and used my feet to jump out away from the boat. I landed, but didn't go completely under due to the vest. A little bit of lake water got into my mouth which was fucking gross. "Okay," I screamed. "Now what?" Daemon jumped over the side of the boat and swam to me.

"Logan! Throw me the skis and the rope!"

Within seconds, Logan had launched two twin missiles in our

direction, following that with an apparent lasso. Daemon reached out and grab the skis before they could collide with my face, however I still was clunked on the head pretty hard by the rope handle.

Logan shouted out to me from the rear of the boat. “You were supposed to catch that, Paige!”

Daemon laughed. “Alright, Damsel, lean back and lift your feet out from underneath the water. I’m going to fit the boots of the skis to your feet. We need to make sure they are tight, or you’ll just be pulled out of them by the boat.

I leaned back as instructed while Daemon fit the skis to my feet. When he was done, he grabbed the rope and placed it so that it was running between the skis before placing the handle in my hands. “You are ready to go. All you need to do, Paige, is stay just like this until the rope gets tight. Once that happens, Logan will increase the speed of the boat to pull you up and out of the water. The skis I have you in now are tied together to help you get a feel for it, Paige, but I’m going to cut those ties after you’ve tried it a few times.”

I was terrified. Images of being dragged along the top of the water danced in my head. What if I lost control and landed in a bed of weeds?

What if there really was an alligator about to bite my ass as we speak? What if I hit the water wrong and broke my neck? There were so many possible ways for me to die that I was convinced that this was a seriously bad idea. “Why are you trying to kill me, Daemon? I mean, really, what have I ever done to you?”

My eyes pleaded with him, but then narrowed at his laughter.

“Paige, I don’t understand. You have no problem driving a motorcycle and no problem chasing a psychopath through the wilderness, yet the idea of water skiing frightens you? It doesn’t make sense.”

“First off, when I’m on my bike, I’m in control; not some beach bum with a penchant for speed. Secondly, there are no incidents out there of an alligator attacking someone while they are on a bike. That only happens in or near the *water*. Third, I grew up in the woods so I wasn’t worried about getting cornered by Chris when I went out there.” I was getting frustrated. “Just...whatever. Swim back to the boat so we can get my execution over with.”

Daemon laughed again, kissed me quickly on the lips, and then complied with my request.

He climbed back in the boat and took a seat in the back to watch me.

David suddenly joined him, smiling like an idiot. He waved one time before I heard the engine start. *Traitor!*

The rope began tightening as Logan slowly drove the boat forward. When I started getting pulled through the water, the boat sped up. I started feeling myself being pulled forward, however I wasn't sure what to do with my legs. Logan increased speed again and I was pulled forward only to go tumbling feet over head. For whatever reason, I still had the rope in my hands and lake water was being shoved up my nose and into my mouth. I quickly let go of the rope and spit out as much as I could. Logan circled back around as Daemon fished the skis out of the water. They

positioned themselves back in front of me. Daemon slid the skis in my direction as Logan pulled the rope into the boat.

Daemon's hands came up to frame his mouth as he shouted to me. "Next time, try bending your knees as you're being pulled forward. Straighten your legs only after your ass is no longer in the water."

I pulled on my skis and motioned for Logan to throw the rope.

"Try to catch it with your hands this time, Paige." All three of them broke out into laughter after Logan shouted to me. I flicked them off after catching the

rope.

Once again we got in our positions and Logan started pulling ahead. The rope tightened and pulled me forward. I kept my knees bent this time which helped to pull me out of the water. Once my ass was no longer submerged I straightened my legs.

Holy shit! I'm skiing!

Logan picked up speed once I was standing upright. I held tight to the rope as I bounced over little bumps in the water. This wasn't so bad. I mentally kicked myself for having been scared and closed my eyes, enjoying the wind against my face. Apparently, closing my

eyes was a bad idea. Just as I started to relax into what I was doing, the boat took a sharp turn and I was launched over the wake. My mouth opened to scream as I flew over the water, careening out of control. The rope was jerked out of my hands when I'd swung out parallel to the boat. I tumbled ass over head into the water, which at that speed felt about as hard as cement. I went under for a second before the buoyancy of my vest shuttled me back up. When I was topside again, I laid perfectly still on top of the water, my eyes taking in the open skies above me.

I heard the boat come back around, laughter erupting from its occupants. *Assholes!*

“Hey, Paige, you might want to keep your eyes open next time.” David’s voice was filled with humor as he shouted out to me.

I finally brought my legs down and bobbed on top of the water. They drove out for a moment to collect my skis, before returning to a position in front of me. Launching the skis out to me again, Daemon yelled, “Let’s do it again, Paige. You were doing an excellent job before you decided to stop paying attention.” His body shook with mirth as he mocked me.

“I’m done, Daemon. I think I hurt myself falling.” I hadn’t really hurt myself, but he didn’t know that. “Yep,

definitely think I broke something!”

Logan tossed the rope out in my direction as Daemon smiled fondly at me. “Damsel, you know me better than that. I’m not about to let you fall without forcing you to get up again. Now, brush it off and strap yourself into those skis.”

We went through the process another ten or fifteen times before Daemon decided it was time to cut the ropes between my skis. He slid them to me one at a time as he called out. “Paige, now that the skis are cut, you’re going to want to make sure you hold your legs together. The skis will want to push out. It’ll be your job to keep them together.”

Great. Well, at least I knew I was flexible.

~

My legs felt like rubber by the time I was finally allowed to climb back in the boat. The three men had an excellent time torturing me for hours on end just for their own entertainment. Collapsing into a seat, I curled in a ball and regretted ever having agreed to that. Sure, it was fun when you were standing up, but the minute your face was introduced to the rock hard water, the fun times ended.

Daemon knelt beside me, removed my arms from my chest before going to

work unfastening my vest. “You looked great out there, Paige. You should have it perfected in a few more trips.”

Even though my eyes were closed, they managed to roll at his statement. “You’re going to put me through this again? Why do you hate me so much, Daemon?”

He snickered as he moved my face up to look at me. “I’m doing this because I love you, Damsel. This was a fun way for me to help you work on your leg strength. It was either this or using the weight benches with Joe and friends looking on. Which would you have preferred had you been given the choice?”

I bounced the two choices around in my mind, but finally decided that this was more fun than working out in a smoky gym surrounded by critics. “Fine. Just let me sit here for second while I nurse my newly torn ligaments, okay?”

He wrapped a towel over me. “So dramatic. You’re fine, Paige. Shake it off.”

We floated out in the water for about an hour after I was allowed to stop skiing. Logan blasted his onboard radio and I laughed when David pulled out a sun reflector to use around his face. Daemon and Logan jumped out in the water for a while as I laid next to David

at the bow. Clouds started rolling in when we decided it was time to get back to shore. After tying the boat to the dock, Logan moved around the bow stowing away the ski gear. David and I climbed out, grabbing whatever towels and bags that needed to be taken back to the truck. We got everything put away before watching Daemon and Logan work to get the boat back on the trailer.

Before leaving, I pulled Logan aside to speak to him about Annie. “So, listen, I wanted to let you know that Annie has been transferred to my parents’ facility in the panhandle.”

Logan’s eyes widened. “Really?! She’s out of the hospital finally? Good

for her. How is she holding up?" A sad excitement was evident in his voice.

"She's good, Logan. She's not a hundred percent, but that'll take time." I paused for a second. "I talked to her about you, Logan. I mentioned that maybe you'd be willing to talk to her, you know, as friends. She's not going to be dating for a long time, but I know you care about her. She said eventually, she wouldn't mind speaking with you again, it'll just need to be when she's ready, and on her terms, you know?"

A faint smile played over his lips. "Absolutely, Paige. Whatever she needs to feel comfortable. I don't know why she's still so stuck in my head after all

this time. There was just something about her. She was easygoing, I guess, fun to be around.”

It warmed my heart to know how he felt about her and I was pleased that he immediately agreed to keeping things on a friends-only level. “That’s great, Logan. Just give it some time and I’m sure she’ll call. I just wanted to let you know what was going on, I know it upset you that she wouldn’t see you after what happened.”

His grin faltered for a second before reappearing. “I understand, Paige. She’s a tough girl, I knew she would pull through. I’m looking forward to hearing from her...when

she's ready, of course.” He smiled brightly at me as I promised to give her his number. I hugged him tightly before we all said our goodbyes.

Chapter Thirteen

My eyes peaked out from above the floor of the ring. My knees were knocking together from my shaking as my fingers gripped tightly around the rope above me.

“No...fucking...way...Daemon. There is no fucking way I’m fighting that thing. Uh...uh. Get it the fuck away from me. Now!”

It’d been two months since Daemon and I started training. Luckily, it had been quiet with no signs of Chris. I would rather have heard that the asshole had been caught, but I couldn’t complain. Although he was still free, he appeared to have given up his pursuit. I’d

attributed his absence to the police presence orchestrated by Detective Troy. Not much had changed in the past two months. David and I were still staying with Daemon, Alex and Ava were still in St. Petersburg, Annie was still at The Center, and Daemon was still attempting to kill me with his *training* exercises on a daily basis. I had to hand it to him, he had one hell of an imagination. Today's lesson was learning to control my fear. I hated today's lesson and I was refusing to cooperate.

“Come on, Paige. You can't tell me you're too scared to beat the shit out of this guy. Come out from behind the ring and show me what you're made of.”

Daemon's voice was filled with humor. I didn't find the situation as funny as he apparently did. He'd pulled out the big guns this time. I planned on murdering him in his sleep in retaliation.

“Fuck you, Daemon! Get that fucking thing out of here now before I break one of these fucking windows to escape!”

The peanut gallery burst out into laughter. I rolled my eyes but held strong to my position behind the ring.

“Oh c'mon, Paige, it's just a clown...” Daemon took a moment to contain his laughter. “...Just get out here and beat his ass!”

I peeked over the edge of the floor of the ring. The clown stared back at me. I surveyed the terror starting from the top of his creepy clown head. A curly green afro topped a painted white face. On that face was a set of overly large red lips and a red ball nose. Green circles surrounded the eyes. From the corners of his mouth, red trails dripped down the smile lines. Yes. Red trails. This was a zombie clown.

From my hiding spot, I couldn't see below the neck, but I remembered a green vertical striped jumpsuit and red shoes. Well...I couldn't be sure about the shoes as I was running scared as soon as he stepped through the front door of the gym.

“Paige, seriously! You are better than this. You’ve been holding your own against me for weeks. Fighting the clown should be no problem!” Daemon’s voiced echoed through the high ceilings of the gym. “You have to control your fear, Damsel, or you will never be able to survive a fight with someone like Chris.”

“If Chris is smart enough to come at me dressed like that, he deserves to win! I don’t see the point in this Daemon. Get rid of the fucking clown!” My voice was hoarse from screaming.

I heard Daemon sigh loudly as the sound of approaching footsteps grew louder. He came around the side of the

ring to grab me. I dodged his grasp and shot around the ring to escape him. As soon as I was on the same side as the clown, it smiled at me. I shrieked and turned around. I was trapped. Daemon's arms came around me as he pulled me to his chest. After dragging me back behind the ring, his head lowered to mine so that he could talk to me quietly.

“Babe, you need to calm the fuck down. You are letting your fear control you. How will you survive an attack if you can so easily be frozen by your own fear?”

My eyes pleaded with Daemon.
“The clown is a little over the top, don't

you think?! What the hell is the point of this exercise? I highly doubt I'm going to get attacked by a clown anytime soon. There is no reason for me to have to face my fears of those creepy fuckers. Just make it go away. Did you see it smile at me?!" I shuddered.

"Fine, Paige. Looks like we are going to have to do this the hard way." Daemon's hands grabbed around my arms as he dragged me out from behind the ring. The soles of my shoes dug into the ground but I wasn't able to keep from being pulled. Finally having to resort to desperate measures, I let my body go completely limp. Daemon's hands slipped from my arms as I fell to the ground. His face quirked into an

annoyed scowl as he bent over to pick me up. I continued my impersonation of a wet noodle, making it difficult for him to lift me. Every time he picked up one side of me, the dead weight from my other half caused me to slip from his hands. “Paige, stop this! You’re acting like a child.”

“Damn straight I am! This trick worked with my parents and it’ll work with you. You’ll never move me from this spot.”

Wet noodle, wet noodle, wet noodle...

He moved around to my feet and shook his head. “Did you parents ever

think of this?" He bent over suddenly, wrapping his hands around both of my ankles. I was suddenly spun around so he could drag me in the direction of the clown. I grasped out with my hands, desperately seeking anything to grab on to. I lucked out when we passed a set of weights. I curled my hand around the long bar which looked to have at least three hundred pounds attached to it. My body jerked after I anchored myself to the weight. Daemon looked back and rolled his eyes. He pulled on my legs again, making me feel like I was being stretched apart. The weights began to slowly slide across the room with me. I was impressed that Daemon appeared to have no problem dragging me and the

weights. The asshole was strong!

The palms of my hands burned, but I refused to let go of the weights. It took Daemon a good three minutes to get me near the clown. He turned around to face me and gave my legs one final jerk. My now sweaty hands slipped easily from the bar. Once I was freed, Daemon dragged me over and deposited me at the feet of the clown, kneeling beside me once he let me go.

