

Control



M S Willis

CONTROL

By M.S. Willis

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Control is dedicated to John and Mary

Ann Willis

They are loved and missed every single
day

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Prologue

“Paige, baby, run outside and play for a little while. Daddy and I need to attend to our new guests who are arriving shortly. It’s best you remain out of sight.”

Those were the instructions given to me each time a new woman arrived to The Center – an abused woman’s facility operated by my parents in the Florida panhandle. They always attempted to shelter me from the sight of the new arrivals as they entered through the large double doors at the front of the facility.

My curiosity got the better of me after the first dozen times I was sent away; and on one particular day, I ignored Momma's instructions and found a small hiding place in perfect view of the entrance.

When those large, foreboding doors opened, the sunlight flooded the entryway, backlighting the petite woman walking through. I was momentarily blinded by the change in light and I could only make out her silhouette as she entered. I rubbed at my eyes to adjust my vision and I gasped when she came into clear view.

Her head hung low and her small frame was folded in on itself. Her eyes

were swollen and bruised and they held no life in them; almost as if her soul had left her physical body, leaving only a shell remaining of the woman she had once been. One of her arms was tucked into her body by a sling and my father walked in behind her carrying a single suitcase containing the only personal belongings she had left in the world.

My five year old eyes were opened wide at the physical marks she wore; reminders of a battle she had recently fought. My heart broke for her as I took in the sight. It was then that I noticed a smaller form tucked discreetly behind the woman's legs. A boy who looked to be my age, or maybe a few years older, shyly glanced around

at his new surroundings.

Momma approached the boy and held out a stuffed animal as a welcome. His little body tensed at her approach and I couldn't understand why anybody would be scared of Momma. When his face came into view, I saw the reason for his hesitancy. His face and arms were marred with ugly bruises and I wondered how he had been hurt so badly. His mother's good arm reached around to comfort him, to let him know he was safe and secure in their new environment.

"It's okay Buddy. These people will help us. I promise we'll be safe here."

Buddy. I didn't know at the time how much that small, shy boy would end up affecting my life. After his arrival, I left him alone for a few days despite my growing curiosity and want for a new friend. He warmed up to me eventually and soon, we clung to each other as only best friends could. Momma called us 'soul mates', but I never understood what that meant. All I knew was that in the short amount of time I had him in my life, I would have done anything for him. I loved him almost immediately when I met him. He teased me relentlessly as any young boy would do to a girl, but he never let me cry or refuse to fight back. In his own way, he was teaching me to defend

myself, to guard my heart, to endure in a world full of pain and abuse; the only world he knew.

On my sixth birthday, Buddy's mom died. The violent manner of her death was enough to traumatize any person, but especially a child. We clung to each other as we witnessed her death. But that wasn't the worst part. Buddy was taken from me that day and I barely had enough time to make a pact that we would find each other again. I gave him the only thing I had as a reminder of our pact; a delicate dragonfly necklace that was a gift to me on what should have been a happy and special day.

My innocence was shattered that day and walls were built around me that would never allow another person close to my heart. The heartache was too much to bear. The loss of Buddy was too much to endure.

Maybe it was a mixture of that day and the constant reminder of pain that existed within the walls of The Center that did this to me. I never again allowed anybody close to me; never relied on another person for anything; never trusted that my heart wouldn't be broken if it opened to another person.

The psychologists said that it was normal for me to hold onto Buddy's

memory as tightly as I did. They believed the trauma of watching his mother die was a turning point in my young life. They believed that I would eventually outgrow the attachment I had to him.

I didn't. I carried Buddy's memory into my adult life. I still hoped he would return one day to find me as he promised he would.

Maybe that makes me crazy. I don't care. I'm safe. I rely on myself like Buddy taught me. If I fall down, I pick myself up and keep going. I don't feel sorry for myself, but rather, I fight. No person can break me the way I'd seen those other women broken.

Buddy is the person who I have to thank for those hard lessons about life.

I grew up independent. I grew up strong. I didn't mind being alone because I was whole within myself. Except for that one part; the part that left that day with my best friend, with my only love, with my Buddy.

Chapter One

Well, well; check this jackass out.

I laughed to myself while I slouched down low in a company car and watched Mr. Marcus Weber water skiing on the lake in front of me. I pulled out my video equipment and began recording as he shot back and forth over the wake being kicked up by the boat; catching air and landing hard each time he crossed.

I'm working as a private investigator and I'm conducting surveillance on a trick skier who, according to his bodily injury lawsuit,

should be laid up in bed with a neck brace while doped up on some pretty decent pain killers. This case is just one of the many I have performed doing contract work for an investigation firm in town. I enjoy the job but it isn't one I ever imagined I would one day be working. While attending college completing my degree in humanities, I applied for a job with the company as a part time receptionist. I eventually worked my way up in the company to the intern investigator position. After two years of training, I was a full-fledged, licensed PI. I completed my humanities degree, but quickly learned that, in reality, the degree was worthless unless I wanted to spend my life traveling with

the local renaissance fair. Since dressing as a wench and slinging beer to tourists wasn't really *my thing*, I accepted the training and agreed to work for the company while I decided what I wanted to be when I grew up. Don't get me wrong. For all intents and purposes, and according to Florida Law, I was 22 years old and considered an adult. However in my head, I was still as lost as a freshman on her first day of high school.

Being an investigator wasn't bad. It paid the bills, I had a flexible schedule, and it fed the curious side of my nature. There were days when I pretended like I was James Bond, and other days when I pretended I was a

super spy ninja. I haven't yet attempted cartwheeling myself in to get the money shot, but I have every intention to do so in the future. I'm just waiting for the perfect moment and I know that when that moment presents itself, I will miraculously not be a total klutz.

I set my small camera on the dash of the car and reached over for the burger I bought myself on the way over to the lake. I continued to watch Mr. Weber ski his little heart out. I will be the first to admit the guy is impressive. Even when he falls, he does so gracefully. I'm completely amazed that even with his back injuries, this guy is able to move so fluidly on the water. His physicians should seriously consider

using this guy as a success story and flaunt his amazing recovery as a testament to their ability to heal.

This particular case is not so bad. It definitely tops last week's case when I had the privilege to conduct a three day surveillance gig following a construction worker. At ten hours a day for three days, I calculated I got to watch thirty exhilarating hours of scratching. That poor man spent his entire day scratching; scratching his head, scratching his arm, scratching his ass and scratching his crotch. At one point he even pulled a wildlife move and scratched his back on a post. It was like watching the Discovery Channel. I was supposed to be looking out for a supposed shoulder

injury suffered on the job. After the thirty hours were up, I realized Mr. Construction Worker was probably telling the truth about his shoulder. Only problem was, if his shoulder was actually injured, it had to be the result of the non-stop scratching. You don't know how many times I had to stop myself from running over to the store and buying the man a little monkey backscratcher or a flea collar. But that would blow my cover. So I didn't.

I ate my food and continued enjoying Mr. Weber's acrobatics for close to two hours and decided to pack up and move along when it looked like it was time for him to come back to shore. I drove to my main office to drop off the

equipment and car. Being that it was a Saturday, nobody was at the office and that was fine by me. Although I got along with my co-workers for the most part, I wasn't feeling very sociable today. Scooting on out of there without having to hear about the receptionist's boyfriend problems or having to side step the romantic advances of the new video editor was a plus.

After stowing away my equipment, I grabbed my helmet off my desk and made my way back down to the parking garage. I threw my hair back into a quick, messy braid, pulled on my helmet and climbed onto my bike. I turned the ignition and sat there for a moment warming up the bike and enjoying the

echoed rumbling that spread through the deserted garage. I pulled out of the garage and turned left to go to the apartment I shared with my two best friends, Annie and David.

Fortunately for me, my apartment was only five minutes from where I worked and I was climbing the three flights of stairs up to our place in no time. The door was open and I pushed my way in to find Annie, David and my other friend, Alex, sitting in the living room arguing over what they should be watching on T.V. Annie was arguing her case for the latest reality show, while David was emphatic that he couldn't miss the newest episode of one of his many fashion shows. Alex kept

interjecting that Annie and David needed to let reality T.V. go and allow themselves to enjoy the zombie flick that was on the screen. Being that Alex held the remote, and the fact that he had at least 50 pounds of pure muscle on the both of them, Alex was clearly winning this argument.

“Damn it you two, can you shut your mouths for one second so I can hear what’s going on in the movie?!”

David turned to Alex with a scorned look on his face and then crossed his arms to emphasize his disapproval with Alex’s choice in entertainment. “Sure Alex, because missing even a second of this riveting

dialogue and images of blown up body parts is really going to ruin the whole plot. I'll tell you how it ends...they ALL die.”

Annie giggled at David's remark and added “I mean really. There was a zombie apocalypse. Do you really think that even if they survive the fight, they aren't going to end up dying later when they run out of food and clean water? It's an apocalypse, there is no one left to maintain civilization. Do the main characters really think they are going to be able to survive for long?!”

Alex's jaw dropped and then closed again. “See Annie, that right there is the attitude that will get you

killed *when* the zombie apocalypse does happen. And *when* it happens, don't look to me to save your ass because I can tell you now, I don't need Mrs. Pessimism slowing me down." Alex shot Annie one of his signature smirks and returned his attention to his zombie flick.

Oh. Dear. Lord.

My body started to tremble.

Not the zombie apocalypse debate. Anything but that. Horrifying images of the 'Great Zombie Debate of 2012' started flashing through my head. Five, count them, FIVE weeks of non-stop zombie arguments. Notes left on tables,

marathon text messaging from across the room, shouting matches at 3:00 in the morning. The worst was when they got creative with the fake body parts left in showers and singing telegrams performed by the creepy zombie clown. I was the unfortunate victim of that particular message and to this day I have to restrain myself from hiding behind furniture every time someone knocks at the door.

I attempted my best invisible impression and started heading to my bedroom to get a shower, silently chanting my magical mantra as I went.

I'm invisible, I'm invisible, I'm invisible...

“Paige! You’re home!” Alex yelled. “Come here for a second, I need your help convincing our dear friend Annie here that she needs to seriously consider her plans for when the zombie apocalypse happens.” Alex shot Annie a pointed look.

Crap.

I turned back to look over at their expectant expressions and moved back towards the living room. Alex jumped up from his chair, grabbed me by the hips and pulled me back down to sit on his lap. I shivered when Alex wrapped his muscular arms around me and nuzzled his face into my hair. Even though Alex and I were only “friends”,

our arrangement also included “with benefits.” We dated for a short period after meeting in college, but I had to break it off after realizing Alex was looking for an eventual housewife, and I was anything but that. Having been raised in the Center and with my past experiences, I had become cynical when it came to the idea of happily ever after. I held on to my independence like it was as necessary to life as breathing. But even though I knew I could never have a relationship with Alex, I saw no problem with continuing the “benefits” portion while we were not involved with other people. We’ve had these benefits for two years now and I’m very pleased with how everything has turned

out. Alex is incredibly beautiful and he is somehow directly linked to my southern regions. If a girl has to have a benefits situation, having one with jet black hair, silver eyes, a chiseled jaw and a body that is so wonderful artists should memorialize it in sculptures, is a preferable situation.

“So, tell Annie and David here why they need to prepare for the upcoming apocalypse. I believe it’s safe to assume that the CDC is aware of this information but is hiding it from us for fear of starting a public panic.” Alex paused and looked up at me with a smile that could drop panties from here to New York City.

I shook my head and muttered “I’m not doing this Alex.”

“Why not?!”

I pushed myself up from Alex’s lap and turned to point to the three of them. “No! This is not starting again.” I was using my best authoritative voice for this speech. “Don’t you three remember last year and the great debate of which we will not speak? One of you,” I glared at Alex, “decided a zombie clown, a freaking ZOMBIE CLOWN, was a good method for passing along a message. And who was the innocent victim caught in the crossfire? Me! Do you know how much the therapy cost me? Psychologists

aren't cheap!"

Alex started to snicker and I kicked him in the shin. "Ow! What the hell Paige?! Come on, it was funny. Just admit it."

My anger knew no bounds. I turned to Alex and started a full on assault. Kicking, slapping, hair pulling, you name it. Alex just started laughing and things got serious. "That's it Alex, I've had it!" I ran to Annie's room, threw open the door and snatched the stuffed pig from her childhood collection. I ran back to the living room and threw the pig into Alex's lap. Alex let out a scream that I wouldn't describe as masculine and tossed the pig as far

across the room as he could.

“Not cool, Paige! I have a phobia that I told you about in confidence, and then you turn around and use that information to torture me?” He let out an exasperated huff and ran his hands through his messy hair. “Seriously, you owe me an apology.”

My face must have been a scarlet red by this point. “I owe YOU an apology?! You?! I was musically assaulted by a ZOMBIE CLOWN!! That just happens to be MY phobia. What do you not understand about that?” I started pacing the living room to keep myself from continuing my former assault.

It was obvious Alex was trying to contain his laughter. “Number one, I didn’t know you had a phobia of zombie clowns and number two, the clown wasn’t intended for you and number three, it was funny.” He chuckled. “I can’t be blamed.”

I threw my arms up in defeat. “Fine. If you three want to argue over the stupid zombies again, that’s fine. Just leave me out of it this time.”

“So, why the fear of pigs, Alex?” David interjected.

Alex shuddered and sat back down in his chair. He sighed and then explained his traumatic story of being

chased by a pig while visiting his uncle's farm when he was a kid. One of the pigs had escaped its pen and for some reason it had a strange attraction to Alex. Alex apparently ran from the animal for a half hour straight before someone finally came out and saw what was going on. They thought it was the funniest thing in the world because they had never seen a pig chase someone like that before. Alex was never the same after that incident.

When Alex was finished recanting his traumatic tale, David and Annie were silent. Within seconds they burst out in coordinated laughter and tears ran down their faces from the force of it.

“Shut up guys! It’s not funny! I’d like to see what either of you would do if you were chased by a rabid pig!” They laughed harder and started clutching their sides from the cramping.

I started back towards my bedroom and shouted to them over my shoulder. “Well, this has been a good talk guys, really, but I need to get a shower and get ready to go.” I walked in my room and locked the door behind me. I was sweaty from my earlier stakeout and needed to rinse myself off. Even with air conditioning, a parked car in Florida can feel like an oven. I stripped off my shirt, jeans and underwear and then turned on the water. While I waited for that to heat, I reached

in my closet and pulled out some clothes to wear to the club.

When steam started billowing out from the bathroom, I jumped into the shower. My muscles immediately relaxed on contact with the hot water. My shoulders dropped and an automatic sigh escaped my lips. I stood there for a few minutes enjoying the instant relaxation and then grabbed the shampoo. I lathered up my hair and was turning around to rinse.

“Hey Paige.”

The sound of my name caused me to jump five feet into the air and I had to grab onto the shower head to keep from

falling. My eyes had involuntarily opened while I was keeping myself upright and the soap burned like acid in my eyes.

“Sonofabitch!” I turned my face into the spray and rubbed at my face to get the soap off. “What the hell David?! I’m naked in here! What are you doing in my bathroom and how did you unlock my door?!”

“Take a valium Paige. You have nothing I haven’t seen before. And those locks on your doors are worthless, they can be opened with a wire hanger in no time.”

Mental note: buy key locks for

my bedroom door.

I pulled the curtain aside and glared at the sneaky intruder. “What do you mean you’ve seen a naked woman before? You’re gay.”

David chuckled. “Well, yeah, I’m gay. But I had a ‘straight-curious’ moment in high school that didn’t work out. The boobs on that girl kept getting in my way. Although with you, I guess that wouldn’t be too much of a problem, Ms. 34-B. I could always consider giving it another shot.” He wriggled his eyebrows and smiled.

David shrieked when I grabbed the removable shower head and aimed it

over the curtain at him. “Seriously David, what is so important, it couldn’t wait until after I was done in the shower. I could have been masturbating! You really need to look up the meaning of the word ‘privacy’ in the dictionary, Mister.”

“Oh please, you? Masturbating? Hardly. I believe Alex has you well taken care of in that area. I know that if I had man candy like that to play with, I definitely wouldn’t be wasting my time wrestling the Cyclops, if you know what I mean.” He pulled the shower curtain back this time to drive his point home with a pointed glare, then released the curtain to sit back down on the counter. “Anyways, my reason for *gracing* you

with my presence is that I'm curious as to where you are going this evening."

I turned off the water. "You know what they say about curiosity." I shoved my hand out from behind the curtain. "Towel please." I waved my hand around thinking that it would make him move faster.

"First, tell me where you are going."

Damn. No such luck. I sighed. "I'm going to Tomb tonight. There's a new band playing and I could really use some music induced nirvana.

David's eyes brightened as he

handed me my towel. I pulled it behind the curtain, proceeded to make myself decent and stepped out.

“Tomb, you say.” He put his finger to his mouth as if thinking. “You know, it’s been a while since I’ve accompanied you there. Maybe tonight I could be a good friend and act as your fabulous male escort.” He winked.

I looked over at David who was a force all on his own. David was just shy of six feet tall and his lean, athletic build could make any man, or woman, jealous. He kept his dark brown hair long and it fell right to his jawline. But it was David’s magnetic personality that attracted a person the most. He never

was affected by tension and would be the first to lighten anybody's mood.

“Oh no. Not again.” I put my hand up as if to stop his thought process. “There's no way I'm taking you back there. You remember what happened last time.”

He crossed his arms in protest. Turning his nose up at me he muttered, “It wasn't that bad.”

My eyebrows shot up to my hairline as I performed my best parrot impression. “Wasn't that bad?! Wasn't that bad?! You're kidding me, right?” I let out a humorless laugh and pointed at him. “You decided it would be a good

idea to pirouette in the middle of the pit while calling out ‘gay man moshing’. You were elbowed in the eye, fell back and hit your head, and then I had to drag you out of there and take you to the hospital. Don’t you remember the broken left orbital, or did the concussion cause you to lose your memory?”

David blanched. “Well, pfft, if you put it *that* way, it sounds all bad. I just remember that I had a wonderful evening spending quality time with my best lady friend.” David put his hands in front of him in a prayer pose and gave me his best puppy dog look with his gorgeous honey brown eyes.

“No! I’m not taking you with me.

If you want to go in there separately, I can't stop you, but I'm not going with you again so that I can babysit you. And if you do go, do us all a favor and stay out of the pit!"

David poked out his bottom lip but then quickly smiled. "Sigh. I guess you are right. I'd say I would stay out of there, but I can't be trusted around sweaty men running themselves into each other. It's probably for the best. I still get headaches and I don't think my face is symmetrical anymore because of that last time."

I laughed and pointed to the door. "Out." David turned and retreated back to the living room and I proceeded to get

dressed.

I had chosen a plain black tank top and my favorite pair of distressed dark blue jeans. At 5'10" and with a skinny frame, finding a pair of jeans that accented my butt and were long enough was a difficult task. When I found these, I bought two other pairs just like them because they fit so well. I pulled on my black knee high, lace-up riding boots and walked back into my bathroom to dry my hair. I left my long blond locks hanging loose down my back and applied some light mascara and lip gloss. After spritzing on some of my favorite perfume, I felt ready to go.

I walked out into the living room

to a low whistle coming from Alex. I ignored him and continued my quest into the kitchen to make a quick cup of coffee before heading out. As I stood there staring menacingly at the slow brewing coffee machine, I felt a pair of muscular, tattooed arms wrap around me. Alex swept my hair aside and began kissing a line up the side of my neck.

“Where to tonight, Paige?” The low timbre of his voice caused goose bumps to race up my arms and I reached behind me to pull him in closer.

“Tomb. There’s a new band playing tonight and I’ve heard good things about them so I thought I’d go check them out.”

Alex turned me around to face him. He started planting feather light kisses along my jaw line before looking into my eyes. Alex's silver eyes were amazing. When angered, his eyes almost appeared black, but when Alex was in his normal good mood, his eyes sparkled and resembled a cloudy day with bits of light peeking out from behind the waterlogged clouds. I've spent countless hours staring into those eyes, and although Alex and my libido were on the friendliest of terms, I could never fall for him because my heart was broken when I was way too young. I never recovered. I was not anxious for the day when some lucky girl stole Alex's heart and our arrangement would

have to be surrendered, but I wanted that for him more than anything.

Alex had been working towards a business degree when we met. After graduation, he bought a failing tattoo parlor and turned it around within months. He works at the shop as both the owner and one of the artists, which was his preference. At first, he was aggravated that the paperwork and accounting kept him busy and away from the artistic aspects of the job; but I eventually convinced him to hire an accountant to free up his time. Once Alex could afford it, he hired a kick ass manager to run the shop and he only works part time now when he feels like being creative. Alex was the one who

gave me the dragonfly necklace tattoo on the back of my left shoulder. I described the necklace my parents had given to me on my sixth birthday and I was shocked at how well he was able to replicate the delicate design. If I didn't know it was ink that he used to create the artwork, I would have sworn he implanted actual jewels into my skin and sewn spun silver over my shoulder for the chain. The man had a gift and I was glad that he was able to turn that into a means of support.

Alex rested his chin on top of my head and hugged me closer. His 6'3" stance always made me feel small, which was nice. I was always taller than my friends and sometimes it just felt

good to be tiny. I felt Alex's jaw move as he spoke over my head.

“Are you looking for company or is this a solo mission tonight?”

I pulled away from him when I heard the coffee machine beep, indicating it was finally ready. Turning to reach for a cup, I spoke to Alex over my shoulder. “David already asked to go with me tonight and I turned him down. He'd most likely be upset if I agreed to take you with me. Plus, I'm taking the bike and if I decide to have a drink, I would feel nervous having you on the back of it when I come home. It's probably best you hang here or whatever.”

“Turned him down, huh.” His face broke into a smile. “Let me guess, ‘gay man moshing’ flashbacks?”

I chuckled. “Yeah, something like that.”

Alex stepped away from me as I prepared my cup of caffeinated bliss. He mocked me with a shocked expression as he watched me fill half the cup with sugar and powdered creamer.

“What?” I smiled and I’m pretty sure my face reddened. “I like a little coffee with my sugar and creamer.”

Alex closed his mouth and then laughed. “You know, you are going to

develop diabetes one of these days drinking your coffee like that. For a person who has a deathly fear of needles, that's probably not the most intelligent beverage choice." I smacked him playfully on the arm and made my way into the living room.

Annie and David were sitting in their original positions completely absorbed as they watched whatever reality show it was that they apparently agreed upon. Annie looked over at me as I lowered myself into the chair Alex had earlier occupied.

"So David tells me you are heading out to Tomb tonight all by your lonesome. By any chance are you

trolling for guys, looking to get lucky?” She wriggled her brows.

I shook my head slightly. “No Annie, I’m not. Alex has my ‘getting lucky’ department well managed, therefore I have no need. I’m just going for the music tonight.” I looked over at Alex and he flashed me his brilliant smile and winked.

Annie sighed. “Maybe I should find my very own Alex to take care of my ‘getting lucky’ department. It would certainly make my dating life easier.” She looked over at Alex and then back at me. She angled her head in Alex’s direction and said, “Or maybe I could just borrow your Alex in the meantime.

We could work out a custody schedule or something like that.”

Alex laughed as he walked up behind me. He began massaging my shoulders and I let out a soft moan.

Oh please, please, please, keep touching me with those magic hands. Another couple of minutes of this and I might not be leaving tonight.

“Sorry Annie girl, but I only have one benefits package and it’s currently reserved for Paige.”

Annie smiled and then returned her attention to the anxious designers on the television screen.

David looked up. “Wow Alex. In a really bizarre way, that was such a romantic statement. I apparently need to find more friends like you. Either that, or just let me know when you are hiring. I could definitely use the expanded benefits package. The only benefits I get at the office are boring crap, like health and dental.” Annie high fived David in agreement.

Annie and I also met in college. She was pursuing a degree in paralegal studies and before she had even graduated, she landed a good paying job at the same law firm where David worked. For as book smart as she was, the poor thing had no common sense when it came to men. With her wavy

auburn hair and emerald green eyes, she could have any guy she wanted. Her milky complexion, hourglass figure, and short stature only added to her appeal. She was like an adorable little Irish doll. Unfortunately, Annie tended to be most attracted to jocks and muscle heads. Even more unfortunately, the men she dated always seemed to lack respect for women. I've spent countless hours watching Annie's heart get torn apart by her boyfriends, and countless more acting as a shoulder for her to cry on. There were times when Annie reminded me of the women at my parents' shelter. She had never come home as bruised and battered as those women, but the mindset was the same. She always

wanted to believe that a guy would change, even after he repeatedly cheated on her or disrespected her in some way or another.

“Well, you know how I like my men. If you happen to stumble upon one who fits my criteria, be sure to get his number for me.”

I grudgingly removed Alex’s hands from my shoulders and stood up. “So, basically, if I see a guy with no neck and small testicles from steroid abuse, and who treats women like objects, and who is also an all-around arrogant asshole, I should send him your way? Sure Annie, I’ll jump right on that for you.”

Annie raised her middle finger at me and I laughed.

I walked into the kitchen, washed out my coffee cup and placed it in the dishwasher. I walked to the front door and turned back to my friends. “I’m out of here you three. I’ll catch you guys later. Try to be good while I’m gone.”

Sometimes this bunch made me feel like a single mother.

“Will do.”

“Drive carefully.”

“Have fun.”

My friends yelled to me in unison

as I shut the door and started down the stairs.

Chapter Two

The drive to Tomb was quick and uneventful. I parked my bike along a side road and made my way to the front entrance. From the outside, the bar looked like nothing more than an abandoned warehouse with the word “Tomb” flashing in bright red neon lettering. It always had a steady line of patrons wrapping themselves around the building from the front entrance. The bass boomed through the walls and I couldn’t wait to get myself inside to lose myself in the vibration.

Inside, Tomb was like any other bar or club in town, only slightly larger

because it was, in fact, a converted warehouse. The front entrance area was lined with ATMs and cigarette machines. Once you got past the front entrance, the club opened up into a large space with ceilings that must have been forty feet high. Lights ran in strips along the ceiling and were accented with strobe lights, spot lights and industrial fans. Full length black stone bars ran along the left and right walls and clear high top tables were situated beside each bar area. There were upper level wooden dance floors on each side and the front contained a large elevated stage for live shows. Stairs led from the upper dance areas down to a sunken dance area referred to as the 'pit'."

Speakers were hung on the walls throughout the club, and two large seven foot speakers sat on the floor in the back of the pit. My favorite place to stand on nights when I needed to get lost in the hard, driving music was directly in front of those speakers. The added bonus was that the music was so loud in that area, nobody approached me attempting to strike up conversation. And even if they did, I could just pretend like I didn't hear them. It's a win-win.

I decided to have one drink for the evening and proceeded over to the bar on the right. It didn't really matter which side I went to, considering the place was one big square, but I saw that Logan, my favorite drink slinger, was

working that side tonight. I've become somewhat of a regular at Tomb due to its industrial feel and because it's a good place to go for a decent mixture of music. That is unless you are looking for country, rap, techno or folk. If you are, then Tomb is definitely not the place for you.

I stood there for an agonizing five seconds waiting to catch Logan's attention. He looked over at me, placed a couple drinks down in front of a couple sitting at the bar and headed over in my direction. The faces on the other customers he passed up to get to me were always amusing. It made me feel special and it only emphasized the point that it really is good to know people.

Logan has been working at Tomb since before I started coming here. He was around my height with shaggy blond hair and a surfer's build. His arms were well toned and his shoulders were broad. His skin always had a perfect tan which only served to complement his straight white teeth and baby blue eyes. When I first started coming here, Logan and I had established a naturally flirty demeanor with each other. Within a couple weeks of my coming here, Logan asked me on a date. I turned him down as gently as I could and used the excuse that Alex is my boyfriend. Having seen Alex with me on several previous nights, Logan believed it and we've been friends ever since.

And *that* is just one more added bonus of the “Alex Simmons Benefit Package.” A fail safe, tried and true excuse that I get to use whenever a propositioning emergency occurs.

I’ve often considered introducing Logan to Annie. Knowing that Logan doesn’t fit the ‘criteria’ that Annie has established for any potential suitors, I haven’t made the attempt. I would hope that Annie would look past her requirements and give a new type of guy a chance, but I realize that in all likelihood, she wouldn’t go for him. Logan is too sweet and Annie wouldn’t know what to do with herself with a guy like him.

“Hey Paige, how’ve you been doing?” Logan stretched over the bar and gave me his best bear hug. He released me and I rested my arms on the bar and leaned over. “I’ve been doing pretty decent lately. How about yourself?”

I watched as Logan eyed my chest and it took him a second to respond. He wet his lips and then looked back up into my eyes and smiled.

“Something interesting, Logan?”

He chuckled and then threw his arms up in surrender. “Okay, you caught me. But you keep leaning over like that and I won’t be able to concentrate on my

job because I'll be too busy fighting off the men trying to get a better look at you."

I looked down at my barely there cleavage and looked back up at him in question. "I'm sorry, Logan, I think your eyes must be going bad. You were looking at me like I was lunch and I'm not exactly 'Boobs Magee' over here."

Logan let out an infectious laugh and then reached over to rub me on the head. "Ah, my little ignorant siren. You have no idea how desirable you really are. Chest size doesn't always matter. It's how that chest fits on the frame that matters, and you my friend, are an absolute knock out."

I blushed and straightened up my posture. “Well thanks, Big Guy. You’re not so bad yourself.” I winked at him and Logan flashed me his gorgeous megawatt grin.

“What can I get for you, Sugar Tits?” Another wink.

“I’ll take whatever beer you have on special tonight.”

“Sure thing, Sweet Tomatoes”

“That’s enough, Logan.”

“Okay.” He chuckled and then turned to reach into the cooler to grab me a bottle. He popped the top for me, wiped down the condensation and put it

on the bar in front of me. I grabbed the bottle and took a large swig as I turned to look in the direction of the stage.

“So, what time does the band start up?” The music had somehow gotten louder and I had to shout for Logan to hear me.

“They should be on in the next couple of minutes or so. I’d start heading down to your prime location if I were you. This band is pretty heavy and the pit is going to get rough. In fact, you might want to choose a different location tonight. I would hate for you to get accidentally hit when they’re playing.”

“No worries. I can handle

myself. But I will let you get back to your other customers before they start jumping over the bar to get to the alcohol themselves. Take care man!”

Logan waved and headed back to help the other patrons. I considered Logan’s warning for a split second but quickly decided that the pit couldn’t get any rougher than I’ve already seen it. The slamming bodies tended to congregate near the stage area so the back speakers were usually a safe hideaway. I walked around the tables and dance floor and took the stairs down to the pit two at a time. I walked through the people who had already started to gather in the area and noticed a couple of people sitting on top of the speakers.

Shrugging my shoulders, I continued over and leaned back on the left speaker, paying careful attention to the swinging legs and feet that surrounded me. A boot to the head wasn't my idea of a pleasant experience so I made a mental note to stand a little away from the speakers when the band started.

I looked around at the crowd. Most of the men wore the standard uniform of jeans, black fitted t-shirts and black motorcycle boots. The others wore jeans, button up black shirts and black motorcycle boots. Variety was apparently an unknown concept around these parts. Looking down at my outfit of choice, I was pleased to see that I had received the memo about the uniform

dress code. Proud of myself for finally fitting in, I started to check out the ladies.

Damn. This is the part where I feel out of place. Almost all of the women were wearing skin tight outfits in varying short lengths with most of their breasts showing. Some of the skirts were so short that their bottoms peeked out from below the fabric. The sky high heels they wore looked horribly uncomfortable and I wondered how they maintained their balance after a few drinks. I was suddenly jealous because it became obvious that they didn't suffer from the same balance challenges as me.

When I was fifteen minutes into

people watching, the band finally came out on stage. The sound in the club became deafening from the screams of the fans. Remembering that my head was currently sharing space with some swinging appendages, I moved far enough in front of the speakers so as to avoid any ‘shoe meeting face’ mishaps.

“Hey everybody, how are you all doing tonight?!” The lead singer screamed into the microphone.

I wouldn’t have thought it possible, but the club actually got louder. People started pouring down into the pit and I became a little annoyed with the close proximity of the people around me. One massive fellow decided

to bypass the stairs all together and jumped over the upper level railing down to the pit. Had he been off a couple of feet in his aim, I would have needed emergency medical attention.

The singer of the band had stepped back from his microphone long enough to allow the crowd to mellow down their frenzy. He approached the mic again and introduced the band.

“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.” He strummed one loud single note from his guitar and the band started in. Mind Crime’s style

was exactly what I needed. While the drummer did his best to beat to death the kit in front of him, the bass player carried a low and evocative rhythm. The singer added an angry melody to the mix and within seconds was screaming an anthem of non-conformist rebellion. I honestly couldn't understand a damn word he said, but it didn't matter once the vibration from the speakers started to wrap around me. I bounced my head back and forth in time with the beat and closed my eyes to become absorbed in the sound. Opening my eyes, I noticed that the people in the pit had already started slamming into each other and the crowd would ebb and flow with the force of the bodies. More people started

to come into the pit and the aggressive dancing only escalated with the faster tempo of the song. I started getting shoved back by a few stragglers who had been knocked out of the herd and I did my best to avoid elbows and knees. As even more people came down, I started getting forced back into the speakers.

I remembered Logan's warning and decided his advice may have been warranted. Inwardly kicking myself for not taking his advice, I started looking around for a means of escape. I quickly determined that I was completely boxed in and started covering my face as best I could. The flailing limbs and bodies continued to push into me and I

panicked. I started overheating from the body heat that was surrounding me and I began to push back any time someone came flying at me. My efforts were pointless and the more I pushed, the more I got run into. I was getting boxed in even more and I started to wonder if I was going to make it out of there.

Just when I was starting to give up hope, an amazing set of arms wrapped around me and I was suddenly being hoisted up onto the speaker. I was placed down and one of those arms stretched out in front of me to keep me from falling forward. I took a second to catch my breath and turned to thank whoever grabbed me. As soon as I caught sight of his clear blue eyes, my

breath hitched and I was momentarily stunned silent. I continued my exploration of the person beside me and discovered a chiseled square jaw, lightly sprinkled with five o'clock shadow. His face was framed with messy dark brown hair. My gaze slowly wandered downward and found the most drool worthy broad shoulders a girl could ever ask for. His t-shirt was pulled tight over his chest and biceps and his mid-section dipped down into a perfect 'V'. His dark blue jeans perfectly accentuated his muscular legs which hung over the edge of the speaker. I looked back up into those eyes and he smiled the most jaw dropping smile, revealing two dimples

on either side of his mouth.

He leaned over to speak closer to my ear. “Sorry to manhandle you without permission, but you looked like you could use some help down there.” His voice was a deep enough timbre that it wasn’t difficult for me to hear him over the music. I continued staring at his sculpted mouth like an idiot and then shook my head to free myself from his spell. I could feel my face getting hot from looking at him.