“Damsel, open your eyes and face your opponent. It’s just a man with makeup and a silly outfit. Look, his oversized shoes have stupid little balls on the toes and they squeak.” He squeezed the shoes twice and my body

stiffened. I turned over and attempted to quickly army crawl away from them. Daemon grabbed my legs immediately and dragged me back. Having no other means of escape, I squeezed my eyelids shut. If I didn't see it, it wasn't there.

“Open your eyes, Paige.”

I squeezed my eyelids tighter.

“Paige...open your eyes.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and shook my head.

“Fine. David...attack her.”

My eyes flew open. David's painted face came into my view. He smiled brightly and waved. “Hey,

Paige.”

Another shriek escaped me as I kicked my legs free from Daemon’s hands, flipped to my stomach, pushed myself up and sprinted to the back of the ring. Knowing Daemon would just drag me out again, I grabbed onto one of the ropes, holding on for dear life. The peanut gallery erupted in howling laughter once again. Apparently they found ‘death by clown’ amusing.

Our struggle went on for another hour, but by the end, I found myself facing an evil zombie clown in the ring. My entire body trembled as I faced David. He took a fighting stance and I stepped back. Daemon stood behind me

just in case I attempted to flee.

“Okay, Damsel. Remember everything you have learned over the past couple of months. You have to take control of your emotions. Fear is your worst enemy in a true fight. Even if you can’t get rid of all of it, don’t let your opponent know he’s affected you. Control it, Paige.”

I squeezed my eyes tight, then opened them again. David grinned back at me. The green striped jumpsuit he wore was tattered with black and red stains smeared all over. A hoop was sewn into the material around his waist giving him a bowling pin shaped body. His hands were covered with silly little

green gloves. This. Was. Insane. There was no way Daemon was going to let me out of this. I knew my only means of ending this torture was to fight David. I took a few deep breaths attempting to calm my racing heart.

“Just give me a second, Daemon. I’ll do it if you just give me some time to calm down.”

Daemon’s hand came up to rest on my shoulder. His voice softened as he said, “In a real fight, you won’t have a second to calm down, Paige. It needs to be instantaneous. Although a small amount of fear is good because it helps pump adrenaline through your body, too much will paralyze you. You need to be

able to think and think fast if you are attacked. Take whatever time you need now, but when we do this again, you need to be able to defend yourself immediately.”

I nodded my head in understanding while maintaining eye contact with David. After a few more deep breaths, I visualized pushing my fear out of my body. My mind felt more clear as a result. It was time to take down the clown.

I lunged forward without warning. My foot landed on one of David's oversized shoes causing a little squeak to sound. Before David could react, I reached up and grabbed ahold of his

hair, attempting to pull his head forward so I could knee him in the face. The wig popped off of David's head and I dropped it on the floor. His foot was still trapped as I stood on his shoe, so David pulled his foot free before lunging back in my direction. I dodged left hoping to avoid his lean frame as it came at me. His gloved hand caught my arm, shoving me down to the mat. I reached over with my free hand and grabbed his wrist to hold it in place as I twisted my arm free. Once separated, we turned to face each other again.

David let out an evil cackle as he dove for me with both arms extended. I bent down before kicking out at his knee with my foot. He tumbled on top of me

from the impact, but I was able to push him aside. Back in my fighting stance, I watched as David got up and took his position opposite me. His face makeup had smeared from our struggles, causing him to appear more vicious and demented. My heart jumped to my throat at the sight, but I gained control of my fear in order to maintain a clear head. I stepped back a few feet to put distance between us. David lunged forward again, this time wrapping his arms around me. My foot came down on top of his other shoe. *Squeak!* My arms were trapped between my chest and his. I continued stomping on his feet, but he wouldn't let go. I brought my head forward, making contact with his

red ball nose. *Squeak!* I finally brought my knee up attempting the classic hit to his junk. As soon as I made contact, David released me before bringing his hands to his crotch and falling to his knees.

“Fuck! Paige! This is supposed to be a *pretend* fight. That fucking hurt!”

I stood up straight as my chest heaved from my breathing. Daemon moved to my side, chuckling as he looked down at David. “Well done, Paige. You pushed past your fear and it appears you have more than subdued your attacker.” His eyes looked over my face and he laughed. “You may want to go to the bathroom and get cleaned

up. It appears some of David's makeup rubbed off on your cheeks from that headbutt."

My eyes widened. Holy fuck. I was wearing clown makeup. I hurriedly turned and sprinted to the side of the ring. After weeks of practice, I was finally able to manipulate the ropes to climb out unassisted. My feet moved quickly as I ran to the nearest restroom. After flipping on the light, I looked in the mirror to find that small bits of zombie clown were all over me. I turned on the water and began frantically scrubbing the white smudges from my cheeks. Once the offensive paint was washed from my skin, I returned to the gym.

David and Daemon had climbed out of the ring by the time I returned. I approached them and chuckled when I noticed that David's face was slightly red where the makeup had rubbed off. His hands still clutched his crotch and his face was twisted up in pain. Joe's laughter could be heard as he approached with an ice pack. Handing it to David, he laughed once again, before patting my back and saying, "That was the funniest shit I've seen in a long time, Paige. Good job up there." Chuckles and snorts could be heard from his friends as Joe returned to stand with them.

"Joe's right, Paige. You were impressive. Although, it'll be even

more impressive to see you do that again *without* the preceding hour long panic attack.” Daemon smirked at me as an eyebrow set perfectly arched above his eye. My eyes narrowed in response.

“Why a clown, Daemon?” I turned to David. “And where in the hell did you find the outfit, David?! It looks like the same one that singing telegram guy wore to the apartment.”

David was bent over at the waist, his hand shoved between his legs. “Correction, Paige, it IS the same one,” he barked out through clenched teeth. I looked down at him sympathetically as he iced his jewels. I must have kneed him harder than I thought. I’d have to

remind him to wear a cup the next time. He removed the ice from his crotch before straightening up to glare at me.

“When Daemon asked that I go through with this *ridiculous* plan, I shopped online to find a cheap costume. This one happened to be on sale through a local consignment shop. I bought it online, but had to go to the store to pick it up. When I was paying for it, the store clerk asked if I was taking the last guy’s place at the novelty shop. She told me that the man who sold her the costume used to perform singing telegrams. He apparently hated the job, but needed the money. Unfortunately, he soon had a confrontation with a crazy, screaming blonde and a naked man on one of his

assignments. After escaping the ‘lunatics’, he went back to the office and quit that night.”

My eyes blinked in confusion. “Well? How do you know it was the same guy? Okay, so, yeah, the screaming, crazy blonde sounds like me, but there was no naked man in the room.”

David sighed and dropped his head into his hand. Looking back up at me, he said, “Actually, Paige, there was a naked man....me.” When I just kept staring, he continued. “You see, I was in the shower when the guy came to the apartment. You’d just returned home from work, I guess, and answered the

door. When I was in the middle of washing my hair, I heard a blood curdling scream, so I immediately jumped out of the shower to see what was going on. I ran out into the living room, but by the time I got there, the soap from my hair had dripped down into my eyes. I stopped moving as I was trying to rub my eyes clear. When I was able to open them again, I was giving the poor man a full frontal, while you were ducked down behind the coffee table, screaming your head off and chucking knick-knacks at him. I was surprised the guy didn't immediately run." David chuckled. "He was real dedicated to his job. He ducked and dodged all the shit you threw at him, sang his song as fast as

he could, then hauled ass when he was finished.”

Daemon burst out in laughter, followed by the peanut gallery. I tried to suppress my own grin at David’s story. I had no idea he’d been in the living room during that incident, much less, wearing nothing but his birthday suit. I couldn’t begin to imagine what that poor telegram guy thought as he was singing to a naked man while having to dodge ceramic figurines.

A set of strong arms came around my waist as I felt Daemon’s chest push up against my back. His lips brushed against my ear when he said, “You ready to go, Damsel. It’s getting late.” He

kissed my cheek softly.

I withered in his embrace, finally feeling the ache in my muscles from training. A warm bed, next to an even warmer Daemon was the place I suddenly wanted to be. “Yeah. Let’s get going. I’ve had enough for today.”

~

My head laid on Daemon’s chest, softly moving up and down with his breathing. My eyes felt heavy and I was dozing off while he watched the news and relaxed. I was very content in that moment, just *being* with Daemon. There was no drama, no fights, no chaos of any kind and I felt like I was able to breathe

again. Our relationship had solidified over the past few months. We'd slipped back into the comforting awareness of each other that had always existed between us. Often, we spoke of our childhood, the things we loved and the things we wouldn't miss. There was always plenty of laughter as we remembered our forts out in the woods or our attempts to catch minnows with our hands in the shallow waters of the marsh.

Daemon and I always had a lot of time alone together as well. David bought a new car and when he wasn't spending the night with Matt, he was working. He was putting in ten to twelve hour days, so even on the nights

that he did return to the apartment, it was late and he wanted to go straight to bed. David didn't mind putting in the extra hours. It gave him something to do, plus the timing of the overtime was exceptionally fortunate. The lease on our apartment was up and we needed to move our furniture and other possessions into storage. David was pleased with the added income to cover his expenses.

We made it a point to visit the Center as often as we could. Momma told me that although Annie still had a lot to work through, she was making incredible strides towards eventually coming home. She also planned on leasing an apartment with David once

she left The Center. I was still undecided if I would be moving back in with them as Daemon was insistent that I live with him permanently. Although I enjoyed keeping him guessing about my decision as to where I would eventually live, I knew that it would be impossible for me to fall asleep without him by my side.

“Breaking News tonight in the brutal murder of twenty-one year old Amanda Cleary...” The news anchor’s voice rang out from the television as Daemon continued watching. My eyes were closed and I covered my head with a pillow. The last thing I wanted to hear about was another victim of a violent crime.

Removing the pillow from my head, I looked up at Daemon. “Turn it off and let’s go to sleep.” He looked down at me and smiled as he reached for the remote control on the bedside table.

“...Police in Tennessee have released a report indicating that trace evidence left at the crime scene matched that of Florida resident and now suspect, Christopher Baxter. Authorities are requesting that any person who may have information on Mr. Baxter’s whereabouts please contact them immediately. Mr. Baxter is described as being six foot, two inches, with blonde hair and blue eyes. The authorities have released this grainy photograph taken of who they

believe to be Mr. Baxter as he left the bar with Ms. Cleary on the night of her death.”

I shot up from the bed as Daemon turned to look at the screen. The photo from the security camera was hard to make out, but it was apparent to both Daemon and I that the man in the photo was, in fact, Chris. I rolled over and grabbed my cell phone from the bedside table and immediately called Detective Troy.

“Good evening Ms. Stone, I take it you just saw the news reports.” Detective Troy’s voice was stoic as she answered my call.

“Uh...yeah. Were you planning on telling me about this?! He’s killed another person, Detective Troy!” My voice became panicked as I spoke.

Detective Troy sighed heavily into the phone before saying, “I only received this information shortly before the media. We were contacted by the Tennessee authorities due to the matching DNA at both crime scenes. I’ve been dealing with the situation, Ms. Stone. At least we know Mr. Baxter is no longer in the area.”

“And I’m supposed to be happy about that?! Another person is DEAD, Detective Troy! D. E. A. D., dead! As in never coming back, as in standing at

the pearly gates, as in no longer breathing, or speaking, or hugging her family.” My body started to shake from my anger. Daemon placed his hands on my shoulders to comfort me, but I pulled away and pushed myself up from the bed. My feet moved quickly as I paced the room.

“Ms. Stone, I am going to insist that you calm down, or I will end this conversation in favor of speaking at another time. I understand your concern, however, there is nothing I can do about it except for continue our investigation for the crimes he is suspected of having committed here. I have no control over what occurs when Mr. Baxter is in another state. Although I am not asking

you to be *happy* about that fact, it is fortunate considering that the police presence at Mr. Pierce's home and at The Center are being discontinued.

“What?! What do you mean by ‘discontinued’? How can they do that, he just killed again!”

“This is the last time, I’m going to tell you to calm down. The next time I have to remove the phone from my ear due to your screaming, it will be to disconnect the call. Do you understand me, Ms. Stone?”

I sat down on the edge of the bed defeated. I could not believe they were pulling the police presence from

downstairs and at my parents' place. Chris was still out there and now Annie and my parents were sitting ducks. I hoped like hell Chris stayed in Tennessee, or better yet, continued running even farther away.

I cleared my throat before responding. "Yes, I understand. Just....why do they think it's a good idea to pull the protection?"

I was surprised by the sympathetic quality of Detective Troy's voice when she next spoke. "It's been two months, Paige. Nothing has happened and now we have information that he is no longer in the area. We can no longer justify the cost of having officers constantly

stationed at your home and your parents' facility."

My head dropped down. I wanted to cry but no tears came. I was too exhausted to cry. This entire situation felt so far out of control that I had to accept I was powerless to change anything about it. There was nothing I could do. Chris had fled the state and I knew he would remain off the radar.

Having nothing left to say I quickly said goodbye to Detective Troy and ended the call. I felt Daemon move up behind me.

"Paige? Are you okay?" The concern in his voice was heartbreaking.

I knew how badly he was working to protect me, to teach me to protect myself. Unfortunately, the one thing he couldn't protect me from was the futility of the situation. The circumstances that were outside of our control were tormenting me. The lives that were being affected and destroyed were haunting me. Amanda Cleary just lost her life, but why? Because a mentally disturbed woman decided to hurt her kid? Because the witnesses to that abuse simply turned their heads? Or because of a run-in with a loud mouth blonde at a nightclub? What was the cause of Chris' crime against that poor, innocent girl?

Sadly, there was no true and distinct cause. She was just another

unfortunate victim of a web of anger and hatred that was created and nurtured by the hand of an abusive person.

“No, Daemon. I’m not okay. None of this is okay. Their *discontinuing* the police presence at my parents’ facility and here. Annie and all those women and children will be unprotected. If something happens to them...” My voice trailed off.

Daemon’s arms wrapped around me tenderly as he pulled me back against him. “Baby, you can’t think like that. You know your dad has that place locked down like a fortress. I highly doubt that Chris would be able to get in, even if he tried. And he won’t be able to get to my

apartment either. You don't need to be so scared." He took the phone from my hands. "I'm going to call your parents to let them know what's going on, Paige. I'll be right back." I nodded my approval before he got up from the bed and walked into the living room to make the call.

When he returned, I was curled up in a fetal position in the center of the bed. Daemon stood at the foot of the bed gazing down at me, a slight smirk playing over his lips. "Do you remember your first night here? What I did to you in that exact spot?" His head tilted in question as he attempted to make me think about something other than Chris. When I looked up at him, his

eyes sparked with mirth, but were touched with a bit of sadness as well. I didn't answer and he sighed before crawling up the bed to sit next to me.

“Damsel, I know you are feeling frustrated right now...”

I let out a humorless laugh. “No need to sugar coat it for me, Daemon. I'm feeling pretty fucking helpless right now. Just feeling frustrated would actually be a relief.”

His hand grabbed my shoulder so that he could pull me onto my back. His eyes locked with mine, and I watched as the flames from the sconces reflected within them. “You're not helpless,

Paige. You did what you could to find him. He is a slimy son of a bitch. There was nothing more you could have done.” He shut his eyes briefly as if thinking of something painful. When he opened them again, I saw fear and anger. “I don’t think he’s gone for good. I wish the bastard would just keep running, but I don’t think he’ll be able to stay away for long. I don’t want you to become complacent about your safety, Paige.” His eyes pleaded with me. “Losing you is not an option for me. I’ve been through it once, I refuse to go through it again. We’re stepping up the training.”

He picked me up and moved me forward on the bed so that my head

rested on the pillows. After reaching over to turn off the lights, he wrapped his large arms around me, pulling me tight against his body. Once secured in the warmth and safety of his arms, my eyes felt heavy as I lost myself to sleep.

Chapter Fourteen

Another two weeks passed. Neither the Florida nor the Tennessee authorities had been able to locate and apprehend Chris. There was a belief that he'd fled, yet again, to another state. I was terrified for every young woman out there. My father was diligent in protecting the Center. He agreed with Daemon that we hadn't seen the last of Chris. Most of the women and children were kept inside the secured walls of the facility. Momma and Daddy were busy keeping them entertained indoors without revealing why they suddenly frowned upon the residents wandering the back yard by themselves.

Daemon continued my daily

training. We spent at least four hours in the gym each day. I'd become stronger, faster and better able to handle myself against a person the size of Chris. Today, Daemon drove me out to another *surprise*; as usual, keeping me in the dark until we arrived at his intended destination. We pulled up to another warehouse-type building as Daemon parked the truck. Opening the door to step out, I pondered why Daemon had brought me to what appeared to be an abandoned property. Only one other car was located in the parking lot. The exterior of the building looked like it had, at one time, been painted white, however, it now looked to be more of a muddled grey. The parking lot wasn't

paved and weeds poked out sporadically through the small pebble gravel that covered the ground. Larger weeds framed the sides of the building and the only thing that could be seen in back was the tops of the tree lines.

As Daemon came around the truck to escort me to the front doors, I eyed him warily. “Do you know of every run down property in this part of the state or do you just enjoy taking me to places that make my skin crawl?”

Daemon laughed. “This is another one of Frank’s old haunts, actually. His friend, George, owns it. It’s not advertised much, but the locals know they can come here to practice shooting

anytime they want. It's set up for all types of weapons, so it's a favorite for gun enthusiasts who want to practice with assault rifles or other high caliber guns."

My feet stopped suddenly causing Daemon to turn back to look at me. "Is there a problem, Damsel?" Humor sparkled in his eyes.

"I hate guns, Daemon." My arms crossed over my chest. "I don't know anything about them, I don't want to know anything about them, and I refuse to go in there."

Daemon walked back and leaned down so that we were nose to nose. His

eyes burned into mine as he said, “You need to get over that, Paige. Just think, if you knew something about how to use a gun, this whole situation with Chris might have ended a long time ago. You had him in your sights at one time. However your lack of knowledge on how to use a gun is the only reason he was able to escape.”

Yeah, and maybe Amanda Cleary and Bill would still be alive...

My thoughts darkened as I remember that day in the woods. Sitting in that tree, trying to figure out how to aim and fire, Chris’ mocking words as he took pleasure in my inability to properly fire the weapon I’d stolen from

him. My failure and lack of experience almost got me killed that day, and it may have been the reason why two more people were now being buried by their loved ones.

“Okay, Daemon. I’ll learn to fire a handgun. But I don’t want anything to do with assault rifles. Those are best left for the military and law enforcement.”

Daemon smirked and I could see his shoulders bounce with suppressed laughter. “Damsel, with your temper, there’s no way in hell I would put an assault rifle in your hands.” His laughter finally escaped him as his hand came up to the small of my back. I scowled at him while we walked towards the

building.

A small bell rang above us as we walked through the glass door. A musty smell enveloped me and my eyes took in the multiple displays cases and gun racks that filled the front room. There were so many different weapons lining the walls that I'd grown quiet as I attempted to take it all in. A man came out of a door to our right and smiled as soon as he saw Daemon. He was dressed in dark blue work pants and a white t-shirt. His silver hair was slicked back and his face was friendly, yet intimidating at the same time. His hand met Daemon's shoulder with a slap. "Holy shit, kid! I haven't seen you round these parts in ages. Where have

you been holing up?!

Daemon spoke with the man, I assumed was George, as I continued glancing about the room. There were enough weapons and ammunition in this place to arm a small army. Not only were there guns, but there were also bullet proof vests, gas masks and an impressive display of hunting and combat knives. My eyes widened when I spotted a crossbow hanging on a wall display. *That could be fun...*

“Paige, are you with us?”

My head shot back to where Daemon was standing. Both he and the other man were staring at me intently

like they were waiting on me to say something. “I’m sorry. Did I miss something?”

Both men chuckled as Daemon threw his arm around my shoulder and pulled me to him. “Paige, this is George. He owns and runs the gun shop and range.”

I smile politely at George and extend my hand. He took my hand and shook so vigorously, I felt like my arm would pop loose from my shoulder. “Nice to meet you, Paige. Joe has told me a lot about you.”

“Joe?” My face turns beet red. “Peanut gallery Joe?”

George smiled and I saw where he would have been quite handsome when he was younger. His green eyes sparkled and two dimples appeared on his cheek from his deep smile. “I don’t know nothing about peanuts, but Joe told me Daemon was training a real beautiful girl down at the gym. I hear you can hold your own against Daemon. That’s something to be proud of. Most men can’t do that, much less, a tiny thing such as yourself.”

I look up to find Daemon beaming down at me with pride. “Uh, yeah. I guess. Daemon’s been teaching me some self-defense stuff for the past couple of months.”

George nodded and grabbed my hand to pull me away from Daemon. Dragging me to one of the display cases, he put his arm around me as I peered down into the glass top case. My eyes scanned over multiple handguns laid out on display. “Well, if you are learning self-defense, you’ve certainly come to the right place. Have you fired a weapon before?”

I looked up from the handguns to answer George. “Once.”

A surprised expression comes over George’s face. “Excellent. What type of gun did you shoot?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I’m not

sure. I know it was a rifle. It was long, and had a little lever sticking out from the side of it that you had to push back and forth each time you shot it.”

“Sweetheart, you mean to tell me you shot a gun and you didn’t know what it was? Who in the hell let you do that?”

“The guy I stole it from. I was trying to kill him, but every time I shot the thing, I missed.”

George stood eyeing me with suspicion as Daemon walked over to join us. “George, it’s not what it sounds like.” Daemon pointedly looked at me like he wanted me to shut up. My eyes widened at him. “Paige has had some

issues...”

Daemon explained my situation to George who looked sickened at the story he was being told. Once Daemon had completed the story, George immediately walked behind the display case to pull out several handguns and place them on the glass top. Looking up from the small selection of guns, George's eyes meet mine. “I'm damn sorry to hear you've been going through that, Paige. I wish you did know how to fire that rifle because nothing would please me more than to know that sick son of bitch was six feet under. However, after Daemon and I are through with you, if that son of a bitch comes near you again, I guarantee you won't miss him the next time he's

looking down the barrel of your gun, you understand?”

I nodded my head hesitantly. Daemon looked over the selection of handguns George had laid out on the counter. Daemon pointed to three of the guns. “I think we’ll try these three. I’ll take Paige to get some ear protection and meet you in the range.

George picked up the guns and started moving towards a back door. “Good choices, Daemon. I’ll take them out now and set them up for you.”

Daemon waved back at George before directing me to the back of the shop. He grabbed a set of ear muffs and

reached up to fit them over my head. As soon as the padded blue discs covered my ears, I could barely hear anything Daemon was saying. His mouth was moving, but a grin tugged at the corners of his lips as he spoke.

I reached up and took off the ear muffs. “What did you just say?”

Daemon’s smile grew brighter. “I was telling you everything I will be doing to you tonight when we get home.” He winked then grabbed my hand to lead me to the shooting range. When Daemon shoved the metal door open, a large hallway lined with benches opened up in front of us. Partitions were evenly spaced, creating stalls to the right

of us and I spotted George at the last stall. The three guns Daemon had earlier selected were laid out on a countertop at the end of the stall. Beyond that was an extremely long aisle with a pulley system attached to the ceiling. A paper target hung at the far end of the alley.

I hitched my thumb back in the direction of the target. "I hope you don't expect me to be able to hit that."

George shook his head, laughing as he did so. "No, Paige, we don't expect you to hit that. The target is set at a distance for rifles currently. Daemon will pull it to the distance that's preferable for the guns you'll be using.

Turning to Daemon, George said, “Alright, kid, the range is all yours. Be sure to go over the safety rules with her before starting.”

Daemon complied with George’s request. After explaining the rules, Daemon placed the ear muffs on my head and turned me in the direction of the target. He reached up and pulled on a lever that brought the target closer to where we were positioned. Daemon selected one of the smaller guns and held it out in front of me. When I took the gun from him, his hands slide over the top of mine.

“You want to hold the gun like this, Paige. Use one hand to grip the weapon,

leaving your index finger free to pull the trigger. You'll want to use the other hand to support and steady the weapon, like this." His hands positioned mine, but all I could think about was the heat of his chest rolling down my body.

Daemon was pressed up against me as he reached out to help steady my shot. I leaned my head back against his shoulder and closed my eyes. I felt him chuckle right before he corrected me. "Damsel, not that I mind you leaning back against me, but this is a situation where you really should try to keep your eyes open."

I opened my eyes to bat my eyelashes at him. "Sorry, you just have

that effect on me.”

His dimples popped out from his smile and I melted right there in his arms. “Let’s keep our thoughts on the task at hand. There’s plenty of time for other things when we get home tonight.”

I let out a small groan before returning my attention to the target, but then something occurred to me. “Daemon? How is it I can hear you right now and yet, I couldn’t hear you when I had these ear muffs on in the store? Wait a second! You didn’t actually say anything in the store, did you?”

His chest vibrated with laughter. “Sometimes, beautiful, you are just so

damned gullible. Now seriously, we have a target to take out. Focus.”

I focused on the target as Daemon continued his instruction. “The gun will have a slight recoil, Paige, so be sure to support it properly. When you are ready, use your thumb to pull back the hammer and then pull the trigger. Try to look down the barrel of the gun to align the center of your target with the sights located on the barrel. Okay, fire when you’re ready, Paige.”

I pulled down the hammer of the gun and closed one eye so that I could use the other to align the sights with the target. My finger came over the trigger and I pulled. Although I was ready for a

loud blast, the actual sound caused me to jump. Without realizing it, I'd closed my eyes as soon as the gun fired. I peaked my eyes open to find that I'd hit the target almost dead center. I was so excited, I started to jump up and down and spun around to look at Daemon. Daemon jumped away almost immediately, but then grabbed my hands to force the gun downward and away from his body.

“Paige, unless your intention is to kill, you need to make sure you always keep a loaded gun pointed away from anything that is breathing. It's best when you are not actively firing the gun that you keep it pointed to the ground, or in a situation like this, replace it on the

counter before jumping around excitedly. Understand? This is VERY important.”

My cheeks reddened a bit from embarrassment as I turned around to lay the gun back on the counter. Turning back to Daemon, his hands came up to cup my cheeks as he placed a soft kiss on my lips. “You did well for your first time, Damsel. But I was helping you that time with your aim and controlling the recoil. I want you to try it on your own this time. Remember to take your time and prepare yourself before firing.”