“Uh, yeah, thanks for that. It normally doesn’t get that bad down there and I wasn’t expecting to get trapped.” I smiled at him and then turned my attention back to the stage. The band

was starting in on their second song and the crowd calmed for a moment before picking it back up with the increasing tempo of the song.

He leaned over to me again. “No problem, beautiful, I’m always happy to assist a fair damsel in her time of distress.” Even though his lips were brushing over my ear, causing tremors; and his hot breath rolling down my neck was doing wonderful things for my body, I was suddenly annoyed.

I shouted over the music at him. “Please don’t say that.”

“What?” He looked at me and his confusion at what I had said was clearly

written in his expression.

“Don’t call me a damsel in distress. It’s degrading and I don’t appreciate being classified by use of a demeaning stereotype.” I turned my attention back to the stage for a second time and we sat watching the show without speaking. I was distinctly aware of his shoulder and thigh pressing into my side and I was disturbed by how his body heat was affecting me. His cologne weaved a trail straight over to my face and I breathed it in deeply before realizing what I was doing. After a blissful half hour of music immersion, the band finished their set and I discovered that I had started leaning into him. I also realized how thirsty I was

and was thankful that I could go get something to drink. The problem with being stuck on a speaker is that it doesn't often present the opportunity to refresh your beverage.

The crowd below us started to disperse from the pit and he jumped down from the speaker. I scooted my butt as far to the front as I could and looked down preparing to jump. It was at that moment I remembered I hated heights and I quickly determined that I was in the middle of an unfortunate predicament.

I looked to my right and left hoping that someone had the foresight to install a ladder on the sides of the

speaker. When it became clear that I was out of luck in that department, I looked down into the eyes of my newest acquaintance. He had a smug look on his face as he watched me attempt to get down. He reached up his hands to offer assistance and chuckled.

“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.”

What the...!

This guy was really starting to piss me off. Who the hell does he think he is anyway?! If it wasn’t for him *coming to*

my rescue in the first place, I wouldn't be in this situation. I slapped his hand away and scowled down at him.

“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.”

His eyes darkened and then quickly filled with humor. His voice lowered an octave when he replied, “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.”

I flashed him my best menacing

stare. “I’ll tell you this one more time, Do. Not. Call. Me. Damsel.” I pointed my finger in his face to drive my message home. It must have worked because he removed his outstretched hand. He stepped back from where he had been standing and held his arms out to his sides in defeat.

That’s right mister, fear the ninja.

I turned my body around, determined to shimmy down the side of the speaker and then drop the last foot to the ground. I got my lower body safely over the edge but my shirt caught on the corner of the speaker and I was stuck there with my ass in perfect view of Mr. Arrogant standing behind me.

“This is a delightful view. I almost wish I had a camera. Are you sure I can’t help?”

My air huffed out from annoyance before I freed my shirt and started shimmying over. I finally dropped to the floor and looked over my shoulder to find my acquaintance openly staring at my assets. His eyes wove a slow path up my body and stopped suddenly on the dragonfly necklace tattoo on my shoulder. His eyes widened and he looked up to my face, grabbed my shoulders and spun me around to face him.

“What is your name?!”

I was shocked by his sudden intensity and I couldn't process what he had just asked me. I stared into his eyes but didn't say a word. He continued to hold me by the shoulders and was searching my face and body as if trying to memorize me. He looked back up at me and slightly shook me out of frustration.

“Your name. What is it?”

I shook away my stupor once again and jerked my shoulders out of his grasp. I took a step back and looked up at him in challenge. “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.” I

turned to walk away and he called out to me again.

“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.”

My jaw dropped and I turned back around. “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 rumbling voice...” He grinned at that and I quickly realized my error. Refusing to

acknowledge that I just called him beautiful, I continued, "...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."

Those dimples of his popped out and his eyes smiled right along with his mouth. "I'll make a pact with you; you tell me your name, and I'll leave you alone for the rest of the night."

I considered his offer. If he was telling the truth I could end this aggravating encounter now just by giving him my name. On the other hand, if he was lying, than at least he might stop calling me Damsel. There really was no

down side to this situation. I decided to play hard ball anyway.

“I’m not enough of an imbecile to believe that you mean that. How do I know you will stick to that agreement?”

He looked at me with a matter of fact expression and seemed to be considering my question. After a moment of intense introspection he formulated his response. “You don’t.”

Well, there you have it.

Defeatedly, I muttered, “Paige. My name is Paige.”

I turned around and started climbing the stairs to leave the pit.

When I reached the top floor and turned to look back over my shoulder, he stood in the same position I left him with an unreadable expression on his face. He continued to openly stare at me and I returned my attention to the bar and proceeded to make my way over to it.

The club was crowded tonight so it took Logan another five minutes before he could get over to me. *So much for my VIP status.* When he finally did approach, I asked him to grab me a bottled water. I pulled some cash out of my back pocket and threw enough down on the bar to cover the water and the beer from earlier. Logan made his way back over to me with the water and leaned over the bar to talk to me without

having to yell over the music.

“How’d it go down there?”

I leaned my head in his direction and he turned his ear toward me to hear me better. “It was rough. I should have listened to you. I ended up getting ‘rescued’ by some chauvinist prick who grabbed me and had to haul me up onto the speakers.”

Logan looked concerned and did a quick once over of my body to make sure that I hadn’t been injured. Once he verified that I was still in one piece, he asked, “Who is this guy and why did you refer to him as a chauvinist prick?” His eyes widened as if in understanding and

he quickly asked “Did he touch you inappropriately? Show me which guy and I’ll make sure security escorts him out!”

I shook my head. “No. It was nothing like that. He thought because he had helped me out that it gave him the right to call me a ‘damsel in distress’.” I turned to look over the crowd to see if I could locate him. I spotted him talking to the female bartender on the opposite side of the room. I pointed over to him to indicate who I was talking about. Logan looked over, paused, and then looked back to me.

“Are you talking about Daemon?”

I shrugged my shoulders as I had no idea what the guy's name was. I never bothered to ask. "Maybe? I don't know. I never asked him for his name. But if you are talking about the good looking asshole that is standing over there talking to the female bartender, then yes."

Logan nodded his head in understanding and leaned even farther over the bar to whisper loudly into my ear. "Yeah. That's Daemon. He works here as a bouncer. He is one hell of a lady's man so it would be best for you to avoid him. I would hate to see you end up as another notch on his bedpost. If I were you, Paige, I would just call it a night and head home to your boyfriend."

I let out a small laugh and then shook my head. “No worries, Logan. I’m wearing my big girl panties tonight and I think I can handle myself, but thanks again.” Logan’s jaw dropped and he got a funny look in his eye. I looked over at him in question and tilted my head as if silently asking what was on his mind. Logan smiled and leaned over to pinch my cheek.

“You keep talking about your panties like that and you might have to start watching out for me as well.”

I laughed at his candor and walked away from the bar.

I made my way over to a table and sat down to enjoy my water. The cool refreshing liquid on my tongue was absolute heaven. I hadn't realized how thirsty I was until my mouth was flooded. My people watching continued as I slowly drank down the bottle.

I learned a long time ago that an excellent lesson in human behavior can be learned by being sober in a bar between the hours of midnight and 2:00 a.m. After a few drinks, people who would normally be self-conscious and conduct themselves with at least a small amount of decorum and self-control would lose themselves in an alcohol fueled annihilation of their inhibitions. It was impressive to see how quickly

civilized individuals could start operating on a basic animal instinct.

Couples were dancing and grinding into each other in such a way that I blushed just glancing in their direction. Several sloppy women were so wasted, they didn't seem to notice or care that their clothes were slipping out of place or that they were spilling their drinks down the fronts of their shirts.

Continuing to swallow down my water, I chuckled to myself while watching the crowd. I scanned my eyes back and forth over the mass of people when my eyes met with Daemon's over the crowd. My body shuddered from the fervor in his stare. He stood to my left

with his arms crossed in front of him which only caused his biceps to bulge out more noticeably from beneath his sleeves. Just the sight of him was causing my traitorous body to respond with an increased heart rate and my skin to break out in goose bumps.

We continued to stare at each other until my brain decided to focus on the information bestowed upon me earlier by Logan. My decision had been made that Daemon was a man to avoid and just as I was about to break eye contact with him, three women approached him and blocked my view. I should have been thankful for the interruption, but I was actually rather annoyed at the intrusion. The women were dressed in the standard

tramp gear for the evening and, although I couldn't hear what they were saying, the way they flipped their hair and rubbed themselves into Daemon made it obvious that they were hitting on him.

Daemon shifted his attention to his admirers. He started talking to them and they let out high pitched giggles and flipped their hair some more. I believe now is a good time to mention that I have a significant distaste for high pitched giggles and hair flipping. However, witnessing those responses being elicited by whatever Daemon was saying made me hate it that much more. By the time Daemon started his slow perusal of each of their bodies, I couldn't take it anymore. I stood up

from my table and made my way to the opposite side of the club. It was alarming how watching him with those women had been pissing me off. The man was an arrogant, egotistical chauvinist and I kept reminding myself that I wanted nothing to do with him.

I approached the bar and plopped myself down into one of the empty stools. The female bartender that Daemon had been talking to earlier sauntered her way over to me and asked what she could get me. I ordered another bottled water and when she brought it to me I handed her some money and then twisted around in my seat to continue my people watching. It was about 1:30 a.m. and the drunken

shenanigans were kicking into high gear.

I looked around the club but was careful not to look over in Daemon's direction. My eyes betrayed me and briefly glanced over to find that his three admirers were now dancing seductively around him. He appeared to be enjoying his private show. As if he sensed me watching, he looked over in my direction and flashed me his signature smug grin.

Busted.

I refused to acknowledge him and returned my attention to the nameless faces in the crowd. As much as I hated it, I couldn't keep my line of sight from sneaking back over to where he was

standing. The pretty redhead of the group was practically glued to him while whispering something into his ear. She pulled a piece of paper from what appeared to be her ample cleavage and handed it to him before suggestively running her hand down his chest and stomach. Daemon took the paper, excused himself, and started making his way over to Logan's bar. Before reaching the bar, he turned back in my direction and winked.

Sonofabitch! I was really starting to hate him.

In order to stop embarrassing myself further, I turned in my seat and busied myself with conducting a

thorough investigation of my bottle of water. That served to distract me for only a few seconds because, let's face it, there is nothing remotely interesting about a water bottle.

I glanced back over my shoulder and found that Daemon was having an animated conversation with Logan. They both looked over in my direction and Logan was emphatically arguing with Daemon about whatever it was they were discussing. I turned back in my seat and busied myself with reading the labels on the alcohol bottles behind the bar.

Within minutes I felt someone come up from behind and before I could

react, a pair of arms wrapped themselves around me. I jerked away from the unwelcome embrace and spun around to face my molester.

An obviously intoxicated man that I've never seen before was standing there swaying back and forth. His breath reeked of alcohol and cigarettes and he gave me a lewd grin. His eyes violated my body and I didn't even want to know what he was imagining himself doing to me. He started encroaching even more into my personal space and I backed up until the bar kept me from retreating farther.

“Hey baby. What's a sexy girl like you doing sitting at a bar all by

yourself?” He slurred his words and took a swig of whatever it was that he was drinking. He continued to leer at me and I attempted to slip away from him by moving to the right.

His arms reached out and grasped the front edge of the bar on either side of me. I was effectively trapped and I braced myself for whatever he was planning to do next.

I attempted to diffuse the situation and, in my best matter of fact voice, stated, “I need to go to the restroom, so if you would kindly move your arms, I’ll be on my way.”

He must have taken my statement

as an invitation because he immediately licked his lips and moved in closer. The smell coming off this man was vomit inducing and I started to get angry.

“Sure thing sexy. Just point me in the direction you are going and I’ll join you.”

Figuring this idiot was too wasted to take a hint, I decided to be more direct. “Seriously, Mister, back the fuck off and let me go!” I pushed at his chest to give myself some room for a retreat but this guy wasn’t taking no for an answer.

“Come on baby. Don’t be like that.” He leaned in closer and when his

lips brushed against my ear I saw red.

“Back off, you drunk asshole!” I shouted and pushed at him even more and that only made him come on stronger. Unfortunately this guy had about 150 pounds on me and my efforts weren’t budging him at all.

He let go of the bar and then wrapped his arms around me to grab my ass. His fingers were digging into my flesh through the material of my jeans and I reached behind me, grabbed his fingers and pulled them backwards as far as I could. I felt a snap from one of his fingers and he howled in pain.

“You fucking bitch!” He pulled

his hands from behind me and grasped one hand with the other in front of him. He glared at me in his drunken stupor and screamed in my face. “You’ll pay for that bitch! You broke my fucking finger!”

He cocked one arm back preparing to punch me and then a second set of arms wrapped him in a headlock. I looked to see who had grabbed the guy and my eyes met with Daemon’s. Daemon jerked the guy backwards off his feet and the drink he was holding flew out of his hand and landed on my chest.

Daemon spun and threw the guy in the opposite direction of me. When his

hand met with the floor he howled in pain again. Daemon quickly turned back to me with a murderous glare in his eyes and asked if I was hurt. I shook my head in response and Daemon returned his attention to my molester who was pushing himself up off the floor and climbing to his feet. He proceeded to get into Daemon's face and Daemon stepped toward him in challenge.

“What the fuck man?!” He held up his rapidly swelling hand. “That BITCH broke my finger!”

Daemon grabbed the guy by his shoulders and started shoving him towards the front entrance. When the guy pushed back at Daemon, I swear I

heard Daemon growl.

“It’s obvious you have no clue how to treat a lady, so I’m sure you deserved it....”

I jumped at the sound of his booming voice.

“...now take your drunk ass and get OUT of this club before I personally throw you out!” Daemon pointed to the front entrance and two other bouncers grabbed the guy and started dragging him to the door. Before they could move him five feet away, he turned back to me.

“You’ll pay for this you stupid whore!”

Oh no. He did not just utter fighting words. My blood started to boil.

I let out a primal roar and lunged for him, fully prepared to jab his eyes out. Daemon grabbed me around the waist and pulled me back as the other bouncers continued to drag the drunken idiot out the front door. I continued lunging forward and was kicking and screaming like a rabid animal attempting to break free of Daemon's hold.

“Let. Me. Go! That asshole needs a serious lesson in manners!” I futilely pushed at Daemon's arms which were wrapped like steel bands around my midsection. He must have finally had

enough because he picked me up and threw me over his shoulder. He walked me to a back storage room and closed and locked the door behind us. He was smart enough to know that the lock wouldn't stop me, so he put me down and then barricaded the door with his massive body.

Standing this close to him, I realized he had to be at least 6'5" because I had to tilt my head all the way up to give him my death glare.

"What the hell?!" I continued glaring. "I had that handled. Move out of my way and let me out of here!" I started pushing at his chest which was solid as rock. He didn't budge.

“I’m not letting you leave here until you calm the fuck down.”

I stalked over to the back of the storage room and began pacing back and forth. I took deep breaths in and out attempting to calm my heart rate and clear the visions of homicide from my head. Daemon stood there calmly waiting for me to get myself under control.

After a couple of minutes, I was finally able to face Daemon like a normal person. He raised an eyebrow at me then had the audacity to smile.

“Are we done now? Or do you need me to continue standing here

making sure you don't see the inside of a jail cell or hospital room tonight?"

I glared over into his crystal blue eyes and held up my hands in defeat.

"Fine. You're right. But that guy deserved more than a broken finger. First, he thought he had the right to grope me, but then to turn around and call me a whore because I fought back against his advances? That's just fucked up. That guy is an asshole!"

Daemon nodded in agreement and let out a loud sigh. He was quiet for a moment and I couldn't tell what he was thinking. He looked at me and walked to a shelf on the right side of the room. He

grabbed a brown package and ripped it open to grab the napkins it contained. Walking over to me, he held out the napkins. “Take this. You’re soaking wet.”

I remembered that the drunk idiot’s drink had spilled all over me. I was so damn angry I wasn’t paying attention to the fact that my shirt was stuck to me from the moisture. I accepted the napkins from Daemon and started patting down my shirt. I lifted the hem of my shirt to better dry my stomach and then had to pull the top part down slightly to dry my chest. When I looked back to Daemon, his eyes had darkened and his gaze was locked on my body. He noticed that I had stopped moving and he

shook his head and looked up at me.

“I have to ask you something,” he stated bluntly.

I looked up into his eyes. “Shoot.”

He cleared his throat and then looked down at his feet for a moment. He looked back up at me and asked, “Why did you react like that out there?”

I looked away from him and retreated farther to the back. “Like I said, he deserved it.”

“I agree that guy deserved more than what he got, but why did you react so violently? I know nothing about you, and I know it’s not my place to ask, but

has something happened to you that would cause you to react that way?"

My head instantly shot up seeking out his signature smug look and I was knocked off balance by the concern in his expression. It occurred to me that Daemon and I had only known each other for a little over three hours, yet, here he was, asking me for personal tidbits about myself. My gut instinct was to tell him where he could stick that question, but considering he had just helped me avoid a bar brawl, I decided I could give him this small consideration.

"Nothing's happened to me," I said softly.

“What was that?”

I must have spoken too softly so I cleared my throat and spoke louder. “Nothing has happened to me.” He nodded his head in relief.

“Well that’s good. That makes me feel better; but I have to tell you, I’ve never seen a woman react like that to some asshole getting handsy.”

I huffed out a breath and allowed the rest of my anger to dissolve away. It was time for the abnormal childhood speech.

“My parents operate an abused woman’s facility in the panhandle. They

spend most of their time there so, naturally, I spent a lot of time there growing up. I've seen too many cases of women broken by guys like him and I tend to react badly when men try that shit with me."

"Well, that's definitely understandable. I imagine I'd be the same way if I grew up seeing things like that."

God he was gorgeous when he wasn't being a prick.

Sharing time had caused an awkward silence to stretch between us. Not able to handle it any longer, I said, "Well, anyway, this has been a great

heart to heart and all, but I've calmed down now so I believe it's time for me to go." I made a move towards the door and he reluctantly turned to unlock it and open it for me. I silently passed by him and walked out the door into the bar area.

I made my way to the front entrance and waved goodbye to Logan as I passed him.

As I walked out the front door, I turned left towards the side street where I had parked my bike. I felt a presence behind me and turned to find that Daemon had followed me out. I put one hand up as if to block him from following me.

“Stop. Why are you still behind me?”

He look confused for a second and then replied, “I’m walking you to your car.”

My independent instincts kicked in and I started to protest. “First, I don’t have a car; I rode my bike. Second, I don’t need you to walk me anywhere. I can manage on my own.”

“You rode a bicycle here?!”

I chuckled to myself at the mental imagery that question elicited. “No. I rode my *motorcycle* here.”

His eyes widened in understanding

and he looked like he was about to give me the speech about the dangers of motorcycles. He must have reconsidered because it took him a moment to respond.

“That’s fine. But I’m still walking you. My boys tossed that guy out of here less than twenty minutes ago and he could still be waiting around for you to leave.”

I scoffed. “I don’t need a bodyguard, Big Guy. I can handle myself. I’m not even sure why we are having this conversation because I believe I made it clear with you earlier that I don’t need rescuing.” I brushed him away with my hand. “Now skip

along, Skippy, because I can manage all by my lonesome.”

The smug expression came over his face again. His voice was antagonistic as he drawled, “I don’t know about that. By my count, you’ve needed rescuing three times this evening, my little damsel.”

And there it was.

Any warm and fuzzies I had for this guy a second ago were instantly replaced with a deep seated hatred of all things Daemon. I turned to him to finally get my point across.

I pointed my finger up into his face

and said, “You know what?! I don’t need anything from you or anybody else. So fuck you buddy...”

He flinched.

“...and fuck the white horse you rode in on.”

I turned and started to walk away and he continued to follow behind me all the way to my bike. It was late at night so the streets were empty except for the people returning home from the clubs. The night air was cool and it carried the smell of oncoming rain. The streetlights cast an eerie glow on the black streets and the sidewalks were lined with replica antique light posts. Shadows

were cast across our path from the large Live Oaks that lined the street and the moss hanging from the branches swung lazily in the breeze. I refused to acknowledge him and when I reached my bike, I put on my helmet and climbed on to ride home. I started the ignition and revved the engine a couple of times to allow it to warm up. I kicked the bike into gear and pulled away. His eyes were still watching me as I drove off.

Chapter Three

I arrived at the apartment and stood at the base of the stairs regretting having accepted an apartment on the third floor. I started my trek up what felt like twelve flights and turned the corner to my door. I opened the door and then closed it quietly behind me. Annie and David were in bed and Alex had fallen asleep on the couch watching horror movies. I was exhausted from my craptastic evening but the situation was too much to resist. I walked over to the television and turned it to the static channel. I turned up the volume to add more of a spooky effect and I turned to make sure that the noise hadn't awoken

Alex. When I saw that he was still sleeping, I tiptoed into the kitchen and grabbed Annie's rubber lobster oven mitt. I tiptoed back behind Alex and grabbed his face with the mitt, growling as loud as I could.

Alex immediately woke up and shrieked. He jumped up from the couch and was swinging his arms around attempting to hit anything in his vicinity. He knocked over a lamp and then jumped from the sound of the shattered ceramic. He stood still for a second and then rubbed at his sleepy eyes so that he could see clearly. Once he spotted me, his face turned a deep shade of scarlet.

“Not cool, Paige!”

I started laughing so hard I had to clutch at my sides from the cramping and fell to the floor. I was rolling on the ground laughing as Alex walked up beside me. He looked down at me and grinned while waiting for me to stop laughing. I wiped the tears from my eyes and reached up for his hands. He grab my outstretched arms and pulled me up into an embrace. He kissed me on my forehead and then lightly kissed me on my nose.

His silver eyes darkened and his mouth softly brushed against mine. I tilted my head up to him in acceptance of this closeness and he lowered his mouth to mine again. I parted my lips and his tongue ran along my bottom lip and I

opened more to allow him entrance. I touched my tongue to the barbell in his and he let out a low moan that somehow pulled on my southern regions. Our kiss was languid and he slowly ran his hands up my sides. I pushed my hands into his hair and pulled him closer to me. He reached around to caress my breasts and stopped suddenly. He started to pull away and I grazed my teeth along his bottom lip as we lost contact.

“Paige? What the hell? Why is your shirt all wet?”

Crap, I had forgotten yet again that I was wearing someone's drink.

He continued. “You reek of

alcohol. Have you been drinking and driving your bike?”

I started to walk back towards my bedroom and Alex followed. I stripped off my shirt and tossed it in the hamper then sat on the bed to start taking off my boots. I looked up into Alex’s expectant face.

“No, I haven’t been drinking. I mean, I had one beer, but that was when I first got there.” I tugged off my left boot and re-crossed my legs to pull off the right one. “The night was a disaster Alex. It was like the universe decided that it was ‘Crap on Paige Day’.”

I pulled my boot off and then

tossed it on the floor next to the other one. I laid back on the bed and I felt the mattress sink when Alex sat down beside me.

“Tell me about it.” He reached over and started running his fingers lightly against my bare, outstretched stomach.

“It’s a long story, I’m tired, and I don’t really feel like recanting the tale tonight. What I will tell you is that it involved a pit mishap, a broken finger, and two chauvinist pigs.”

Alex shuddered. “Pigs. I hate pigs.”

I laughed and then sat up and patted Alex on the leg. “I’m jumping in the shower. You’re welcome to sleep in here with me so you don’t get a crick in your neck sleeping on the living room couch.”

Alex smiled up at me and nodded his head in acceptance of my offer. He grabbed his shirt from the back and pulled it over his head, tossing the shirt onto the floor by my boots. He stood up and started unbuttoning the jeans that hung off his hips perfectly. I took a second admiring his form. Alex had colorful sleeve tattoos along both arms and a large piece on his back. Lines of small script ran along his ribs. Even though he didn’t need the help, those

colorful markings only accented his perfect physique. I have had many opportunities to explore Alex's toned, athletic build and I swear the man must have been molded from clay.

I reluctantly peeled my eyes off him and I turned to go into the bathroom. I turned on the water and started to strip out of my jeans and underwear while waiting for the water to heat. After a few seconds, steam started pouring out and I walked under the spray. The water helped to relieve me of the tension from earlier and I grabbed a wash cloth and body soap and lathered myself up in order to rinse away any remnants of the alcohol I wore home. Images of Daemon started playing through my head

and it annoyed me that my body reacted to him with lust and desire, while my mind wanted nothing to do with his arrogance. I sighed and thought about what a shame it was that someone as beautiful as him could be so ugly on the inside. Regardless of his out of control ego, the man was absolutely breathtaking. If I were more of a foolish girl, I could see myself easily getting lost in those crystal blue eyes of his. Logan's warning started repeating itself in my head and I cringed at the thought of the countless women Daemon had taken home. That thought alone was enough to free me of my reverie.

I turned off the water and grabbed a towel to wrap around me. I shuffled

into my closet and put on a pair of underwear and pulled on an old oversized *Ramones* t-shirt that I stole from David.

I climbed in bed and cuddled up next to Alex. He was still awake and he wrapped his arms around me to pull me closer. Curling into his side was comforting and familiar. Traces of his cologne mixed with his natural scent and the smell was intoxicating. He slowly trailed his hands up and down my arm. I was starting to fall asleep when I felt Alex turn to trail kisses down the side of my face. I shifted position to give him access to my mouth and he slowly placed his mouth on mine. Our tongues started to move together and he turned so

that his body was pressing into mine. I could feel his excitement pressing into my thigh and, although I was exhausted and wanted sleep, I couldn't deny him this comfort. There were never butterflies or fireworks in my feelings for Alex, but his touch and his closeness could always erase whatever tension I had inside me.

Alex reached down and began a slow lazy trail with his hands up my thighs, pulling my oversized T-shirt along with him. He continued to kiss me lazily as he lifted the hem of my shirt. I raised my arms above my head so that he could remove it and he tossed it aside. I rubbed my hands over his broad chest and we looked at each other in the scant

traces of light that came in through the window to our right. The man was beautiful. There was no other word to describe him. Every part of him looked like it was chiseled from stone but his naturally tan coloring softened him to the point where you couldn't help but want to run your hands over the smooth skin.

Alex bent down and started placing kisses on my stomach. I ran my hands over his shoulders and down his back as he continued to kiss his way up to my ribs. His hand caressed my breast and he took it into his mouth. I arched into him from the feel of his warm mouth on me. He teased the tip of my breast with his tongue and the suction of his mouth caused the tip to harden into a

small pebble. He turned his attention to the other breast and a soft moan escaped my lips upon contact.

I pushed my hands through Alex's hair and pulled him up to my mouth. His lips pressed into mine and his body shifted between my legs. There was no need to rush what was happening between us. There was no passionate force in this, no driving desire to totally and completely consume the other. What we had was perfect for me because I had the comforting closeness of another soul, but my heart could remain protected in the walls I constructed around it so long ago. There were times when I felt selfish for allowing this between us. Although I knew I could walk away

unbroken when this eventually came to an end, I wasn't sure the same could be said for Alex. He never voices an emotion that goes beyond the line I drew for him years ago, but I often suspect he hopes that, someday, I can give him more.

When we had touched and tasted and driven each other to a point of desperation for more, Alex slid his boxers down and his hands grazed my hips as he stripped me of my underwear. His fingers teased along my core and a low growl erupted from within him when he discovered my readiness. He pushed into me slowly and paused before continuing the slow, lazy rhythm. My head tilted back when he filled me

and a quiet moan escaped my lips. We rocked into each other and our hands continued their exploration of our bodies. A slow fire began to burn down below and my tension released further as he pushed deeper and an explosion started to build within me. Alex's rhythm became faster and harder as we moved towards release together. We locked eyes as our bodies climaxed in unison and once the final tremors had finished tearing through us both, Alex bent down and placed the gentlest of kisses on my mouth. I smiled a lazy and satisfied grin at him and he reached up with his hand to caress my cheek. The look on Alex's face was one of adoration and love and my guilt consumed me. I wished so

much that I could give this beautiful man the parts of myself that he deserved, but no matter how badly I wanted that, my heart would not respond. I broke eye contact with him and he moved to the side to let me up. Alex learned a long time ago that I'm not the type to cuddle after sex. It was a means to an end and any emotion that came with it was uncomfortable for me.

I pushed off of the bed, never making eye contact with him, and I walked into the bathroom to clean up. I returned to the bed and Alex was laying on his back staring at the ceiling. The look on his face was a mixture of frustration and hurt and the guilt tore at me more when I realized I had caused

that pain. I laid down beside him and started to hug my arms around him, but he pushed himself up and walked to the bathroom. He closed the door behind him and I sighed. I threw my arm over my eyes and considered releasing Alex from what was between us. I loved him too much to cause him pain, but I was not in love with him and I wasn't able to give him what he needed most. Alex opened the door after a few minutes and silently made his way back to the bed. He reached out his arms and pulled me until my back was pressed against his chest. No words were exchanged and I finally fell into a deep sleep beside him.

The sun outside was blazing down on my skin as I lay amongst the grasses and wildflowers of the backyard. It was May in Florida and every year at this time, clouds of all shapes and sizes would be floating along the breezes that blew across the wetlands. A natural harmony of sounds would surround you and the high pitched birdcalls would complement and contrast with the croaking of the frogs. Every once in a while you would hear a fast buzzing as the dragonflies shot across your path. The light would shine off their incandescent wings when they landed on the marsh grasses, each flutter of their wings gave the illusion of sparkles.

Momma used to tell me that dragonflies were the spirits of our loved ones returning to make sure we were okay. She said that if you saw one it was a reminder that, even in death, our love for each other never dies. I was five and I didn't truly understand the concept of death. I was still attempting to learn the meaning of being alive and my young mind couldn't wrap itself around the idea that we wouldn't always exist. I believed that all those creatures were connected in some way; and that I was a part of them as well.

A turtle popped his head up from the waterline beside me. I sat up and brushed myself off and I stared at that

turtle as he slowly pushed himself through the water. Small bubbles and ripples would form on the surface of the water as fish came up to catch insects and other small food. I heard footsteps behind me but didn't need turn around to know who was approaching me. Buddy came up beside me and the turtle's head went back under the water from his movement. I squinted up at Buddy and the sun seared my blue eyes with its brilliant light.

“Wanna climb trees?”

I thought about it for a second and then nodded my head yes. He reached down and took my hands to

help me stand up. We ran over to the giant Camphor trees that shaded the yards closest to the building. Buddy jumped up to the lowest branch first and then reached down to pull me into the apex made at the base of the large branches of the tree. Once I was up there, he started climbing the branch to his right and I went up the branch to the left. We silently climbed as high as we could go, a wordless challenge to the other as to who could go farther. I always won these challenges because I was smaller and could safely traverse the thinner web of branches at the top. Buddy would watch as I made my way up and I would smile at him when I realized I had won. When I had gone

far enough, I climbed back down and, together, we would make our way back to the ground. When our feet touched earth we would race to the next tree and do it all over again.

There was a massive cypress tree that grew along the shoreline. It had to be thirty feet tall and its branches hung out over the water. The bark was covered with a thin layer of moss and its roots pushed up from the ground into spikes. I often challenged Buddy to climb that tree but he would never agree to it because it was dangerous. When wet, the moss on the branches became slick and it was too easy to lose your grip and fall on the spiked roots below. I would tease Buddy and call

him chicken for not accepting my challenge, but he was always firm in his refusal.

My consciousness shifted to a time after Buddy left. I would often sit outside and stare at the Cypress tree and I decided to climb it one day when I was playing by myself. It had rained earlier and I decided to ignore Buddy's warning about the slick branches. My climb up was uneventful and I was proud of myself for having made it. I spent a little bit of time sitting in the branches above the water and I slowly started making my way back down. When I was ten feet from the ground, my foot hit a slick patch of moss and went out from underneath me. I tried to

grasp the branches with my hand to keep from falling but my hand slipped as well. I didn't hit any branches with my body on the way down but I landed on one of the smaller roots sticking up from the ground. Upon impact, my body curled in on itself from the pain and I laid in a fetal position in the shallow water, not able to move or cry out. The pain in my back was the worst I had ever experienced. I don't know how long I had been laying there when thunder started to rumble through the sky. Small raindrops started falling onto my face and when the dark clouds shaded the sunlight, the cicadas started belting out their song. The wetlands came alive in rainstorms and I became

nervous as I knew the rain would draw out the water moccasins and alligators.

I heard the back door of the building crash open and Daddy started calling out my name. I was still in so much pain, I couldn't call out to him and I lay there praying that he would find me. My father ran around the yard when he finally spotted me lying in the water.

“Oh my god, Paige?!” He ran over to me and knelt down. “Paige baby, are you all right, what happened baby? Talk to me.” His voice was panicked and I tried to move to look at him. His hands brushed over me looking for broken bones or other signs

of injury. I started to turn over and he picked me up after seeing that I was moving.

He hurried me inside to the building and called out for Momma. "Maia! Maia! Come quick. Paige is hurt!"

Momma came running out of the kitchen and Daddy laid me on a couch in the back parlor. I stretched out my body and the pain that shot through my back caused me to wince. Momma gently rolled me over and lifted the back of my shirt to inspect me. She stifled a small cry when she saw my back and she shot up and hurried into one of the bathrooms. Daddy stayed

with me and continued to pet my head and console me. Within seconds, Momma was back at my side and was wiping my back down with a warm cloth. She dried the area and then spread a small amount of ointment on my skin. She bandaged the area and turned me back to face her. She didn't ask me what happened but I knew she would save those questions for later, now that she knew I was alright.

I was lucky I didn't land on my spine. The root had bruised my back something awful, but I didn't break any bones or cause other permanent injuries. After that fall, I started to fear heights and I never climbed another tree.

From that day forward, I kept my feet on the ground.

Chapter Four

I shot up from my bed and I reached over to find Alex, but his side was empty. The bed was still ruffled from where he had laid, but the sheets and pillow were cool to the touch. He must have gone in to work early.

I laid back down and turned my head to stare at the light peeking in from the edges of the curtains. My mind was still in a state of shock from last night's dream. I haven't dreamt of Buddy in many years, even though he was still barricaded behind those walls around my heart. I stayed there for another couple minutes while the emotions

consumed me.

I eventually shook off the thoughts and pushed myself out of the bed. Padding over to the bathroom I grabbed some clothes from my closet on my way. I relieved myself and then quickly dressed and brushed my teeth. My hair was thrown up into a messy bun and I turned around to walk out my bedroom door. The tattoo on my shoulder caught my attention as I turned and I reached over to gently touch it with my fingertips.