I returned to the stall and picked up the gun. My hands came up in front of me and I steadied myself, aligning my

sights before firing. When I pulled the trigger, the blast surprised me again and the recoil of the gun forced my hands up. I looked at the target to see that I'd barely nicked the paper. I grimaced and tried again. After firing three rounds, my aim hadn't improved and I became frustrated.

Setting the gun down, I turned to Daemon. "I can't do this, Daemon. I suck. Look, I can't even hit the fucking target!"

Daemon came up behind me, placed his hands on my shoulders and turned my back towards the target. "It takes practice, Paige. You have to learn to relax when you fire. Next time you

shoot, try taking a deep breath. While you are releasing that breath, pull the trigger.”

I picked up the gun again and attempted the shot. This time, a nice hole was blown into the right side of the target. Even though it wasn't a perfect shot, I was excited. I started to dance around at my success when Daemon's hand came down on the gun, pointing it downward.

“Damsel...”

I quickly replaced the gun on the counter before looking back at him. “Uh...sorry. My happy dance sometimes gets the best of me.”

Daemons eyebrow arched. “Well, let’s keep the ‘happy dance’ under control when playing with dangerous weapons.”

The remainder of the afternoon was spent testing out the three different guns Daemon had selected for me. By the end of the day, I was feeling confident about using what Daemon informed me was a thirty-eight caliber snub nose. Although never making a dead center shot, I was close enough that Daemon felt we could call it a day. We left the guns on the counter of the stall and returned to the store through the metal door.

George was standing behind a display case cleaning parts of a gun that

he'd broken down. "How'd it go back there? Are you missing any body parts, Daemon?" George chuckled to himself about his little joke as he looked up at us.

Daemon's hand rested on the small of my back as he led us to the counter where George was standing. "I'm still in one piece, thankfully. Paige, did exceptionally well, actually."

George nodded his approval as he placed the gun part he was cleaning on the counter. "Well, that's good then. You feeling confident that the next time you come across that sick son of a bitch, you might actually hit him this time?"

All eyes were turned to me and I shrugged. “Hopefully, it won’t come to that, but, yeah, I guess if I had that little gun I was using, I might do some damage.”

Daemon laughed. “It’s a thirty-eight, Paige. It’s far from being considered a ‘little’ gun. George, Paige preferred the snub nose and I’d like you to go through the application process with her so we can buy it for her.”

George moved to grab a manila folder with paperwork inside. He slid the folder to me with a pen. “I’m going to need you to fill those papers out. There’s also an application for a concealed weapons license in there.

You'll need to practice some more and complete a safety course before it will be approved, but you will be able to pick up the gun from me after a three day waiting period."

"Why the three day waiting period? I can't just take it home now?"

George looked at me and laughed. "No ma'am. The state wants to make sure you get a chance to cool down in case you're buying the thing to kill someone."

"But, I thought I was buying it to kill someone."

George looked at Daemon, arched a brow, and then looked back at me.

“Paige, I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that. Listen, I know you’ve got a psychopath chasing after your ass and I agree he should end up dead if he ever bothers you again. More importantly, though, I prefer you not have blood on your hands. It’s not an easy thing to deal with, darlin’, and it’s best you just remain careful and let law enforcement handle him. When you do have the gun, there is one rule you need to be sure and follow. No matter what the situation, whether you’re being attacked, or there is an intruder in your home, or whatever is going on...NEVER pull a gun unless your intent is to use it, and ALWAYS make sure you know what you are shooting at. Guns are a responsibility

that you should never take lightly. They are there to protect you and they should only be used when you fear for your life. Do you understand me, sweetheart?”

I nodded my head and returned my attention to completing the paperwork. George and Daemon chatted as I filled out the applications. Once I was finished, we said our goodbyes and left. As Daemon and I walked to the truck, he took his hand in mine and kissed the top of it. I looked up at him to notice a serious expression on his face.

“What’s wrong?”

Daemon shook his head.

“Nothing’s wrong, Damsel. I’m just proud of you.”

I’m sure my expression showed my confusion at his statement. “Proud of me for what?”

Daemon took both my hands into his and pulled me so that we were face to face. “For everything. You are handling this entire situation so well. You kick ass in the ring and soon, you’ll be firing like a skilled marksman. You’re amazing in every way possible. I truly am a lucky man to have you, Paige.”

I could feel my cheeks heat as I smiled at him. Never being good at

taking compliments, I shrugged him off and turned back in the direction of the truck. “Come on. Let’s go get some food. I’m freaking starving.”

~

~~Daemon~~

“Come on Daemon! Live a little, would you?!”

Paige sat on the railing of my balcony overlooking the city. We’d just returned from dinner where she’d had way too many drinks, instantly transforming back into the stubborn and obstinate person I’d grown to love. Apparently, based on the fact that she

was precariously balanced over a railing that sat three stories high, she'd become fearless as well. As soon as we'd arrived back at my place, her clothes had vanished from her body as she'd danced seductively around the living room of the apartment. I won't lie and say I tried to stop her. With the way the light from the fire sconces bounced across her skin, I was mesmerized in my silent admiration of her body. It was a damn good thing David wasn't here or he'd have gotten one hell of a show.

“Damsel, I need you to come down from there, please. You'll fall. Plus, you're naked. We are not so high up that people can't see you.” Even though I was freaking out on the inside, I kept my

voice calm and controlled as I spoke to her. I stood between her legs with my arms wrapped protectively around her waist.

Her laughter echoed out through the night as she wrapped her legs around me. “Whatever, Daemon, I know you won’t let me fall.” The city lights twinkled in her eyes as she looked down on me with absolute trust. Her words were like a punch to the chest. She trusted me. The drunken confession she just made had not gone unnoticed.

I smiled up into her beautiful face. “Took you long enough.”

Her brows creased in confusion,

just as a hesitant smile broke out on her lips. I watched her mouth as she spoke next, enjoying the sounds of her slurred words. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, Daemon.”

I locked my eyes with hers. “You trust me.”

The night sky lit up as lightning shot through the clouds. Her eyes widened, but I didn’t know if it was because of the sudden thunder, or because of the words I’d just spoken. Slowly, her lips curved up into a shy smile, her cheeks reddening from some private thought. She was bared to me completely and, at the moment, her life was technically in my hands; yet, it was the idea of *admitting*

that she trusted me that made her nervous and shy. I shook my head in amazement.

When I heard a car honk in the distance, I was snapped back to the realization that Paige stood naked in plain view. “Baby, we need to get you inside. I’m the only one who should be appreciating that body of yours.” She twisted around to look out over the city just as a bolt of lightning cracked across the sky. Within seconds, booming thunder rolled over our heads, causing vibrations on the balcony. The skies opened up pouring down a wall of water to the ground below.

Paige laughed a beautiful, melodic laugh. One full of joy and contentment;

freedom from inhibition. “I don’t think they can see me now, Daemon. Besides, even if they could, I don’t have to hide anymore.” Her blue eyes locked with mine. My pants tightened even more at the look she gave me. “You’ve brought down my walls, Daemon, opening me up in ways I never thought possible.” Her face was taken over by a bright smile. “I don’t care if I’m naked in front of everyone...as long as you’re there. Because when you are around me...” Her finger came up to tap me on the nose. “...you’re the only person I see.”

She leaned back into the rain and my arms tightened around her, keeping her from falling. I watched as the rain soaked her hair and ran in rivulets down

her skin. My fingers dug into the flesh of her hips as I imagined my mouth following the paths of water that ran down her body. She was so drunk; just laughing as she allowed the rain to cover her. *Fuck it.* I decided to take advantage.

“Marry me, Paige.” My voice was strong, determined as I told her what I wanted. It wasn’t a question. There was NO question that she would eventually be my wife...it was just a matter of getting her to accept it.

Her head sprang up, her expression one of surprise and humor. A devious grin curved out from the corner of her mouth. My eyes were taken captive by

hers. I could see the effects of the alcohol in her eyes. Her eyelids were half open, but light still happily danced within the different shades of blue. She brought her head down so that her forehead rested on mine.

“Okay.”

My body froze. The corners of her eyes crinkled with mirth. She smiled again, before leaning back out into the rain. Lightning and thunder continued battering the skies as I stood motionless, my mind endlessly replaying one word...”*okay.*” She wouldn’t remember this in the morning, but, fuck, I didn’t care. I was holding her to her acceptance.

I pulled her down from the railing and turned to press her body against the wall that stood between both railings. Curtains of water poured down on either side of us, the sound only serving to echo back every word that was spoken. “You’re mine, Damsel. I’m not letting you go. Especially, not after what you just agreed to.” Her head fell back onto the wall as she ground her hips against me. My fucking dick was about to burst from my jeans so I reached down with one arm to strip them from my body. As soon as I was free, I was going to bury myself deep inside her body.

She looked back down at me, shaking her head. “You’re so blind, aren’t you, Daemon? I’ve *been* yours.

Maybe not exactly like this, but in some way or another, I've been yours since I was five years old." Her hands came up to cup my cheeks as my hands continued working to relieve myself of my clothing. "But don't go getting all big-headed about it. I'll just deny it if you ever try to repeat it." She winked at me before her sassy mouth came down on mine. My jeans slid to the ground and, without warning, I speared myself inside her. Her body trembled and quaked as I slowly started to move.

I could taste the alcohol on her tongue as she opened herself to me. The heat of her body soaked into me as my hands explored the smooth contours of her skin. She moaned out as I continued

moving inside her, taking her body prisoner and connecting to her in a way that had always been reserved for me. Her confessions rang inside my head as the sounds coming from her wound me even further into an absolute fucking frenzy. My movements became more hurried, more powerful. I wanted to invade every part of her, claiming for myself the one woman who could touch the deepest parts of me. She drove me crazy, but that only made me want her more.

I felt her begin to pulse around me, her warmth enveloping me. The feel of her water slick skin sliding against mine was driving me to a desperate hunger I've never before experienced. I could

take this woman every day, every hour, ever fucking second that I have left to live, and it would never be enough.

When she cried out my name, my head fell back as my ears bathed in the sound that echoed and was amplified by the falling rain. I lost myself almost instantly, releasing myself within her. My head came forward again and my eyes slowly digested the sight in front of me. Her skin was pink from her release, her chest heaving up and down from her heavy breathing. Water continued to drip down her skin and her eyes... fuck...her eyes were heavy and sated, calling for me to take her again. I slid down to the ground still holding myself inside her as she traveled with me. I sat

with her on my lap, our hearts slowing and our breathing once again becoming regular.

She looked up at me. The expression on her face was unreadable. Her lips parted as she started to speak, but she hesitated, apparently rethinking whatever it was she was going to say. Her eyes met mine as her head lulled back and forth. "I'm....really....drunk." One short laugh erupted from her before her head came down to my shoulder. I sat there, stunned, but laughing.

When her breathing became shallow and regular, I knew the alcohol had finally forced her to sleep. I picked her up to carry her to bed. After laying

her head on the pillows and pulling the blanket up to cover her, I sat down and smoothed my hand over her damp hair.

I don't know how long I sat and watched her as she slept. Before laying down beside her, I whispered my confession. "Forever used to feel like a long time; but then this girl walked back into my life, one I'd dreamed of and carried with me from the moment I'd thought I lost her. Suddenly forever could never be long enough." My hand came to rest against her cheek. Even in her sleep she moved to nuzzle against my palm. She belonged to me. It was never more apparent and I couldn't help but fucking smile down at the woman who always held my heart...the woman who

owned me.

Chapter Fifteen

~~Paige~~

Another three months passed with no signs of Chris. He'd fled Tennessee, they knew that, but most believed he traveled north to escape police investigations being conducted in the south. The local authorities had enlisted the aid of the F.B.I. due to Chris having committed murders across state lines, but even with their assistance, nobody knew for sure where he'd run off to. Daemon remained on edge most of the time, but I'd started to relax into the belief that Chris was gone. Disappointment covered me like a blanket when I thought about how he'd

escaped being brought to justice; however, I couldn't help but feel relieved that the lives of my friends and myself could return to normal.

Normal.

Maybe that was a bad choice of word. There was no normal after the damage he'd left behind him. Alex and Ava had returned from St. Petersburg. David was still spending most of his time at work or with Matt. Daemon and I were still training, but more for the fun of it rather than as a necessity. Annie was still living at The Center and had not yet reached a point where she'd felt comfortable speaking to Logan. I didn't push the issue, and neither did he. It

would take time, but we both knew she'd reach out eventually. Although all of our lives had continued forward, *normal* was not the way I could describe it. We'd been changed, altered in ways that would never quite fade from us. We carried on, not allowing the weight of Chris' torment to bring us to a standstill. The battle for normal was being fought within all of us. I had no doubt we would find *normal* again, but it would never be the same.

I watched as Daemon dressed by his closet, preparing to go to Tomb on the first night it reopened. As he slid his dark blue jeans up his body, I admired the way his muscles moved along his arms and legs. Grabbing a black button

down shirt, he pulled his arms through and turned to me as he buttoned the shirt from the bottom to the top. His crystal blue eyes met mine as a grin tugged at the corner of his mouth.

“You sure you don’t want to come with me? I could be there pretty late and I hate to leave you alone.” A dimple popped out on his cheek as his smile widened and my heart sped up at the sight of it.