I left my room and hurried into the kitchen to brew some coffee. I measured the coffee grinds and water and poured them into the machine. After hitting the

start button I immediately began tapping my fingers impatiently on the counter while it sputtered and steamed. I opened the cabinet, pulled out a cup and placed it on the counter. The pot was only a quarter of the way full by the time I turned to check it and I inwardly groaned at its slow pace. I worked on my mixture of sugar and creamer and then placed the half-filled cup next to the machine.

David walked in behind me and let out a loud yawn as he stretched out his slim frame. He padded over to where I was standing and eyed the machine with me.

“How long have you been waiting

so far?”

I turned my glare to him and then huffed out a breath. “Three minutes.”

“Too long,” David commented.

“Agreed.”

He started tapping his fingers beside mine. “We need a faster machine.”

After five more agonizing minutes, the machine graciously beeped indicating the coffee was ready. I filled my cup to the rim and then handed the pot to David. While he poured the contents into his cup, I stirred together my drink. We silently walked into the

living room together, set our cups on the table and plopped down in unison on the couch. The couch slightly tipped backwards from catching our combined weight.

We drank our coffee in silence for a few minutes and then David spoke.

“Sooooo...how was last night? Did you have a good time?”

I groaned and rested my head in my hands. I looked back up at David and gave him a small smile.

“Last night was not so good. I think I might have to avoid Tomb for a while, which sucks, because they always

have the best music.”

David gave me a questioning look and then his eyes brightened and he smiled.

“Did you have a drunken liaison by any chance?” He paused then nudged my shoulder with his. “Because, if so, you are going to have to give me all the naughty details so I can live vicariously through you.” He shook his eyebrows up and down.

I chuckled and shook my head. “I wish man. But unfortunately it was nothing as fun as that.”

David raised one eyebrow in

question and I spilled.

“Ok, the band was heavy last night and the pit got a little rough. I was standing in my normal spot by the speakers, but I got crushed in by the amount of people who were there last night.”

David put up his hand to stop my story. “So wait, before you go any further, are you about to tell me that the great and powerful Paige got trampled in the pit? If that is, in fact, the case, I will need a moment to openly gloat.”

I glared at him and he laughed.

“I didn’t break any bones or fall

on my head, if that's what you're thinking." He responded to my statement by turning up his nose in fake disdain.

"So anyways, when the crowd started to get too rough and I was having to push back to keep from being trampled, this guy grabbed me and pulled me up on top of the speaker."

David's head quickly turned in my direction. "Was he hot?"

I sighed. "Yes. He was gorgeous. An Adonis actually, and it was really fucking annoying."

David's expression remained blank but then he narrowed his eyes at

me. “Explain,” he commanded.

“After pulling me up on the speaker, he called me a ‘damsel in distress’.”

David’s mouth formed a silent ‘O’ in understanding. “Knowing you, Paige, I don’t see this going well at all.”

I shook my head and sighed. “It didn’t. I asked him not to call me that and explained my issue with demeaning stereotypes, but he kept calling me that anyway and then claimed to have *rescued* me three times last night.”

“Three times?”

“Well, yeah. I’m not done.” I

lowered my head and then looked back up at him. “So after the band stopped playing and the people in the pit were dispersing, he jumped down and I realized how high off the ground I was...”

“Oh dear,” David interrupted.

“...So the asswipe tried to help me down but was being all smug because I needed help. I refused his help to be spiteful and I eventually had to shimmy my way down the side, giving him an up close and personal view of my ass.”

David nodded in understanding.

“We got in an argument about him calling me Damsel and he told me he would leave me alone for the rest of the night if I would tell him my name; so I did. I talked to Logan later and he told me to stay away from the guy because apparently he’s got a reputation for being a man whore. Later that night, another drunk guy trapped me near one of the bars and grabbed my ass.”

David’s eyes widened. “Did you kick his ass?”

“No, but I did break his finger...”

“Good girl.”

“... but the guy was twice my size

and Daemon had to pull him off of me.”

David looked confused. “Who’s Daemon?”

“Daemon is the asswipe from the speaker.”

David nodded his head. “I see. Continue.”

“Well that’s pretty much it except for Daemon tried to walk me to my bike when I left and I told him that he and his white horse could fuck off.”

David chuckled then took a moment to absorb the details of my story. He took my hands into his and his warm brown eyes stared into mine.

“You know, Paige, I love that you are all ‘I am woman and I’ll kick your ass’, but it doesn’t make you a weaker person to accept assistance from other people. You are one of the strongest people I know and you’ve seen and experienced more than most people, but one of these days you are going to have to let someone in. I’d hate to see you wasting your life pushing people away and then ending up alone when you are older. It would suck if you ended up the friendly neighborhood cat lady”

I shook my head and quickly responded. “There’s nothing wrong with being alone, David. And if my heart can open to someone in the future, I wouldn’t object to the experience. But I haven’t

come across anybody who's been able to break through my walls. Regardless, Daemon was a complete prick and, even if I need to learn to accept help, I don't have to accept it from someone like him."

David gave me a knowing look and dropped the subject. "What are your plans for this beautiful day?"

It was Sunday and my normal routine involved running into town to grab breakfast and then taking a long ride to visit my parents at The Center. They started spending more time there after I left for college and eventually sold their house to build an extra wing for them to live on the property. Their

space was the size of a normal home and it had all the rooms and amenities a home could offer.

“I’m heading out to see my folks.”

David thought it over for a moment and then asked if he could join me for the day. David’s personality was always welcomed by the women and children at The Center. His enthusiasm for life was infectious and it inspired the women who lived there. The children loved him because he was a giant jungle gym and he had two or three kids hanging on him at all times.

“Sure thing. But can you follow behind me in your car? I’m kind of

looking forward to biking down the roads through the state parks.”

David agreed and he retreated to his room to get dressed for our journey. I waited on the couch in silence when Annie emerged from her room. Annie isn't a morning person and she grunted in my direction as she went in the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee. She made her way back into the living room and sat down in the winged back chair. She took a couple of sips of her coffee and I swear I saw when the caffeine took effect. Her eyes brightened and she smiled at me.

“Mornin’ Paige. Heading out to see your folks today?”

I nodded and then added, “Yeah, David is following me in his car if you want to come along.”

Annie shook her head. “I’d love to babe, but I’ve got to run into work for a few hours to help prepare some trial exhibits for next week. Maybe next weekend I can join you?” It was quiet for a moment before she continued. “So, did you get any numbers for me last night?”

I laughed. “No I did not and you know good and well that I will not be contributing to your tragic love life. If things go south between you and any guy, I want none of the blame.” I gave her a pointed look and then reconsidered my

statement. “Well, let me rephrase that. There *is* a guy I’d love for you to meet, but I haven’t gotten his number for you because I have a feeling you won’t go for him.”

Annie looked at me in question. “The bartender again?”

“Yes.”

Annie laughed. “Well Paige, I guess one day I’m going to have to join you and I’ll give him a look over to see if I could, possibly, bend my rules.”

I looked down and started playing with a frayed string on the couch. “Well, it’s going to be a while because I have

no plans on returning there any time soon.”

“Bad night?”

I looked back at Annie and nodded my head. “You can say that. Long story short, there was a gorgeous man, he was a prick, and I told him to take a hike.”

Annie smirked. “Sounds like my kind of man. Did you get his number, by chance?”

I started to respond when David burst back into the living room and announced, “Ready!”

David was dressed in a dark grey fitted t-shirt and dark jeans. His hair

was stylishly messy and the dark shade of his shirt brought out the bright gold in his eyes.

“I guess it’s time. Let me go get my stuff.” I left Annie and David in the living room and I went in to my room to grab my bag and my helmet. I swiped my keys off the night stand and checked my phone real quick. There was a text message from Alex.

Alex: Morning beautiful. Sorry to leave you alone this morning, but I had an early client at the shop. I know you are off to see the folks today so I’ll catch up with you when you get back in

town. BTW, I cleaned up the broken lamp.

I shot Alex a quick response.

Me: Hope you didn't get a screamer or a crier this time. Go easy on him. Catch you later.

I threw my phone into my bag and headed out to the front door. David jumped up and was behind me as we waved goodbye to Annie and made our way to the parking lot. I climbed on my bike and pulled out. I waited until David was behind me and we drove into town.

I was stopped at a red light on the edge of town when I looked up at the luxury loft apartments to my right. The building only had three stories but those apartments cost a small fortune due to their size and proximity to downtown. Movement caught my eye on one of the third floor balconies and I caught sight of a half dressed man looking out over the town. He stretched his arms above his head and then brought them back down to rest on the railing in front of him. His body was insane and I could see the definition in his shoulders, chest and arms from where I was sitting. His dark brown hair was messy and I suddenly realized who I was looking at.

Daemon.

I started to look away but then noticed a familiar redhead come up behind him wearing nothing but a robe. She wrapped her arms around him from behind and started rubbing her hands down his washboard abs. She was on her tiptoes as she whispered something in his ear and he smiled. He looked down in my direction and I turned my head back to the road to keep him from seeing me. I laughed when I realized I had my helmet on and there was no way he would recognize me behind the dark plastic. I looked back up and jumped.

He was looking right at me.

A blank expression was written

across his face and David's car horn blared behind me. I jumped again and then looked up to find that the light had turned green. I kicked the bike into gear and then sped down the road away from Daemon's view.

I pulled into the restaurant parking lot and was sickened by what I saw on the ride here. I climbed off my bike, removed my helmet and then shook out my hair.

"You are so hot when you do that. I think I heard a sizzle." David had pulled up beside me and was talking to me from inside his car. He rolled up the window and climbed out. A little beep sounded as he turned on the alarm.

We walked into the restaurant and the hostess seated us in a booth. Our waiter came up to take our drink order. The waiter was a good looking guy with brown hair buzzed short, but not too short. He had friendly green eyes that were as dark as jade and even through his uniform you could see that he had a slim swimmer's build. He smiled down at me but his eyes brightened when he took a look at David. David didn't miss the look on the waiters face and he flashed him a brilliant smile.

The waiter cleared his throat and introduced himself. "Uh, hey, my name is Matt and I'll be your server today. What can I get ya'll to drink?"

Wow. His thick southern accent was divine.

I ordered an orange juice and David ordered one of the weird mango and wheatgrass health smoothies. I gave David a strange look and waited for Matt to walk back to the kitchen.

“Mango wheatgrass smoothie? Really? What happened to your standard vanilla shake?”

David quietly laughed and looked quickly in the direction of the kitchen before turning back to me and responding in a hushed tone. “That Matt guy was dreamy and looked like he took care of himself. I want to give him the

impression that I'm not a human garbage disposal."

I laughed. David was not the type to miss the opportunity for love.

"So tell me, Paige, what was up with the mental vacation at the red light down the street, hmm? Were you looking at the same thing I was looking at?"

I turned my head to look out the window and then turned my attention back to David. "Hot guy, balcony and a half dressed redhead?" I asked.

David's face broke out into a grin and he responded. "That would be it.

That man was amazing, wasn't he? Artists have spent many years trying to replicate his body with paint and clay. He put Michelangelo's *David* to shame. But I have to tell you I'm a little surprised you noticed him. You're not exactly the type to admire the scenery." He angled his head in question.

I looked out the window again and responded, "Yeah, well, that was Daemon. He's a little hard to miss."

David's jaw dropped and he made a motion with his hand like he was picking his jaw up off the table and closing his mouth.

"*THAT* was Daemon? As in

‘speaker asswipe’ himself? That guy?”

I chuckled and nodded my head.
“The very one.”

David considered what I said for a moment and then let out a low whistle.
“Damn girl. I know the guy is a prick but I think that body of his would more than make up for it. In fact, he meets two out of three of my strict criteria. I think you should reconsider your hatred of all things Daemon.”

I scoffed at his suggestion. “What criteria are you talking about and what does he have besides his looks?”

“Well, isn’t it obvious? He has

money. And in my book, looks plus money is a good combination. The sparkling personality can be optional.”

This time my jaw dropped, but then I thought about what he said. “Why do you think that he has money?”

David gave me a pointed look to silently imply I was being ignorant. “Um, did you *see* where he was standing? Do you know how much those apartments cost?” He clapped his hands. “Oh! I bet he’s loaded. You should go back to Tomb tonight and wrap him in your love spell. I’ll go with you and watch.”

I quickly turned down David’s

offer but then started questioning what he was pointing out. Why *was* Daemon standing on that balcony? I know a person can make decent money being a bouncer, but not enough to afford those apartments. I wondered if maybe he had gone home with the redhead and that was her place. The question was bothering me and I decided that I would have to check Daemon out a little more closely.

Matt returned to the table and gave us our drinks. He took our food orders and I ordered two fried eggs, sausage patties and a bowl of grits. David ordered a salad. When Matt left the table, I laughed at David's choice in breakfast.

“What?! At least he isn’t looking at me like I’m going to keel over any second from a grease induced heart attack.”

I sat back in my chair and placed my hands on the table in front of me. “Grits with fried eggs and sausage mixed in are good. You should try it sometime. My mom used to make that for me every Sunday and I love it.”

David shrugged his shoulders and then picked up the green concoction that Matt had placed down in front of him. He tilted the glass back and forth and watched as the thick liquid slowly moved from side to side.” I made a face of disgust and David smiled.

“Bottoms up!” David took a large swig of the smoothie and his face puckered in on itself. He frantically looked from left to right and then sprayed the table in front of me as he spit the drink out.

“Oh my god, holy crap and heaven help me, that stuff was disgusting!” He grabbed a stack of napkins from the side of the table and started mopping of the puddle between us. I tried not to laugh, but it forced its way out and some of the other patrons turned to look at us. When David had finished cleaning the table he pushed the stack of soiled napkins to the side and looked up at me.

“Do me a favor.” He whispered.

“When Matt comes back, order a vanilla shake and pretend like it’s for you. I’ll slam it when he isn’t looking.”

I chuckled. “Did you want me to order some real food for you while I’m at it?”

“Please?”

I chuckled again and nodded my head in agreement.

Chapter Five

David and I ate our meals and then left the restaurant; David being one phone number richer. He had a shit eating grin on his face and I was happy for his Matt induced ego boost. We drove out of town and started on the long route to The Center. If we took the highway, we could make it to my folks' place in forty-five minutes tops, but if you added another thirty minutes to your drive, the scenery was definitely worth it.

I drove along the curvy roads that cut through the state forests. The roads were never busy and occasionally you

would be passed by a family heading to the springs or a fisherman towing his boat towards the beaches. Florida is surrounded by water and the limestone shelf it sits on often collapses, creating natural lakes and springs. The roads were lined by the trees and grasses and every once in a while you would see a gator sunning itself in the side ditch. Between the natural scenery surrounding me and the sound of the air rushing past me, I was immersed in this ride. There were days where I was so upset I would make the drive just to experience this serenity, even when I had no particular destination in mind.

We arrived at the Center and my parents stepped outside to greet us.

Momma gave David a huge bear hug and then made her way over to me while Daddy shook David's hand and clapped him on the back. Momma grabbed me and pulled me tight to her and gave out an excited squeal to have her arms wrapped around me. She wasn't shy in her hatred of my transportation so when she got to hold me in one piece, she always acted like it was the last time she would get the chance.

“Now move over Maia and give me a chance to take a look at our girl.” Daddy came up beside us and tickled Momma to get her to move out of the way. Momma laughed and stepped aside so Daddy could take a look at me. He grabbed me by the shoulders and held

me away from him like he was inspecting me before pulling me into a hug.

I shook my head when he pulled away and laughed. “You guys act like you didn’t just see me a week ago. Trust me, nothing has changed in that amount of time.”

Daddy winked at me before saying, “Just checking baby girl. You know we need to make sure you haven’t sprouted a third arm or anything.”

David came up next to us and acted like he was being ignored. “What about me, Mom and Dad? I could be wasting away to nothing and you two

would not have even noticed.”

Momma and Daddy laughed and then Momma turned to look at David. She put her hand to her mouth like she was thinking and she gave him a good hard look up and down. “Yep, just as I suspected. You are in excellent health and you are an exquisite specimen of male masculinity and prowess.”

Daddy let out a huff of air but smiled as he said, “Should I be worried that you will be leaving me for a younger model, Maia?”

David grinned and stated, “Oh, you have nothing to worry about there, James. Your lovely wife isn’t exactly

my type.”

We all burst into laughter and then started walking back towards the building. I couldn't help but stare at those large double entryway doors and think about the amount of pain that has walked through them.

We walked through to the back parlor and David immediately ran to the children's play area to start acting like a human playground. The children who had been there for a while recognized him and wasted no time tackling his large form to the ground. As usual, David had to overdramatize his defeat, making the children laugh even more. He threw his arms out in surrender and

clutched at his chest for the take down scene. He landed on the ground with a loud thump and I winced wondering if that was going to leave a mark. The children who were newer to The Center appeared hesitant to approach him at first but quickly warmed up to him due to his comedic antics. The mothers all laughed as they watched their children climb all over David and their faces brightened to see their young ones enjoying themselves.

I sat down on the back couch and remembered my dream from earlier. This was the exact couch where Daddy had laid me after he found me in the water. Sitting on it so close in time to that dream brought all the emotions

flooding back into my consciousness. My parents didn't notice my discomfort so I shook it off and smiled brightly up towards them.

Momma sat down next to me and Daddy sat in the rocking chair to our right. It was rare that my parents took a moment out of their day to rest and have a conversation, but they made sure to at least give me an hour when I came for my weekly visit. I was never upset that they couldn't afford to give me more uninterrupted time than that. I understood that what they were doing was so important to the people they were helping. Momma asked me about my job and they gave me their full attention as I told them about Mr. Weber, the miracle

skier. They laughed at my rendition of the story and Momma made her usual comments about how it is so important for me to be careful. Concerned that I would get caught one day and that someone would react with violence, they asked that I arm myself to protect against attack. Momma, Daddy and I all shared the same distaste for firearms, but I agreed to pick up a can of pepper spray to make them feel better. My job isn't as dangerous as they think but I have heard stories of investigators accidentally stumbling upon drug deals or other criminal behaviors undertaken by the people they were watching.

After an hour, Momma and Daddy excused themselves to take care of

whatever chores they had to accomplish and I turned to find David reading a book to the kids. They all were laying on top of him and snuggling into his side. As he was otherwise pre-occupied I decided to go check out the backyard.

When I refer to the backyard at The Center, I may be using the wrong word. The Center was backed up to the outer perimeter of the state park and a large half acre yard led out to a marsh land that fed into a lake. Daddy would mow the grasses closer to the building, but he left the area down near the marshes as natural as possible. The beauty of the place was always startling no matter how many times you have seen it. There were seven large camphor

trees that had now grown out to the point that a massive canopy shaded the first thirty feet or so by the building. Momma and Daddy had added a medium size veranda and sitting area since I moved out and it's the perfect place to sit and read a book or watch out over the water.

The breeze carried cool winds with it today which perfectly complemented the heat of the sun. It was one of those days where you could easily fall asleep in a hammock or lounge chair and not wake up for hours. The weather combined with the natural music of the wetlands was an instant relaxer and you couldn't help but feel hopeful about life. As usual, I felt an instant connection to my surroundings

and I knew I would spend several hours just absorbing it all.

I spent a few hours walking around and visiting all my favorite childhood hiding spots. Nothing has changed around this place since The Center started and looking around the yard I remembered the dream again. I glanced over to my right and stared at the Cypress tree I had fallen out of years ago. It had grown taller since then and I shuddered at the thought of how high I had gone that day. I was a fearless child and I've stayed that way for the most part except for when it came to heights, spiders and zombie clowns; well, I guess I should say *any* clowns.

Momma came out after a while and found me sitting down in the grasses. She took a seat next to me and threw her arm over my shoulder and started rocking me slowly from side to side. I looked into my mom's face and she had a knowing look to her.

“What are you thinking about, Baby Girl? You look like you've got a lot on your mind.”

I hung my head down and was busying my hands, tying a piece of grass to another. I looked up at Momma and then over to the lake. “I had a dream last night that bothered me.” I paused and my voice became quiet. “It was about Buddy.”

Momma nodded her head in understanding and then stayed quiet to give me time to continue.

“It wasn’t about what happened on my birthday, it was just a scene from when we had been climbing trees. But then the dream shifted and I remembered the time I fell out of the Cypress. The pain and the fear and everything else was so real. I woke up Momma and I carried those emotions into my waking life. I’ve been trying to shake them all damn day, but they won’t let me go.” I put my head into my hands. “I haven’t dreamt about him in years, why now?”

Momma was thoughtful for a moment. She was one of those people

that took their time to really think about what they were going to say before she said it. Her responses were always so well stated and honest that I appreciated the way she communicated with me. Momma never had to take back a hurtful word or apologize for not being forthcoming. She had a pure spirit and it was evident in everything she said and did.

“Well, Baby, I don’t know exactly why you had the dream and I don’t know what it was trying to tell you. I know that the brain has a funny way of processing information and sometimes our subconscious knows something we don’t and for whatever reason it won’t easily share what it knows. Dreams are

a way for us to look farther inside ourselves and every once in a while a memory will sneak in there and it'll be like you are reliving it.”

She squeezed me closer to her and her voice took on a regretful tone. “I often worry about you, Paige. I know how hard it is for you to let people in. You give so much of yourself to the people you love but you never leave yourself vulnerable where it matters the most. Don’t get me wrong, Baby, I’ve always said it’s important to guard your heart, but sometimes, and for the right person, you have to lower the drawbridge and let someone inside those walls.”

My eyes started to well with tears and I kept my head turned so Momma wouldn't see.

Momma sighed and continued. "I want to think it is strange that you are still so affected about what happened with Buddy. It's been sixteen years, Darling, and you are at an age where you should be able to move past it. For as short a period of time that you knew each other, you two bonded like twin souls. I regret having taken you to those apartments that day. You were too young to witness something so terribly tragic. Baby Girl, I know he meant a lot to you, but you've got to let go and move on. Constantly looking behind you will only keep you from ever looking forward.

That's no way to live a life.”

I reached up and quickly wiped that tears that had escaped my eyes and then I turned and leaned into my mother. “Did you ever look for him Momma, you know, after he was taken?”

Momma was quiet again. She let out a slow breath before she responded. “I did look for him baby. He was placed in the foster system a couple days after Kristi died. It was his natural father that had killed her and then himself that day, so they tried to find family that could take him in. None of his extended family wanted him and he was placed with a foster family after that. Your father and I applied to be his foster parents, but the

State didn't think it would be proper for him to be raised around The Center. We understood the concerns they had and we couldn't argue that our home life wasn't exactly normal. Once he was in the system for a few years, they stopped giving us information. Being that we weren't blood related, there was nothing else we could do."

I put my arms around my mom and pulled her into a hug. "It's okay Momma, I know you tried."

We sat together silently for another hour, but then Momma had to get back inside to tend to dinner. It was getting late and I knew that David and I would have to be leaving shortly. I pushed

myself up and brushed off my bottom. I looked over at the Cypress tree again and then, as if by their own will, my feet somehow carried me over to it. I looked down at the base of the tree to see the roots spiking out of the water. There was enough sunlight left that I could see the sooty bottom of the marsh and I took off my shoes, rolled up the bottoms of my jeans and walked into the cool water. When I was about shin deep, I stopped and looked out over the lake.

I heard the back door slam open and I turned to see David coming outside. I called out to him and he began walking in my direction. When David had gotten close to the marsh he waved his hand at me and started saying

something but he was cut off when his foot stuck in the ground near the edge.

I ran out of the water while he was attempting to tug his foot out and only making matters worse.

I shouted out to him as I ran in his direction. “Hold still David! Moving your foot around will only get it stuck deeper.”

David ignored me and continued frantically tugging at his foot. “Hurry up, Paige. The freaking swamp is trying to eat me!” David stepped forward trying to gain leverage to tug some more. When his other foot started sinking into the muck as well, he

shrieked.

I finally reached him and had to keep myself from doubling over in laughter. He was moving in such a way that it appeared he was dancing, the whole time waving his hands in the air and cursing the Florida swamps. “It’s not funny, Paige, I’m about to die here and all you can do is sit around laughing your ass off. Now do something! I’m stuck in quicksand!”

I got myself under control, lost it again, then controlled myself again before I sprang into action. I carefully placed my feet in areas that I could feel were solid and I grabbed David’s right leg. “Now hold still, David. You’ve

stepped into the edge of the marsh and I have to pull your leg out straight in order to break the suction.”

David looked at me with a surprised expression on his face. “What do you mean I’ve walked into the marsh? I thought the marsh is where you were standing.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Well, it is, but marshes tend to extend out a little further and you can’t really tell because of the grasses.”

His eyes narrowed and he glared in my direction. “So if you knew *that* little tidbit of information, why did you feel it necessary to call me over here in

the first place?!”

“I didn’t think you’d be stupid enough to walk into a swamp. I was turning around to come meet you, but you ran in like you knew what you were doing.”

David’s face turned purple with frustration. “I’m from CHICAGO. We don’t have swamps, and weird reptiles, and freaking quick sand! How the hell was I supposed to know this would happen?”

His face took on an incredulous expression. “You, my little friend, are a blasted siren! You called me out here like I was some lonely sailor in hopes

that I would get stuck in the marsh and drown. Don't even try and deny it!"

I shook my head in response to his accusation and tried to suppress my grin. "Just hold the fuck on, David. I'll have you out of this in a second." I tugged his leg straight up and after a loud sound like a vacuum seal opening, his foot popped out; sans his shoe.

David looked down and noticed his missing footwear and let out another shriek. "Those were three hundred dollar shoes! You need to reach down there and get it, Paige!"

I placed his foot on solid ground and then turned to tug on the other.

“There is no way in hell I’m reaching down there to get your shoe. And who the hell buys shoes that cost three hundred dollars, much less wears them into a swamp?!” When I gave his other leg a good tug it broke free as well, and also did not have a shoe. I found a solid spot for that foot, set it down, and brushed off my hands. “Sorry David, but that was a really dumb decision on your part. I think you should really consider your footwear better while planning out your day.”

David’s jaw dropped and then snapped shut again. “Shut up, Paige! You’re really not going to get my shoes out of there?”

I shook my head. “Nope. Consider them buried. I can say a eulogy if that would make you feel better.”

David hung his head down and sighed. “They were a good pair of shoes and they will be missed.” His head turned up for dramatic effect. “I remember the first day I walked past the window that contained those shoes...”

I laughed. “Give it a rest and come on. We have to get home, it’s getting late.”

I grabbed David by the hand and showed him where to step until we were safely out of the marsh area. We walked

inside and Momma immediately noticed how muddy David's feet and pants were. She tsked at David and then grabbed a towel for him to wipe himself off. He pulled off his socks, wiped down the bottom of his jeans and then rolled them up.

While watching him clean up, Momma asked, "Do I even want to know what happened to you, David?"

David's head shot up and he pointed to me while looking at Momma. "Your daughter tried to kill me. She was out in the marshes and then she called me over without warning me they extended out into the grasses. I was sucked into quicksand and I barely made

it out alive. If it hadn't been for that large stick that I was able to grab onto and use to pull my way to safety, I would have been a goner for sure!" He paused. "And what's worse, the swamp ate my favorite pair of shoes. They cost three hundred dollars!"

Momma couldn't help but grin and she shook her head. Daddy came walking up behind her and said, "Who wears three hundred dollar shoes into a swamp?! You know, David, you should really consider your footwear better when planning your day."

David's jaw hit the floor and his eyebrows shot up to his hairline. I howled with laughter and fell to the

floor clutching myself. Momma and Daddy joined in the laughter shortly after I went down.

After everybody had calmed down, we talked for a few moments and then said our goodbyes. I climbed onto my bike and watched David shake out his pants before climbing into his car. We started our vehicles and began our journey home.

Chapter Six

I woke up Monday morning feeling refreshed from my trip to my parents' place. Alex hadn't been at the apartment when we arrived home and I didn't hear from him by phone or text either. Annie was also out when we arrived and I went to bed after David locked himself in his room muttering something about swamps and footwear.

I jumped out of bed and ran to the bathroom to take care of business. I didn't bother changing out of my pajamas because I wasn't planning to do anything but curl up on the couch with junk food and watch old kung fu movies

for the entire day. Annie and David usually object to this particular choice of movie marathon but they give up when I convince them that the movies are necessary components of my ninja training.

I shuffled out to the kitchen and went through my normal stare down with the coffee maker. After experiencing my usual loss to the whims of the machine, I walked into the living room and sat down on the couch. I picked up the remote and started the first movie.

I didn't even make it through five minutes of the movie before my thoughts drifted to Daemon. I had to admit to myself that I didn't *hate* all things

Daemon, he was just able to piss me off like no other person could. I gave some thought to what David had said at breakfast yesterday and I decided that it was time to put my skills to good use and find out all that I could about Daemon. Unfortunately, the only information I had about him was his first name and the fact that he worked as a bouncer at Tomb. Even the most seasoned investigator needed more than that to go on. I resigned myself to the fact that I needed more information and that the only way I could get that was to go to Tomb.

I started formulating my plan and I determined that I would need a second set of eyes and ears with me at the club.

I considered taking Annie or David, but quickly dismissed that idea realizing that I would end up babysitting one or both the entire evening. I pulled out my phone and texted Alex.

Me: I have a mission, if you choose to accept...

It was still early so I was surprised when my phone chirped back almost immediately.

Alex: Excellent. What is it and when do we rendezvous?

Me: We're going to Tomb. You will be playing the role of my doting boyfriend. Rendezvous at my place. Six

o'clock.

Alex: Mission accepted.

I returned my attention to the kung fu goodness on the screen when Annie staggered into the kitchen. She emerged a moment later and then padded her way into the living room. I watched as she sat down on the couch and sipped from her cup. As usual, the caffeine kicked in and she suddenly came to life.

“Morning Paige!”

Odd. Even for Annie after her first sip, this was a little too chipper.

“Morning. Where were you last night? Or do I not want to know?” I gave

her a sly grin.

Annie laughed and her face was absolutely beaming. “I had a date last night and I know it’s early, but I think I’m in love. He’s incredible, Paige, and it feels so different this time.”

Annie’s speech is familiar. In fact, it’s the same speech she gives every time she meets a new man. I started to point that out to Annie, but then changed my mind. “How’d you meet this one?”

She jumped up and down in her seat as she started her story. “When I left work, I decided to stop at the grocery store before heading home. I finished my shopping and was walking

out to my car when I saw him trying to put his groceries in the back of his car. He had a splint on his hand and couldn't grip the bags and boxes, so I stopped to help him. He wanted to thank me, so he took me out to dinner." She got a dreamy reminiscent look in her eye. "It was the best night of my life, Paige. This guy could be *the one*."

I wanted to be excited for her but I inwardly groaned at the thought of another boyfriend. "That's great, Annie. Tell me about him, and you can start by telling me his full name, date of birth and social security number." I flashed her my brightest smile.

Annie laughed and then shook her

finger at me. “Oh no you don’t. I know what you’re up to and I’m not letting you *investigate* him. His name is Chris and he’s really a nice guy, so when he comes over, I want you on your best behavior.”

I shot her a look. “He’s coming over?”

She had an innocent look on her face and she rubbed her finger along the rim of her cup. “I invited him to come over and hang here tonight.”

I shook my head and responded. “Well, you are in luck Annie. I have plans to go out to Tomb tonight so I won’t be around to screw up your future marriage.”

Annie smiled but then gave me a strange look. “You’re going to Tomb. I thought you were going to avoid that place?”

“Well, yeah, I was, but I like it there and I’m taking Alex with me to keep me company.”

Annie nodded her head and I returned my attention to the television.

~

Alex arrived to the house promptly at six. I quickly briefed him on his role for the evening and explained that I was on a fact finding mission and needed my *boyfriend* there to appear innocent. When our pow wow was complete and

he understood his task, I went back to my room to get ready. I looked in my closet and choose a black, corset style top which I paired with skinny jeans and my boots. I took some extra time with my makeup by lining my eyes and applying a light layer of eye shadow to bring out their color. I left my hair loose but curled it at the ends.

Alex and I left and waved goodbye to a really excited Annie and a nervous David. I chuckled when I realized that she must have told him about her expected guest. I should have felt bad for leaving him to fend for himself, but instead, I couldn't help but be amused.

We took Alex's car so that he wouldn't have to ride on the back of my bike and we parked along the same side street as before. It was a Monday night and luckily it wasn't as busy at the club as it had been two nights ago. We made it through the front line with no problem and headed into the main area. Logan was tending the right bar tonight so I grabbed Alex's hand and led us over to see him. He smiled when he saw us approaching and leaned over the bar to talk to me when I sat down on a stool.

“Back already? I was wondering how long I would have to go without being able to bask in your presence.” Logan looked up and did that head nod thing guys do when acknowledging each

other. Alex nodded back and then sat down and turned to look out over the club.

I smiled at Logan for the compliment and asked, “Why’s that?”

He looked at me like I was crazy and laughed. “Because of what happened the other night. I saw the brawl you almost got into with the creep who grabbed you. And damn, Paige, that guy was twice your size. What the hell were you thinking?!”

I waved my hand in the air to stop his protest. “I’m not worried about that guy. I totally had that handled.”

His eyebrows shot up. “You had that handled? Because from where I was standing, it was Daemon who had to rush in there and handle that.”

Perfect. An opening. Time to throw on my business face.

“Speaking of Daemon, how long has he been working here anyway? I don’t remember seeing him around until the other night.” I gave him my innocent look.

Logan thought before answering and then shrugged. “He’s been working here since before I started. I’m surprised you haven’t seen him before. He doesn’t work every night, so maybe you just

keep missing each other.”

I nodded my head in moderate disinterest and tried to appear like I was just making polite conversation.

“So, is he just a bouncer, or does he work other jobs around here as well?”

Logan narrowed his eyes slightly like he thought I was up to something. “He’s just a bouncer. Why?”

I realized he may have been on to me so I rubbed my finger in a circle on the bar to enhance my innocent facade.

“No reason. I was just making conversation.” I smiled up at him

sweetly. “You don’t happen to know his last name, do you?”

A low timbre voice from beside me responded and I jumped. “If you want to know about me, why don’t you just ask me yourself?”

Busted.

I slowly turned around and looked up into Daemon’s eyes. My body instantly reacted and I felt woozy all of a sudden. *Holy Crap! Was that a swoon?! Did I just fucking swoon?! What the hell is wrong with me?!* Daemon had his signature smug look on full power and my face heated from his glare. I reached over to take Alex’s

hand and he turned back and noticed my predicament. He scooted over in my direction and put his arm across my shoulders. I looked up at Daemon and a sly grin broke out on his face.

“Hey Daemon, long time no see.” I looked between Daemon and Alex and I wasn’t shocked to find them in the middle of a stare down. “Let me introduce you to my *boyfriend*, Alex.”

Daemon and Alex both looked each other over and then Daemon smiled and nodded his head at Alex. I turned, “Alex, this is Daemon. He’s one of the bouncers here at Tomb.”