“From what you tell me, I’ve apparently agreed to be your wife, Daemon. I’m not concerned about being alone for a couple of hours. We have all the time in the world to be together...or so you say.” A brow arched over my

eye as he smiled down at me. The day after we'd gone to the gun range, Daemon informed me of our time together on the balcony upon returning home. I argued that I'd been inebriated and couldn't be held accountable for anything said or agreed to at that time. Daemon simply stated that he didn't care. He'd gone out the next day and bought me a ring. I still hadn't put it on.

It's not because I didn't want to, it's just that I couldn't let him think he'd tricked me into my acceptance.

His eyes heated as he watched me. The seductive quality of his voice dripped with confidence. "Oh...I say, Damsel. You'll realize it soon enough. Lucky for you, I'm a patient man."

“And if you weren’t patient...” I looked up at him in feigned challenge. “...What would you do then?”

His shirt tightened around him as he lowered himself to the foot of the bed. Crawling up, he forced me onto my back, hovering above me, overpowering and claiming what was his. My eyes couldn’t escape his as he stared down at me. “I have a small confession, Damsel.” His eyes searched mine as I waited for him to continue. “I’m not actually as patient as I would have you think. I know that I already have you, in fact, I’ve known that since before you admitted it while drunk. In truth, I haven’t had to wait for you. So, I’m sure you can see why I’m not too concerned

about whether you wear that ring or not. Quite frankly, it doesn't matter if you admit it or deny it. Your skin prickles when I get near you, your cheeks heat when I tell you that I own you. You can hide in your head as long as you fucking please, because when I bury myself in you, your body tells me all of your secrets."

I trembled underneath him, causing him to smile wickedly. "I wish I had time to show you exactly what I'm talking about before I leave, but I guess that will have to wait until later." His lips tickled my ear as he leaned down to whisper. "I'll be sure to rush back." His warm mouth crashed against mine. I was overtaken by the salty taste of him

when he tongue invaded my mouth. My heart sped up, my hands gripping the sheets around me. His hands rubbed rough paths up my thighs and over my stomach before claiming my breasts, then moving up into my hair. His lips pressed against mine with such force, that my breath was stolen from me and I became lightheaded. He pulled away eventually, chuckling when he'd he forced me into submission.

I groaned as he pushed up from the bed to leave. "Last chance, beautiful. You know I don't like leaving you here."

I shook my head, refusing his offer. "I'm fine, babe. It will only be a few hours."

He breathed out a resigned breath before snatching his keys off the top of the bureau beside him. “Call me if you need something. I’ll be home when I can.” I watched as he disappeared out of the bedroom door. I could hear his footsteps echoing through the hall. Soon I heard the front door open and close, then the lock as it snapped into place.

I knew Daemon was disappointed that I hadn’t gone with him, but the holidays were getting close and I needed some time alone to try to figure out a gift for him. It was the first time we would spend a Christmas together, and the first Christmas that he would have a family. I wanted it to be special, something that could make up for all the holidays he’d

spent alone or unloved. I grabbed my laptop from the nightstand and scrolled through different websites, searching for the perfect gift. I grew frustrated after an hour searching. Nothing seemed right. Finally taking a break, I threw my laptop on the bed and walked over to the bathroom to take a long bath.

As I soaked in the warm water, the smell of the oils I'd dropped in soothed me as I was blanketed in steam. I'd thought about what Daemon had said to me on the bed and my skin flushed in response. He really did own me, or if nothing else, my heart. It was a connection so intense, that even when parted I could still smell him, feel him, know that he'd invaded and take

residence within my very spirit. It wasn't that he owned me...it was that he'd become a part of me.

When my skin started to wrinkle, I finally forced myself out of the tub. I dried off and threw on a pair of pajamas, waiting for Daemon to return. I was watching some random sitcom when my phone rang. It was just after midnight and I found it odd to see The Center's number on my caller I.D. My parents were never awake at this hour.

Hesitantly, I answered, "Hello?" I wondered if something was wrong.

"Don't sound so scared, whore. It's only me." Evil dripped from a low

and angry voice. My skin scrawled at the sudden realization that it wasn't my parents on the other end of this call.

Fuck! Every muscle in my body tightened and my throat closed up in fear. I pushed through the emotions, I couldn't let him know how I was feeling.

“Chris. What the fuck are you doing, Chris?” My voice wavered as images of what he could have done or was going to do flooded my thoughts. Tears threatened to spill from my eyes, but I forced them back, desperate to maintain emotional control.

It was silent for a moment before a sickening laugh erupted from the other

end. I could hear the depravity twisted within the sound of it. My stomach churned as bile forced its way up my throat. Small tremors raked across my body, my head pounded from a rush of blood.

“It’s been a while, Paige. You should sound happier to hear from me. I know Annie was extremely excited to see me again.” My heart felt like it tore from my chest when I heard a slight whimper in the background. The shaking intensified and I couldn’t hold my voice straight any longer. “Chris...please... please tell me you haven’t hurt her.” I fought hard to maintain my composure. Fear gripped me, squeezing every muscle and organ as it coursed through

my veins. I felt tight and nauseous, my body overtaken by pure, unadulterated terror.

Another laugh; this one more menacing, saturated with the darkness that lived within Chris. He had me cornered and he knew it. There was nowhere for me to run, no person who could jump in to help me. He'd gone after my greatest weakness...Annie.

"I'd love to catch up, bitch, but I don't have a lot of time. Neither does your friend..."

I flinched before curling in on myself.

"...You have two hours to get here

if you want Annie to continue breathing. And if I were you, I wouldn't go getting smart either. You are to arrive alone, and nobody is to know that you are here. If I hear a siren or see a light turn on anywhere in the building, Annie's dead, and so are the rest of the people sleeping in this place. Do you understand me?"

"Yes." I squeaked out.

"I mean it, bitch. It would be wise of you not to call anyone, because I will kill every fucking one of them if anybody wakes up before you get here." I heard Annie whimper again. Pain shot through my jaw as my teeth clamped together. I needed to stay strong, level-headed. I pushed past the fear that was drowning

me and responded.

“I won’t call anybody. But, I can’t promise that nobody will wake up. What if someone has to use the bathroom? That wouldn’t...”

“DOESN’T. FUCKING. MATTER. BITCH!” I jumped in reaction to his voice. “Sounds to me like you better hurry your ass up and you better fucking pray that nobody has to pee before you get here.”

The phone went silent. He’d hung up, leaving me shocked and motionless in the center of Daemon’s bed. Time stood still for that moment as I fought to process the situation. Chris had Annie.

I had to get to her. There were no other options. I wanted to call my father, but by doing so, he would undoubtedly go searching for Annie, and I couldn't afford to drag more people into this. Chris wanted me and it was time I give myself to him.

I pushed myself off the bed and ran to the closet. I pulled on some jeans, a sweatshirt and my boots. After quickly throwing my hair in a low bun, I grabbed my backpack. I reached up to the top shelf of the closet and pulled down the lockbox containing the gun Daemon had bought for me. I'd completed the safety courses and had submitted my application for my permit. I felt confident in my ability to fire the

weapon. Removing it from the box, I slipped it into my bag.

As I passed the bureau, my hands reached out to grab my keys. Guilt overtook me when my fingers closed around them. Daemon trusted that I wouldn't go anywhere without telling him. He'd stopped feeling the need to control or influence my every move and I was about to repay him by doing the one thing that would destroy him. My head fell back and my eyes closed as I wrestled with calling him. *He trusted me. I could trust him.* The thought kept replaying through my head, until I made a decision. Grabbing the phone from the bed, I dialed Daemon's number. I couldn't wait for him, but I could at least

let him know what I was doing. He would tell me to stay at his house, I was sure of it. He had to know that even if he begged, nothing could stop me from going to Annie.

The phone rang five times before being sent to voicemail. I was relieved when he didn't answer. It was going to be easier to say what I needed to say. Daemon's recorded message played, followed by a tone indicating it was time for me to speak.

"Uh, it's Paige." I paused for a second, deciding how I could tell him where I was going. I took a deep breath and stated it bluntly. "Chris has Annie, Daemon. He's at The Center. Baby, I

have to go get her alone. Chris will kill her if I call the police or my parents...or you. I was going to go without telling you, but I couldn't, so please, Daemon, please show me I was right to trust that you won't call anybody. He'll kill them." I grew silent again as tears streamed down my face. Even though I was doing the right thing by calling him, I knew that leaving would be a betrayal of his trust. "Please forgive me, Daemon, but I have no choice. I have to go." Taking one more deep breath, I told him I loved him, then ended the call.

I threw my phone into my bag and slapped the tears from my cheeks. Straightening my shoulders, I resolved to leave. My footsteps carried me quickly

from the apartment. I hurried from the elevator to the bay where my bike was stored. I ran to the bike, pulled on my helmet and started the engine. When my foot left the ground to kick the bike in gear, I drove hard and didn't stop again until I was standing in front of the building where I'd grown up.

~

The winter nights were always deafeningly quiet around The Center. The normal sounds of the marshes were silenced by the cold winds as they pushed across the water and out into the trees. The only noise came from the creaking and moaning of the tree

branches, swaying within those winds. I turned off the engine of my bike which undoubtedly warned Chris of my arrival. Cutting the lights, the area was doused in the black night, not even the moon illuminated the area in which I was standing. I pulled my backpack around before reaching in to retrieve the gun. I had no idea what I was walking into. I pushed the fear and anxiety from my body, before clearing my head and beginning my walk around back.

When the backyard came into view, I noticed movement down by the marshes. A silver glow reflected off the water providing just enough light to show that somebody was standing near the cypress trees. I placed one foot in

front of the other as I quickly marched forward.

When I approached the water line, Chris and Annie came into view. I walked to them slowly, my eyes taking in every small detail before me. Annie was dressed in a white nightgown. It was simple and fell to her ankles. The moonlight shone through the thin material, making it possible to see her figure underneath. Her body trembled and I wondered if it was from fear, or the cold, or a combination of both. Chris held a gun to the side of Annie's head, his other hand clamped tightly around her arm. I searched her face, looking for any indication of what she was thinking. Her expression was

blank, her eyes were defeated. My heart pounded against my chest and it felt like my throat had finally ceased to function. I couldn't swallow down my fear as I stood looking at my friend.

“‘Bout fucking time you showed up.” He leaned into Annie while maintaining eye contact with me. “Look, Annie...Paige has decided to join the party. Maybe I'll finally get to show you what it looked like when I had my night with you.” He laughed a sickening laugh. “I never did get a chance to show you the pictures. What do you say, Annie? Wanna watch me fuck your friend? Or would you like me to kill you ahead of time?”

My hand tightened around the gun I held to my side and I forced strength into my voice as I spoke. “Chris...please let Annie go. It’s me you want. It’s always been me.”

A thousand thoughts pounded my mind.

Fight.

Shoot.

Maim.

Kill.

A thousand things I’d been training to do, a thousand ways for me to save myself. But how many of those things could save my friend? None of them.

There was only one thing that could possibly save her.

Surrender.

The one thing I'd never been taught. The one thing Daemon had never wanted me to do. Never in his childhood or his adult life had he allowed me that choice. But now, in this moment, it was the only one I had. I'd been taught to control my body. I'd been taught to control my thoughts and emotions. But never had I been taught to surrender that control to another, to submit to the request of a person intent on killing me.

“Always been you?” He snorted

out a laugh. “What makes you think you’re so goddamned special?”

I had to urge him along, had to anger him to bring out the uncontrolled monster I knew lurked within him. Chris stood completely still as he pointed the gun at Annie. His shirt looked torn and dirty, his jeans frayed and wet at the ends. Mud caked the bottom half of his boots. His face was made to look more devious by the shadows of the swaying trees above him.

“I’m the one you want, Chris. It’s what you wrote in your journals, isn’t it? I’m the one you stalked and followed. How many pictures of me have you taken, Chris? Why take them if

it wasn't me you were after?"

Annie whimpered as Chris' grip tightened around her arm. Her eyes locked with mine when I looked in her direction. Her face remained stoic as she stood facing death.

I moved to grip my gun in both hands as I raised it up to aim it at Chris. From this distance, I was sure I could hit him between the eyes, bring him down like the beast that he was. But I knew I would never pull the trigger. I was just trying to force his hand.

He laughed when I pointed the gun in his direction. An angry snarl took over his expression as he spit out his

mocking words. “And what the fuck are you going to do with that, bitch? You shoot me, and your friend dies. How’s it going to feel with both of our blood on your hands?”

Suddenly remembering his trigger, I decided to mock him. Maybe if I was able to humiliate him, I could remind him of the evil acts he planned on committing against me. I angled my head in question as I continued to stare at him down the barrel of my gun. “And what would that get you, Chris? Annie would be dead, but so would you. I’ll walk out of here unharmed.” I shrugged my shoulder. “Guess I was correct to know that you aren’t enough of a man to take me.” I huffed out a laugh. “Probably

couldn't have gotten it up anyway, given how fucking pathetic you are.”

Annie cried out as the barrel of his gun was shoved tighter against her skull. He jerked her body closer to his. The look in his eyes changed from sick humor to absolute rage. I could imagine the gears turning in his head. “Drop the gun, bitch.”

I stared him down, not daring to look away or show any fear. “Let go of Annie, Chris, and I’ll drop the gun. Let her go...” I held my hands out to my sides, never releasing the gun. “...and you can have me.”

He looked me over long and hard.

My knees trembled, but I kept my expression blank. His hand appeared to loosen on Annie, but not enough that she could break free of his hold. Silence hung between us, thick and suffocating as I waited to see what he would say or do.