Alex nodded at Daemon and I was

pleased to get the introductions over with.

Daemon looked back over to me and held my stare as he spoke next. “I’m glad to see you brought your own personal white knight with you tonight, Damsel. I was nervous when I saw you were here. You tend to make my job a little tougher.”

If my eyes could throw daggers, this man would have about a thousand holes in him right now.

We continued our stare down and then Alex cleared his throat to break up the tension. I shook off whatever this was between me and Daemon and said,

“I’m happy to oblige, Daemon. I’d hate to pull you away from your fan club again this evening.”

A wicked grin broke over Daemon’s face. “I’m surprised you noticed. I would have thought you were too busy with all the *situations* you kept finding yourself in. I was starting to wonder if you weren’t purposely setting it up for me to have to come save you.”

I narrowed my eyes at Daemon and then Alex reached down to squeeze my hand. I looked over to Alex and he had a questioning look on his face. I looked back over to Daemon and said, “Well, this has been a good talk, but I’ll need you to excuse me so I can enjoy my

evening with my *boyfriend*.”

A low timbre chuckle erupted from Daemon and he nodded his head at me. “Stay out of trouble tonight, *Damsel*, I hope you and your *boyfriend* have an enjoyable evening.” With that, he turned and sauntered out into the crowd. I realized my body had been tense while talking to Daemon because when he was out of sight, my shoulders relaxed and I turned back to Logan to order a drink. If I was going to get through tonight without committing murder, I needed a few mixed drinks to relax me. Fortunately, we took Alex’s car and he could play the designated driver.

Alex and I talked with Logan while he was preparing our drinks and then sat at one of the tables by Logan's bar. We talked and joked around about the people at the club and after a couple of drinks, Alex left to go to the restroom. I stayed at the table and continued looking out over the crowd. The club was playing old southern rock tonight and I tapped my foot along with the music. It took a while for Alex to return and I turned in my seat looking for him. When I spotted him, I noticed that he was chatting up a pretty brunette over by the dance floor. She was looking at him with interest and kept lightly touching him in response to something he said. I should have been jealous to see

him like this, but I couldn't help but hope that maybe, Alex was finally moving on.

“Where’s your white knight, Damsel?” That familiar low timbre voice called from behind me.

I turned to see Daemon staring down at me and he momentarily looked over in the direction of Alex. His eyes narrowed when he saw Alex and the brunette and I could see his body physically tense. I looked between him and Alex and shrugged my shoulders. “Uh, he’s over there talking to an old friend of his.”

Daemon eyed Alex again and then raised one eyebrow. “A friend? Okay,

Damsel, we can go with that if you want.” I nodded my head in response and then started playing with the little straw in my drink. Daemon moved closer behind me and then leaned down to whisper in my ear. “You know, if you were *my* girl, I wouldn’t take time away from you to talk to a *friend*.” His lips brushed my ear and tremors ran through my body. He must have felt me shake because he smiled knowingly at me and his gaze darkened slightly. I had to play this off.

“Yeah, well, you know how it is; we’ve been together so long that we’re kind of like an old married couple now.”

Daemon cocked an eyebrow at me

and I realized what I had just said. He moved to stand to my side and reached up to trace his finger along my jaw. As good as that felt, I pulled my head away to appear disinterested. He smiled and those dimples of his popped out causing me to melt a little. I decided to play along even more. I leaned up to whisper into Daemon's ear. "Tell me something. What do you mean by 'if I was *your* girl'?"

Daemon flashed me a seductive grin and I realized I had stumbled into dangerous territory. Daemon looked over to where Alex was standing and after deciding that he was otherwise preoccupied, reached out and took my hand. He started pulling me towards the

same back storage area from the other night. I hesitated to follow him at first but then remembered my mission. Deciding that getting him alone might help me get the information I wanted, I got up and followed behind him.

When we reached the back room, Daemon opened the door and motioned for me to walk through. I walked straight to the other end of the room, taking the position that I had the other night. Daemon closed the door and locked it and then blocked it when he continued standing in front of it.

I spoke first. “Well, here we are...in a locked room...together. Feels familiar, although, I’m not a raging

lunatic tonight so there's really no need for the lock and barricade."

He let out a low chuckle and my knees started giving out beneath me. *What is up with this guy and how is he doing this to me?*

Daemon looked amazing as usual. He had on a dark blue t-shirt that brought out the crystal blue of his eyes and his dark jeans hung off his hips, yet still perfectly hugged his bottom. His hair was stylishly messy and he had his usual five o'clock shadow peppered along his jaw. I imagined what that stubble would feel like scraping across my skin and had to stop the mental imagery before I lost it. He was slowly stalking towards

me when he finally responded. “Yes, it does feel familiar. However, I never know what you are going to do next, so the lock is just added security.” He stopped when he was a few feet in front of me. “Why are you here, Damsel?”

I flinched at his use of that word but I played it off and acted like a professional. I cleared my throat. “I’m here for the same reason everyone is I guess; music, alcohol, dancing. You know, fun with the boyfriend and all.”

By the time I was done spewing out that pathetic excuse he had walked closer and was standing directly in front of me. I could feel the heat coming off his body and I had to look up to meet his

darkened eyes. He looked like a predator and I froze. We stood there staring at each other for what felt like minutes and my heart felt like it was going to come through my chest. He reached his hand up to my face and starting tracing the outline of my bottom lip. I couldn't tell what he was thinking by the strange expression he had on his face. He leaned over slowly and replaced his finger with his mouth. His kiss was feather light but sensual. My traitorous body trembled again and he softly laughed and ran his hand over the goose bumps that broke out on my arms. He pulled back to look me in the eyes and I continued my statue impression while he backed up to put a small

amount of space between us.

“There you go using that ‘boyfriend’ word again. Somehow, I don’t think you are being very forthcoming with me, Damsel. Care to guess why I think that?”

I looked up at him and in an attempt to appear angry, I narrowed my eyes at him. “I have no idea why you would think that, Daemon.” I angled my head to the side. “I will tell you though, if you attempt any more funny business like you did just a second ago, you’ll be lucky if you don’t walk out of here with two black eyes.”

Daemon’s eyes got wide and he

suppressed a grin. “Can’t wait.”

I was suddenly under the impression that Daemon wasn’t believing my cover. He continued. “Although I’m thoroughly enjoying this back and forth that we are having currently, I believe I brought you back here to answer a question, which I very much would like to do.”

I was confused for a second but then remembered what I had asked him while sitting at the table. I started to chastise myself for having opened up that line of questioning.

“You wanted to know what I meant by saying ‘if you were *my* girl’.” He

moved closer to me again and tilted my head up by placing his finger underneath my chin. “If I had you, Paige, I would not only be with you; but I would *own* you, I would *control* you, and I would, in all ways, *possess* you.”

A shocked laugh burst from my lips. “You would own me and control me. What kind of crap line is that?! I mean, do women really fall for that shit?” My laughter continued bubbling out. “I don’t know who you think you’re talking to Daemon, but I believe you have me mistaken for the slutty redhead you were with the other night.”

His eyebrows shot up at that comment and he chuckled. “No. I don’t

have you mistaken for anyone, Damsel. I know exactly who I'm talking to at this moment."

I crossed my arms over my chest and glared up at him. "Well, then it's obvious you've suffered an unfortunate head injury and have forgotten what I told you about myself. NOBODY owns me or controls me or dictates my life in any way. Besides, I don't even know anything about you. For instance, what is your last name?"

He gave me a knowing look and answered. "Pierce."

My head shot up in shock at how easily he had given up that information.

He smiled and then continued explaining his statement.

“I think you may be misunderstanding what I am saying. I wouldn't dictate your life and you'd be free to do whatever you like, but when you are in my bed, you will do as I say, when I say it. Thus, the control. And if you were in my bed, I'm not sure I could stand it if any other man touched you again after that. Thus, I would own you from that moment forward.”

I didn't understand why he was telling me this. Even though I now had the information that I needed and I should be walking back out to the club, my curiosity got the best of me and I

couldn't help but question him further. This was just too good to not fully discuss. "So, if I'm understanding you correctly, if I were to sleep with you, you would *own* me or *control* me, just like the rest of your lady friends?"

He eyed me for a minute before responding. "No. Not like my other lady friends. I couldn't care less what they say or do once I've had my night with them. I just know that with you, it would be a different story altogether and I think it's only fair that I warn you ahead of time."

His eyes were the deepest blue that I had ever seen. His jaw worked over itself and it made his face appear

even more masculine. He crossed his arms over his chest and I wanted nothing more than to reach out and run my hands over the definition of his arms. I tucked my hands behind myself to keep them from reaching out on their own accord.

I couldn't help it that my voice was husky when I responded. "I guess it's a good thing that I'm spoken for. I suspect we'd have a few issues if we ever attempted being anything more than we already are. I'm not one of your women waiting around to be tamed and I don't enjoy being told what to do, or pain, or crazy bondage shit, or whatever the hell else it is you are implying that you would like to do to me." I started moving forward to indicate I was

leaving when he grabbed my shoulders and forced me to look at him again. His look was intense as he searched my eyes.

“Once again, Paige, you are mistaking what I’m saying.” He bent down to whisper against my ear. My breath hitched at his closeness and I tensed up in an attempt to control my body’s reaction to him. “I would never hurt you. I would never do anything to you that you haven’t asked for. There is no crazy bondage shit; no whips, no chains, nothing like that. What I want to do to you doesn’t require props or toys or anything else. Just me and you. But I would control you and I know that you would like it.”

The tension within me was more than I could handle and I started feeling woozy. *Damn my traitorous self and this annoying swooning.* I shook it off.

I spoke slowly so as not to give away what he was doing to me. “I can guarantee you, Daemon Pierce, that you can set whatever it is you are suggesting aside. I’m not the type of girl you think I am.” I looked up into his face in challenge and he released me. I started to walk past him and he called out to me again.

“Whatever you say, Damsel; but I’ve felt how you react to me and I’m sure I’ll be seeing you again. Enjoy your

evening with your *boyfriend*.”

I didn't look back at him as I walked to the door, unlocked it and then let myself back out into the club.

When I emerged from the storage room I searched around the club for Alex. I couldn't find him immediately so I walked over to sit at a stool by Logan's bar. Logan walked over to me after a couple minutes. “Where's Alex?”

I looked at him nonchalantly. “He's around here somewhere. He ran into an old friend earlier and he's been catching up with her.”

Logan looked scared for a moment but then motioned to one of the dance floors. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Paige, but I think he’s a little bit more than friends with her.”

I looked in the direction he had indicated and my jaw dropped when I saw Alex and the brunette dancing and grinding in to each other like there weren’t other people around who could see them, including his fake girlfriend.

Damn it. I am seriously going to have a conversation with Alex about acting like a boyfriend while in public.

I continued to watch Alex and when they started kissing I turned to look

away. As I was turning back to the bar I caught sight of Daemon. He was standing in a corner near the dance floors where Alex was kissing the brunette. He was staring Alex down with a murderous glare in his eyes. He turned to look in my direction and when he saw that I was looking at him, his face softened and he looked sorry for me.

I looked back at Logan and shrugged. "Guess you figured out he's not really my boyfriend, huh?" Logan smiled and patted me on the head. "It's okay Paige. Your secret is safe with me..." He paused for a moment and then added. "...And everybody else in this club." I was about to change the subject

when my phone chirped.

David: When are you coming home??!

Me: In a couple hours. Alex met someone and I want to give him a chance to get to know her better. What's up?

David: Annie's boyfriend is here and let me tell you, this guy is a real treat.

Me: That bad? Maybe I can hurry Alex along and come to your rescue.

David: Hurry.

Me: I'll try but Alex is in the middle of a heated game of tonsil hockey, so I'll see what I can do.

I looked back at Logan and then remembered my earlier idea for a match made in heaven. “So, are you seeing anybody currently?” Logan gave me a strange look and I laughed and continued. “I have a roommate who, unfortunately, has a tragic love life. I think you two would really get along so I was wondering if you would want to come over one night when you are off work.”

Logan considered my offer and then smiled. “Yeah, sure, that sounds

cool.” He picked up his phone from behind the bar. “What’s your number, I’ll text you mine.” We exchanged numbers and then I shuffled off to hunt Alex down and pry him away from his friend.

Alex and the brunette had moved from where they had been dancing and I was annoyed that I had to go find them. I was pushing my way through a congested area around the left bar when I felt a hand grab my arm.

I turned around to find that Daemon had grabbed me and before I could protest, he was dragging me towards the back exit. He slammed open the door and pushed me into the alley behind the club. The door

slammed itself back closed and Daemon grabbed my head with both hands and brought his mouth crashing down on mine. His tongue slid along the crease in my lips and I opened my mouth to give him entrance. He tasted like mint and I couldn't help but enjoy his kiss. The passion blooming between us was canceling out my thought process and I was helpless to the sensations exploding throughout my core. I slid my hands up his rock solid chest and grabbed onto his shoulders as he kissed me. I caressed his tongue with mine and a possessive growl erupted from within him. I shoved my hands into his messy hair and pulled him closer towards me. He began to nip at my bottom lip and I

moaned from the slight sting that it caused. My knees felt weak and I was suffocating from the heat between us. Only when it was necessary that we come up for air, did Daemon stop what he was doing.

I was left breathless and speechless and I'm sure my eyes were as huge as saucers. I continued trying to control my body's reactions but then he slowly started kissing his way down my jaw, causing me to shiver. He planted a small kiss on the most sensitive part of my neck and then nipped at my ear. I forced my hands back to his chest and reluctantly pushed him away.

He had the look of a man obsessed

but he let me go when I softly pushed at him. Daemon's chest moved up and down with his heavy breathing and I could tell that his pants had tightened from our encounter. I took a moment to contain myself and looked up at him.

“What was that for?” That had to have been the most unintelligent question ever, but my mind was still trying to reboot after that kiss.

Daemon gave me a wicked grin and he started rubbing his hands over the goose bumps along my arms. “I noticed your *boyfriend* has moved on to someone else, giving me the perfect opportunity to claim what's mine.”

I closed my eyes in an attempt to calm my heart rate. Never before have I been this affected by another person and I felt like a fish out of water. My body wanted to jump him here in the alley, but my mind wouldn't stop screaming out that this was a bad idea.

“You saw that?”

His smile grew wider. “Yeah, I saw that. Care to share with me why your boyfriend is kissing another woman while he is out with you?”

I tried to play it off but I had a feeling Daemon wasn't buying anything I was selling at the moment. “Would you believe me if I told you that Alex is

certified in CPR and he was giving her mouth to mouth?”

Daemon remained quiet while he shook his head. We stood looking at each other while he rubbed his hands softly up and down my arms. The continued contact wasn't helping calm me and I threw my hands up in defeat. “Fine. He's not my boyfriend. We just pretend that we're together so that I can avoid being hit on by other guys.” I gave him a pointed look. “Apparently, it's not working when it comes to you.”

Daemon's grin widened. “Apparently.” He reached his arms around me and started rubbing his hands along my lower back. My body arched

involuntarily to his touch.

“Tell me where I can find you, Paige. I want to see you again and I want it to be outside this club.”

An inner battle began playing out within me about whether or not I should agree to seeing him again. Daemon is one of the most arrogant men I know and I was concerned that I could be falling prey to the game he was playing. I knew I should walk out of there and avoid him for as long as possible, but my heart clenched at the thought of not seeing him. I considered my options before answering his question.

“I’m not ready to tell you where I

live. I'll give you my phone number and we can see where it goes from there, but I have to warn you, Daemon, if you are looking for a girl you can order around, you are looking in the wrong place."

Daemon continued to look at me with an expression I couldn't figure out. "I'll take what I can get with you, Damsel. If you can only offer me your number at this point, then I'll be happy for having that."

I shook my head in agreement and pulled out my phone. We exchanged numbers and once I had put my phone back in my pocket, his mouth was on me again. This kiss was soft and slow and it felt like he was worshipping my

mouth. His arms reached around me and he pushed on my lower back causing me to arch my body against him. Another growl came from within him and it vibrated my body where it was touching his. My head was swimming in desire and I didn't think I could take much more of this without losing control. Just when I was about to lose it for good, he nipped at my lip and pulled away. He appeared to be shaking off whatever reaction his body was having and his eyes held me in the most seductive stare. We didn't speak for a few seconds and then he reached for my hand to lead me back inside.

Once we entered the club, Daemon bent down to whisper in my ear. "I've

got to get back to work, Damsel, so you should find that *ex-boyfriend* of yours and start getting home. You WILL be hearing from me soon enough.” He nipped at my ear and then walked away. I stood where he left me attempting to balance myself from that experience. Once I felt that I could move without falling over I went back out in search of Alex.

I finally located Alex still attached to his brunette. *Geez, get a room guys.* I tapped on his shoulder and gave him a pointed glare when he broke free of her face and turned in my direction. Alex wasn't surprised by my presence and understood that I was ready to go home. He turned back to his friend and kissed

her quickly on the lips. Turning back to me, he introduced the brunette.

“Uh, hey Paige, this is Jill and Jill, this is my good friend, Paige.” Jill and I exchanged waves and I motioned Alex to the front entrance. I started walking away while he said his goodbyes and then followed after me. We walked in silence to the car and climbed in. Alex started pulling away when I remembered David’s texts from earlier in the evening.

“Hey Alex, you might want to hurry home.” He glanced at me in question and I explained. “David texted me earlier needing the cavalry to come riding in. Apparently Annie’s newest guy isn’t one of David’s favorite

people.”

Alex laughed. “Well I’m not surprised. I’ll get there as fast as I can.” And with that, we were off to the rescue.

Chapter Seven

Alex and I arrived at the apartment in no time. We jumped out the car and flew up the three flights of stairs. Alex went inside first and we heard Annie giggling loudly. I walked in behind Alex and caught sight of David standing in the kitchen. I immediately turned and walked over to where he was standing.

David turned to look at me and his face was a mixture of disgust and apprehension. I raised my eyebrows at him in question and he used his head to indicate in the direction of the living room. I heard Alex introducing himself to Annie's boyfriend and Annie giggled

again. Alex came into the kitchen to join David and me.

Using his thumb to point back in the direction of the living room, Alex asked, “What the hell is that?”

David turned to Alex with a scorned look. “*That* is Annie’s new boyfriend Chris. He’s a 36 year old loser who works at the local flea market as a janitor. He’s not going to be able to work for the next four to six weeks because of his injury and he’s already convinced Annie that she should loan him some money to help with his bills. Annie thinks he’s gorgeous and believes she is in love with him. They’ve know each other for a little over twenty-four

hours and he's convinced her to give him four thousand dollars! Have I done a good job in explaining what *that* is?"

Alex's eyebrows shot up and I dropped my face into my palm and groaned. I began shaking my head in silent protest. I looked back up at David and he looked like he was about to explode. I turned to Alex to ask his opinion.

"So, is he a bad looking guy?"

David let out an insulted gasp. "Well, if any man in this room should be judging the beauty contest, it should be me. He's not a bad looking guy, it's just that his personality is obnoxious and he

is an obvious mooch. Poor Annie is completely smitten with this guy and she has no clue that he's using her. I mean, what kind of person asks another person to borrow money within twenty-four hours of meeting them?"

I thought that over for a moment and then voiced my guess. "A bank customer?"

Alex laughed and David gave him a pointed glare. "Oh sure, chuckle it up, Chuckles, but while you're busy finding this amusing, we've got a serious problem in there. What are we going to do about this?!"

I crossed my arms over my chest

and huffed out a breath. “Unfortunately, Annie is a grown woman. If she wants to give her money to some guy, the only thing we can do is suggest against it. She’s ultimately the one who will make that decision and there’s nothing we can do to prevent her from making that mistake.”

David shot his head towards me. “Nothing you can do? Are you kidding me?! We can lock her in her room, take shifts watching her, deny her outside communication and internet access, and install a two way key lock and not give her the key. There’s *plenty* we can do. My question is, just how far are we willing to go to keep her from doing this?”

Alex patted David on the back. “How will Annie go to work if we have her locked up?”

David put his finger to his mouth to think about what Alex said and then responded. “I’ll tell them she’s ill. I’ll take over her cases until she comes to her senses and then she can have them back when she gets over this idiot.” He gave Alex a thumbs up. “Good attention to detail.” He turned to me. “Paige you should take some notes from Alex’s good thinking. It might help you out in that career of yours.”

I uncrossed my arms and pushed myself up from the counter. “I guess I

need to go in there to see what we are dealing with. Maybe if I can find enough issues with the way he looks I can appeal to Annie's superficial side."

David pointed to the living room.
"Go."

I sighed and turned toward the living room. "No problem. I'll just go in there and take control of this situation."

I took a few steps towards the room when I heard a low moan and a high pitched sigh.

Ew.

I turned around. "Um, no. I'm not going in there."

Alex tried to suppress a grin while David acted like he was dry-heaving over the sink; well, at least I think he was acting. I walked back over to where they were standing and hopped up to sit on the counter. “Guess we’ll be here for a while.”

David finished hacking up his hairball, looked up from the sink and stamped his foot. “Oh no, I am not getting stuck in the kitchen while she gets her dirty going on the living room couch!” David marched into the living room and cleared his throat loudly. “Excuse me! Could you two possibly stop licking, and tugging and touching all over the *community* seating area? There are other people here; although I can

understand how it would be difficult to know that with your eyes closed and your tongues shoved down each other's throats." David crossed his arms and forcefully nodded his head. "Now have some decorum people and stop pretending like you are horny teenagers in the living room."

"Get the fuck out of here faggot!"

OH HELL NO! I did not just hear that.

David's body tensed and his jaw dropped at what Chris had said.

My fists started to clench as Alex and I ran into the living room. Annie

started yelling at Chris, finally coming to her senses. As I rounded the corner, I saw Annie pushing Chris away by shoving a pillow in his face. I ran around to stand next to Annie while Alex moved over to stand next to Chris. Annie pulled the pillow from Chris' face and I gasped.

I was staring at the drunken idiot from the bar.

I looked down to see that the hand that I broke was in a splint. Why didn't I pick up on that when Annie told me how she met him?! I looked over at David, pointed at Chris' splint and shouted, "It's the guy from the club! The one that left with a broken finger!"

David's eyes widened when he remembered my story about Tomb. I looked over to find that Annie and Alex were clueless because I had never given them the full story of Saturday night. I realized that the fastest approach to dealing with this would be to quickly tell Alex.

“He was one of the pigs from Tomb. He grabbed my ass and I broke his finger trying to pull his hands off of me.”

Alex put Chris into a headlock and started lifting him from the couch.

“What the fuck man! Let go of me!” Chris shot me an evil glare and

then pointed in my direction. “That whore was shaking her ass for everyone to see and then broke my finger when I touched her. *She* was coming on to *me* and then she went all psycho bitch when I tried to dance with her!”

I’m not sure what shade of red my face must have turned after hearing Chris’s versions of the events from that night at Tomb. I was already absolutely disgusted by what he called David, but then to add those lies? It was apparent that Chris needed a good ass kicking. “Alex, you know me well enough to know that this fucktard is lying through his teeth. Get him out of my sight before I rip his fucking head off.”

Alex nodded and then jerked Chris off the couch and tightened his hold. Chris grunted when Alex intentionally pushed his legs into the coffee table as he turned Chris towards the front door. Alex was yelling at Chris as he walked him out. "Get the fuck OUT of this apartment and don't you dare show your bigoted face around here again!"

Alex continued to drag Chris to the stairs and I ran out the front door to see where Alex was taking him. Alex walked as far as the stairs and then released Chris, slightly shoving him down the first step. Chris turned in my direction and his face was purple from rage. Veins stuck out of his neck and his nostrils were flared as he screamed at

me. “You are going to pay for this bitch! I’m going to fucking kill you for this!”

Alex shoved Chris farther down the stairs and then crossed his arms over his chest while he glared at Chris in challenge. Chris stared Alex down for a couple of seconds and then turned around and stalked down the three flights of stairs. Alex and I waited on the landing until we saw that Chris got in his car and drove away.

Alex and I walked back into the apartment to find a pissed off David attempting to console a crying Annie. We all sat down in the living room waiting for Annie to calm down. Alex was still breathing heavy from having to

drag Chris' large form out to the stairwells and I kept alternating between sitting down and jumping back up to pace the room. Annie calmed down after another ten minutes and David was the first of us to be able to speak.

“Well, that was fun. Annie, you should invite your boyfriends over more often. I rather enjoy being called filthy names in my own home by assholes who like to grope women in bars.”

Annie started bawling again and I glared at David for being insensitive. He shrugged his shoulders at me. “What?! We’ve been warning Annie about these kinds of guys since we’ve met her and she refuses to listen. Maybe

it's time for us to be a little more blunt to drive the message home."

Annie sniffled loudly and then wiped at the tears falling down her face. "How was I supposed to know that Chris was like that?!" She pointed at David. "Everything was fine until you decided to play penis patrol and yell at us like we were children."

My jaw dropped. "You have to be kidding us Annie. That guy was a major creep! And what the hell were you thinking agreeing to loan him so much money? I was heading in here to talk some sense into you before David said what he did, and the situation wouldn't have ended any differently once I saw

who you were making out with in our apartment. So stop blaming David! If anything, you should be apologizing for bringing an ignorant bigot into our home for us to deal with! Seriously Annie, your choice in men is insanely bad and this crap has got to end. Open your freaking eyes once in a while and take a hard look at what you are doing to yourself...”

Alex touched my shoulder to stop me from my tirade. I opened my mouth to continue but closed it again when I realized that Alex was right. Now was not the time for this discussion and we were all exhausted and angry. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Annie, I’m sorry for screaming at you. I know you didn’t know that Chris was like that. Maybe we should all just call it a night and resume this conversation tomorrow.”

David hugged onto Annie and then helped her back to her room. Alex and I were left in the living room staring at each other. We were quiet for a couple of minutes before Alex finally started speaking.

“Why didn’t you tell me about what happened at Tomb Saturday night?”

I shrugged my shoulders and took a moment before answering. “I was tired when I got back that night. I didn’t think

it was necessary to give you a play by play when the situation was handled.”

Alex shot me an angry look. “You didn’t think it was necessary?! Paige, that guy threatened to kill you.”

I waved off Alex’s concern. “He threatened to kill me at Tomb too. I’m not worried about it. Chris is obviously in need of psychological help and he’s a loser. I’ve run into plenty of men like him in my life Alex and I’ll run into plenty more. It’s not worth recanting the tales every time something like that happens.”

Alex moved from the chair he was sitting in to sit by me on the couch.

“Paige, trust me when I tell you, I know that you have a special gift for pissing people off. But you have got to start telling people when things like that happen. What if that guy had followed you home from the club? He could have seriously hurt you, or worse.”

I sighed and hung my head down. I felt like a five year old child getting scolded and I wasn't in the mood to hear it. “Alex, I understand your concern, but I wasn't that worried about him. He left the club nursing a broken finger and Daemon walked me out to my bike. I wasn't in any danger.”

When I looked up, Alex had a strange look on his face. “Daemon? As

in the bouncer who couldn't take his eyes off you the entire time we were there tonight?" Alex turned his body to look more directly into my eyes. He lightly placed his hands on either side of my face to make sure I was listening to what he was about to say. "Beautiful, I don't know if I trust that Daemon guy much either. He appeared to have an unhealthy interest in you and it might be a good idea to stay away from Tomb for a while."

I removed Alex's hands from my face and placed them in his lap. Why was everyone jumping on the "Paige is a wimp" bandwagon? "First off, I'm not sure how you were able to monitor where Daemon's eyes were all evening,

considering you were stuck to Jill's face for the majority of the night..."

Alex flinched.

"...Second, I can handle myself. I'm not going to avoid Tomb or anywhere else in fear of what could happen to me. Daemon is an arrogant ass, yes. But I doubt he is obsessed with me, unnatural or otherwise. He's just another guy trying to get in my pants. There's nothing unnatural or abnormal about that! I wish you guys would finally realize that I'm not some helpless person that can't take care of herself. It's starting to seriously irritate me."

Alex sighed and then stood up

from the couch. “This is a bad time to be talking about this. We’re on edge and pissed off and it’s probably best that we just call it a night and talk more when everyone has calmed down.” He reached down and grabbed my hands to pull me up from the couch. “Let’s just go to bed, Paige.”

I allowed Alex to pull me up and he held onto my hands as we walked to my room. Alex shut the door behind us as we walked in and I grabbed some pajamas from the closet as I made my way to the bathroom. Alex was getting undressed as I closed the bathroom door behind me.

I turned the water on to wash my

face and brush my teeth when my phone chirped.

Daemon: Hey Damsel. Hope you made it home safely tonight without need for rescue.

Me: Oh I definitely needed rescuing. But luckily my OTHER white knight was there to save me.

Daemon: You mean your other EX-white knight?

Me: Has anyone ever told you what an arrogant bastard you are?

Daemon: All the time.

*Me: Apparently you weren't
fazed by the critique.*

Daemon: Apparently.

Me: Good night Daemon.

*Daemon: Night Damsel...
dream of me.*

I didn't respond to his last text. I'm not sure what to think about what's happening between us and I'm definitely not sure that I trust Daemon. However, now that I had his last name, I could check more into him, but that would have to wait until tomorrow. I proceeded to wash up and get in my pajamas and opened the door to find that Alex appeared to be sleeping.

I walked over to the bed and switched off the lamp next to it. I crawled under the blankets and Alex wrapped his arms around me and pulled me to him. I cuddled into his warmth but cringed when he started placing feather light kisses down my neck. I tried to pull away but he held onto me tighter. “Alex, stop.”

Alex lifted his head to look at me better. “What’s wrong? Are you still mad about what I said?”

I shook my head no and responded. “No, but after watching you glued to Jill tonight, I’m not exactly in the mood to take over where she left off.”

Alex turned me around to look into my eyes. “Since when do you care about me making out with another girl? We’re friends, remember? You are the one who wanted it to be like this between us. I didn’t sleep with her obviously, so what’s your deal?”

I didn’t answer him. I couldn’t. I didn’t want to admit to Alex, much less to myself, that my issue wasn’t seeing him kissing Jill, it was the fact that I had kissed Daemon. “Just go to sleep Alex, this has been a long day and I’m tired.” Alex laid back down, squeezed me to him, and we silently drifted into sleep.

It was early morning at The Center during the first weeks of June. As usual, I was playing outside The Center, chasing butterflies and lizards as the rays of the sun started peeking over the trees of the wetlands. Momma and daddy had come in before dawn and once there was enough light to see, they let me go outside. Early morning was my favorite part of the day. The light created a magical glow as it softly shown through the tree branches and the air still carried a cool breeze from the night before. If I got out early enough, I could play outside for a long time before Momma would call me in to drink water and cool down. I was happy at that moment because I knew I

had a few hours before the sun would heat the air to the point where the humidity would wrap around you, making you feel like you were suffocating.

A green anole crossed my path as I was running around the camphor trees and I chased it around the base of the tree. Those types of lizards were my favorites because they could change to any color they wanted. Momma told me they changed color to blend in and hide from other animals that would eat them. I was jealous that I couldn't change like they did when I was frightened. The lizard ran up the side of one of the larger camphor trees and I decided to climb after it to see if it

would turn from green to brown. It didn't go very high and I only had to climb up three branches to reach it. I watched it for a while and laughed at how it would stick its red neck out and then pull it back in again. I didn't know why it had that silly red skin that it would puff in and out of itself, but I always liked to watch them do it. At times, the lizard would bounce its head up and down like it was dancing and I would bounce mine in response. I'm sure I looked stupid dancing with the lizard, but I felt like we were communicating with one another.

The lizard ran to an outer branch and I quickly lost sight of where it had gone. I started climbing back down to

go chasing after whatever else I could find when my shoelace got stuck, tripping me as I descended. I was at the base of the tree and was able to catch myself before I fell but my knee still scraped down the rough bark, causing my leg to bleed. My knee stung and I sat down on the ground to inspect my injury.

Buddy ran up to me as I was blowing on the wound trying to stop the sting and I couldn't hide the small tears that escaped my eyes. "Did you hurt yourself again, Paige?" I looked up at Buddy and wiped the tears from my face. I always hurt myself and I felt ashamed for being so clumsy. I didn't respond, but rather, I just nodded my

head to indicate yes.

Buddy ran into the Center and then came back out seconds later with a first aid kit and a warm, damp cloth. As usual, Buddy took his time cleaning out the scrape and then applying a thin layer of ointment before placing a bandage over the wound. He reached up after dressing my knee and used the same cloth to wipe at my tear streaked face. I looked up at Buddy and his eyes smiled as he tended to me. Sometimes, I secretly wished that Buddy would hurt himself in front of me so that I could tend to him and not feel so foolish for always being the one needing help.

Buddy stood up and took my

hands to help me stand with him. He placed the washcloth and the first aid kit in the apex of the tree and challenged me to a race to the water's edge. I took off after him and forgot that I had been hurt almost immediately. Buddy would never let me wallow in the pain of my injuries and because of him I learned to get up when I fell, dust myself off and keep going.

We raced to the water's edge and laughed as we competed against each other to see who could spot the most turtle heads before they ducked back down under the water. We continued our game for an hour at least and then ran to the grasses where we could lie down and look up at the sky.

The clouds were large and white as they slowly rolled across the sky. We watched the clouds and we would laugh at the funny shapes we could see in them. At some point, Buddy pushed himself up on one elbow so that he was leaning over me. He looked at me with a funny expression and I stared at him trying to figure out what he was thinking. Before I realized what he was doing, he leaned down and placed a small peck on my mouth, only to pull away again as fast as he could. I sat up real fast and placed my hand to my lips not understanding why that momentary contact made my little heart flutter like it did.

“What’d you do that for?” I looked over at Buddy and he had a smile on his face like he knew something I didn’t.

Buddy stared into my eyes for a quick second before he answered me. “Cause that’s what boys are supposed to do with girls. Just like your momma and daddy. Didn’t you like it?”

I was quiet while I thought about what he was asking me. I was only five so I didn’t know if I should like it or not. I knew what kissing was because the older kids at the Center had told me about it, but I never had the desire to kiss anyone. Daddy always told me that boys weren’t supposed to kiss me

and that if they tried, I was supposed to smack them and tell them no. So that's exactly what I did.

I sat up, slapped Buddy on the shoulder and crossed my arms over my chest to indicate I was mad. Buddy laughed before he asked, "Why'd you hit me?"

"Because Daddy told me I'm supposed to smack any boys that try to kiss me."

I glared at Buddy, but he only smiled wider, causing his eyes to crinkle at the sides. "Your Daddy's right, Paige. I better not hear about you letting any other boys kiss you

because I'll beat them up if you let them."

I was confused why Buddy would kiss me and then tell me I shouldn't let boys do that, but before I could ask him, his expression changed and he was back to his normal self. He stood up from where we were sitting and as I was starting to stand up with him, he pushed me back down while pulling my hair and then he ran off.

I was mad after he did that and I decided that after that kiss, I wouldn't be letting any boys do it again. Secretly, however, I knew that if Buddy tried, I wouldn't stop him. I liked his kiss and it was the only kiss that I

wanted to try again.

Chapter Eight

I woke up early the next morning and was happy to have a job starting so I could leave the house before everyone woke up. Alex was still sleeping next to me and I took a minute to look him over, to memorize him like he was right now. I knew that we were nearing the end of our arrangement and I would miss these moments we had together. I thought about Jill and hoped that she could be the person to steal Alex's heart. I know it's selfish, but it would be easier for him to leave me. I knew what heartache felt like and I never wanted to be the one to cause that in him. I remembered my dream last night and thought that maybe,

I was remembering Buddy because I was leaving Alex like Buddy left me.

I shook off my melancholy and slowly stood up from the bed. I stretched out my arms and started my usual routine. I threw on a pair of jeans with a green tank top and didn't bother with makeup. The only place I would be for the next ten hours was the inside of a company car and I had no one to impress.

While most people would hate to spend ten hours with only themselves as company, I enjoyed the hours of introspection and solitude. It was refreshing to spend time alone and I was always less grouchy after a job. My

spirit started to brighten just at the thought of getting some time to myself and I swiped my bag and helmet as I left my bedroom.

I decided to skip my daily stand-off with the coffee maker and hurried out the front door to go to the local coffee shop on my way into work. With any luck, I could get to work early enough to grab my gear and scoot out before the other employees arrived, forcing me to be sociable. I put on my helmet as I was running down the stairs and I grabbed my sweatshirt out of my bag and pulled it on for the ride.

Within seconds I was off and the sun was just starting to peek over the

horizon. The air was crisp and I was thankful for the sweatshirt covering my body. I drove downtown and pulled into the parking lot of an eclectic little coffee shop which was owned by a cute young couple. I parked my bike in a front spot and hurried inside to find the small brunette wife tending the registers. I ordered my coffee and was standing to the side, waiting for her to finish my order.

The bell above the door chimed and I instinctually glanced over my shoulder to see who had come inside. I froze when I saw that Chris had just walked through the doors. He was dressed in coveralls and had a cap on his head with the flea market logo

written across the front. His splint stuck out from the sleeve of his coverall and he had some bruising around his neck. Alex must have had him in one hell of a headlock to leave a physical mark as dark as that. I panicked when I saw him and I made the tough decision to abandon my coffee to get the hell out of there.

I turned toward the door and angled my head down to try and mask my face. As I was pushing open the door, the shop owner called out to me. “Ma’am! Ma’am! You’re forgetting your coffee!”

I shoved the door harder and moved a little faster to get to my bike. I

grabbed my helmet and climbed on the bike. Reaching up to put on my helmet, I turned towards the handlebars. When I looked through the glass doors of the shop my eyes locked with Chris'. His eyebrows were narrowed and his good hand was balled in a fist. He was approaching the doors as I started the ignition. The door was beginning to open while I hurried to back up and pull away. I kicked the bike into gear and took off, barely avoiding him as he came running at me.

As I pulled out onto the street I could feel his eyes staring at me from behind. My bike screamed as I accelerated quickly and I was out of his sight within seconds. I raced to work

and didn't slow down until I approached the parking garage. Luckily there was no traffic and I was able to race through the streets easily. I drove into the garage and the echo from my bike was deafening. Pulling into a spot, I ripped off my helmet and dropped it on the ground. My heart was pounding and my breathing was labored. I started taking deep, slow breaths to try and calm myself down.

After I had calmed down, I marched into my office and grabbed my assignment and my gear. It was almost time for Peggy, our receptionist, to arrive so I only had time to throw a longing glance at the coffee maker as I rushed out the door. I climbed into one

of the company cars and read over my assignment to see where I was heading. I entered the address into the GPS and drove out of the garage.

Driving *somewhat* over the speed limit, I reached my destination within thirty minutes of leaving my office. The house was in a quaint suburb and I had to arrive early in case my subject would be leaving for work. If he came out the door, I would follow him to wherever he went and hopefully catch him in some outside activities. A lot of the time, the subject stays indoors, either at home or at work, and you often find yourself sitting in your car staring at buildings. I parked the car within view of the house and killed the engine. I set up my gear to

record the front door of the house and began my tedious wait.

There are only so many positions you can stay in for any length of time while sitting in a car. Those same positions are limited even further when your rear end starts cutting off the nerve that runs down your leg. An hour into my wait and I was shifting my position so often, I looked like I had too much coffee to sit still. The pathetic irony was that I had no coffee because of a certain asshole trying to attack me. I started thinking about what I could do to deal with this situation with Chris, but was interrupted when my phone alerted me to a new text message.

Daemon: Morning Damsel. Just checking in to see if you've gotten yourself trapped, or kidnapped or attacked recently and are in the need of rescuing.

It pissed me off knowing that he was never going to give this up. I considered not responding but then remembered I was stuck in a car in the middle of normal town USA and I had nothing better to do.

Me: Well, well. If it isn't the BLACK knight. How have you decided to piss me off today?

Daemon: I haven't thought that far yet but I'm sure I can come up

with something. Tell me where you are and I'll jump on my WHITE horse to come save you.

Me: Thankfully I'm at work so you and your LITTLE PONY won't be able to find me. You have no idea how pleased I am at the thought of not having to see your arrogant ass.

Daemon: I affect you that much, huh?

Me: I have no idea what you are talking about.

Daemon: I'm taking you out tonight.

Me: I do believe you're a little full of yourself. I'll call the pharmaceutical companies and see if they can come up with a pill for that.

Daemon: I'll pick you up at your place at 6.

Me: You're not going to leave me alone, are you??

Daemon: No.

Me: Stalker.

Daemon: ...

Me: I'll kick your ass if you show up at my apartment. Be afraid.

Daemon: Can't wait. J

Me: You're sick, seriously. You should seek professional help. I'd say I could refer you to someone but I don't think there's a cure for arrogance.

I jumped as my phone suddenly rang and I checked the caller I.D to find that Daemon must have been sick of typing. I hit the little green button and before I knew it, one of the sexiest gruff voices I've ever heard was speaking to me.

“I'll ask you again, Damsel, when and where should I pick you up?”

I wondered if he had just woken

up because the normally deep timbre of his voice now had a rough edge to it that sent chills up my spine. I had to clear my throat due to the fact that I hadn't actually spoken out loud for the past couple of hours. "Hi Daemon. It's nice to hear from you too." Daemon must not have been one for polite conversation in the morning because he remained silent while waiting for me to answer his question. I sighed and resigned myself to the fact that small talk was not going to be occurring at this moment. "I don't know, Daemon. I'm not typically the type to be told what to do."

I didn't think it was possible but his voice dropped lower as he responded. "I'm not telling you, I'm

asking nicely.”

A laugh burst out of me almost immediately. Who is this guy kidding? “I’m sorry, but I don’t recall hearing a question in anything you have said so far.”

He chuckled. “I guess you are not paying attention, beautiful, because I distinctly remembered asking *when* and *where* I could pick you up. Both of those words are indicative of a question. Wouldn’t you agree?”

I couldn’t believe this. My first conversation with Daemon over the phone and he was giving me a lesson in grammar. The only problem was the fact

that he was right. Apparently, we were playing hard ball.

“Unfortunately Daemon, I’m going to have to decline. I don’t recall having been asked *nicely*, and really, your demands aren’t doing much to make me want to agree to seeing you tonight.”

He sighed into the phone. “My Dearest Paige, would you *please* do me the honor of agreeing to spend some time with me this evening?”

I couldn’t contain the grin that broke out on my face. Paige – 1, Daemon – 0. Unfortunately, I now had run out of reasons why I couldn’t agree to see him tonight. I could go for the

tried and true excuse of having to wash my hair, or David's hair, or both. Somehow I think that Daemon would see through that. I stated my demands. "Fine. I'll agree to a *short* get together, but you're not picking me up. I'll meet you somewhere."

I heard him laugh from his end and my traitorous body buzzed from the sound. The constant mutiny of everything below my neck was frustrating me to no end. I couldn't believe he was affecting me physically just by being on the phone.

"Like I've said before, I'll accept what I can get with you, Damsel. There's a coffee shop around the corner from my house on 1st and 3rd, we can

start there. Meet me at six?" My brain desperately searched for a witty come back but I was drawing a blank. "Yeah, that'll work. I'll meet you there." I hung up the phone before he could respond and tossed it on the passenger seat when it chirped again.

Daemon: Try not to think about me too much.

And we're back to Mr. Egotistical. I hated to burst his bubble with my response, but not really.

Me: What? Oh, were you still talking? I had already forgotten all about you. J

Daemon didn't respond to that jab and I high fived myself in my head. I'm not sure that raised my score to the 'two' category, but it definitely landed me at a firm 'one point five'.

I stuck around Mr. White's house for another couple of hours but he never came outside. Calling it a day, I drove back to the office to deposit my gear and drop off the car. I considered stopping for coffee, but remembered there would be free leaded goodness at the office.

My eyelids were drooping as I pulled into the garage. I really missed my caffeine and I ventured inside in search of a cup. I attempted to rush into the kitchen but stopped short when Peggy

called out to me. Reluctantly, I turned to wave at her and she immediately started in about her latest boy problems. I smiled and nodded at all the right parts but I had no idea what she was saying. I could see the coffee maker from where I was standing and my focus was solely on that machine. Brad, one of the managers, walked in as I was staring and my eyebrows narrowed as I watched him reach for the pot. The second hand on the wall clock suddenly began to echo and I watched helplessly as the steaming black nectar poured into his cup. I started tapping my fingers to get Peggy to move it along but she didn't take the hint. When she stopped to take a breath, I waved goodbye and flew into

the kitchen. I have no idea if she was done talking, but I saw my break and I took it.

Brad was placing the pot back on the burner when I grabbed a Styrofoam cup and marched over.

“Oh! Hey, Paige. Sorry, but I just took what was left.”

I gave Brad my best death stare but he didn't drop to the floor like expected. I attempted mind control and willed him to give me his cup, but he just looked at me funny and walked off with the goods. My knees buckled when I realized my search for coffee had not come to an end and I berated myself for

not stopping at a store before I got here.

I was in desperate need of caffeine but I wasn't about to stop at the coffee shop from this morning. The only other place was the one I would meet Daemon at later, so I didn't want to go there either. There was a slight chance that coffee would be available at my apartment, so I ran to my bike and sped home.

I dragged myself up the three flights of stairs and threw open the door to my apartment. Annie and David sat in the living room and I managed to grunt in their direction as I moved toward the kitchen. David raised an eyebrow at me when I passed but I couldn't attempt

actual words without caffeine. I made it to the kitchen and scooped out the last of the coffee grounds into the machine. I poured in the water and hit the power button. My fingers were tapping out their normal rhythm as I watched the machine spew steam and sputter. A funny tingle happened in my spine when I realized I didn't hear coffee dripping into the pot. I looked at the empty pot and then up at the reservoir. The water appeared to be moving, yet coffee was not magically appearing. I tapped on the top of the machine to encourage it along.

Nothing.

I tapped on the machine again, but then hit it with my fist to move it along.

Still nothing.

I panicked and must have resembled a gorilla with all the jumping and grunting and slapping at the machine. I had developed my own little coffee dance as I tried everything to make just one drop come out. I felt a hand land on my shoulder and I spun around to find David behind me.

“Paige. I have bad news.”

My eyes widened and I looked back at the machine. *NO!* I quickly looked back and forth between the machine and David, silently willing him to tell me he was joking. He wasn't. My mouth opened like something

resembling English was going to come out but my voice wasn't responding and I just stood there with my mouth hanging open. David gave me a sympathetic look and patted me on the head.

“Annie discovered it this morning. I believe she's been traumatized. I had to stay home from work to console her.”

I looked over at the machine again and then ran my hand over its smooth top surface. We've shared so many good times over the years. Sure, most of that time was spent with me urging it to hurry along, but it always eventually gave me what I needed. I wasn't sure what to do at this moment and my head dropped

down as I held back a tear. I walked out of the kitchen and made my way over to my bedroom. I turned to close my door and David walked into the living room to rejoin Annie and continue their mourning.

I closed my door and tossed myself on my bed. Hugging my pillow to me, I turned my face into the cool cotton and thought about what to do with our current situation. Obviously a trip to the store was warranted, but I couldn't help but feel like it was too soon to replace my good friend. A sense of loyalty had suddenly come over me and I was shocked to discover I had developed such an attachment to an inanimate object.

The lack of caffeine must have gotten to me because I fell asleep for a few hours. I woke up slightly confused and my alarm clock indicated it was three in the afternoon. I stumbled out into the living room to find that Annie and David had left. A note was on the table telling me that they had run to the store to purchase a new machine. I was pleased that they had the situation under control, so I grabbed my laptop and sat down on the couch.

I booted up the machine and decided to research the person I would be meeting up with shortly. I typed Daemon's name into Google and waited for a response. There weren't too many

hits and I selected the link to the Florida corporation website. My jaw hit the keyboard when the corporate filings for Tomb appeared on my screen.

Daemon wasn't just a *bouncer* at Tomb, Daemon *owned* Tomb. And not only Tomb. He also owned three smaller bars in the surrounding area. I ran through the listings of his business ventures and discovered that he was the sole proprietor of all four establishments. It appeared that he first obtained one of the smaller bars five years ago and built up from there.

I typed the property appraiser's website into the browser and entered Daemon's name into the search bar. His

address popped up and confirmed that Daemon owned the apartment where David and I had seen him on Sunday. My emotions were all over the place and at first I was angry when I realized that Daemon had lied to me about being a bouncer. I stewed for a moment before remembering that it was Logan who had told me that Daemon was a bouncer, and that, technically, I had never asked Daemon directly.

I continued my quest into Daemon's background but wasn't able to find any other information through public records. Pulling out my big guns, I used my company log in to request a background report from a subscription service available to investigators and

law enforcement. I entered in Daemon's information, watched the little hourglass spin around for a moment, and then a link popped up to a .pdf copy of the report. I opened the link and read through the information it gathered.

Most of the information was your standard statistics of a normal member of society. I scrolled through his history of vehicle registrations, which included a few motorcycles, his phone numbers, addresses and business listings and licenses. I was pleased to discover that he didn't have a criminal record, but it occurred to me that his background didn't contain information older than five years. I skipped to the section of the report which would detail members

of his family and there was nothing.

It wasn't unusual for information regarding his youth to not be included, but usually there was *some* information about a person's family contained in these reports. I flipped back to his driver's license history and that only went back five years as well. I looked at his birth date and found that he was twenty-four years old. His history should go back at least eight years, but there was nothing beyond that five year mark.

Very strange indeed.

While I was scratching my head trying to determine what planet Daemon

may have come from, my phone chimed.

Logan: Hey Beautiful. Doing anything tonight? Thought I'd take you up on your offer and meet your friend.

Me: Perfect timing. She just broke it off with her boyfriend last night.

Logan: Uh...should I be worried?

Me: Trust me. It's not her, it's them.

Logan: Ok, I'll trust you on that. What time should I come by?

Me: You can head over now, but I have to leave at 5:30. No worries, David will be here so it shouldn't be awkward.

Logan: Is David the guy who got knocked out in the pit that one night?

I snickered. David was never going to live that down. I finished my conversation with Logan and had just given him my address when David and Annie returned. They made their way into the kitchen cradling a large box and I was intrigued. I pushed myself up and padded into the kitchen behind them. David solemnly removed the old coffee maker and placed it aside with a

remorseful look. We stood together and held each other in remembrance.

David broke free first and pulled the new machine from the box. My eyebrows narrowed when I gazed upon the shiny red machine that had more buttons and dials than I had ever seen before.

Now, how in the hell was I supposed to operate THAT in the morning??

David must have noticed my concern because he turned to me and stood in such a way that would make any game show hostess jealous. “Paige, let me introduce you to our new brewer.

She's got a timer that we can set so the coffee is ready when we get up." He turned excitedly to demonstrate the machine's features. "And if you turn this dial here, you can set it to make a single cup for emergencies."

His explanation was starting to sink in to my caffeine-deprived mind. "Hold it. So what you are saying is, no more waiting for coffee?" He gave me a bright smile and nodded.

Hallelujah!

We played with the machine for a while and read over the instructions about all the buttons and dials. Once we felt satisfied that we knew how to work

the machine, it was time for the christening. I bounced over to the cabinet to the grab supplies and froze when I discovered we were out of coffee grounds.

“What the hell?! It’s official, I’ve stepped into some alternate universe that apparently is hell bent on denying me my tasty beverage!”

I continued my rant and my phone chimed with a text from Logan alerting me that he was on his way. “Oh crap! Logan’s going to be here soon. Quick Annie, go make yourself presentable, he’s coming to meet you.”

Annie cocked an eyebrow and was

about to respond but David beat her to the punch. “Logan? As in hot surfer boy bartender from Tomb? That Logan?” I nodded my head and David bounced up and down, clapping his hands excitedly. He grabbed Annie’s hand and started dragging her towards her room.

“Come on Annie, we need to hurry and get you ready. This guy is major hot factor. I just know you’re going to love him.” As David pulled Annie into her room, he looked back over his shoulder and added, “Paige, you are a genius! Seriously, they should erect a statue in your honor.” The door slammed behind them. I momentarily felt bad for Annie, having been on the receiving end of David’s ‘beauty treatment’ myself a time

or two.

I giggled as I thought about all the tweezing and plucking Annie was currently undergoing and looked at the clock. Shit! It was almost five and I had to get ready to meet Daemon. I hurried in my room to freshen up and choose an outfit. I picked out a royal blue bustier top to give myself the illusion of cleavage and paired it with my favorite jeans and knee high boots. I braided my hair down the back of my head so that if I took it down later, it would have some decent wave to it. After slapping on a layer of mascara, some eyeliner and a nude lip gloss, I was ready to go.

The doorbell rang as I walked

back into the living room. I started for the door but David flew past me and indicated in a melodic voice that he had it. I turned to see a very beautiful Annie emerging from her bedroom, freshly shined and polished for her guest. She looked radiant in her emerald green top that accented her auburn hair and green eyes.

David threw open the front door and practically yanked Logan inside. Logan looked very dapper in a pair of loose jeans and a fitted shirt that perfectly complemented his tan skin tone. David dragged poor Logan into the living room to make the introductions. Logan nodded in my direction and his eyes widened upon sight of Annie. I

jumped up and down in my head when I noticed his approval.

Annie eyed Logan, but then smiled brightly when she finished her inspection. David deposited Logan by Annie and then walked over to stand next to me. He leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Like I said, Paige, you are a genius!" He nudged me with his shoulder and wiggled his eyebrows up and down. I couldn't help my grin.

After everyone was settled and Logan and Annie started talking, I turned to David to give him his babysitting instructions, which only included, "Don't let her do anything stupid."

David saluted and said, “I’ve got this. No worries.” I glanced at the clock and saw that I was now officially running late for my date. David looked at me in question and I answered his silent query.

“I’ve got a date. Don’t wait up.” I started to turn to leave, but David grabbed my arm to stop me.

“I need details.” He narrowed his eyes at me to indicate his dissatisfaction with not being previously advised about my plans.

“Um...” I looked away and perfected my innocent look before glancing back up at him. “...I’m meeting

Daemon.”

David’s eyes widened and his jaw went slack. “You are meeting up with Mr. Gorgeous Man God himself...” He paused but then raised his voice. “... And you didn’t tell me?!”

I waved my hands to tell him to lower his voice and whispered my response. “Yes. I’m meeting ‘Mr. Gorgeous Man God’, but I don’t have time to explain. I’ll give you a full report when I get back.”

David crossed his arms over his chest to show that he meant business. “I’d expect nothing less. Now go get him girl!” He half pushed me out the

door to hurry me along.

Chapter Nine

I raced down the stairs and stopped dead when my feet hit the parking lot below. My bag dropped from my shoulder and my helmet dropped from my hand.

What. The Fuck?

My bike was trashed. I walked in circles around it to take in the damage. Both tires were not just slashed, but shredded. The front headlight was busted and the seat was torn apart. All the paint was keyed and the word 'whore' was clearly carved into the gas tank. The side mirrors hung helplessly

from the sides and the gas cap was missing. I cringed at the thought of what could have been poured down the tank. Whoever did this obviously meant business.

My legs gave out and I slumped down to the ground. Who could have done this and why? I reached in my bag to pull out my phone.

Me: Date's cancelled.

Daemon: Cold feet? Or have you gotten yourself in trouble again?

His mockery wasn't appreciated at that moment, however he caught me in a weakened state and I let it go. My

fingers wouldn't cooperate to type out what happened so I took a quick picture of my bike and sent it him.

Daemon: Give me your address. I'm coming over.

I didn't have it in me to argue or otherwise respond with my standard sarcasm. I gave him my address and dropped my phone back into the bag. By the time Daemon pulled into the parking lot, I was still sitting in the same position gaping at my once beautiful bike.

Daemon exited his large, black, military style truck and rushed to my side. No words were exchanged as he

approached. He walked a circle around my bike to better assess the extent of the damage and I saw him physically tense when he read what was carved into my tank. He circled the bike one more time before walking back to me. Reaching down to grab my helmet and bag, he whispered, “Paige, let’s go up to your apartment so we can talk about this.”

My head nodded in silent agreement and I reached up for him to help me stand. He placed his hand on the small of my back and I led him up the three flights of stairs to my front door. Daemon reached around me to open the door and I stumbled inside.

As soon as they caught sight of my

expression, David, Annie and Logan jumped up in unison. A small chuckle broke through my catatonic state when Logan saw Daemon. The look on his face was a mixture of surprise, concern and fear, and I believe those emotions flashed through him in that order. David and Annie took a moment to openly gawk at Daemon but then sprang into action wrapping me into a group hug. We stood that way for a few moments before I felt David mouthing a question over my shoulder. Daemon must have answered with a silent indication because David passed me over to him and then walked outside.

The obscenities being screamed from the parking lot were an excellent

indication of when David caught sight of the bike. Annie and Logan must have also heard him because they raced out the front door together.

Somehow I managed to move over to the couch to sit down. I couldn't understand why someone would do that to my bike. What did my bike do to them? My poor baby would be in the shop for weeks, plus, what was I supposed to do in the meantime? Drive a car? I cringed at the thought. I could handle small doses of an enclosed vehicle for my job, but what would I do when I felt a need to collide with the air?

Daemon was pacing back and

forth in front of me, his jaw visibly clenching in anger. David, Annie and Logan eventually returned and took seats around me. Annie started crying and dropped her head into her hands. "I'm so sorry, Paige. I feel like this is all my fault."

My head snapped to Annie and I asked, "How is this your fault? I don't know what you are talking about." Annie started crying harder and David responded in her stead.

"I think she's talking about Chris. But I don't think it could have been him. How would he have known it was your bike?" David started rubbing Annie's back in an attempt to help Logan console

her.

Chris!! Why hadn't I considered Chris?!

My hands balled into fists as I pictured that asshole touching my poor, defenseless bike. “Actually, he would know it was my bike. He saw me when I stopped for coffee this morning and tried to attack me as I pulled out of the parking lot.”

David's head snapped to me when he asked, “Why didn't you tell me?! First the date and now this?! Paige, I'm really starting to get concerned that our communication isn't working properly...”

“WHO IS CHRIS AND WHY IS HE ATTACKING PAIGE?!” We all flinched at the sound of Daemon’s booming voice.

As usual, David was the first to recover. “Simmer down, Big Guy.” He took a breath before he continued. “Chris is someone who Annie dated *briefly*. He is a total loser and apparently he and Paige got into it at Tomb. My badass female friend over there broke his finger when he tried to grope the goods.”

Oh crap.

I groaned when David mentioned what happened at Tomb.

Daemon and Logan quickly looked at each other and then back at me. David was oblivious to what he had just told them and I cringed at what I knew was coming.

Daemon took a moment to process the information and to compose himself. He spoke slowly when he asked, “Paige, was Annie dating Chris when he attacked you at the bar?”

I shook my head and sighed. “No.” I shifted my position on the couch so I could look up at Daemon without having to crane my neck. “Annie met him at a store the day after it happened. She didn’t know who he was. She brought him over here last night while I was at

Tomb with Alex.” I took a breath before continuing as I was not looking forward to telling Daemon this part of the story. He already looked like a ticking time bomb.

“When Alex and I got home, Chris was here and, well, basically, Alex had to put him in a headlock to drag him out.” My voice quieted as I said that last part.

The room became eerily quiet all of a sudden.

David spoke up to break the tension. “You know, Daemon, you should stop working your jaw like that. Even though it’s probably one of the

sexiest things I've seen, I can hear the enamel being scraped off from where I'm sitting and that's bad." Daemon shot David a glare. David held up his hands in mock surrender and added, "What? I'm just looking out. Lord knows dentists are expensive."

My face met my palm. Leave it to David to say something like that at a time like this.

Daemon wasn't fazed by David's comments and returned his stare to me. "So tell me what happened at the coffee shop, Paige."

Damn. I was hoping David's comments would have caused Daemon

to forget that part. The fact that he was referring to me as Paige rather than using that annoying pet name was an indication of his continued rage.

I sighed. “I stopped at that little coffee shop on North and Vine and Chris showed up. I ran out to my bike and took off as he was running after me.”

“And, when you spoke to me this morning, you didn’t mention being attacked hours earlier, because...?”

His calm demeanor was unnerving, and when he spoke, his voice was flat, but carried an undertone of menace. If this was a cat and mouse game, I was currently the mouse and I

had a sneaking suspicion I was being cornered. He was visibly angry and I wasn't sure if that was due to Chris' actions or mine. My only option at this point was to strike first, so that's what I did.

“Maybe we should just call it a night? Between my complete lack of caffeine and an asshole destroying my bike, I've been through a lot today. I'm just going to grab a shower and crash. Thanks for coming by and all.”

Daemon clamped his hand down on my shoulder and turned me to look at him directly. “Paige, I'm not letting that asshole ruin my night and I won't let him ruin yours either. Let's take my truck

and go out like we planned. We'll figure out what to do about your bike and everything else tomorrow."

I shook my head. "Don't worry about it Daemon, I can get my bike fixed myself and..."

"Paige," Daemon interrupted, "please let's just go. We can talk about all of this later."

I crossed my arms over my chest and said, "I'm not sure I want to go."

"Why not?"

"Because you are calling me Paige. If you are calling me that, I know you are angry and I don't really want to

deal with your anger.”

His eyebrows shot up and he let out an exasperated laugh, “Would you rather I call you Damsel?!”

From the corner of my eye I could see the heads of my friends looking between Daemon and I. They resembled spectators at a tennis match and I hated to have to end their free entertainment. But, because I wasn’t feeling like being the center of attention at the moment, I decided I’d just go with Daemon to end this conversation.

“Fine.”

I reluctantly got up and said my

goodbyes to everyone. I walked out the door and Daemon followed behind me.

We walked to his truck in silence and Daemon moved to the passenger side to open the door for me. Once I was safely in the vehicle, Daemon closed the door and climbed in on the driver's side. We were still silent as he started the truck and pulled out of the lot. I looked back at my bike as we drove off.

While in route to the coffee shop, Daemon began talking again. "Were you going to tell me about Chris, or is that another situation you have *handled*?" He ground his teeth together as he said that last part.

My feet suddenly became interesting as I tried to avoid this conversation. I didn't feel like I should have to tell Daemon anything, but I knew he was just concerned and didn't mean any harm in wanting to know if I was in danger. "Technically, I *did* tell you, but you just didn't pick up on it. You should try and be a little more perceptive in the future."

Daemon glanced at me and then back to the road. "I would have remembered you telling me about a psychopath trying to kill you. When exactly was it that you told me about this?"

"Last night." I held up my phone

so he could see what I was talking about. “I told you that my other white night saved me.” I shrugged. “It’s not my fault that you chose not to believe me.”

Daemon let out a humorless laugh. “We were joking around, Damsel. Of course I didn’t believe you. You also left out some important details in that text if you ask my opinion.”

He was right. The text wasn’t exactly a play by play of what had happened at my apartment. I didn’t know what else to say. I needed coffee. My body was shutting down from the lack of caffeine and I was losing the will to live, much less argue.

We arrived to the coffee shop and Daemon came around the truck to open my door for me. He led me into the shop and we ordered our drinks. When the barista handed me my coffee I could have sworn a small light from Heaven shown down upon it. I carefully ran to the condiment area and poured in my sugar and creamer. Daemon's face puckered when he saw the way I drank my coffee. I looked up at him and shrugged. "What? It's good."

Daemon chuckled while he led us over to an overstuffed couch. I looked around the shop and I was impressed with this little place. There were tables scattered throughout the middle of the shop and the walls were lined with

overstuffed couches and chairs. Paintings and photographs created by local artists lined the walls and there was a stage area for open mike poetry and folk music. On the opposite wall from us, there were book shelves with a wide assortment of reading material. The floors were a deep mahogany and the countertops were a rich black. Large windows near the machines allowed light to pour into the shop and light jazz played over the speakers. This place had a calming effect and I took a large swig from my cup.

“Ow! It burns, it burns!” I had apparently forgotten to let the liquid cool and I was breathing quickly in and out of my mouth trying to stop the burning. I

realized I probably looked like the world's biggest idiot at the moment.

Daemon had an amused expression on his face and I was somewhat annoyed that he was taking pleasure in my pain. I narrowed my eyes and glared at him and that only made him start laughing. He took the cup from my hands and placed it on the table in front of us. He turned back and rubbed his thumb along my jaw line. "Do you realize how beautiful you are?" He leaned over and placed the lightest kiss on my lips. His cologne wrapped around me and his masculine scent pulled at something inside of me. My eyes fluttered as he leaned back but kept looking in my eyes. He was wearing a black fitted shirt and the dark

contrasted with the crystal blue of his eyes. Now that I saw him in better light I noticed that his eyelashes were thick and it made me jealous. The line of his jaw was speckled with shadow and his mouth had a perfect pout. I wanted nothing more than to lean over to him to bite on that bottom lip.

He reached over to lightly run his finger along the crease of my mouth. I couldn't help myself, and I stuck out the tip of my tongue to taste the salt of his skin. A low growl erupted from him and he abruptly pulled his finger away. I looked at him in question and he said, "You have no idea what you are doing to me. It's probably best I keep my distance while we are in public because

I want nothing more than to throw you down on this couch and claim you as mine.”

His words caused butterflies in my stomach and I felt that familiar woozy feeling when Daemon is around. I smiled up at him through my lashes. “Well then I guess it’s a good thing we are in public. I’d hate to have to disappoint you by not letting you have your way with me.” I fluttered my lashes and smirked up at him. He had a wicked grin on his face and his stare became heated.

Daemon leaned down and his lips brushed my ear as he whispered, “You’ll let me have my way with you, Damsel.

You just don't know it yet.”

He was right. But I wasn't about to let him know that.

Daemon leaned back and stared at me for a moment. I took that opportunity to reach over and grab my cup of coffee. It had cooled down enough and I chugged it down. I swallowed the last drop of the java and my body instantly relaxed. It's odd that coffee had a relaxing effect on me, but I decided it was because I just fed my addiction.

“Thirsty?” Daemon had a sideways grin on his face after watching me drink down the coffee like it was cool water on a hot day.

I chuckled and set down the cup. “Yeah, I’ve had one hell of a day. Every time I tried to get coffee, something crazy happened so that was the first cup I’ve had.” My skin blushed as I said, “I kind of have a slight addiction.”

Daemon shook his head and laughed. “Why am I not surprised to hear that?” He got quiet for a moment and started rubbing circles on my leg with his thumb. “Will you do me a favor, Damsel?”

I looked between his face and where his hand was in contact with my leg. Those circles were distracting as hell and they were touching a nerve that shot through my entire body. If that

slight contact was enough to make me feel like this, what would it feel like to have his body pressed up against mine? My blush deepened and I tried to shake it off.

“What’s the favor?” I asked.

Daemon reached over and took both of my hands into his. His crystal blue eyes burned into mine and I wanted nothing more than for him to fulfill that former threat of throwing me down on this couch. “Will you please be more forthcoming with me about the problems you are having? It pisses me off to know that a man has attacked you two times and you haven’t mentioned one word about it.” His eyes softened as he said,

“I know that we just met, but I care about you more than you realize. I want to know that you are safe.”

I looked down at our hands. I couldn't look him in the eyes as he said this. Looking at him as he spoke those words was causing a strange tightening sensation in my chest. It was unfamiliar and unwelcome. Keeping my eyes trained down helped relieve it. I wanted to tell him to fuck off, that I could take care of myself, but I couldn't get rid of this irritating voice that kept telling me to agree with what he was asking.

Without looking at him I asked, “If I tell you things, are you going to try and tell me what to do?”

He thought about it. “I can’t promise you that I won’t offer suggestions, but ultimately, the final decision will always be yours.”

Not being able to find the harm in what he was asking I nodded my head in agreement. He let out a breath like he had been holding it for my response and then pulled me into him. His mouth met mine and he nipped at my lips before running the tip of his tongue across them. Every nerve ending in my body came alive and the small bites that he gave me sent shocks straight through me. My hands lightly ran up the front of his shirt and I could feel a hint of his muscular form beneath the material. The energy he exuded was of authority and raw

power and I shivered when his large hand cupped my cheek. I opened my mouth to him and touched my tongue to his. He deepened the kiss and reached his arm over to pull on my lower back. My body arched up to him and I wrapped my hands around the back of his neck. I started to push my hands up into his hair when he broke contact with me and pulled back. He held my gaze as we both took a moment to catch our breath. Both of our chests revealed our labored breathing and we laughed about what we must have just looked like.

Daemon put his cup on the table and turned around to take my hand and pull me up. "Let's go, I have something I want to show you, but I have to warn

you, it's at my house. I wanted to put that out there now so there was no surprise. Knowing you, if you thought I had ulterior motives, you would try to beat me up while I was driving or jump out of a moving vehicle." He raised his eyebrow. "You're not to be trusted."

His voice softly rumbled when he said those last words and tremors ran through my core. I had to admit that Daemon had charm and I knew I was walking into dangerous territory. But damn if I'm not a curious person. I didn't even bother with my standard inner debate this time. I just said okay.

Chapter Ten

The trip to Daemon's apartment was short as the coffee shop was around the corner from where he lived. He pulled his truck into an underground garage and after exiting the truck, we walked to an elevator hidden away in a corner of the garage. The elevator was for residents only and Daemon had to use a key to call it. Once inside, we silently rode up to his third floor apartment. The elevator opened to a hallway with a door on either side. Daemon reached down to take my hand and then led me to the door on the left. He opened the door but then stepped back to motion me inside.