He snorted just as a lewd smile broke free on his face. “Have you been watching the news, bitch? I’ve already had you. Just used a different body instead. The bitch knew why she died, though. I told her all about you as she took her final breaths. We had hours for me to tell her why she had to die that night.”

Amanda Cleary...

Fuck, this guy was depraved. He'd killed an innocent stranger just so he could feel like he'd taken me. Vomit threatened at the back of my throat and my hands trembled where they hung. I fought against showing my disgust at his words. He was attempting to shake me, but I wouldn't let him.

“She wasn't me, Chris. The name of the girl you killed was Amanda. I'm still here. Standing in front of you, alive and unharmed.”

When he didn't move, I decided to kick it up a notch.

“You know, before he died, your father told me all about you Chris. He

said you've been a pussy your entire life. He told me all about your mommy issues; how she hurt you, humiliated you, rejected you...just like me."

His face contorted with anger.

"Do I remind you of her, Chris? I've humiliated you, taunted you and laughed at you. Remember getting your ass tossed out of the club? Or how about my apartment? You know I laughed as you drove away. I knew you were never man enough to take me." A short burst of feigned laughter broke from my lips. "You couldn't even fuck me when you had me tied up."

His bloodshot eyes narrowed as he

looked between me and Annie. I knew he never wanted her. He knew he had to let her go if he wanted me.

“Drop the gun, bitch and I’ll let your friend go. Try to move again after I release her, and I’ll put a bullet through you, drop you to the ground and fuck you until you take your last breath. You understand me?!” His arm moved so that his gun was now pointed directly at me.

I smiled.

We were at a standstill, but I knew what he wanted and it wasn’t the girl he currently held. My hand flexed open as my gun fell to the ground. Annie’s eyes

quickly flicked to where the gun fell before returning to me. I held out my arms, praying that he would release Annie so that he could get to me. I panicked as I saw him bring the gun back to her direction, but instead of placing the barrel back against her skull, he raised his hand above her, bringing the gun down hard against the back of her head. Annie dropped instantly, her motionless body lying in the mud of the marsh.

I remained still as he approached me. Even though he'd released Annie, I still needed to lead him away from her. There was a chance she would live through this if I could just get him away. I decided quickly that if I could get him

alone, away from everybody that I loved, my only weaknesses, then I stood a chance of fighting him. The moonlight shown down on my body as I waited for him to approach. A spotlight on the one thing he wanted most. I didn't move a muscle, didn't dare make him think that I wouldn't let him take me. My anxiety slowly drained from my body the farther he walked away from Annie.

When he approached me, he grabbed my arms, twisting them forcefully behind me. My arms were bent at odd angles and pushed up against my spine, my muscles screaming from the tension of their position. His rancid breath rolled across my skin as he leaned in to whisper to me. "Do you

want it right here, bitch, or is there somewhere else you'd rather lead me? Not that I mind if your screams wake the entire fucking building. Although it'd be a shame for your folks to see you beneath me as you died."

I knew he needed to move me. He wanted hours with me, not just minutes. He'd chased me for months, desperate to destroy the woman who, in his mind, had replaced his mother.

"There's a clearing...in the woods. Nobody will hear or see us there." If I was lucky, I could take his gun from him once we were safely away from Annie and my parents. If I could take his gun, I would end him.

He snickered triumphantly. “Well, then...lead the way, whore.”

Chapter Sixteen

~~Daemon~~

My boots sank into the damp ground as I ran through the woods along a path that led to The Center. Errant branches slapped against my chest and head from the speed I was moving, but it didn't fucking matter. I had to get to her. I'd been breaking up a fight between two drunken hotheads when she'd called. It pissed me off to know that a drunken fight over a girl had made me unavailable when she needed me most.

As soon as I'd tossed the assholes to the street, I felt my phone vibrate to indicate her message. The damn thing nearly slipped from my hands when I

listened to her words. The room spun on its axis leaving me weak until my anger started to boil within me. I flew out of the club without any explanation to my staff. But it didn't fucking matter. Paige had gone to face Chris. She was putting herself in danger to save her friend.

I barely paid any attention to stop signs and traffic lights while racing out of town. Within minutes, however, I was driving through the state parks, one lane each way and not a single fucking stop sign for miles. If a cop had been out there tonight, I would have been fucked, not being able to stop from getting to Paige, but also not being able to lead a car in with me that was blasting their sirens and flashing their lights. Lucky

for me, the path was clear. Once I reached the interstate, it was another half hour before I could reach her.

I parked my truck in a wooded area at the base of a trail that led into the woods that surrounded The Center. I'd found it playing alone one day when Paige's mother had found some other activity for her daughter. I remember hiking out to the clearing we played in as children when I discovered it. The trail wasn't perfectly cleared, resembling more of a game trail used by animals as they traveled to the water. I'd followed it as it wove through the woods, eventually dumping out on a dirt service road. I'd forgotten about the path until the night I found Paige in the clearing.

My eyes grazed across it before landing on her huddled form by the tree.

The cold bite of the wind bit at my skin as I ran through the woods. My legs impacted with low brush and fallen branches, but I pushed through the pain, fighting to get to Paige. I ran until the clearing opened up in front of me. The moonlight ribboned down through the trees, breaking up the thickness of the black night. Within one thin wisp of light shown the eyes of an owl. An ominous tremor ran through my body as I remembered something my mother had told me when I was young. Seeing an owl was a foreshadowing of death, not necessarily yours, but of something or somebody you know. I wasn't as

superstitious as my mother, but seeing those eyes made me run harder, faster in her direction.

The path began to widen in front of me and I knew I was almost there. I could hear faint voices coming from the water line off to my right. The talking stopped suddenly, once again returning silence to the woods. The only sound I could hear was the pounding of my shoes against dirt and my labored breath from running.

When I emerged from the woods, my feet stopped suddenly. My eyes squinted at what looked like two people walking towards me. I slowly moved forward but stopped again when I

recognized what I was looking at. Chris walked behind Paige, one arm hidden behind her back. He was close to her, practically shoved against her, his head dropped forward as he whispered in her ear. She didn't respond, she didn't move, she barely even flinched as he spoke. Her expression was perfectly calm, unreadable, and, at least to me, dangerous. I'd taught her that look, not officially, but by teaching her what to do in a situation such as this. My eyes searched for Annie and I felt sick when I couldn't find her. I feared Chris had killed her before somehow subduing Paige.

I crept forward, hoping to get closer. Staying low, I moved through

the shadows, stopping every few feet. Chris and Paige were walking in my direction and I could have sworn she watched me as I crept towards her. Just as I neared them, a sudden wind gust blew, moving tree branches, and removing the shadows they provided me. As soon as I became visible, Chris stopped and jerked Paige back with him. Her eyes widened momentarily when she saw me, but her expression returned to one of boredom and disinterest. She was playing the game well.

I stood up and held my arms out, indicating I was unarmed. Chris jerked back on Paige, causing her face to contort in pain. This picture was

familiar. I'd seen it when I was seven. Except this time, it wasn't my mother with a gun to her head, it was Paige. My heart pounded and every muscle in my body twitched as I restrained myself from charging at him. If he pulled that trigger, my life was over. My very soul would be ripped from me.

“Well, isn't this fucking convenient?!” He pulled Paige down so that her ear was by his mouth. I could see as she fought against showing her pain, her discomfort of him being so close. “What the fuck, whore? Thought we had a fucking deal. I fucking told you to call NO ONE.”

She winced as the tip of the gun

was shoved forcefully against her head. “Guess, I’m just going to have to go back and kill your friend once I’m done with you after all.” He bit her earlobe, causing her to cry out and her knees to buckle. His voice raked against me when he next spoke. “And the added fucking bonus is I get to kill your sweet little boyfriend while you watch.”

Chris’ eyes met mine. “So, I’m curious? Did you fuck her after tossing me out that night at your club? It did take you a little while to walk her out to her bike.” He was taunting me, attempting to anger me into doing something stupid. It wouldn’t work.

I winced as anger shot through me,

my muscles constricted from my contained rage. Keeping my voice steady, I attempted to keep him talking. I didn't care if he pointed that fucking gun at me, but while it was still attached to Paige's head, there was nothing else I could do but keep him talking.

“Chris, just let her go, man. She's done nothing to you. She's not the person, who fucked you up, Chris. Just please...fuck...please, Chris, let her go.” I purposefully made myself sound helpless. I didn't want to clue him into the fact that I was about to rip his head from his body.

Chris snorted out laughter. “Don't try that shit with me, lover boy. I know

you were with the bitch when she talked to my *Daddy*. I don't care what that bastard told you. I took care of the bitch who raised me, and it's about time I take care of this one as well."

Paige's face remained stoic as she kept her eyes trained on me. I kept glancing over to her to find a blank expression, but this time, an apology was written across her face. I blinked against my own tears to see that she'd given up. She knew she was going to die, she'd accepted it.

Doesn't mean that I had, though...

"Chris, what will it fucking take, man? Money? I'll give you however

much you want, just don't you dare pull that trigger." I went down on one knee and then two. Chris laughed at me as he sneered down. Paige remained calm, but the sorrow in her eyes damn near killed me. I watched as Chris' finger twitched against the trigger. One wrong move and Paige was gone. He'd said he would kill me first, let her watch as I died. I needed that gun on me.

"You know what? Forget I offered anything." I pushed myself up from the ground and glanced at Paige. Her brows furrowed slightly in confusion, her eyes pleading with me to not do anything stupid. Well it was too late for that. I was stupid for having left her at the apartment in the first place. If I'd gone

with my gut, we might not be standing here at this moment. “I’m sorry, but you really are a fuck up, Chris. There’s no way in hell I’m going to beg you for shit. It’s obvious your *daddy* was right. You’re a filthy son of a bitch that can’t get laid unless you take it. So, no offense to Paige, but there is no way in fucking hell that I’m going to lower myself to you.”

I locked my eyes with Paige, begging her to trust me.

Chris pulled on her arms again, forcing her against him. Her eyes squeezed shut, but she showed no other indication of pain. “What the fuck ever man, I don’t have fucking time for this

shit!” He swung the gun in my direction and I took my chance. I lunged forward, intent to take him out at the knees. Rather than shooting me, he placed the gun back to Paige’s head.

I froze.

He laughed. “Not so tough when the bullet is pointed in her direction, are you?”

I looked over at Paige and died inside to see tears leaving trails down her cheek. The moonlight reflected off the moisture, further accenting the pain that escaped her eyes. Her bottom lip quivered, but she tried so hard to hide it. Her eyes burned into mine, almost as

if she was saying goodbye. I couldn't look away from her. She was all that mattered. Memories flashed between us; pigtails and climbing trees, hours in the sunlight and a night spent making love in the rain. Those memories spanned many years, but were so few compared to the amount of time we should have had together. I barely smiled so that only she would be able to tell. It always amused me how she could see anything in my expression, no matter how hard I attempted to hide it. But then my smile faltered as darker memories played through my mind. I remembered being huddled down with Paige and the gunshots that rang out when my parents died.

My eyes left Paige only briefly as I looked at the gun. When I saw Chris' finger tighten on the trigger, my heart stopped. I lunged forward again, desperate to get to them and knock the gun from his hand.

The sound of the gunshot stopped me in my tracks. It was familiar to me, a distant memory that meant the loss of the only person that mattered. I had to remind myself to breathe again, to move, to get to her.

“Paige!” The scream sounded like my voice, but it was disembodied, as if I were hearing it through speakers, rather than it having come from me.

My eyes widened when her body crumpled to the ground. Within seconds, I was down there beside her.

~

~~Paige~~

When Daemon walked out of the woods, my heart sank to my stomach. I was proud of myself for having led Chris away from Annie. But my strength and determination faltered when I was met with another weakness in my path. Daemon wasn't noticeable at first, and unless you knew to look for him, you wouldn't have seen that he was there. But I knew. My body reacted to his presence. No matter the situation, my

skin prickled when he was close by.

I kept my eyes trained on him as he moved through the shadows, silently willing him to turn back. My hopes were crushed when a gust of wind blew through the branches, removing the cover of shadow and making him visible to the mad man who held me captive.

As soon as Chris saw Daemon, he pushed against me, forcing my arms even farther up my back. Pain shot through my shoulders and my hands as muscles and tendons were bent in ways completely unnatural for my body. I bit the inside of my mouth attempting to keep from crying out from the pain, praying he didn't dislocate my shoulder.

“Well, isn’t this fucking convenient?! What the fuck, whore? Thought we had a fucking deal. I fucking told you to call NO ONE.”

My stomach twisted at his words and I knew he would kill Daemon. I watched as Daemon’s eyes moved back and forth between me and Chris. I could see the panic and rage swirling within the depths of his eyes. If it had been a different situation, I would have cried at seeing the pain within him; but I needed to be strong. For him...for me. I purposefully kept my face blank. I didn’t think we would both live through this, but I didn’t want that hopelessness to be the last thing Daemon saw on my face, either. I would remain blank, I

would remain strong...for us.