I walked into the apartment and gasped when I saw it. The apartment was three times the size of the one I shared with Annie and David. The ceilings were raised and my footsteps echoed as I crossed over the dark hardwood floors. The walls were painted a light grey which mimicked the color of stone. Daemon flipped a switch and wall sconces ignited. The sconces were gas flames and shadows danced around the room from the movement of the fire. Pendant lights hung from the ceiling every few feet or so and bathed the room in a soft light. The effect of both sets of lights gave the room a mystical feel and I was shocked by the beauty of it. Daemon's furniture was

very masculine and the dark leather overstuffed couches and chairs combined with cherry wood tables gave the room an old world feel. The wall opposite the entryway door held a floor to ceiling book shelf stacked with hard back books and other various objects that appeared to be replicas from middle age or renaissance Europe. I didn't see any pictures or other evidence of the life that Daemon has lived and I was disappointed that he continued to remain a mystery in that aspect. Paintings depicting medieval scenes hung on the walls and were evenly spaced. Three large windows ran along the right wall and large doors led out to what I assumed must be the patio. I was

surprised and impressed by the detail of the decor in the room and I wondered if Daemon had hired a decorator to create this space.

I was engrossed as I took in my surroundings and I hadn't noticed when Daemon came up behind me. I felt his large, muscular arms wrap around me from behind as he bent down slightly to whisper in my ear. "Do you like it, Damsel?" His lips brushed my ear as he spoke and I could feel his warm breath trail down my neck. Goose bumps broke out on my arm and Daemon chuckled as he released me to rub his hands up and down my arms.

"It's amazing, Daemon. I've never

seen a more beautiful room.” Compared to my apartment, which consisted of mismatched furniture thrown together from the belongings of my roommates and me, Daemon’s apartment looked like something out of a magazine.

Daemon reached for my hand again and led me down a hallway with double doors at the end. He opened one of the doors and started to lead me inside. As I walked behind him I saw that this room was his bedroom, and just like the living area, it was large with vaulted ceilings with the same lighting and wall color. The room was a touch more modern with a large flat screen television hanging on the wall opposite his king sized bed. The bedding was

black with touches of white and red and it took up the majority of the space in the room. A large dark wood headboard sat against the wall opposite the television and it contained more shelves with various objects which looked antique. There were no paintings on the walls of his room, but a delicate tribal pattern was painted along the center of the walls. Dark red curtains hung from the windows on the left side of the room and I imagined they were thick enough to block light from entering the room while you slept. I stood there for a moment, taking in the beauty of this room before realizing where Daemon had led me. I started to step back to turn towards to the living room and Daemon squeezed

my hand before saying, “Don’t worry, Damsel, I didn’t bring you in here for what you’re thinking. I just need to grab a set of keys.” He let go of my hand and walked over to a bureau that ran along the length of the left wall. He pulled open a small drawer near the top of the bureau and extracted a set of keys. Closing the drawer, he turned back to me and brushed past me as he exited the room.

I turned to follow him and he led me into the kitchen that was set apart from the living room by a half wall. Just like the other areas that I had seen, the kitchen was beautiful and had black quartz countertops and dark cherry wood cabinets. The flooring tile was a dark

grey stone with veins of black quartz creating a unique pattern to each tile. The upper cabinets had brushed glass and there were interior lights which shown out from behind the glass. The large gas powered stove and other appliances were a light brushed nickel and the metallic color perfectly complemented the dark surfaces of the room. Daemon reached into his pockets to pull out his wallet and phone and he tossed them on the counter before turning to take my hand again. “Let’s go back downstairs for a second. I have something I want to show you.”

Daemon led me back out into the hallway and to the elevator doors. We took the elevator to the garage and I

followed Daemon to some hidden bay doors that were tucked away on the opposite side of where he had parked his vehicle. Daemon unlocked one set of the bay doors and it clanked loudly as he lifted it to the ceiling. He reached inside and flicked on a light and the lights buzzed as they came on. Daemon turned to me and motioned into the bay. “My *white* stallion awaits.”

I laughed at his emphasis on the word ‘white’ and looked inside the bay to where he was indicating. My eyes widened at the sight of one of the most beautiful white motorcycles that I had seen.

“While your bike is in the shop

being repaired, I want you to use mine. I would prefer to lend you my truck in the meantime because it's safer, but I have a feeling you would feel more at home driving something like this."

I shook my head when I realized what he was offering and I opened my mouth to decline, but was interrupted before I could voice what I was thinking. "It's only for a few weeks, Damsel, and I only use the bike recreationally. You need transportation and it's better for you to use this than pay for a rental. Please, take the bike."

"I'm afraid of what might happen to it, Daemon. What if Chris comes back and destroys this one too? I can't

afford to have two bikes fixed. At least with a rental, I could purchase insurance that would pay for the repairs if Chris were to do something to it.”

Daemon wrapped his arms around me from behind and my muscles tensed from his close proximity. His body heat was apparent on my back and I reached behind me to wrap my arms around him to pull him closer. He rested his chin on the top of my head and I could feel his mouth move as he answered me. “The bike is insured, Damsel. If Chris were to destroy it, the cost to fix it would be covered. I want you to take it. I’m asking you *nicely* to take it.”

I thought about his offer and how it

would be more convenient than having to rent a car. Plus, he was right in his belief that I would feel more at home on a motorcycle than I ever would in an enclosed vehicle. I released Daemon and approached the bike. When I was close enough to touch it, I ran my hands along the smooth paint and leather seat. I threw my leg over the bike and sat down while taking the grips of the handlebars into my hands. I looked over to Daemon and his eyes had darkened and a wicked grin came over his face. I angled my head in question and he explained, "I've never been more jealous of an inanimate object than I am at this moment."

I laughed at his comment and then

turned back to look over the different dials and indicators located below the handlebars. I reached over to Daemon and he placed the keys in my hand. I inserted the key and turned the ignition and the bike roared to life. I twisted the accelerator and the bike screamed and then calmed again. I could feel the power of the bike from the vibrations and I reached to turn it back off. I looked over to Daemon. "Thank you, Daemon. I don't know how to repay you for letting me use it. It'll make things a lot easier for me while my bike is being fixed."

Daemon nodded his head and then reached for me to lead me back outside of the bay. He closed the bay doors

behind us and started leading me back to the elevators as he asked, “Is there any chance I could convince you to stay here with me while we figure out what to do about Chris?”

I laughed at his question before answering. “I don’t think so, Daemon. Chris could follow me back here just as easily as he could my apartment. Plus, I’m not sure what we can do about him. Staying here seems unnecessary and I don’t want to leave David and Annie to fend for themselves if he were to show back up where we lived.”

Daemon didn’t respond as he led me into the elevator. We rode up in silence and when the doors opened he

took me by the hand and led me back into his apartment. We sat down on one of the leather couches situated in front of the large picture windows. The white gossamer curtains were pulled aside and you could look out and see the lights of the city below.

Daemon turned his body so that he was facing me and the skin between his eyes was creased in concern. Between the soft light of the pendant lamps above us and the dancing of the flame sconces, shadows moved across his face, giving him an air of ancient times and dangerous encounters. The contours of his face made him appear as if he could have been a medieval knight or any type of rugged warrior. A breeze blew

through the room causing the curtains to swing in and out from where they hung and it was easy to imagine I had been transported back to a time that existed centuries ago.

He let out a slow breath before telling me what he was thinking. “I’m worried about you, Damsel. Chris appears to seriously have it out for you and I imagine he won’t stop until he hurts you in one way or another. I know you won’t hide here, so will you tell me what you intend to do to protect yourself?”

I opened my mouth to respond to Daemon’s question but closed it again when I had no answers to give him. I

hadn't put a lot of thought into what I would do about the situation with Chris.

Except for what happened at the bar, he hadn't yet committed a crime that I could easily connect back to him. I could try for a restraining order due to his threats, but even then, a piece of paper was not going to stop a person intent on harming me. The best that piece of paper could do was momentarily blind him if I threw it in his face and ran like hell to get away. Somehow, I doubted that would be enough. On top of that, all I knew was his first name and where he worked, so going to the police or courts would be useless until I could better identify him.

“I don't know what I'm going to do.” I looked down and fidgeted at

having to admit that I didn't know. I sighed and looked back up into his eyes. "I haven't thought that far out, Daemon, and at this point, all I can do is watch my back. Technically, he hasn't done enough yet for me to file charges or anything of that nature."

Daemon appeared to be struggling with my response. He reached down and took my hands into his. "I'll be honest with you. It's hard for me not to throw you into one of the rooms in this apartment and keep you locked in there to keep you safe." My eyebrows shot up at what he said and he softly chuckled at my expression before adding, "But I know you would just end up tearing down the door or climbing out the

window in an attempt to scale down the building, so I won't actually attempt to kidnap you."

I laughed at the mental imagery of me climbing down the side of his apartment building. Of course, with my fear of heights, tearing down the doors seemed to be the better option.

"I appreciate your concern Daemon and I understand it. You need to realize, though, that I'm not as fragile as you think..." Daemon put a finger to my mouth to stop what I was saying.

"I know, Damsel, you don't need to explain yourself to me. I have a very good idea of who you are, and don't get

me wrong, you are an amazingly sexy woman because of your independence. I just want you to know that you're not alone in this. I want to help you."

I nodded in acknowledgment of what he was saying. "Thank you for caring. Even if I refuse your offers at times, it doesn't mean I don't appreciate them. Sometimes I just need to do things on my own."

I shifted my position so that I could move closer to Daemon and settle myself beside him. I sighed, rested my head against him and he put his arm around me. I must not have realized how tired I was because my eyes began to drift closed and I was completely

relaxed in Daemon's arms.

Daemon and I sat that way for a while before he reached down and tilted my face up to him. He slowly leaned down and placed his mouth over mine. His kiss was sensual and seductive and my body responded instantly to it. The masculine scent of his cologne teased my senses and I felt a heat start to ignite between my legs. I reached my hands up into his hair and pulled him down closer to me. My mouth opened to him and our tongues slid against each other. His taste was addictive and I couldn't seem to deepen the kiss enough to satisfy me. My body needed more. Daemon broke the kiss and I groaned in complaint to the lost contact.

A wicked smile came over his lips and he leaned down again to trail kisses down my jaw line and neck. He slightly nipped at the sensitive skin behind my ear and my head fell back as a soft moan escaped my lips. My body arched up into his and he growled at the pressure and heat between us. His hands moved down the sides of my body and when he reached my thighs, I lifted my legs to wrap around him. Our passion began to build and hasten when his mouth found mine again. I ran my hands up his chest and over his broad shoulders and my fingers clenched and grasped the material of his shirt.

Daemon shifted his position and

pressed himself between my legs and my body rocked against him seeking more contact. My hands moved from his shoulders and I grabbed at the bottom of his shirt. I began to lift his shirt to gain contact with his skin but he reached down to stop me and pulled away from the kiss. “Not here, Damsel, not like this.” I groaned louder and threw my arm over my eyes while I tried to calm my body.

I could feel and hear Daemon’s heavy breathing as he stood up and took my hand. I looked up into his face to find that his eyes had darkened and his gaze once again reminded me of a predator stalking its prey. He pulled on my hand to lift me from the couch and

placed his hand on the small of my back as he led me towards his bedroom.

My mind started racing as he led me down the hallway and I suddenly remembered what he had said to me last night at Tomb. As he pulled me into his room, my hand broke free of his and I backed away from him slightly. I nervously looked around the room, trying to see if I had somehow missed seeing canes, whips, riding crops, or other types of objects that could be used to control a person as he warned he would do to me in this very room.

Daemon cocked an eyebrow at me and a lopsided smile appeared on his face. “Looking for anything in

particular?”

I finished my inspection of the room and after not finding what I assumed could be lying around, I answered, “I was just thinking about what you said to me at Tomb.”

Daemon let out a humorless laugh before he said, “Okay. You’re going to have to help me out here, Damsel, I’m not sure to what you are referring.”

I looked him straight in the eyes and held his stare. He really did appear to be confused. “Last night, in the storage room at Tomb. You told me if you got me in your bedroom, you would control me.”

His head dropped but then he looked up and took a step towards me to reach over and take my hands into his. He pulled me towards him and brought my hands up to his mouth to place a kiss on each one. “So what exactly is it that you are looking for around my room?”

“Whips, chains, canes, other torture devices; I don’t know, just things you would use to control someone.”

Daemon appeared to be stifling a grin. “Paige, I believe I also told you last night that I don’t need those things to do what I intend to do to you. You have the wrong idea about what I was saying.”

“So explain.” I glared up at him in challenge.

A hint of aggravation flitted through his gaze before he grabbed me by both shoulders and pushed me over to his bed. The momentum from his actions sent me flying back onto the mattress looking back up as he lowered himself down and crawled over me. My eyes couldn't help but watch the way his muscles flexed as he moved up my body. He was almost feline in his movements, only adding to his appearance as a predator. When we were finally face to face, he put his hands on the mattress on either side of my head as he spoke in a sinful, deep timbre tone.

“You are the most frustrating woman I have ever known. From the minute I first met you, you have done nothing but argue, fight against me and push me away. But at the same time, your skin and your body crave and react to my touch. And I have to tell you, Damsel, I’ve never been more intrigued and more turned on than when I hear those sassy little words of yours spill out of those lips and then see those exquisite bumps run up your arms when I come near you.” He reached over and traced the crease of my mouth with his finger and his gaze became heated.

His crystal blue eyes burned into mine as he said, “I have no bigger desire

than to break that persistent stubborn streak in you, right here and right now.”

His voice dripped with sin and dark pleasures and the sound of it was causing an involuntary dampness to develop between my legs. Regardless of my body’s reaction to him, my brain wouldn’t give up the fight.

“So, what? You want to break me? Tame me like some wild horse?” I laughed. “Where’s your riding ring? I must have missed that when you gave me the tour of your place earlier.”

The look in his eyes became primal at my words and I shivered under the intensity of his stare.

“Oh my sweet, little damsel, you’re in it at this very second.”

I opened my mouth to retort when he covered my lips with his hand. His grin turned mischievous and I knew I was being cornered.

“You can keep talking, but you’ll only make me more determined to break you down completely. You are so fucking arousing when you’re angry and stubborn.” His mouth formed that arrogant grin that reflected an air of authority.

He removed his hand and replaced it with the slowest and most seductive kiss I think I have ever experienced in

my life. His tongue teased at my mouth and every time I tempted him to enter, he pulled away, only to begin again. His hands ran up the sides of my body and his thumbs brushed the sides of my breasts. I arched up into him instantly and he lowered his body to press against mine. I could feel his excitement through his jeans and I trembled in anticipation of his next move. I was completely confused by the influence he had over me. I wanted to fight against him, but something deep within me wanted nothing more than to give him everything he wanted, exactly as he wanted it.

He pushed himself back up above me and I groaned at the loss of his

touch. Smiling a triumphant grin, he stood up to move around the bed. I continued to watch as he approached me and leaned down to whisper in my ear.

“Stay.”

His large form stood up and I was motionless as he walked around the room and lowered the lights. The only illumination left in the room was the fire sconces which bathed us in dancing shadows. He walked into a room that I assumed was the bathroom and emerged holding a scarf of some sort in his hands. I tensed slightly trying to determine what he was doing.

I pushed myself up into a sitting

position with my legs hanging over the edge of the bed. Daemon knelt down in front of me and used his hands to part my legs. He moved forward so that he was kneeling between my legs and his expression turned serious when he looked in my eyes. "I've decided to teach you what you get with being stubborn. But, I'm going to blindfold you while I do so and I want you to sit in the middle of this bed when I'm done doing that." He turned slightly to motion over to a small device that sat in the corner of his room. "That is a white noise machine. I use it to sleep normally but I'm going to turn it on during this. Every sound, smell and sensation I want you to experience will be from me.

There will be no outside distractions during our time together. Do you think you can handle that?”

I nodded that I could, but my nervousness prevented me from saying it out loud. He smiled sweetly at me again. “I promise you, Beautiful, there will be no pain, no force, and I won’t do anything to you unless you ask me to. Since I’m allowing you to be in control, you have to direct me, understand?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you need to tell me what to do. If you want me to kiss you or touch you or even come near you, you have to tell me. *You* are in control this

time, understand?" I nodded and he smiled and placed the blindfold over my eyes before he tied it behind my head. He must have sprayed some cologne on the soft cloth because I was suddenly overtaken by the scent of him. I could tell that he stood up then and I felt his hands on my shoulders, gently guiding me to the middle of the bed. I sat with my legs folded underneath me, resting my bottom on my feet. I heard him walk across the floor and a soft click sounded, followed by a noise that reminded me of static from a television.

The sound was light at first but as I sat there with my senses handicapped, my hearing became hypersensitive and soon, the static was the only sound I

could hear. I waited for Daemon to do something, *anything*, but nothing happened and I wondered if he had left the room.

“Daemon?”

I jumped when he suddenly whispered in my ear. “I’m right here, Damsel. Tell me what you want me to do.” He softly chuckled as he played his game, but I could barely hear him over the noise.

I had no idea what I was doing at this moment. I felt defenseless without being able to see him or hear him and it was unnerving how that slight sprinkling of fear also caused a raw yearning for

his touch. My body squirmed where it sat and my mind fought to form even the simplest of thought.

“Okay, kiss me.” That probably sounded lame, but this was the first time I’ve done anything like this. The bed moved as Daemon’s weight pressed down into the mattress. I could tell he was in front of me. A feather light kiss was placed on my lips but he pulled away. I reached out in search of him to pull him in for more. My hands only met with air and I instinctually turned my head to look for him before remembering that the blindfold was preventing my sight.

“Why did you stop?” I asked in the

direction of where I assumed Daemon would be. The only thing I could hear was the white noise but when Daemon spoke again it seemed to break through the noise that was consuming me.

“You told me to kiss you, so I did. If you want more, you need to tell me what you want. You were stubborn enough to fight me for control Paige, and so I gave it to you. Tell me what you want me to do.” His voice was like smooth silk as he spoke to me and the only thing I sensed at the moment was Daemon. My mind was disoriented and my body was raging with need.

I decided to be more descriptive, thinking it would move things along. I

wasn't good at instructing people what to do, especially sexually. I preferred to let whoever I was with take over so that I could lose myself in what they were doing to me. "Kiss me deeper." I felt him move towards me again and his mouth slowly moved against mine. His tongue sought entrance and I opened for him. Our tongues tasted each other and I reached out again to pull him to me which caused him to pull back. The only part of him touching me was his mouth and my body was frustrated, wanting more contact with him. He pulled away again and I began to protest.

"Tell me what you want me to do, Damsel." I could tell he had moved some distance away from me by the

sound of his voice. This was so frustrating. I was surrounded by him, my senses were overtaken by him and I didn't want to have to tell him what to do. I just wanted him to take over.

“I want you to take over. I can't do this, Daemon. I don't know what to say.”

“Tell me what you want me to do, Damsel.”

This man was driving me out of my mind. Sitting there blind and essentially deaf while knowing he was near me was making me crazy. My body was aching for his touch and I spoke softly as I said, “Take control, Daemon.”

He was quiet for a moment before responding. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I paused and then added, “Please.”

Chapter Eleven

I sat and waited to see what he would do. When there was nothing for what felt like forever, I became impatient and began to fidget where I sat. I felt him run a finger down the back of my neck.

“Stop moving, Damsel.” My body stilled and all I could feel was the trail his finger was making as it moved from my neck and down my back before finally stopping between my shoulder blades. Every nerve ending that his touch traversed came alive and chills ran through me. I’d never been so in tune with someone else’s touch as I was

at this moment.

His finger began to trace along the outer rim of my ear and chills ran through me again. I started to fidget again and his finger was replaced with his mouth. Heat from his body and his breath caressed me as he whispered in my ear. “Be still my sweet damsel, give me time to worship every part of you. If you move again, I’ll stop and we’ll start from the beginning.” A groan escaped me and I heard him softly chuckle at my response.

The mattress rose and fell as he moved around me and I tried to sense where he was positioned. His touch could come from anywhere, at any time,

and my entire body tingled with need. Electric sparks erupted from my nerves and the anticipation had my heart racing. My breathing was labored and I was acutely aware of how my chest moved in and out with the force of my breath. My skin had become so sensitive that I could tell when air moved against me and just as I thought I couldn't stand it any longer his mouth started trailing kisses down the path his finger had previously traveled. I cried out from the shock of it but I held myself still so he wouldn't stop and begin again.

When his lips reached the top of my shirt, he pulled slowly on the zipper in the back and continued kissing along my spine as the fabric parted. The cool

air of the room mixing with his warm breath on my newly exposed skin was a jarring sensation. My head started to fall back as he placed the final kiss on the small of my back. My arms held my shirt in place as he moved around the bed. His lips met mine again as he gently took my arms to move them and pull my shirt off me. I now sat in my strapless bra and jeans and the skin that had previously been covered by my shirt hummed with the cool air brushing against it. I could feel the tips of my breasts tighten under the material of my bra as I imagined his eyes taking me in.

“I’m going to guide your hands to my shirt, Damsel. I want you to lift it off of me when I do. Understand?”

I nodded to indicate that I did and he took both my hands from my lap and pulled them to where he was sitting. He placed my hands on the hem of his shirt and moved them along his washboard abs, pulling the shirt up with our combined hands. I wanted to touch his skin, to feel the smooth, soft skin stretched taut across his muscular form, but he hadn't directed me to do so. His hands released mine and I continued to lift his shirt until it was free from his body. He took the shirt from me and tossed it aside.

Daemon started running his finger from my collar bone down and then across as he traced the swell of my

breasts. His finger ran down my side slowly and then traced along my ribs before finally running a straight line down to the top of my jeans.

“Lie down, Damsel.”

There was no argument left in me. I didn't want him to stop and I think that I would have done anything in that moment to make sure he kept going. I shifted my body so I could pull my legs out from under me. My leg muscles burned as I stretched them out from having been bent for so long. I went to lay backwards and his hand held the back of my head as he guided me to a pillow. His finger trailed down, between my breasts, and stopped again

at the top of my jeans. He ran both of his hands down my legs and removed my boots and socks.

“Spread those amazingly long legs for me, Damsel.” His hands ran back up my legs and when he reached my thighs he moved to kneel between them. His lips brushed against my stomach and my body arched up slightly seeking his warm mouth again.

“No moving, Damsel.” He paused to see if I would still and after a few moments, I felt the button on my jeans pulled up. The button released and the material returned to my skin, looser than before. He slowly pulled down the zipper and I felt the material lift as he

moved it down. His fingers scraped against my skin as he pulled my jeans off my hips, down my legs and then off my feet.

He left me lying there without his touch for minutes. My skin was buzzing again, anticipating where he would go next and what he would do when he got there. I felt his hands run along the sides of my bra and he lifted my back from the bed as he unclasped the hook. He pulled my bra off and the tips of my breasts instantly hardened when met with the cool air of the room.

“You have the most beautiful body, Paige. So sleek and tight. And your skin is absolutely flawless.”

His hand cupped my breast and his warm mouth took in the tip. I gasped at the sensation and my body arched as my hands gripped the sheets on the bed. He pulled away again softly laughed.

“What have I told you about moving? Although, I will admit, I do *adore* watching you squirm.” He returned his mouth to my breast and his tongue swirled around the taut peak. His lips closed around it as he lightly sucked it into his mouth. He cupped the other breast and placed his mouth on it to do what he had done before. My chest was rising and falling quickly as my heart raced underneath. The bed moved as he stood up and I protested until he placed a finger on my mouth to silence me.

He climbed back on the bed and moved between my legs. He stayed like that without touching me for a few seconds and then he slid one finger along the center of my core.

“Oh, Damsel, you are so ready. I can feel how wet you are through the cloth of your panties.”

His smooth voice slid past me and I was starting to lose control. I felt him move over me and his voice whispered in my ear. “If I take you now damsel, I don’t want another man touching you. I’m claiming you as mine if you’ll let me, but you need to let me know if you want that. I can stop here, or I can keep

going. Just know that if I take you, I'll own you and no other man can have you." He kissed along my face till he reached my mouth before he leaned up and said, "Tell me what you want me to do, Damsel."

I didn't even have to think about what I wanted. "Keep going, Daemon. I want you to keep going."

He growled as I said that and he removed my panties from my body so that I was completely exposed to him. He pushed my legs farther apart and ran his hand along the inside of one as he kissed along the inside of the other. When his mouth met my core I bucked against him. The warmth of his mouth on

me unraveled me and when his tongue met the bundle of nerves my head fell back and my chest arched upwards. He continued to suck as he placed one finger inside me and then moved it in and out to the rhythm of his mouth. My legs began to tremble and my hands released the bed to grasp his hair. His pace sped up and soon he was using two fingers. He pulled them apart as he moved them in and out of me and I felt an explosion building within me. He lapped at me with his tongue as he continued to move his fingers in and out, picking up speed as time passed. My body felt like it was splitting apart with the tension that was building inside of me. I was about to burst when he removed his mouth and

said, “Let go, Damsel. Show me what I’m doing to you.

A scream erupted from me as the muscles of my core began contracting over and over. My body trembled with the force of my release and waves of pleasure rolled through me, one after the other. I saw bursts of light behind my eyelids and my breathing held momentarily while my release peaked. I started to float back down and while aftershocks shot through me, I felt him kiss my stomach and then each breast. He pulled the blindfold off me and I blinked my eyes to adjust to the dim light in the room. Daemon was above me and my breath caught at the sight of him. Shadows danced across his smooth skin

and every muscle in his body was toned and defined. I reached out with my hands and ran them down his chest and across the ridges of his stomach. His body was magnificent and I was engrossed by his beauty.

His eyes smiled along with his mouth as he looked into my eyes. “When I make you mine, I want you looking at me.” He kissed me lightly on the forehead and removed his boxers before settling back between my legs. My legs parted farther as I opened myself for him. His gaze heated and he positioned himself at my opening. “Are you sure you want this, Paige? Once I take you, there is no going back.”

I still couldn't speak after the release he just gave me and I nodded in response.

He rolled slightly to the side to pull a condom out a drawer on a side table. He ripped the package open with his teeth and rolled the condom over his hard length. His eyes seared into me as he held my hips and slowly pushed himself inside me. My body arched as he filled me and my head rolled back into the pillow.

“Oh my sweet damsel, you fit around me perfectly.”

He gently pulled my head back forward and then his mouth crashed into

mine. His lips moved against mine and his tongue invaded my mouth when his body started moving in a slow steady rhythm against me. I rocked into him, wanting him to go deeper, and he grabbed my legs to wrap them around his waist. His pace sped up and I could feel the tightening in my stomach again. We moved with each other in perfect harmony. The explosion within me started to ignite and I moaned into his mouth as he moved within me. My body started to tremble and buck as sensations flooded me. I couldn't hold it any longer and I screamed his name as my release exploded out of me. My muscles gripped around him and I could feel how hard he was as he slid back

and forth against the contractions of my core. His body tensed and he pushed inside deeper and roared with his release.

We stayed in that position staring at each other as our bodies calmed down and our chests moved with the force of our breathing. He kissed me again and my body relaxed into the bed. I had never come apart as fully as I just did with Daemon and my body felt sated while my thoughts were jumbled.

After a few minutes, my body calmed and I wondered why Daemon was so concerned about scaring me off with that encounter. If the extent of his control was a blindfold and sensory

deprivation then I had no problem giving that to him. My mind ran through a million questions, but the only thing I could ask was, “So, that was it?”

Daemon looked at me with an amused grin. “Again, Damsel, you are going to need to help me out with what you are thinking.”

“The control thing. That was it? A blindfold and some noise? I don’t understand why you were so concerned.”

Daemon’s gaze became heated and a wicked grin broke out on his face. “Oh my sweet Paige. That was just the beginning. I took it easy on you for the

first time because I need you to trust me completely, to give yourself to me completely. In answer to your question; no, that wasn't it. We can refer to that as 'control' lite."

Daemon rolled to the side to remove his weight from me and he went to the bathroom to clean up. I was lazy and sated when he returned to the bed and curled around me with his arms wrapped around me from behind. His voice had dropped an octave and was husky when he whispered, "I can promise you, the next time I take you, you'll know what *control* means." A million ideas started running through my head at what he told me, but I was too tired to focus and I decided to let it go

for the moment. As we lay together, my eyelids became heavy and I drifted off to sleep.

~

A finger traced a pattern along my left shoulder as my eyes fluttered open and I woke up in Daemon's bed. My muscles were languid and I didn't have the strength to move, much less roll over to look. I was able to mutter hello to alert him to the fact that I was awake. He was silent as he continued the same pattern along my shoulder and it occurred to me that he was tracing his finger along the outline of my dragonfly necklace tattoo.

His voice was quiet as he asked me, “Why do you have this?”

I lay in the same position for a moment before finally finding the strength to roll over and look up into his eyes. He looked far away, like he had a lot on his mind.

“It’s a necklace my parents gave me on my sixth birthday. Something tragic happened that day and I gave the necklace away as a reminder of a promise. I described it to Alex about a year ago and he drew it out for me. His drawing looked exactly how I remembered the necklace, so I asked him to tattoo it on my shoulder.”

“The necklace was important to you?” His voice was soft as he asked me.

I shrugged. “I thought it was the most beautiful thing ever given to me. But it wasn’t the necklace that was important. Just what it represents, I guess.”

“And what does it represent?”

“A lost love.”

He laughed softly. “You said you were six. How did you love someone so young?”

I smiled when he asked me that. Alex and David had asked the same

thing when I told them about what happened that day; about what I lost. “I gave it to a boy who was one of the children at my parents’ shelter. He was special to me, my best friend and my first, and only, love...” I paused while I thought of Buddy and chuckled. “...even though he drove me crazy most of the time and picked on me constantly. But he was always the first to defend me when other people picked on me, and he always took care of me when I fell down or hurt myself.” I smiled brightly while I remembered Buddy. “I was a train wreck even at a young age. Constantly falling and hurting myself, it was nuts. He was always there to clean and bandage whatever damage I inflicted on

myself. But he never would let me sit around and cry about something. He was always pushing me to get up, dust myself off and keep going.”

I couldn't understand why I was telling Daemon all of this, but it felt good to talk about my past.

“On the days when Buddy would pick on me the most, I would go running to my mother, with my eyes full of tears. I never understood why he could be so sweet at times, but then turn around and act like a normal boy. Momma would always let out the biggest laugh and would hold me and tell me that Buddy must be secretly in love with me because boys only pick on girls that drive them

crazy the most. Even at five, the irony of that statement was not lost on me. There I was, standing in a shelter for women who were hurt by the loves in their life, yet I was being told that what Buddy did was *because* he loved me. I think that's one of the points where love and trust became confusing for me."

Daemon was quiet for a moment, but then his body shook from a silent laugh. "So, I have him to blame for your stubbornness. Good to know."

I smiled. "Guess you could say that. But really, he just helped develop it in me. My stubbornness is just another aspect of my awesomeness. I wouldn't be the same without it."

He nodded his head in understanding. Since we were having ‘sharing time’ I decided now was a good opportunity to dig a little into his past. “What about you? Where did you grow up?”

His face grew dark as he remembered something. He cleared his throat before answering. “Foster care. My parents died when I was young so I spent most of my youth bouncing from one foster house to the next. I ran from the system when I was sixteen, lived on the streets, did things I wasn’t proud of to survive.”

My eyes widened at what he was telling me. I felt sorry for bringing it up.

“I’m sorry to hear that. It sounds rough.”

He smiled slightly. “It was. But I grew past it and made something of myself, so I guess it doesn’t really matter that much. I survived.” He shrugged his shoulder to brush it off. “Want some coffee? I was going to go put on a pot.”

“Coffee? Yes please.”

He chuckled in response to my instant acceptance and pushed himself off the bed. “I’ll leave you to get cleaned up and dressed. The bathroom is through that door if you need it. Meet me in the kitchen when you get done.”

He walked across the room and I

admired his half-dressed body as he passed. He'd put on his jeans at some point while I was sleeping and they hung off his hips and accented the perfect shape of his midsection. Once he was out of the room, I jumped up and started gathering my clothing together. I made my way into the bathroom and gasped when I saw that it was bigger than my bedroom at home. The tiles and countertops of the bathroom were the same as the kitchen. There was a glass enclosed shower with multiple shower heads and a separate oversized tub that could probably fit five people at one time.

After I was dressed and freshened up, I padded out in search of Daemon.

The smell of the freshly brewed coffee attacked my senses as soon as I stepped foot in the kitchen and I hustled over to the machine in search of my caffeine fix. I heard Daemon chuckle behind me and I turned to find him standing there holding up a cup. “You’ll need this I think, unless of course you were just planning on sticking a straw directly in the pot.”

I smiled at that thought but added, “Nah, the cup will come in handy actually. I need something to measure out my sugar and creamer.” Daemon handed me the cup and then turned to reach up in the cabinets to pull down my coffee supplies. He watched in amusement as I put together my mixture and shook his head when I gave him a

thumbs up when it was put together.

I laughed. “Alex swears I’m going to develop diabetes one day from the way I drink this.”

Daemon’s eyes narrowed slightly when he asked, “What is up with you and Alex exactly?”

Crap. Explaining Alex was going to be tough. I wasn’t sure how Daemon was going to react and I hoped he wouldn’t get all possessive and obstinate about Alex. That would be a definite deal breaker. “Alex and I are good friends. We dated briefly in college, but he wanted more than I could give, so we remained friends...” I

looked up at Daemon through my lashes before adding, "...with benefits."

Daemon's eyes narrowed further and I waited for him to say something that would piss me off. He surprised me with his response. "I feel bad for Alex. Giving up benefits with you will be tough, I imagine. Hopefully, you can remain good friends when all is said and done."

I couldn't help the smile that broke across my face. I was totally expecting him to go all caveman and demand that I not see Alex again. "Yeah, I was hoping he would meet someone else and call things off with me first. Unfortunately, that hasn't happened."

Daemon walked over to me and loosely wrapped his arms around me to pull me closer in to him. “It’s like I keep telling you, Damsel. People have to take what they can get with you and they have to be happy to have gotten that. I can understand why Alex hasn’t moved on. I’m not sure I could ever walk away from you.”

His statement rattled me. I knew that Alex felt more for me than I did for him and I pondered whether I had been leading him on by continuing to sleep with him. If Daemon is right, and Alex was merely accepting what I would allow, than I haven’t been a good friend to him at all. I felt shameful for my actions and I feared that it had been a

selfish whim on my part to not stop my arrangement with him. It occurred to me that Alex may have believed that my feelings would change, that I could change, and my heart broke over the realization.

Daemon crossed through the kitchen towards the living room and sat down on the large leather sofa. I followed him and watched out the window as the sun peaked over the horizon. The sky was a brilliant blue and the clouds were stained pink and orange from the first rays of the sun. I was lost in my thoughts about Alex when Daemon turned and grabbed my legs to pull my feet into his lap. He started massaging my feet as he spoke. “Any

plans for today?”

My mind was in the process of designing an award for his massage abilities and I almost didn't hear what he had asked me. “Guess I need to head over to my place to figure out what to do about my bike. I'll probably also look into Chris' identity and background.”

Daemon nodded his head as he listened to my plans. “If you need anything from me, you know where to find me. I have to work today and tonight, but I can leave if you need something.”

My smile brightened at his offer. “Thanks, but I wouldn't hold your

breath. You know how I am about asking for help.”

He laughed. “Yeah, I’ve started to figure that out about you.” I playfully fluttered my lashes at him in response to his comment.

Pulling my feet off his lap, I started to push myself off the couch when he grabbed my arm and pulled me back down into his lap. He wrapped his massive arms around my slim frame and placed a kiss on my forehead. “You’re amazing, Paige.”

My skin must have turned bright pink at the compliment, but I played it off anyway. “I know.” Daemon grinned

at my response and released me so I could continue on my way.

After grabbing my boots and pulling them on, I went back into the living room to find Daemon sitting in the same place, apparently lost in thought. I took a moment to admire his half-dressed state. My mind began flashing back to the night before and I could feel my skin heat at the thought of it. I was nervous that this man could affect me the way he did, and I tried to shake off the feeling before letting any dark thoughts ruin my good mood.

Daemon looked over to me and my breath hitched. The early morning light cast shadows across his face, hardening

his features. He really was magnificent and I became concerned that I might have gotten myself in over my head with him. He stood up and walked into the kitchen, grabbed the keys to the bike and walked over to me to place them in my hand.

As I was turning to open the front door, I remembered I'd left my helmet at my house. "Crap! I don't have a helmet."

Daemon moved over to a side closet, opened the door and pulled out a white helmet. I raised my eyebrows questioning how his helmet would fit my head and he responded to my silent inquiry by stating, "It's for passengers,

when I have them.”

Images of slutty redheads clutching themselves to him on the back of his bike played through my head and a twinge of jealousy shot through me. Logan’s warning about Daemon’s man-whore reputation rang in my thoughts and I worried that I could be just one more egg in a basket of many. The walls that had started to crumble around my heart reconstructed at the thought and I felt myself begin to lose the high spirits I had been enjoying this morning.

Daemon didn’t immediately bring me the helmet, but instead, he walked into the kitchen, opened a drawer and pulled out a black permanent marker.

He wrote something in small script on the back of the helmet, smiled at me, and came over to hand the helmet to me. I took it from him and looked to see what he had written. My jaw dropped and I laughed out loud to see that he had tagged the helmet with the word ‘Damsel’.

Take that slutty redhead!!

He flashed me a stupid grin and opened the front door to let me out. He took my hand as he walked me to the elevator to escort me down to the garage. The bay door clanked loudly as he raised it above his head and I half walked, half ran, over to the bike. Daemon came up behind me as I started

to pull on the helmet and his mouth found mine. When he finished having his way with my lips he looked into my eyes and said, "Please take good care of my trusty steed. I may need it for the next time my fair damsel finds herself in distress."

I laughed and replied, "You might want to consider ditching that damsel of yours, she sounds like a pain in the ass."

He gave me a sly grin and bent down to whisper in my ear. "You have no idea what a pain in the ass she is." I laughed while climbing on the bike and Daemon moved out of the way so I could pull out. I flashed him one more giant smile, started the ignition, and off I went.

Chapter Twelve

“Details!!!”

David stood in the doorway of our apartment wearing an apron over his clothes and holding a feather duster. My eyebrows shot up at the sight of him and I couldn't help the laugh that escaped me. I motioned to his attire with my hand. “What's with the housewife getup?” David looked down at his clothing and then waved his hands at me to brush off my question.

“Oh no, you are not shifting the focus on me. You did not return last night, you were with Man God and I will

live vicariously through you this morning.” He ran up behind me, pushed me into the living room of our apartment and shoved me onto the couch. He held up his finger to indicate he needed a minute and ran into the kitchen. I heard cabinets opening and closing and then a beeping as he was setting the microwave. I leaned over to see what he was doing, but he was just out of sight. Within a minute, I heard popcorn popping and the distinct fizz of a soda bottle being opened. The microwave dinged to alert that it was done and David came around the corner holding a bowl of popcorn and a soda. He dropped himself into the wingback chair opposite me and placed the popcorn in

his lap. As he raised the first kernel to his mouth, he said, “Okay, I’m ready. Proceed.”

My grasp at the English language was momentarily stunned as I took in the sex starved, masculine housewife, who was currently eating popcorn in front of me. “Can I ask about the outfit?”

“No. Details first and then I’ll spill. So make like a canary and sing.”

The munching of the popcorn was distracting. “Okay, well, we went and got coffee...” David nodded his head enthusiastically. “...and then we went to his place...” David developed a shit eating grin. “...and I spent the night.”

His face fell.

“You’re kidding me, right? That’s all you’re going to tell me?! I don’t think so, Paige, you promised a full report and you are going to give me a FULL report. Now spill. I have a house to clean and I don’t have time for your cryptic story telling.”

I sighed and counted off the details on my fingers. “He loaned me his bike while mine is being fixed. His apartment is well decorated and he is apparently into medieval or renaissance décor.”

“Oh, that’s super racy. Continue.”

“What do you want to know?”

“The sexy, dirty, drool will drip uncontrollably from my mouth part. Tell me that.”

I chuckled at his questioning. “It was nice...okay, it was amazing... seriously David, could you stop with the munching? It’s distracting me”

The bowl was flung on the table and he sat primly with his hands in his lap. Ugh. I was going to have to draw him a diagram before this inquisition was over. “He blindfolded me, used some weird static noise device to make it so I couldn’t hear, and then he teased the hell out of me to the point where I

probably would have attacked him and forced myself on him if he tried to stop.”

David’s eyes widened and his eyebrows shot up to his hairline. He held out his hand to shush me. “Stop right there. He’s kinky? There’s kink involved? I knew I should have opened a bottle of wine.” He waved his hand at me. “Go on.”

“That’s it, I mean except for the control thing. I’m not sure what to make of that.”

“Control? Explain.”

“Well, the other night when I saw him at Tomb, he took me in the back

room when Alex was distracted. He told me that if I was his girl, he would possess me, own me and control me.”

David’s eyebrows crinkled in between his eyes. “And you agreed to talk to him again? *You?! Oh my dear friend, Paige, you’re turning over a new leaf.*” He clapped his hands excitedly. “I’m so proud.”

My back sank into the couch when I realized this was going to be a long conversation. “Yeah, I don’t know about that exactly, but anyway, he explained that he didn’t mean that he wanted to control my life...” My voice quieted. “...He just wants to control me in the bedroom.”

His jaw dropped and his face froze that way for a full minute. When he spoke again, his words came out slow and clearly pronounced. “That is the hottest thing I think you have ever told me. It’s like a scene directly out of a dirty romance novel.” He dropped out of his chair and scooted over to me on his knees to take my hands into his. “So did you like it? I mean, with all your trust issues and all? Honestly, what he did wasn’t all that bad. Kink can get a lot more involved. He is definitely far over on the ‘less is more’ side of the spectrum.”

I chuckled. “That’s just it, though. He told me that he had gone easy on me because it was the first time. He said

that was ‘control lite’ and the next time I would know what control really is.”

David put his finger to his mouth in thought but then dropped it again. “Wow. That’s...wow. But what I asked was, did you like it?”

A humorless laugh burst out from me and I couldn’t believe what I was about to say. “Yes, I did. That’s fucked up right?! I don’t know why, but it was the best sex I’ve had in my life. I think I need to seek psychological help.”

David shook his head in disagreement with what I was saying. “Actually, it makes sense. Think about it. You are so damn strong and

independent and, you know, ‘Ms. Powerful Female’ in all aspects of your life, it makes sense that being dominated is a fantasy for you. It’s the one time when you are able to give up control completely, to let someone else call the shots. I imagine that could be a relief for a headstrong person.”

He was right. It was a relief. I hadn’t thought of it like that but I fell asleep almost immediately afterwards. I’ve never been one not to immediately get up after sex to break away from whoever I was with. But last night I stayed and the thought of leaving Daemon never crossed my mind. “I think I’m in over my head, David. I think Daemon was serious when he said

he was being easy on me. What have I gotten myself into?"

David opened his mouth to respond when an angry voice interrupted. "So, what? You're going to let this guy use you and degrade you? Are you fucking kidding me, Paige?"

I snapped my head in the direction of the voice to find Alex standing in my bedroom doorway. He was leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed over his chest. His rage was clearly written in his expression.

I froze. I just, froze. I tried, but I failed to come up with an intelligible word, phrase, or sentence when I saw

him standing there.

He uncrossed his arms and stood straight before stalking into the living room to stand in front of David and me. David raised up one of his hands and said, “Alex, when did you get here? I don’t remember seeing you come...”

“Give it up, David! You’re not helping her by encouraging her to let this guy fuck with her head!”

David’s mouth opened and then closed.

Alex started pacing back and forth on the other side of the coffee table from us. He would stop every once in a

while, turn to us like he was going to say something, but then turn without speaking to start pacing again. How in the hell did I let him find out this way? This situation is a thousand times worse than any scenario I had considered.

Alex turned to us and asked, “Paige? Can we please go talk in private?”

I nodded in agreement and was happy that the shock had worn off enough so that I could physically move to get up off the couch. Alex turned to go in the room and I followed behind. David gave me a sympathetic smile as I passed.

Alex closed the door behind us and I sat on the bed. He was quiet and he wouldn't look at me as he crossed the room to sit in a chair near the closet. He took his time before finally speaking. "I assume this means our *arrangement* is no longer." His voice was raw and rough as he spoke.

My voice came out in a whisper as I replied, "Yes, Alex. The 'with benefits' portion of our arrangement is done." I looked up at him and tears welled in my eyes as I took in his pained expression.

"So, we're done." His voice was so soft, I could barely hear him.

My head started to shake in protest. “No. We’re not. Just because we’re not sleeping together doesn’t mean that we aren’t still friends. Our relationship wasn’t about sex. We were friends first!”

His words were hurtful when he spoke again. “Actually Paige, it was just about sex. You never let it be more than that, remember? Couldn’t let someone in and all that shit. I heard you when you said this asshole would own you. Are you together with him?!” He stood up suddenly and moved directly in front of me.

My head dropped in my hands and shook back and forth. My mind wasn’t

processing this situation well and the consequences of everything I could think of to say to him played itself out to disastrous results in my head. I raised my head slowly to look up at him. His body was tense and he looked straight ahead with his eyes closed as he waited for my answer.

“I don’t know. We haven’t really talked about it, this is all so...”

“Do you want to be with him as more than friends, Paige?!”

I sighed. There was no easy way to do this. I went with the direct approach just to get it over with. “Yes. I would be with him as more if that is

what he wanted.”

His head dropped suddenly and I held my breath as I waited for him to respond. He looked up at me and the raw pain I discovered in his eyes disturbed me. I wanted to reach out to him, to take him in my arms and beg forgiveness, but I couldn't force myself to move.

“Why him, Paige? From what I heard you telling David, this guy is treating you like an object; like something that he can use and toss aside at his leisure and you are allowing him to do just that. It's everything you've always said you were against. What is it about him that is making you change who

you are? I don't even know who I'm looking at right now. I mean, I see my *friend*, Paige, sitting in front of me, but I have no idea who the fuck you are!" He paused to reign in his anger. "I love you, Paige, and I would never treat you the way that asshole is treating you." His voice quivered on those last words and I could tell he was holding back what he was saying.

I didn't know how to respond. I didn't understand the hold Daemon had over me enough to explain it to myself, much less Alex. My mind was fighting some kind of internal battle and my logic understood what Alex was saying, while my soul was grasping to the thought of how Daemon affected me. I had to

remind myself that he wasn't controlling my life, he wasn't even attempting to do so. If anything, Daemon had been more liberal in his influence over my decisions than Alex was being at this very moment. Whereas Daemon had allowed me to make the choice, Alex was trying to force a decision within me.

“I don't know what to tell you, Alex. I can't help what I feel for him. It's out of my control.” Tears began to trail down my face as I admitted to him the very thing I had not yet admitted to myself. Daemon had invaded every part of me and I was powerless to push him away.

Alex nodded his head once before

he grabbed his keys from my side table and slammed my door closed as he exited my room. I heard his heavy footsteps as he crossed through the living room and slammed the front door behind when he left the apartment.

I laid down on the bed and tears fell from my eyes. I could still smell his cologne on my pillow and I pulled it to hug to me. My tears kept falling as the shame and guilt ripped through me. Alex was one of my best friends and I feared I had just lost him because I wasn't strong enough to stop what was between us before his heart became too involved. I laid there, curled around the pillow and cried myself to sleep.

It was a humid July evening and I was outside the Center playing in the tall grass with nothing but the cicada as background noise. The sun had begun to set and I knew that I would be going home soon for dinner, my bath, and then bed. I laid down amongst the wildflowers and listened to the sounds of the wetlands that surrounded the Center. With my eyes closed, I imagined that there was no other place as peaceful as this backyard.

“Paige?”

I opened my eyes at the sound of my name and turned to find Buddy

standing there, backlit by the setting sun. Even draped in the brilliant light, I could tell something was wrong by the look on his shadowed face.

“Buddy? What’s wrong? Did you get in trouble again for sneaking in the kitchen and stealing sweets? You know Momma and Daddy don’t like it when we take without asking” I scolded. He looked at me and sat down in the grass beside me. He was quiet for a moment and then looked up with the most pained expression in those crystal blue eyes. “Paige. If I tell you something, do you promise to keep it a secret?” he whispered. I instantly sat up and grabbed Buddy’s hands in mine. “What is it Buddy? What happened?” Buddy

started to cry and I took him into the biggest hug my little five year old body could muster. Momma always said that hugs can fix even the biggest of hurts.

When Buddy stopped crying he wiped his face on his sleeve and looked over at me again. “My mommy is leaving, Paige. She is taking me with her and she says we won’t be coming back to the Center. She told me I had to be quiet about it, that I couldn’t let your folks know where we are going.”

“But why?!” I protested. “I don’t understand. Women leave the Center all the time and they always let Momma know where they are going.” I looked at Buddy and my face must have given

away my heartache. He pulled me into his lap and we hugged and rocked back and forth. He finally let out a sigh and quietly responded, "I don't know why we are going, or why I can't tell no one, but I'll get in trouble if she finds out I told you. You have to promise to keep this secret."

While we were talking, my mother came outside and began to call for me. With the grasses being so high, you could barely see me when I was standing up, much less sitting down. I untangled myself from Buddy and stood up to look for my mother. She caught sight of me and came over to where Buddy and I were sitting. "Paige, sweetie, it's about time to start heading

home. It's getting dark and you two need to get inside before you become a buffet for the mosquitos again. You know they can't resist biting something as sweet as the two of you."

"OK Momma. Buddy and I will be inside shortly." My mother turned to go back to the Center but stopped and turned back our direction. "Buddy? Why does it look like you've been crying? What's wrong?" Buddy looked between me and my mother, trying to determine if I would tell. Once he realized I would remain silent he smiled up at my mother and said "Sorry Mrs. Stone, but I haven't been crying. I was just watching the sun set with Paige before you came out here.

Mommy says I have something called “avergies”, so maybe that’s what you’re seeing.” Momma laughed and said “allergies, Buddy. You have allergies.” She sighed. “You are probably right though, the pollen count has been unusually high this summer. But that’s just another reason why you should come inside, so hurry up you two. I don’t want to have to tell you again.”

Momma turned and finally retreated back into the building. I looked at Buddy and couldn’t help the hurt that was crushing my little body. The pain didn’t show on my skin like the women as they arrived at The Center, but I knew it was the same thing

they felt every time they entered. Buddy walked over to me and wrapped his arms around my neck. He kissed me on the forehead and took my hand and started to lead me back inside. I dug in my feet and pulled Buddy back before we walked the full distance. I looked up into his haunted eyes and whispered, "Will I ever see you again?"

I was shocked when Buddy laughed and drew me into a bear hug. "I don't know when, but someday you will see me again. I'll make a pact with you, Paige. You keep this to yourself and after we are gone, I will make sure I get back here to play with you in the yard. I don't know why Mommy is leaving the way that she is,

but I do know that she loves your Momma and Daddy. I'm sure after a couple days she'll want to come back. But I promise you Paige, you are my best friend and I'll never leave you." A tear ran down my cheek and Buddy wiped it away with his sleeve.

"Now quit crying, you're acting like a girl."

I looked up at Buddy with the most forceful expression that I had and said "I am a girl Buddy, and don't you ever forget it. Besides, you just don't like the fact that a 'girl' can beat you at climbing trees."

At that Buddy laughed again. He

pulled away from me and then wrapped his arm around my shoulder. "I guess you're right Paige, but I'm going to practice climbing trees every day and when I get back here, we'll see who reaches the top first." With that, we walked inside. Buddy went back to his mom's room and I walked out the entrance with my folks. I looked back as Buddy retreated down the hallway to the rooms. He turned to me before opening his door and smiled.

My consciousness shifted to the next morning when I returned to the Center and ran to Buddy's room. I knocked on the door softly at first, just in case he and his mom were still sleeping. I put my ear to the door but

didn't hear anybody inside, so I walked down the hall and turned into the kitchen to eat breakfast. After eating, I went outside and figured that Buddy would come out to play when he woke up and was ready. My momma came out several hours later and picked me up when she reached me. She looked sad and I reached my hand up to her cheek to comfort her just like she always had done for me. "Paige, I have to tell you something and I know you aren't going to like it."

I already knew what she was going to say. Buddy had already told me.

"Baby, Buddy's mom has left the

Center. She left us a note telling us how much she and Buddy would miss us but said that she made some decisions and had to leave.” I looked down at the ground and then back up into my mother’s mournful eyes. “Did she say where she and Buddy went? Did she leave us a way to find them?” I was so hopeful that Buddy was wrong and that his mommy would have left us an address or a phone number where we could contact them. My mother sighed and shook her head. She placed a kiss on the top of my head and put me back down on the ground. She knelt down to my height and took my face in her hands. “I’m sorry baby, but sometimes when our guests leave they don’t want

to keep in touch with us. This place can carry some bad memories for those who want to put their pasts behind them. I love that you had something special with Buddy, but I don't want you getting your hopes up that you will see him again. I just want you to remember the friendship that you had with Buddy and be hopeful that wherever his mommy took him, they will have a better life than they did before they came here." I didn't cry at what my momma told me. I couldn't. Buddy had promised me he would find me again and Buddy never lied. Even though Momma said I shouldn't keep my hopes up, I knew that there was something to be hopeful for. I nodded

*my head and looked at my momma.
“Okay.”*

*She took me into a hug again and
said “that’s my brave girl.” My mom
stood up and ruffled my hair and then
turned to walk back into the building.*

Chapter Thirteen

My body shot forward, ripping me from my sleep. Tears burned my eyes and were pouring down my face as I felt two arms pulling me into an embrace. I buried my face into David's chest and my body shook with the force of my sobs. The pain consumed me as it flooded my body and I cried for Alex, and I cried for the friend I lost when I was young. A dam had just broken within me and no matter how hard I tried to stop, there was no containing the deluge that battered my mind and body.

David held me patiently, stroking my hair and whispering words that I

could barely hear over the sounds escaping from me. It took so much restraint for me to keep from pushing David away. I wanted to scream until my throat was raw, to tear apart and destroy everything around me. My mind was desperate to break the physical objects that surrounded me to distract myself from the agony I carried within myself. David continued to hold me and he gently rocked me back and forth as I wept. After a while, my eyes ran dry and my body heaved with occasional tremors as I slowly calmed myself down. My heart pounded within my chest and my fingernails cut small grooves into the skin of my hands from having been balled into fists. David was

quiet as he cradled my body and he waited for me to come back to him from my misery.

When I had finally settled and calmed to the point of sanity, David spoke softly to me. "I'm so sorry, Paige. I had no idea he was here. If I had known, I would have never pressured you to talk about your night with Daemon. I'm so damn sorry."

I shook my head in an attempt to tell him it wasn't his fault. My voice wouldn't work and I couldn't express what I was thinking. He smoothed his hand over my hair until I calmed even more and could look up at him. When I was able to find my voice again, I

responded to what David had said. “It’s not your fault, David. I shouldn’t have allowed my arrangement with Alex to continue for as long as I did. I’ve known for a while that what I was allowing was selfish, but I wasn’t strong enough to tell him. It’s my fault; he’s hurting because of me.”

David kept consoling me even though I didn’t deserve his comfort. I’d been a bad friend; I deserved this pain and I was angry that I couldn’t bear the burden of Alex’s pain as well.

“Beautiful, I know what happened was hard on you, and I know you are worried about Alex, but I don’t think you should be taking it as hard as you are.

Alex is a grown man and you were always clear with him about what was going on between the two of you. I don't see how you can be blamed for anything that has happened.”

My muscles ached as I pulled myself into a seated position next to David. He continued to lightly pat me on my back as I wiped away the tears from my face and rubbed at my swollen eyes.

“You don't understand. He was in love with me. I knew he was and I knew I could never feel the same way about him. I should have ended it months ago, but I was too weak...”

“Stop right there. It’s not your fault he accepted that arrangement. He knew you didn’t feel the same way for him. You never led him on and you never lied to him. You can’t blame yourself.”

I considered what David was saying and couldn’t see past my part in the situation. I was always up front with Alex, always the one to clearly identify what type of relationship we had, but I still knew how he felt. What was I supposed to do when I realized that his heart was involved?

“Are you blaming him, David?”

David sighed as he took my hands

in his. He absently rubbed at the marks my fingernails had made in my skin as he replied, “Paige, no one is to blame. Alex may have had the foolish idea that he could change you, but if he had just opened his eyes, he would have seen that you couldn’t love him back. If he thought being intimate with you would change things, then he only has himself to blame. I don’t want to see you beating yourself up over this. It happened. Give it some time and I’m sure Alex will move past this so that you can be friends again. Sitting around being upset about it won’t do anybody any good; so stop.”

I raised my face up to David and he laughed as he wiped away the remnants of my breakdown. “I know this

situation sucks, but you need to let it go.” I nodded my head in agreement and he smiled at my acceptance of what he was saying.

“I’m happy that you agree. Now, I need you to get your pathetic ass up and jump in the shower. I have a date coming over tonight and I’ll be damned if your drama is going to mess it up.”

Laughter bubbled out from me and I began to push myself up from the bed. “I’ll make sure I’m presentable for your date.” An image of David in an apron with the feather duster popped in my head. “Is your date the reason you were dressed like you were this morning?”

“Yes. Matt will be here at five and I want everything to be perfect. First impressions are important and I won’t let anything screw this up.”

David’s last words were a warning. I knew better than most that when David wanted to make a good impression, he would stop at nothing to do so. If I continued to wallow in my self-pity, it was possible that I would find myself tied up and stored safely away in my closet until Matt left. Hoping to avoid that fate, I sucked up my melancholy and went about getting myself cleaned up.

Once I had made myself presentable to David’s standards, I was

allowed to park my ass on the living room sofa where I was intent to remain for the rest of the evening. Annie came home and marched into the room to collapse on the couch beside me. Her face was contorted into a painful looking scowl and I was instantly worried that things had not gone well on her date with Logan.

“How did it go last night?” My voice gave away my uneasiness at having to ask.

She pulled herself away from her thoughts and looked at me inquisitively. “Huh?”

“Last night. Your date with

Logan. How did it go?”

“Oh! It went great. Logan is an amazing guy. I wish I would have met him months ago when you first mentioned him to me.” She nudged me with her elbow. “I think you are right, I need to reconsider my dating criteria.

My eyes rolled at her admission and I withheld the ‘I told you so’ that begged to escape my lips. “Did you two go out, or did David hold you captive for the rest of the night?”

Annie’s eyes brightened and she shifted her position to look at me face to face. “He took me to the beach and, oh my god, it was so romantic. We walked

along the shoreline in the moonlight and he showed me all of his favorite places. He asked me to hang out with him at Tomb tonight until he gets off of work.”

My relief was palpable. I was performing a victory dance in my head and my face couldn't hide my excitement for her. Logan was worth my approval and I hoped that Annie would learn the difference between her normal type of guy and a good one. “So, what was up with the scowl plastered to your face when you got home?”

“That was because of work. I love the job, Paige, and I'm happy to be working in the industry, but the people I have to work with are awful. I was five

minutes late getting into work today and someone complained to the office manager that it wasn't fair that I get to come in whenever I want. It was ridiculous. I have never been late, I work evenings and weekends when I have to, and I rarely take a lunch. But yet, when I'm five minutes late one day, those bitches go complaining to management. I swear they need to get a fucking life! All they do is sit around and talk about how crappy their lives are and about other people. They need to stop pushing their noses into other people's lives. Sometimes, I swear that they have nothing better to do than to spread around their misery. It's pathetic."

Annie's tirade was amusing and I laughed at hearing it. This was the same complaint I got from David most days and I wished they could find a better place to work. David had switched jobs several times trying to escape the people he couldn't stand, but he realized that no matter where he worked, the people were the same. He finally settled down at the office they currently work at and I was glad they had each other for company.

Annie began to squirm in her seat and I watched her as she mulled over whatever it was she was thinking about. "How was your night with Daemon?"

Her question took me by surprise.

From the way she had been acting just before she asked, I could have sworn something more serious had been on her mind. “It was good. We went to a coffee shop for a while and then back to his place.”

She nodded her head, still obviously struggling with something. “So, Logan told me some things about Daemon last night, and I don’t want to bring it up, but I think you have the right to know before things become serious between the two of you.”

My heart dropped. This had to be bad. Annie is the type of person that had no filter. There was not a phrase, word or sentence in existence that didn’t roll

off her tongue at any moment, despite whether it could be deemed appropriate or not. For her to be struggling with what she wanted to say, it meant that my feelings for Daemon were about to be shattered.

“Spit it out, Annie.”

Annie squirmed some more, fidgeted with her hands and checked out the state of her toenail polish before responding. “Logan is worried because Daemon has a reputation for being a player. He said it’s a new girl every couple of nights and obviously, he can’t say anything to Daemon to warn him off of you, being that Daemon is his boss and all; but he wanted me to tell you to

be really careful.”

My breath rushed out of me as she said that and my head dropped into my hands. I knew what Logan was saying. Hell! I'd personally observed Daemon's man-whore ways. Images of slutty redheads marched before my eyes and I simply chose to look the opposite direction. However, Logan was right. It would be ridiculous for me to think that Daemon would change. I'd be guilty of the same type of mistake Alex had just made with me.

“I know. I saw the women congregating around him Saturday night while I was at Tomb. I also saw him and one of those women half naked on

his balcony the following morning. Logan warned me that night as well.”

David came around the corner as Annie and I were talking. “Why the long face?”

Annie looked up at David as she answered for me. “Logan told me that Daemon had a reputation for being a player and I just told Paige to be careful.” Her eyes suddenly widened and an excited expression came over her face. “I know! I’m going there tonight to see Logan. I can watch Daemon and report back to you if I see him with another woman.”

I was about to decline her offer

when David interrupted. “I have a better idea. Paige, you’re an investigator, right?”

This can't be good.

“Yeeeeesss,” I said in my best skeptical tone. “Why?”

“Well, since you are an investigator, you happen to have the exact skills necessary to find out if Daemon is still seeing other women.”

One eyebrow went up as I tried to determine where David was going with this. “So, what you’re saying is...”

David huffed out an annoyed breath as if I should know what he was

suggesting. “I’m *saying* that you need to spy on Daemon.”

A laugh burst from my lips at David’s idea. “And how am I supposed to do that? Somehow I think he would find it odd if I sat at the bar all night and videotaped him working.”

He tsked at me. “There’s no need for video and he wouldn’t recognize you if you were in disguise.” His excitement dripped heavily on that last word.

Annie let out a squeal and clapped her hands in front of her. “That’s an excellent idea! It’ll be so much fun to get you ready. What will we dress her up as?”

I jumped up from the couch and held my hands out in front of me to slow their momentum. “Wait, no, that’s absolutely ridiculous. He would recognize me! There is no way in hell that I’m going to go into that bar, *disguised*, to spy on Daemon. There’s a word for something like that. It’s called ‘stalking’.”

David waved off my protest and continued in his decision making. “Paige, Annie and I will take care of everything. Daemon won’t recognize you once we get finished and we have everything we need to make you into a totally different person. Matt will be here soon and he just happens to be going to school for cosmetology. We

could totally pull this off.”

I shook my head at what he was saying but my brain was telling me it just might work. Obviously, they would have to completely transform me, but there was a slight chance I could pull this off. I’ve never been undercover before and it’s something I’ve always wanted to try. This could be easy. I would go in, sit in an inconspicuous spot, have a couple drinks, and watch to see what Daemon was up to. It wouldn’t take long to get my answer and then I could scoot out of there before anyone noticed a thing. David’s plan was actually pretty good.

“Okay.”

David and Annie jumped up and hugged each other then turned around to hug me. David grabbed my hand and started dragging me back to Annie's room to begin my ultimate makeover with Annie following closely behind. My error in judgment was apparent to me when we entered Annie's room and David immediately went for the tweezers.

Oh god. What have I gotten myself into?!

Chapter Fourteen

“I look like a five cent hooker!”

The black haired, red lipped woman that stared back at me from the mirror was a sight to behold. Somehow, Annie, David and Matt had found a way to turn me into one of the tramps that typically hang out at Tomb. Annie's collection of past Halloween costumes turned out to be a treasure trove of the most god awful skin tight clothing I had ever seen. David was delighted with the collection and I griped and complained every time they pulled an article of clothing out of it. Most of it was your standard 'sexy nurse' or 'sexy cop' or

‘sexy fairytale character’ and was unusable, but David had the brilliant idea of mixing and matching and throwing together an outfit that I wouldn’t be caught dead in normally. Unfortunately for me, I was outnumbered. By the time Matt arrived and had also become thrilled with the project, there was no way I was able to back out.

Once the three of them had finished poking and prodding and plucking my body into submission, I was dressed in a skin tight black leather skirt that barely covered my ass and a bright red halter top that should have been considered illegal to wear in public. My body could barely squeeze into the

material and I was shocked that Annie, with her ample curves, had been able to wear them at all. They accessorized the ensemble with a pair of four inch stiletto heels and round silver earrings that I believe could pick up satellite reception if aimed in the proper direction.

“Oh shut up, Paige. You look great. Daemon will never know it’s you.” David stood behind me as he took in my reflection in the mirror.

“I’m supposed to be inconspicuous, David! How the hell am I going to blend in wearing this?!” My eyes couldn’t take the sight of me anymore so I walked away from the mirror and sat on Annie’s bed.

“Well, Matt did an excellent job on your makeup and it’s only for a few hours. Everything will be fine. Now get up and practice walking in those heels before you go in there and embarrass yourself by breaking your neck.” David pulled me off the bed and I almost fell over when my legs refused to balance on the spiked heels. The heels made me 6’2” and I developed vertigo from the added height.

“This is such a bad idea, David. There is no way I’m going to be able to pull this off.”

Annie gave me her hand to balance me when she said, “Don’t worry so much, Paige. You’ll be in and out of

there before you know it and you'll have your answer about Daemon. Nobody will know it's you, so there's no point in worrying about looking like a tramp. Just have fun with it. I'll be up there at eleven and I can take over until the bar closes."

My nerves were working my body over pretty good and I felt like I would get physically ill before it was all said and done. I cannot believe I went along with this. I made a mental note to seek counseling as it was obvious that I hadn't been myself lately. First, I agreed to date Daemon, and now I'm practically stalking him due to my fucked up trust issues. This is the exact reason I don't date. I'm not cut out for it.

“Look at the time, you need to move it along, Paige.” David grabbed my purse and shoved it in my hand. I couldn’t take the motorcycle because I was wearing a wig, so David loaned me his car for the trip. He handed me his keys and practically shoved me out the front door. When the door slammed behind me, I knew that this was going to go down.

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Tomb was unusually busy for a Thursday night. I glanced at the marquis on the way into the club and noticed that a band I had not heard of was playing tonight. Thankfully, the front line moved

quickly and I was able to make it into the bar without any problems. I noticed Logan working the right bar so I went to the left and sat at a barstool in the darkest area I could find. My purse sat in my lap as I scanned the crowd in search of Daemon. The dance area was packed and the pit was as busy as it had been the night I met Daemon. I was concerned that I wouldn't be able to keep an eye on him due to the amount of people. The bartender approached me and I ordered a cranberry vodka drink. I'm not normally a liquor person, but the added alcohol content would be useful to calm my nerves.

I continued to scan the crowd when I spotted Daemon sitting on the

speaker where I had met him. It appeared as though the band was about to go on stage and I determined that Daemon was helping himself to a front row seat. A trashy blonde was sitting next to him and my body instantly tensed. She appeared to be talking to him and he smiled every once in a while in response. I gulped down my drink and then caught the attention of the bartender to order a second one. I had the feeling this was going to be a long night.

The band came on as the bartender was handing me my drink and they started to play a fast paced song that had a dark quality to it. The female singer's voice was haunting and melodic and her

words invoked a dark sense of desire and intense need. I would have thoroughly enjoyed the music if I wasn't so focused on Daemon and the wonder-slut sitting next to him. They weren't touching or openly flirting and they had pretty much stopped talking by the time the band had started playing, but I still couldn't shake the jealousy that was tormenting my body. Homicidal ideations flooded my thought process and I attempted to calm my reaction by remembering that this was his club and he was probably just being polite. It would be ridiculous of me to expect that Daemon wouldn't talk to other women while at work and I couldn't comprehend why I was freaking out to

this extent. I started employing deep breathing to calm my nerves and begin to think clearly again.

I continued throwing down drinks as the band played their set and before I knew it, an hour had passed and I was tipsy. My bladder started screaming and I ventured to the bathroom to take care of that need. My gait was extremely unsteady due to the amount of alcohol coursing its way through my system combined with the four inch heels strapped to my feet. I somehow managed to make it to the bathroom without falling and I was proud of myself for the accomplishment. As I was walking back to the bar, I noticed that Daemon was no longer on the speaker

and I made my way back to the chair I had previously occupied. My eyes scanned the crowd again and I located Daemon standing near the left bar.

He looked absolutely amazing tonight in a button down slate grey shirt with dark jeans that hugged his muscular thighs. His shirt sleeves were rolled up to his elbows and the shirt was pulled tight across his chest and shoulders. He crossed his arms over that broad chest and it burdened the material of his shirt that much more. His brown messy hair was perfectly framing his face and the lighting in the area where he stood created shadows that accentuated his square jawline and high cheekbones. I bit my upper lip just looking at him and

heat ran through me when I thought about the night before.