Daemon attempted to talk Chris down, but it was hopeless. He attempted weakness first, but then switched to anger. I could tell he was becoming desperate. He was afraid that I would die. When Daemon went down on knees, my spirit fractured and the heartache of watching him beg destroyed me as I watched. His eyes locked with mine, telling me everything I needed to know. Daemon had complete control over his expression...except for those eyes, I could always see what was going on behind those crystal blue eyes. I continued staring at him as he spoke to Chris. He pushed himself up from the ground, he was goading Chris into

aiming the gun at him. I started to cry, not able to stop the moisture from leaking from my eyes. I tried to stop them. I didn't want that to be the last thing Daemon saw.

“...It's obvious your *daddy* was right. You're a filthy son of a bitch that can't get laid unless you take it. So, no offense to Paige, but there is no way in fucking hell that I'm going to lower myself to you.”

Daemon's eyes found mine. I could tell he was trying to tell me something, he was begging for me to stay strong. I knew Chris would kill Daemon first. Daemon was the larger threat and Chris didn't have plans for him other than

death. But me? Yeah...Chris had plans for me.

When Chris aimed the gun at Daemon, my Heart. Fucking. Stopped. I braced myself for the inevitable, but Daemon kept fighting. He lunged towards us and Chris surprised me by returning the gun to my head. I found it odd that relief flooded me, but I knew Daemon wouldn't die if the gun was on me. I wanted the gun on me.

Daemon smiled. It was so slight, that Chris wouldn't notice. I knew he was doing it for me, that he was trying to tell me something, and I could only blink in response. He still had hope and I was saying goodbye.

When the gunshot rang through the trees, it echoed; bouncing back at me off of every solid surface that littered the path of the sound. My body instantly became heavy and my knees began to give out. Before falling to the ground, I looked up at Daemon, saw him scream as he was running towards me. But gravity was faster and I impacted with the ground with such force my teeth rattled against each other. My forehead slammed down and pain shot through my head. I could feel the warmth of the thick liquid soaking my hair and streaming down my face. My eyes opened to see the blood as it pooled in the dirt below me. I tried to move, tried to push myself up, but my arms wouldn't

work and my body felt like it was weighted down.

The weight was abruptly lifted from me and I felt Daemon's arms wrap around my body, pulling me from the spot where I'd landed. His hand came to my head to wipe away the blood that soaked my skin. He was talking to me, but I couldn't hear what he was saying. I was in shock, I think. Not able to connect with the reality of what had just happened. Daemon tilted my head up to look at him. His jaw was tight as his lips moved with silent words. He held me to him, his chest beating against me from his heavy breath. I laid my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes. I could feel the tears as they finally forced

their way out of me. Like a dam giving out to the strength of a river's current, those tears flowed freely from my eyes. My body began to warm up as Daemon held me against him, and when I was ready to connect with reality once more, I opened my eyes and looked up.

Chris' body lay motionless, face down in the dirt. He must have fallen on me and it was his blood that saturated my hair. I could see where the bullet had entered the side of his head. Blood pooled and swirled on the ground as it continued pouring from him. I looked up at Daemon as he stared down at Chris.

How?...

Daemon's body twisted around at the same time as I pushed up to look over his shoulder.

I gasped out at when I discovered her. She looked like a distant phantom covered in shadow. The branches of the trees swayed rendering partial and brief glimpses of illumination. The moonlight bounced off her hair and her nightgown appeared ethereal as it rippled from the winds that blew across her body. Her expression was blank, her body stood perfectly still. Her arms hung down at her side, and in her right hand, she held the gun I'd thrown down in the marsh. Small strings of smoke continued to leak from the weapon.

Annie.

I pushed myself up, attempting to run to her, but Daemon's hand came down on my arm. Her hand relaxed and the gun simply fell to the ground. She locked eyes with me before silently turning and walking back towards the building. My eyes followed her slow path, until she finally disappeared through the back door. Lights could be seen as they were turned on throughout the building. Daemon and I sat motionless with shock, but like a rubber band, reality snapped back and what had once seemed like a slow-motion filmstrip, now sped up to normal time.

I could hear the distant yelling. The

distinct voice of my father echoing out over the trees and water in the yard. My head turned to look back at Chris and I had time to see the cold, lifelessness in his still open eyes before Daemon could force my head back against his shoulder.

“Don’t look, Paige. Please, baby, don’t look.”

Those words. They were memories reborn. Two children, huddled together, holding on to each other in a moment where innocence was stolen and the ugliness of the world was introduced. My mind went back to that day, that parking lot, that car....and those words.

“Don’t look, Paige. Just don’t look over there. We just need to stay here and look at each other, okay? Promise me you will look at nothing but me.”

How two people could end up in this situation, not once, but twice, was beyond me. It didn’t seem fair, but then again, nothing was. Life hadn’t been fair when Daemon’s mother was killed and it hadn’t been fair when I watched his face in that rear window, growing smaller and less defined as distance was forced between us. It certainly hadn’t been fair when we’d been faced with the possibility of one watching the other one die. Maybe we were cursed after all. Or maybe, we’d both just been born into

lives marred by the ugly reality of abuse, anger and hatred.

My arms grasped to his body tightly, my body molded to his, and I was certain reality would take a different path this time. I wouldn't let him go again and forces didn't exist that could separate us from each other. The same situation, but there would be a different outcome. Two souls once forced apart by violence were now strengthened by the same circumstances, the same ugliness that existed within so many lives.

I clearly heard my father approach and stop just short of where Daemon and I were sitting. I never looked up. I

knew the scene my father's eyes were seeing, and I knew he looked over to check and make sure I was okay. I should have looked over at him just to let him know I hadn't been harmed. But I couldn't. My body wouldn't move apart from Daemon. I wasn't able to release him for even a second without feeling like my strength would weaken, that I would fall apart. Daemon was my strength in that moment...the only person that could hold me together.

He must have known. He never attempted to move me or push me from his body. He just held me. There, in the muck and mud, with the cold winds battering against our bodies, he sheltered me, he kept me strong. It wasn't until

blue lights reflected off the trees on the other side of the building and officers rushed in that we were forced to move. Even then, he never let me go. His arms came around me and he carried me, tight against his chest, and moved me to sit at the base of the camphor tree within which we'd spent so many hours as children. He continued to look on as police took photos of Chris' body, eventually covering it with a tarp once they'd documented the scene. Numerous people attempted to talk to us and Daemon would answer when it was necessary. Other than that, we remained quiet. There was no need for words, only the knowledge that when it was over, when the scene was cleared, we

would still be holding on to each other, never separated again.

As Daemon watched out over the yard, I trained my eyes up into the branches of the tree above us. I could hear the faint laughter of children, of a boy and a girl as they raced up to see who could climb the highest. I was safe within those memories, not thinking about the horror that was currently laid out in the grasses in front of us.

We moved again eventually as Daemon carried me to the front of the building. The police had left and so had the ambulances as the sun rose beyond the horizon. I stared up into the brilliant colors that slashed across the sky. Light

returned and with it, a new day. Daemon held me to him as my father pulled up into the front yard with Daemon's truck. He climbed out of the driver's side as Daemon moved around the truck to place me in the passenger's seat. After he placed the seatbelt around me, he backed away so my mother could come up to hug me. I felt her body shake with her tears, but I was numb, still in shock, and missing Daemon's heat against my body.

As we drove back to the apartment, Daemon kept his hand wrapped tightly around mine. He never let go of me, making sure to keep constant contact while he drove us home. Once we'd arrived, he'd taken me upstairs, running a bath and placing me in the water. He

washed the blood and mud from my body. My eyes followed the reds and browns as they swirled together, eventually escaping down the drain.

After I was clean and Daemon had dried me off, he carried me to his bed, laying me down on the soft mattress and blankets. His arm remained around me when he climbed in to lay beside me. I'm not sure if I fell asleep, or even if Daemon was ever claimed by slumber. I simply laid in the darkness, surrounded and comforted within the warmth of his body. I smiled to myself briefly as I realized that this time, when death had descended upon us, when the weight of madness and hatred had once again infected our lives; this time...I wasn't

forced to let him go.

Epilogue

Daemon's fingers drummed out a beat on my thighs, keeping time with the music as he sat next to me. Our legs swung out in front of the branch where we were seated and I looked down, excited not to be hyperventilating from panic. I mean...sure...the branch was only ten feet off the ground, but it was an accomplishment that I'd climbed up here at all.

We sat in our favorite tree in the backyard of The Center attending a large barbeque my parents were having in celebration of Annie going home. David had moved into Matt's new place, but they had an extra room for Annie. It'd been six months since the night Chris

died and Annie was finally ready to walk forward in life, to claim the happiness that she'd always deserved. Momma and Daddy hardly ever threw these types of parties as most women favored walking silently back into their lives, not wanting to acknowledge the beasts they conquered before leaving this place.

But not Annie. That little woman wanted to celebrate. Her victory was a long time coming, one she'd fought for, almost died as she'd accomplished it. I'd been nervous after that night with Chris. Not only did Annie have to get past the pain that was inflicted against her, but now, she had to deal with the knowledge that she'd taken a life. She'd

remained quiet the first week after it happened. Eventually, Momma convinced her to talk to Detective Troy. The police needed to complete their paperwork and Annie's testimony was key to their reports. Daddy was able to tell them how Chris had entered the building. A wire had been cut, one simple wire, and Chris had entered through a window without tripping the alarm. However, it was Annie who needed to tell them what happened between the time Chris had found her and the time that I'd arrived to The Center.

Detective Troy would never tell me what Annie had told her about that night. I wasn't sure if Annie asked that I not

know, or if Detective Troy was attempting to shelter me from the events that'd occurred prior to my arrival. On the surface, it bothered me not knowing what had been said or done before I could get to her. However, deep down, I was relieved with not having to carry the knowledge of any additional evil committed against her.

I felt Daemon's hand slide up and grasp mine, freeing me of my thoughts. He turned my hand over so that the sun glinted up to my face from the diamond on my finger. The ring was simple, but beautiful, and I groaned inwardly when I'd compared the size of the rock to my finger. I never really wanted a ring, never thought my life would head in that

direction, but then to see the size of the one that had been slipped on my finger, I'd grimaced briefly, before smiling up at the man who'd placed it there. It wasn't a romantic proposal, if the term 'proposal' could even be used. Two days after Chris had died, I was standing in the kitchen waiting for the coffee to brew. Daemon woke up to find me missing from the bed and came out in search of me. He'd spotted me in the kitchen and looked me over for a long time before turning to go back to the bedroom. When he came into the living room a second time, he proceeded into the kitchen and placed the blue jewelry box on the counter of the island beside me. I looked up from the coffee pot I'd

been watching and my eyes followed the lines of his abdomen, his chest and broad shoulders, continuing until they locked with the swirling blue of his eyes.

“It’s time, Damsel.”

I could feel my brows furrow in confusion at his statement. My gaze momentarily flicked down to the box on the counter before returning up to his. I arched an eyebrow, but I remained silent awaiting his explanation.

His eyes burned into mine and I could feel my skin prickle in response. His arm came down to run along the goosebumps on my arms as a grin

threatened the corner of his mouth. “Paige, when I saw you being led to the woods by Chris...when I saw the gun to your head...I thought our lives were ending in that moment.” He huffed out a breath before continuing. “I thought I was right in my fears that forever with you would never be long enough. After having been faced with the possibility of losing you...again...I made a decision while holding you under that tree...”

His hands moved to open the box and remove the ring. He grabbed my hand and slipped the ring on my finger before I could protest.

“...it’s time for you to stop being

stubborn, Paige. We've been through too fucking much to doubt that we were meant to be together. It's true that we can survive when we are apart, but we can only truly live when we are together. You're going to marry me, Paige, and it doesn't mean we'll stop fighting each other." He chuckled. "... To be honest, I'm looking forward to each and every day that I have with you, pissing you off and then making it up to you all over again."

I pulled my eyes from his and looked down at the ring. Just as I went to look at him, the coffee machine beeped. I smiled when I said, "Coffee's ready." Shrugging, I pulled my hand from his and went to make myself a

cup. I knew he was smiling behind me and I couldn't contain the smile that beamed on my lips as well.

So, yeah, it wasn't the most romantic proposal in history, but it was perfect for us. We still haven't set a date and Daemon constantly argues with me about taking his name. It wasn't because I was fighting against being his wife; it was simply because I thought 'Paige Pierce' sounded stupid. I'd told him I would marry him, but he'd have to take my name. 'Daemon Stone' was preferable. I laughed each time we had the argument and I told him he should be careful what he wished for. It wasn't a daily battle like he'd predicted, but it was a battle nonetheless.

Even though I still argued, my heart danced daily at the sight of him. The boy who'd held my heart now would become the man who connected to my soul...he'd become my husband. The word felt foreign, as if it should never have applied to me, but sometimes fate had different plans than those we'd imagined for ourselves. I've spent many nights staring at him, recognizing the irony that it was because of a father's madness was that we ever met and were parted; and it was because of the madness of an abused son that we were forced back together so suddenly. Two very dark and heart wrenching circumstances that, ultimately, led to light...to our love. Life is funny that

way. Sometimes, beautiful dreams can be born from nightmares; a person just has to pay attention to find it.

“Hey, you ready to get down from here and join the party?” I shook myself once again from my thoughts and looked up into his sparkling eyes. Nodding my head, I moved to climb down, taking his hand as we made our way to the ground below. My feet only touched solid ground for a moment before Daemon picked me up and brought his mouth to mine. His lips moved possessively against mine, the warmth of his mouth seeping in, lighting a fire within me. He pulled away, leaving me breathless; grinning as he reached out to help steady me.

He grinned mischievously as I blinked up at him. “What was that for?”

His eyes filled with mirth and he winked before responding. “Oh... nothing. I was just watching you and thinking about how you’ll be the future Mrs. Pierce. ‘Damsel Pierce’....sounds good, don’t you think?”

My eyebrow arched. I reached up, placing my hands on his shoulders like I was going to kiss him. As soon as his guard dropped, I used my foot to sweep his feet out from under him, while pushing back on his shoulders. His ass hit the ground and a small dust cloud exploded up around him from the impact. My smile brightened as I looked

down at his surprised expression.

“Who’s the Damsel now?”

Those dimples of his popped out from the dangerously seductive grin that graced his lips. The deep timbre of his voice was like silk as he responded, “Just wait until I get you home, beautiful. I have every intention of showing you exactly who the Damsel is in this relationship.”

My body shivered at the decadent threat. “You’ll have to catch me first.”

I sprinted away from the tree, laughing as Daemon pushed up from the ground and started chasing me. When we approached the veranda, Momma’s

head shook as she watched us run in. I hid behind her as soon as I could reach her. Daemon's and my laughter echoed along the ceiling of the veranda and Momma smiled when she asked, "You two will never change, will you?"

The look in Daemon's eyes was enough to make my knees weak. "Ms. Stone, I can promise you that I'll be chasing your daughter every day for the rest of my life."

Momma laughed delightedly as she stepped aside, leaving me exposed. "Well then, don't let me stand in the way. I'm smart enough to know that you should never stand in between a man and the woman he loves. Sorry, baby girl,

but you're on your own.”

I gasped at Momma's betrayal and then shrieked as Daemon ran up and grabbed me. He swung me around before placing me back on my feet. One beautiful blue eye winked before he leaned down to take my mouth with his. Our moment was interrupted by my father's voice.

“David?! Have you lost your mind, son? There's no way that is going to work!”

Daemon and I looked over to find Daddy shaking his head in disbelief as he stared down at David. My eyes followed his and I my jaw dropped

when I saw David strapping tennis rackets to his shoes. He looked up at Daddy when he'd finished and smiled.

“This is going to work, Dad, just wait and see. I researched it. The tennis rackets will be just like snow shoes. If I can extend the surface of my foot, there's no way that stupid swamp is going to suck me down again.”

Daddy was laughing so hard that he was rendered speechless. I grabbed Daemon's hand and together, we walked over to stand next to Daddy. My voice was pitched high from my shock. “David, why in the hell are you even walking out there? Just stay away from the marshes.”

His eyes narrowed in rebellion and determination. “Hell no!” He looked out over the backyard and watched as the kids ran around playing tag. His eyes eventually found and followed Alex and Matt as they walked beside Ava while she took photos of the wetlands. His arm extended out and he shook a finger in the direction of the wetlands. “It seems like everybody else is able to walk around without getting sucked into the muck and I will NOT be excluded just because the freaking swamp thinks I’m tasty. If it works, I’m going to sell them and market them as ‘Swamp Shoes’! It’ll be a huge hit with the tourists, I’m sure.” His expression turned to one of pride and satisfaction as

he pushed himself up, ready to test his idea.

David began to walk out towards the water, taking large steps in order to compensate for the rackets strapped to his shoes. He resembled a duck as his body rolled with every step he took. Daemon and I almost fell over from laughter just watching him walk, but when David finally reached the marshes and was sucked into the mud, Daemon and I laughed even harder, clutching at our sides from the cramping. We held on to each other, struggling to keep ourselves upright as we watched Alex and Matt run over and attempt to pull him free.

Daddy shook his head again as a low whistle escaped him. Turning to Daemon and I, he said, "I don't know about you two, but I am seriously concerned about that boy." I was wiping away the tears from my face as Daddy walked over to clap Daemon hard on the shoulder. "Come on, son. Let's cook up some food before everyone starves." Daemon squeezed my hand before releasing me to assist my father at the grill.

I eventually made my way over to a hammock that swung between two trees in the yard. It swayed softly as a summer breeze blew across me, carrying with it the sweet smell of Jasmine. My eyes followed the dragonflies flitting out

amongst the grasses and a sense of peace and serenity overtook me. I'd come full circle. Despite the circumstances of the years that preceded me, despite the pain, the loneliness and the effects of decisions made throughout those long years, with Daemon, I was once again whole.

“Feels good, doesn't it?” I looked up to see that Momma had followed me over.

I half-smiled at her in question. “What do you mean?”

She patted my shoulder with her hand before sitting down and hugging me to the side of her body. “I mean, baby

girl, when you reach the end of the tunnel, when the world opens back up to you so that you can, once again, have room to breathe. It has to feel good.” She took a deep breath as her eyes filled with memories. “There was only one other time in your life that I saw you shine so brightly with hope and happiness, and it was when you were with that boy as a child.”

She looked over at Daemon as he listened to Daddy’s instructions about the grill. “If you would have asked me twenty years ago if this day would come, I wouldn’t have answered ‘yes’. However, it appears I was a fool to believe that the twin to your soul wouldn’t survive what Daemon has been

through; to believe that events in his life would poison him and change him into something ugly.” Turning back to me, she smiled sweetly. “You both amaze me. You are two shining examples of the reason your Daddy and I built this place. You both have walked such dark paths, your lives littered with pain and betrayal; but you were both able to walk away from it, to find beauty and love on the other side. I never wanted you to have to fight, baby girl. I wanted an easier life for you than what it’s been.”

I reached up to wipe away a tear that escaped her eye. She laughed suddenly and batted my hand away. Her eyes locked on something behind me as she said, “And, *that* girl....Good Lord,

that girl deserves a medal...”

I turned to see Annie running out from the woods behind us.

“...I guess like does attract like after all, because Annie and Daemon... all of your friends, really...you’re some of the strongest people I’ve ever had the pleasure to know. It doesn’t surprise me that you hold on to each other as tightly as you do. Truthfully, I would have never guessed it of Annie, but I think she’s one of the most amazing women I’ve seen. Not only did she walk through a war and come out alive at the end, she came out stronger, brighter... she survived and she did it with such grace and resilience that it’ reopened my

cynical eyes to the true power of a person's spirit."

Straightening my body, my eyes met Momma's. The tears from just a second before had been replaced with pride as she continued to watch Annie. Tapping me on the shoulder again, she pushed off the hammock, "You all have filled me with renewed hope. I'm sorry for the events that brought us here, but I'm not sorry for the results." Sniffling, she wiped the moisture on her cheeks before turning to walk away to help Daddy with the food.

Laying back down on the hammock, I smiled as the sound of children's laughter heightened my spirit. I was

taken back to a day when that sound had been made by a boy and a girl who would eventually have to fight to come back together. My eyes scanned over the water line and I smiled when I saw Annie running through the grasses. Her face was covered by a broad smile and she held herself up, strong and determined. She'd changed in the last year, but I knew her life would continue to improve. She'd once said that she would compete against me as the toughest woman around here. Little did she know that she'd left me in the dust a long time ago. I could only hope to be as strong as her if faced with the circumstances of her life. My eyes continued to follow her as she walked

out across the yard, her head turning to look back every once in a while in search of something. Eventually, Logan came running out of the woods, causing Annie to shriek as he chased her through the yard. They were only friends at this point, but everybody could see the love in their eyes when they looked at each other. Annie had called him out of the blue about a month after Chris had died and he had been her rock ever since.

I closed my eyes, completely satisfied while I laid in the warm light of the sun. When the hammock suddenly swung, my arms shot out in an attempt to steady myself. Soft, melodic laughter caught my attention and I opened my eyes to two sparkling emeralds. The

corners of Annie's eyes crinkled from her smile; her breathing was heavy from running.

“Hey, gorgeous. Sorry to disturb you, but you looked way too peaceful relaxing over here all by yourself.” Annie's amusement was evident in her voice. I smiled instantly in response, before reaching up to pull her down with me. Her feet barely extended to the bottom of my calves; her short stature made more apparent as we laid side by side. Despite her small size, I knew I was hugging onto a girl that had the spirit of a giant.

“Having fun with Logan?” I moved to nudge her shoulder with mine, just as

laughter escaped her.

Her eyes softened while she watched Logan talking to Alex and Ava down by the water line. “He makes it difficult to takes things slow, I can tell you that. It’s like a small ball of sunshine was placed inside him and you just want to curl up within its warmth.” Her head turned as her eyes shot to mine. “I always have fun with him. He doesn’t push things and he stays right by me when I slip backwards. I swear, sometimes it’s like he’s holding out his hand, pulling me through my darkest memories; kind of like a life preserver, you know?”

My body shifted and I found myself

staring up into the clouds that rolled above us. "I know what you mean." My thoughts drifted to Daemon, to the image of the two of us pulling each other through the storm. "In all honesty, though, I know you would have pulled through with or without him. You are one tough chick, Annie." I grabbed her hand with mine and squeezed. "I think you won our contest. You are definitely more impressive than I could ever be. Shit! You saved our lives. All three of us." I paused for a moment and my voice was barely a whisper as I asked, "Are you okay...you know...with what you had to do?"

I rolled over to rest my head on my hand, so I could look down at her.

Annie smiled up at me. “I like to think of it as we saved each other.” Her eyes darkened momentarily; but then it was gone, replaced with resolve and determination. “Your Momma is right when she teaches about how we need to help each other, about how we need to stand together against those that hurt us. I’m not sorry for what I did...not one bit. I know I should be, taking a life and all...but I just don’t care. You saved me in our apartment that night; you and Daemon both. I was just returning the favor. Would you have felt bad if you were the one who killed him?”

I instantly responded, “Hell no!”

She nodded. “Exactly; so then you

know there's no need to be worrying about me."

My smile traveled ear to ear at her words. "Fine; but I have to ask...how in the hell did you pull that shot off?"

Annie grinned and shrugged a shoulder. "You don't get named after a woman like Annie Oakley and not get taught to shoot as you're growing up. I guess that's one of those things you didn't know about me. My parents were gun nuts, they made sure that I knew how to handle a weapon."

My jaw dropped, but then I shook my head in amazement before laying back down beside her. We swung for a

while, laughing and talking as we tried to make out shapes in the clouds above us. Eventually, Logan approached, pulling Annie up and to his side.

“If you’ll excuse us, Paige, I need to borrow Annie for a moment. Ava wanted to get some pictures of us before dinner.”

I saluted my approval and watched as they walked out to pose for Ava. My eyes were heavy as I started to doze off in the warmth of the Florida summer. The sound of the breeze was my lullaby as a blanket of contentment covered me. The added sound of laughter comforted me into a blissful sleep. I awoke to Daemon’s hand on my cheek, his

dimples poking out from the smile that graced his handsome face.

“Rise and shine, beautiful. The food’s ready and you need to eat.”

My eyes peaked open and I squinted against the sunlight that backlit Daemon’s face. Memories surged forth of a small blond boy who smiled down at me years before. Pushing myself up, I stretched before taking Daemon’s hand to follow him to sit down at the tables my parents had set up within the veranda.

Eventually we were all seated, laughing at jokes being told, small bits of food being thrown across the table at

each other. Every face was lit up with a smile, every person was strengthened by the family we had become.

Just like any story, ours wasn't perfect. We weren't all born into lives of comfort and happiness. We had to fight to find that joy that we'd gained. Our lives had been bent up and altered by the circumstances and events that plagued us, but, more importantly, we'd endured and survived the battles that we'd fought. Hatred, anger, abuse; those three things had spread out into each of our lives, like a disease that slowly infected every person it contacted. Some of us were the recipients of the abuse...Daemon and Chris especially. I often wondered if someone had taken the

time to love Chris like Frank had loved Daemon, if his life would have turned out differently. But there was no one to stick up for Chris, no one to finally reach out and stop what was being done to him. Despite his actions, my heart broke for him as I wondered about the person he could have become had his circumstances been different.

However, the effects of the actions of both Chris' and Daemon's parents had continued to spread beyond the children they were enacted against. I was affected, my parents, Alex and Annie; on and on down the line of lives until even strangers weren't immune to it. I thought about Amanda Cleary, about her parents and loved ones, about the people at

Tomb who'd almost lost their lives when the building caught fire. Those people would never understand the truth about why they were hurt and why their lives were forever changed.

I looked up at Alex as he tormented David about, once again, being sucked into the swamp. Even though his words were directed at David, Alex' eyes never left Ava. A smile peaked out from my lips to realize that he'd found love, regardless of what it had been done to him in his relationship with me, he'd found it again. I was damaged when he met me, and I left him a damaged person when we parted. Ava had no idea how much I appreciated her at this moment. She'd mended the broken heart I'd left in

my wake.

A knee brushed against mine and I turned to look up into the smiling eyes of Daemon. His brow arched above his eye as his hand wrapped around mine. He'd noticed my distant thoughts and silently questioned whether I was alright. I smiled up at him in response when I realized I was better than alright. I was strong, I was happy, and once again, the empty space within my soul had been filled by a blue eyed boy, in a magical yard, surrounded by the people who loved us.

We were finally free. We could breathe again. Above all, we had prevailed in the face of adversity and,

together, we had conquered the demons that haunted us.

The End

Future books in this series will be:

“Captured” – Alex and Ava’s story

and

“Changed” – Annie and Logan’s story

Anticipated release: early 2014

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