“Well, hello there, Beautiful. My name is Mark, what’s yours?”

I turned to find a man who looked to be in his early twenties standing to my right. His dirty blond hair was worn in a military cut and his clothing was preppy and appeared to be expensive. His eyes roamed over my body and his mouth formed an ‘o’ as he took in my state of dress. Rolling my eyes at his attempt to pick me up, a scowl came over my face and I worried that this could get out of hand. Ending this encounter quickly was crucial before my cover was blown. I plastered my most innocent smile on my

face before I responded.

“Hi Mark. Wow, you are cute. Listen, here’s the deal, I have a really nasty case of one of the worst STDs known to man, so I’m going to do you a favor and be up front with you about it before you agree to talk to me any longer. My doctor says there’s a one percent chance that I could still have sex without infecting my partner and I’m here looking for someone who is willing to take that risk.” I winked at him. “What do you say, Mark? You feeling lucky?”

Mark’s face instantly dropped when he processed what I finished telling him and he practically ran from

me without another word. I snickered as I watched him bump a table in his retreat and disappear from view after taking the stairs down into the pit.

Score!

Due to its effectiveness, I filed that line away for future use. I straightened up in my chair and looked back towards the left bar to where I had last seen Daemon standing. The crowd had become thick in that area and I had to push up from the chair to look over the mass of people. Daemon wasn't standing in the same location and I hastily looked around to try and locate him. The last thing I needed was for Daemon to get close and recognize who

I was. I continued my search and located him walking over to the right bar.

Crap!

I jumped up from my chair and had to steady myself before walking off. I kept my head low and crossed through the tables and over the upper level dance floor. It was my intent to take a short cut by taking the stairs down and crossing through the pit. I quickly changed my mind when I remembered I was walking on stilts. I took the long way around the pit and made my way over to a dark area near the left bar. I had to be careful to stay out of sight of Logan.

Once I was situated at a table near the back corner, I looked around to find out where Daemon had gone. I spotted him as he walked past the right bar and turned to go back down into the pit. He was walking in circles around the club and I realized that he was just making his rounds as a bouncer. I relaxed somewhat at the thought and continued to watch him. He made it through the pit and was coming up the stairs to the left bar again. Once he reached the top of the stairs he moved back over to the area where he had been standing previously. I kicked myself for not having stayed at the right bar because it was apparent his current location was a favorite place for him to stand.

Within five minutes of Daemon stopping, a group of five women approached him. Like last time, they were dressed provocatively and they were shamelessly flirting with him. Daemon didn't appear to be interested but he wasn't stopping them from touching him and rubbing their hands down his arms as they were talking to him. My hands balled into fists as I watched the women throw themselves at him. Daemon continued to scan the crowd but smiled every so often at something one of the women had said. As his eyes crossed my path they stopped momentarily and I panicked. If Daemon recognized me, I knew he would be pissed and would most likely

think I was psychotic. It felt like minutes that his eyes were looking in my direction and I kept my head down to prevent him from making eye contact.

Daemon's gaze began to wander again and I let out a breath I didn't realize I had been holding. My shoulders slumped at the release of tension and I absently played with the straw in my drink. I looked back up at Daemon and noticed that he was flirting with the brunette girl of the group. She was standing directly in front of Daemon and had one of her hands placed on his chest. She twirled her hair with her other hand and the grin on his face made his dimples pop out. My heart fluttered at the sight of those dimples but then

dropped when I realized that he must still be seeing other women. I guess the whole ‘owning’ thing was a one sided requirement. When he leaned down to whisper something in her ear I was convinced and my body slumped even more from the disappointment. It was a bad idea to come here, but at the same time I was thankful I knew the truth about him. I couldn’t believe I was foolish enough to think that anything he had said to me was sincere. It was apparent that Logan was correct in his assumption that Daemon had only intended for me to be another notch on his bed post.

I continued to watch as Daemon and the brunette were talking when he looked over in my direction again. I

didn't bother to look down since the likelihood that he would see me was slim. He scanned over the table to my right and when his gaze met mine, his eyes stopped. He held my stare for a moment and then winked.

Not good.

I immediately broke eye contact with him and looked down as if I was interested in something in front of me. The water in my glass had formed a whirlpool from the speed at which I was twirling my straw. There's no way he could have recognized me and I was trying not to panic. I looked up again. Daemon was still looking in my direction but looked down again at the

brunette who was rubbing herself all over him. A smug smirk was on his face and I wanted nothing more than to walk over there and slap it off of him. The brunette's behavior was disgusting me and I didn't know how she slept at night without feeling ashamed of herself.

Since I now had my answer, there was no point continuing to torture myself. I slowly got up from the table and started making my way to the front doors. Out of habit, I waved at Logan as I passed and his eyes widened at the sight of me.

“Paige?”

Apparently my costume wasn't as

convincing as my roommates had thought. I flashed Logan a quick smile and then continued my path to the front doors without stopping to explain myself. I had almost reached the doors when I was suddenly lifted and thrown over Daemon's shoulder.

Without a word, he carried me to the storage room, placed me down and performed his usual routine of locking and barricading the door. I stood perfectly still as his eyes raked over my body. His gaze was hooded and traveled slow before meeting my eyes. He stood there silently staring at me for a few moments before he finally spoke. His voice was deep and husky and it ran through me as he said, "Can I ask why

you are here this evening dressed as a prostitute?”

My eyes dropped to look down at myself and I sighed when I remembered what I looked like. What the hell was I supposed to say to him, *I'm disguised so you don't catch me spying on you?* Somehow I didn't see that working out too well so I said nothing. Of course, it didn't really matter what I said because once I was able to give Daemon his bike back, this thing between him and I would be over.

“What does it matter, Daemon? You were obviously busy, so why don't you just let me go so you can return your attention to the brunette woman?” I

looked up into his eyes and could tell that he was enjoying this little exhibition of mine by the slight upturn at the corners of his mouth. When he couldn't contain it any longer a sideways grin broke out on his face and one dimple came along with it. I held his stare while he processed his thoughts and became impatient as I waited for him to move away from the door.

Daemon chuckled. The bastard chuckled! His reaction pissed me off and I started marching forward to move him out of the way. The only problem was that I had forgotten that alcohol and stilts didn't go together well and I took a step only to promptly land on my ass. I dropped my head into my hands, sighed

loudly and then began the process of removing myself from the floor. Before I could accomplish lifting myself, two massive hands gripped around my arms and pulled me up. I looked up to a searing glare in Daemon's eyes. The expression on his face could only mean two things; either he was about to kill me, or...well, okay, there was only one thing. He was about to kill me.

He held onto my arms and moved me backwards until my back was firmly planted against a wall. His eyes never left mine as we crossed the room and he continued to stare at me after placing me there. His grip was forceful, but not enough to hurt. I didn't bother fighting because there was no way I would

overpower Daemon. My heart was racing as his body was barely touching mine. The heat between us was stifling and his scent was washing against me. One of his hands released my arm and came up around the front of my neck. I swallowed hard as I panicked. His grip around my neck wasn't choking me, but he gently pressed the tops of his fingers into the back of my jaw to keep my head in place. He moved slowly as he placed his forehead against mine, never once breaking eye contact. His head didn't move as his lips reached out and lightly brushed against mine. I remembered the Brunette waiting outside of this room for him and I struggled to turn my head away from him. His eyes crinkled from his

smile and I knew he was enjoying my inability to move. My breathing was labored and my chest would rub against his every time I inhaled.

I closed my eyes to break his stare and he rubbed the tip of his nose down my cheek to just past my jawline and placed a kiss on the sensitive spot of my neck. His mouth was warm and his lips slightly parted on my skin. Chills ran through me and those traitorous bumps raced across my arm. His grip on my other arm released so that it could rub my skin's reaction to him.

“Oh, my sweet damsel, what are you up to this time?”

His voice was like silk wrapping around my body. The low timbre and slow speed of his words was reminiscent of darkness and dangerous liaisons and my knees started to give out while he held me in place.

The alcohol diluting my blood wasn't helping matters either. My mind was angry at this seductive man, but due to the alcohol, my body was responding in full force. It took everything I had to not give in to him.

“Let me go, Daemon. Just go back to your friend and let me go home.”

His crystal blue eyes shot back to mine and his stare was disarming in its

intensity. “My *friend* was a show I was putting on for you. I’ll admit, I didn’t notice you when you first came in, so I’m not sure how long you’ve been here, but when you went to the restroom, I saw you immediately.” I didn’t think it was possible, but his voice grew even more seductive. “You need to understand Paige, that you are seared in my memory; the way you walk, the way you talk, the way you turn your head, or laugh, or smile, your sound, your smell...” his grin grew wicked and his voice lowered “...the way you squirm when you don’t know what I’ll do next or when I’ll do it.”

Ironically, I squirmed as he said that. How in the hell was this turning me

on so much? His touch had severed all communication between my mind and my bodily functions. Everything from my neck down was operating on animal instinct and there was nothing I could do to get it back under control.

“So, you’ve known it was me this whole time?”

Daemon’s face was so close to mine that his lips brushed against me as he spoke. “I walked over to where you were originally to find out what you were doing dressed like this. When you ran away I became convinced that you were up to something. I decided to play along. I ended up pushing that brunette *tramp* out of my way so I could get to

you when I saw that you were leaving. Now tell me, Damsel, what are you up to?”

I caved. There was no way around this. I was one hundred percent busted and the only option was to just come out with it. “I was spying on you.”

“Why?”

My breathing became heavier and my heart raced faster as I regretted what I had to tell him next. “To see if you were dating other women. To find out the truth about your reputation of only wanting women for a few nights and then moving on to the next...” I paused to let out a guilty sigh. “...to see if you were

doing that to me.”

His mouth turned up at the corners and his body shook from a silent laugh.

“Well, well, Damsel, I do believe you are becoming possessive of me. Whatever shall we do about that?”

I expected that he would become angry with me, that he would ask me to leave his club and never return; but instead of anger, his mouth was suddenly on mine. He moved his lips slowly against mine at first and his tongue swept across my mouth. His tongue rushed in when my mouth parted and his taste flooded my senses. I slid my tongue against his and his hands let go of my

neck and arm to grab my hips and push me up onto the wall. He grabbed my legs and wrapped them around his waist and my short skirt instantly slid up to my hips. The only thing between us was a small patch of cloth as he pressed himself against me. His desire was evident and my hips rolled against the friction. His chest rumbled as he deepened our kiss.

He shoved my underwear aside and pushed a finger inside me while placing his thumb over that one special spot. His other hand reached beneath, cupping my ass and holding up my weight. My arms were wrapped around his neck and my head fell back as he started kissing my neck. He nipped at

my skin and I let out a small cry.

“Shhhh, be quiet, Damsel. We can’t let people hear us, now can we?” His voice purred as he spoke to me. “If you make another sound, I’ll stop. And I really do *not* want to stop.” He kissed my lips gently and then held his mouth to my ear as he whispered, “Holding your breath will help you stay quiet.”

His thumb starting rubbing circles as he inserted another finger. I wanted to cry out from the sensation but I didn’t want him to stop. I bit on my lower lip and held my breath as he instructed. He continued his rhythm and that familiar building started to occur throughout my body. I focused on remaining quiet

which only made his movements against me more pronounced. I would take in short gasps of air when my lungs screamed for it, but I would bite down harder and hold my breath longer when I knew my body wanted to vocalize its pleasure.

Daemon's eyes continued to hold mine and the intensity of his stare was too much for me to handle. This man had completely overtaken me and I was powerless to do anything but what he wanted me to do. Logical thought no longer existed within my mind rendering me a puppet to which Daemon held the strings. His gaze began to slowly travel down my body and he watched what he was doing to me. I could feel his eyes

on me and the nerve endings in my skin came alive. His hand started moving faster and more forcefully and it took everything I had not to cry out from the sensations he was forcing through my core. My head became dizzy due to the pace of my heart combined with the lack of oxygen from holding my breath. The climax that was building within me was too much to hold in. My body felt like it was ripping apart from within itself and my gasps at air became more frequent and desperate. Nothing else around me existed at this moment. There was only Daemon and what he was doing to me and I couldn't contain my release for much longer. I shook my head back and forth as I fought against letting go and

Daemon's eyes shot up to mine and widened when he realized how close I was. He leaned in to brush his lips against my ear as he whispered, "You can let go now, Damsel."

His voice was rough and vibrated through me and I couldn't contain myself any longer. My body lost all control. I took in a deep breath and a scream burst forth from my lips as my muscles gripped around his fingers inside me. His mouth crashed into mine as he swallowed my scream and waves rolled through me, relentlessly battering the inside of my body. My release felt like it would never come to an end and tears welled in my eyes from its force. My head rang from the rush of blood and I

was hyperaware of every nerve ending within me. I could feel him still pushing his hand against me as my muscles gripped and released him over and over again. This wasn't just an orgasm, this was nirvana like I had never experienced it. I saw bright bursts of light even with my eyes open and I never wanted to come down from this feeling.

As if in tune with my body, Daemon's hand slowed its rhythm as the last tremors quaked within me. My breathing was heavy and my head swam. A loud ringing sounded in my head with each beat of my heart and when I opened my eyes, Daemon's gaze was heated and fierce. He had complete power over me and he was very much

aware of that fact. His smug grin didn't anger me, he had every right to it. Relief flooded me as I let go of all control and allowed Daemon to do to me what he wanted. My willpower had abandoned me and my stubbornness had been battered into submission.

A growl erupted from Daemon and he quickly undid his pants and shoved his hard length within to fill me. My head rolled back and he returned his hand to my neck. He used just enough pressure to control my breathing, only loosening his grip when it was necessary for me to gasp in air. He drove into me and my legs tightened around his waist with every movement he made. He was rough in his force and I started to swell

around him. The explosion inside me started to build itself again. The sensation was too much for me and tears fell down my cheeks as my body trembled uncontrollably. Daemon continued powering into me and my muscles gripped around him driving him deeper with each stroke. My release started forcing itself out of me and just when I couldn't take it any longer, Daemon released my neck and I drew in a large breath of air. My release burst forth again unbelievably stronger than the one he had given me moments before. His mouth covered my lips and his tongue swept over mine as he muffled the cry of my body. His body quickened and tensed as he peaked and

we gripped on to each other as our bodies shuddered from the concentrated power of our combined release. Our chests collided from our labored breathing and our eyes were closed as we floated back down together. This dark and arrogant man had awakened something deep inside me and managed to tear down every crumbling wall I had left. I felt defenseless without my usual barriers and the feeling was unsettling, but at the same time, insanely erotic. My muscles still gripped him sporadically and he twitched within me in response. We stayed like that for a few moments until I felt a small laugh shake his body as his thumb wiped the remaining tears from my face.

“Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

His voice was soft with concern but still rough from the experience we had shared.

I shook my head in response. Yet again, the English language escaped me and my voice failed me. When I was able to connect with logical thought once again I vocalized my answer. “No. I’m fine, I just...god...I have no idea what you just did to me. There are no words to explain it.”

He chuckled wickedly as my legs started to unwrap themselves from his body. They were like jelly and when Daemon released me I barely had time to

pull my clothes back into place before slumping to the ground. Daemon was soon sitting beside me and our backs were pressed up against the wall while we tried to calm our bodies. Every once in a while he would turn to look at me and we would laugh at our breathlessness and inability to communicate.

Daemon leaned his head back against the wall and I admired the profile of his face. His features were perfection and the stubble that always peppered his jaw only emphasized his masculine beauty. He turned to me and smiled brightly and those dimples popped out causing me to melt. We

stared quietly at each other for moment before he let out a small chuckle and said, “My intention for bringing you in here was to find out what you were doing here tonight. I’m, uh, sorry I got carried away. I have to ask that you not come here dressed like that again.”

I shamefully looked down when he said that. It was wrong for me to spy on him or attempt to deceive him. My voice was soft as I asked, “Are you angry?”

He sat up from the wall and turned to look at me directly. “Why would I be angry?”

My hands fidgeted with each other

and I couldn't look him in the eye. I don't know what came over me when I agreed to this. It went entirely against my nature and I felt silly and foolish for having allowed my trust issues and jealousy to cause me to act like this. "Because I dressed up in this ridiculous outfit and came to your work to spy on you."

A laugh burst out of him and he placed his finger under my chin to tilt my gaze up to his. "Paige, I didn't tell you not to dress like that again because you were spying, although we do need to talk about that. The reason I said it is because I can't keep dragging you in this storage room. If you dress like that, and I have to see men staring at you and

hitting on you, I'll have no choice but to keep you locked in here every time you show up."

I was momentarily stunned speechless as he said that. He wasn't mad about the spying. I couldn't understand how nonchalant he was being about my attempt at espionage. My smile broke free and he smiled in response. I started to say something when bass from the music playing outside the room started rattling the walls and distracted me. Daemon had told me to be quiet so people wouldn't hear us, but it didn't occur to me at that time that it was impossible for someone to hear us over the music in the club.

“Why did you ask me to be quiet?”

A sly smile appeared on Daemon's face and he looked straight ahead to avoid eye contact with me. My curiosity was heightened even more by his reaction to that question and I moved so I could face him while he responded. His arms shot out when I was closer to him and he pulled me onto his lap so that I was straddling him. My barely there skirt slid up to my hips again and his hands came from around my back and began rubbing up my legs. Daemon's gaze heated as his hands climbed higher and his fingers began to slightly dig into the flesh of my thighs. I pushed under his chin to bring his attention back to my face and he laughed softly at my

inquisitive glare.

“That’s for me to know for now; but more importantly, why were you spying on me, Damsel?”

My mind raced with what I was willing to admit to Daemon about the motivation behind my actions tonight. I didn’t want to mention to him that Logan had warned me against him and I was afraid that if I did, Logan would no longer have a job. The only other alternative was to admit to him that I had allowed my jealousy to get the better of me, and I cringed at the thought of that confession. The only way to spare myself the insufferable embarrassment of admitting a weakness was to turn it

around on Daemon.

“I was trying to determine if your demand for ‘ownership’ was a one-sided requirement.”

He looked amused by my statement and he pulled me closer as his legs bent up to support my back before responding. “I have to tell you, I’ve never met another person that has the same maddening ability as you to hear only certain parts of a conversation, while ignoring the most important parts.”

My eyebrow raised in question and he couldn’t contain the lopsided grin that broke out across his face. “Like I’ve told you before, I couldn’t care less

what or who those other women did once I had my night with them. There was never a question, a concern or an afterthought about them when they left in the morning. But you are different in so many ways, some of which..." He appeared suddenly distant before continuing his statement. "...some of which, you don't know. I wanted to make it clear to you in the beginning that if this happened between us, I wasn't going to just walk away and forget I had known you."

A silent laugh shook his body before he added, "It's like I've told you before, you are the most frustrating and stubborn woman I have ever met. I was intrigued with you from the moment I

pulled you up onto the speaker and called you Damsel..." He tapped his finger on the tip of my nose. "...You were instantly aggressive and, to be honest, it was appealing as hell. Then, when I got to watch you shimmy down that speaker as you refused to accept my assistance, my interest only intensified." I squirmed and another silent laugh shook him. "But after seeing you fight Chris and after having to hold you back when you attempted to break free while we broke up your little skirmish..." His gaze grew heated as he continued, "...well, let's just say you had my attention. In all honesty, I didn't expect to see you again after that, at least for a while. When you returned with Alex two nights

later, I couldn't help myself when I approached you. I was disappointed after you introduced Alex as your boyfriend, but I couldn't shake the idea that you weren't being completely honest. I wanted to accept the fact that you were with someone else, but it was impossible to stay away. Luckily, for me, Alex met that other woman and it became abundantly clear that you had been lying. I'll have to remember to thank him for that later."

I winced at what he was saying and bit down on my lip as guilt overtook me. It occurred to me that I have spent a lot of time lying to Daemon, yet here I was, practically stalking him to determine if he had been lying to me.

The double standard was apparent and I felt shameful to have conducted myself as I had.

Daemon tugged on my lip to pull it from between my teeth. “Regardless, you still haven’t answered my question, and I’m not letting you out of here until you do. So what’s it to be, Paige, are we finishing the conversation, or should I have had furniture stored in here to keep me from having to sit on the floor all night? I’m fine either way, but I do think we would be more comfortable spending our evening elsewhere.” His eyebrow cocked up in silent inquiry.

I huffed out a breath of air. What the hell did he want me to say? I had

already told him why I was here tonight and why I had been spying. Where was he going with this conversation? “What do you want to know, Daemon? I’ve already told you I was here to see if you were still sleeping with other women.” My confession was mortifying and I looked away to break his stare. “There’s not much more I can tell you.”

He grabbed my chin and turned my head to look at me directly, “Do you want to be with me exclusively? Is that why you were concerned about what I was doing tonight? I said I would own you and I will if we continue this, but I won’t force that upon you without your consent. If you want me, Damsel, I’m yours, but you have to let me know.”

Two opposing armies were battling it out in my head. I could clearly imagine them as they rolled in their cannons and blasted small iron balls at each other. It was a battle between logic and emotion and the discomfort it created in me was alien and disturbing. Alex was right when he accused me of acting in a way that completely went against my character. How could I trust Daemon not to shatter what was left of my heart? In the end, there was only one answer I could give him.

“Yes.” My voice was quiet as I said that and his eyes narrowed at my response.

“Yes, what?”

Sonofabitch, this was annoying the crap out of me. Why did he always make me voice the confessions that were the most difficult for me to even admit to myself? This was uncharted territory for me and I had no idea what I was doing or why I was even doing it. My first instinct was to leave the club and return his bike to him as I had planned to do when I attempted to leave earlier. His words and questions were difficult for me to process and I was angry that it had grown as complicated as it had. Speaking my mind had never been a problem before, but something about those crystal blue eyes that were currently burning into mine...intimidated

me. Daemon had somehow forced his way past my walls and I couldn't grasp how he had been able to do so in such a short period of time. There was no other choice left in me but to relent and admit that he had affected me as deeply as he had.

My words were spoken slowly as I reluctantly confessed. "Yes, I want to be with you, only you, and I want you to feel the same way about me."

His arrogant smile wasn't helping matters. My body tensed immediately and I was about to pull myself up and exit this room as quickly as I could. Daemon must have sensed my flight instincts kicking in because his hands

grasped around my waist, essentially holding me in place.

The timbre of his voice deepened and he spoke softly when he said, “I’m glad to hear that, Damsel; in fact, you have no idea how happy it makes me for you to finally admit that. I will point out, though, that had you communicated that to me earlier, we could have avoided this entire incident. Although, in all honesty, I’m glad you showed up. If for nothing else, it has been *enjoyable* in so many ways.” His head angled as he flashed me a brilliant, all teeth smile. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Keeping in the spirit of communication, I guess I should admit

that I'm glad I showed up as well. It has been an experience, to say the least.”

“That it has, Paige. However, I regretfully need to cut the rest of this conversation short. I have to get back out there and my ass has fallen asleep from sitting on this hard floor. Besides, you need to go home and put on some more clothing before I have no choice but to take you again while we are in here. Unfortunately, I have work to finish up and your presence is very distracting.”

He stood up and turned to reach for my arms and pull me up beside him. He wrapped me in a warm embrace and kissed me on the forehead. “Would you

mind if I came by to see you after I leave here?”

I didn't mind, so I shook my head and said, “Not at all.” He smiled in response and took my hand to lead me back into the club.

Chapter Fifteen

Daemon and I left the storage room and he escorted me out to David's car before heading back to the club to finish up whatever last minute jobs he had to perform. He assured me that he didn't have much to do and that he would be at my place within a couple of hours. I started David's car and reached for my phone to make sure I hadn't missed any calls. It was just after one o'clock in the morning and my roommates had been expecting me home hours earlier. I fished around in my purse for the phone when I discovered that it was missing. Sighing to myself, I climbed back out the car and made my

way into Tomb in search of my phone.

Hoping Daemon wouldn't see me and start up round two as he threatened, I hurried back to the storage room and found my phone on the floor near where he and I had been sitting earlier. Picking it up, I hit the little button to power it on and an indication popped up that David had called earlier and left a message. He must have been checking to find out if I was successful in my spy mission and I decided that I would wait to inform him of my failure when I returned home.

While passing the left bar to head back out of the club, Logan waved me over to talk. I grudgingly stopped to talk to him and assumed he wanted to know

why I was dressed like this. “What’s up, Logan?”

He eyed my odd choice in clothing and I could see the question he was wanting to ask by the expression on his face. Not wanting to explain, or rather, admit why I was dressed this way. I smiled brightly and raised my eyebrows to dare him to comment on my apparel. He momentarily appeared to be considering if he should ask, but then shook his head and decided against it.

“Hey, Paige. I was just wondering if you have heard from Annie. She was supposed to get here over two hours ago but hasn’t shown up. I tried calling her, but she hasn’t answered her phone or

responded to my texts.”

I checked my phone again to see if Annie had called as well as David. She hadn't. It wasn't like Annie to stand up a date and it definitely wasn't like her to not respond to texts. Earlier, she had been overly excited about seeing Logan tonight and the fact that she hadn't called or showed concerned me. Had something happened and that's why David called me? I pulled my phone from my purse and hastily hit the button to return David's call. Placing my finger over my other ear to hear better I became nervous when David's phone rang five times and then went to voicemail. He had a date with Matt tonight and it was possible they were

busy, so I hit the button to check my voicemail. David hadn't left me a message and all I could hear was a loud crashing sound on the recording.

What the hell?!

My body raced out of Tomb so fast, I didn't even bother with social pleasantries by explaining David's voicemail to Logan or even waving a quick goodbye. My feet instantly took me back to David's car before slamming on the gas pedal to get home.

~

My front door was ajar when I finally arrived to the apartment. It hadn't taken me long to get here and I

believe I broke just about every traffic law known to man to make the quick transit happen. I cautiously approached the door and stood outside to see if I could hear anything within the apartment. Nothing.

I toed the door open as I poked my head in to inspect the entryway. All appeared normal so I opened the door further.

Oh my god.

The living room in the apartment was completely destroyed and there were broken lamps and vases littering the ground. The furniture was knocked over and the coffee table was broken

down the middle. I moved towards the living room to investigate further and, due to the broken glass spread out over the floor, I chastised myself for having left my shoes in the car. I carefully walked around the broken pieces when I noticed a trail of what appeared to be blood leading to behind the couch. Tiptoeing over to follow the trail, I remained quiet as I attempted to listen for movement in another part of the apartment. My jaw dropped when I found Matt balled up behind the couch with a nasty looking gash on his head. My purse fell from my hand as I ran over to kneel down and check to see if he was breathing. His chest was moving and when I pressed my fingers to his neck I

found that his pulse was still strong. I shook him awake and his eyes momentarily fluttered open before closing again. He groaned while conscious for that split second and I could have sworn I heard a faint sound coming from near the bedrooms.

Deciding that Matt was okay for the moment, I jumped up and hurriedly crossed the room to look down the hallway leading to the bedrooms. My face fell and a gasp escaped me when I saw David's battered body lying near Annie's bedroom. His face was covered in blood and his arm was twisted in an unnatural position and my heart shattered at the sight of him.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no. Not David. Please not David.

I dropped to the floor and crawled on my hands and knees to get to him and I began to check for any signs that he was alive. His breaths were shallow and his chest barely moved as he inhaled. My fingers came in contact with his weak pulse and I carefully nudged him to see if I could wake him up. Tears began pouring from my eyes when he wouldn't respond and I called his name in an attempt to rouse him. His face was almost unrecognizable and his body twitched every so often making me afraid to move him in an attempt to encourage him awake. I couldn't tell if he was in pain and my lips trembled at

the thought that I couldn't wake him.

“David? Come on David, wake up for me. Please David, please wake up.” My voice was strained and it quivered as I begged him to let me know he was okay. My entire body slumped and I felt like a hundred pound weight had been placed on my shoulders. I was desperate for him to speak to me, to somehow communicate with me that he was still with me. I was upset about Matt, but losing David would be too much for me to bear. My agony was crippling me and I struggled to get my emotions under control. He needed medical attention and it took everything I had to leave him to call for help. Fear overtook me that he could die while I went to retrieve my

phone, but I had no choice but to attempt to get him the help that he needed.

I started to turn to go back and call for help when I heard a groan coming from Annie's bedroom. I instantly remembered Logan's concern over her absence and I realized that she would have been home as well. I nudged the door to her room open and spotted her lying on the bed, half dressed and in the same beaten state that I had found David. Her body and the white bed sheets were stained with blood and she lay face down over the mattress. Pushing up from the floor I raced to her side and tried to cover her with the blanket on her bed. She was unconscious like everybody else and I

started to rush back to the living room to call 911.

As I turned to exit the door, my hair was grabbed from behind and I was pulled backwards off my feet. The floor impacted instantly with my back and my breath was knocked out of me briefly. My lungs struggled to gasp in air when I felt someone heavy straddle my midsection. My eyes flew open to discover Chris looking down at me. He had an evil smirk on his face and his hands and body were covered in blood. A few dark bruises were beginning to form on his face and I was thankful that someone was able to get in a few good shots in the struggle. How in the hell had he fought and won against all three

of them? Matt and David weren't small guys and I didn't understand how Chris was able to beat them so badly while still incapacitating Annie.

“Hello, Whore.” Disdain dripped from his lips as he spoke to me. My body clenched at the sound of his grating voice and I struggled to lift him from my body.

“I'm so glad you have finally made it home. I was starting to wonder if I would have to keep pleasuring myself on Annie while I waited for you to return.”

I remembered Annie's half-dressed state and was instantly sickened

when I realized what he had done to her. I opened my mouth to scream but he forced his grimy hand over my mouth to silence my voice. He pressed down on my face so forcefully that I felt my teeth cut into the inside of my lips.

Adrenaline graciously began to course through my body and my shock gave way to allow anger to drive me. I reached up and pressed my fingers into his eyes, attempting to blind him. He howled in pain and released my shoulders when he reached up to remove my hands from his face. I let go quickly and then began hitting him with my fists in an attempt to force him off me. He slapped me across the face and the impact caused my head to spin to the

side. My jaw where he had hit me was pounding and tears welled in my eyes. My rage kept me going and my knee came up from behind him, impacting with his head with enough force that it knocked him sideways. Once I was freed from his weight, I scrambled to roll over and crawl away on my hands and knees. Why did I not call for help when I first got here?!

Chris swiftly recovered and grabbed one of my ankles as I was crawling. My foot instinctively kicked back and caught him in the forehead. The impact of my kick jarred him enough that I was able to crawl far enough to push myself off the floor and out of Annie's bedroom. If I could just make it

to my phone I could call the police and hold him off until they got here. I started screaming for help as I ran towards the living room and I hoped that one of my neighbors would hear me.

My phone was in reach when Chris tackled me back down to the floor. He turned me over onto my back and straddled me again and I hit him with as much force as I could. Broken shards of glass on the floor tore into my skin and the pain from the cuts was excruciating. It was unfortunate that he weighed so much more than me and was apparently built like a brick shithouse. My own muscles started to burn from the exertion of my actions. I started to scream again and Chris covered my

mouth with his hand. My teeth tore into his fingers as I bit down on him trying to free myself. He snarled when I bit down and grabbed my head with his other hand and started beating my head into the floor repeatedly. My head screamed in pain and I bucked my body up trying to shift him off of me. My efforts were useless and after a few more hits to the head, my vision tunneled, until all I saw was black.

~

“Wakey, Wakey.”

Drops of water sprayed over my face as my head was being assaulted with the worst headache known to man.

My thoughts were jumbled and I came back to consciousness, rapidly remembering my current circumstances. I tried to move but found that my hands and feet were bound and a gag was tied tightly over my mouth. The cords used to tie me were cutting into my skin and they stung every time the water washed over them. I opened my eyes to discover that I was lying down in my bathtub. The porcelain was freezing and it didn't help that Chris was spraying me down with ice cold water.

“Since a bad little whore decided she needed to fight, she got herself all dirty. I'm just going to clean you up so that I can do *my job* and dirty you up all over again.”

Oh, this guy was a sick bastard. I've known he was abusive, but I could have never guessed the depth of his depravity. My limbs continued to struggle against the cords but whatever he had used to secure me was effective. The water was freezing and it felt like knives were raking over my body. He continued to wash me down and I jumped when he began rubbing his hands over me. His fingernails scratched into me and I cringed at the feel of his calloused hands touching me. He placed one hand on my ass and squeezed so hard a cry escaped my lips. His lips turned up into a nasty sneer at the sound of my pain.

“Wouldn’t let me touch this before, would you? Well, now sweetheart, I’ll be touching a hell of a lot more!” He hit me with the shower head and then threw it into the tub by my feet. After turning off the water, he pulled me up by the cords around my hands and dragged me up and over the lip of the tub. My body impacted with the floor again and my feet slapped against the floor uselessly. The pain in my wrists was making my hands go numb and I thrashed back and forth in a hopeless effort to break myself free. Chris reached down and grabbed me by the hair and dragged me out of the bathroom by my hair and my hands. My head hit the door frame as he pulled me past it and I cried out again from the

blow.

I opened my eyes as he dragged me into my bedroom and I was stunned to see that he had lit at least three dozen candles. The room was dark except for the dancing light and shadows and it made Chris' face appear even more sinister than before. How long had I been unconscious to give him time to do this? Rage coursed through my system and I was thankful for that emotion smothering my fear. I wouldn't give Chris the reaction he was looking for and I glared up at him after noticing what he had done to the room.

“Do you like it? I hope you don't mind that I helped myself to Annie first.

As I recall, she would have given it to me willingly if it hadn't been for you and that fucking faggot out there! If it makes you feel any better, I know I'm going to take my time and enjoy you more thoroughly. I don't see your buddies waking up anytime soon, so we should have *hours* before I finally kill you."

My body continued to thrash as I screamed at him that he was a fucking lunatic. The gag muffled my words but the sudden anger in his gaze indicated to me that he understood what I had said. He picked me up by both of my bindings and threw me onto the bed. He slapped me across the face again before screaming, "Stop fucking moving, Bitch! You keep fighting me and I'll go out and

kill all fucking three of them! Do you understand me?!”

It took all the willpower I had to stop fighting against him. Annie, David and Matt were still alive when I checked them and there was a chance that they could live through this in time for help. My instincts were screaming at me to keep trying to free myself, but I used all the self-control that I had to stop moving. Thoughts and ideas of ways to get out of this flitted through my head and I couldn't calm down enough to focus on what I had to do. When my body stilled, Chris smiled his sick grin and said, “I'm glad to see that you do understand.”

His eyes began to travel over my body and he licked his lips with anticipation. Both of his hands grabbed my breasts and forcefully squeezed, causing me to whimper from the pain. The sick smile on his face only widened when he saw that he had hurt me and I could tell that he was relishing my captivity.

He leaned down to speak in my ear and I had to hold back from being physically ill at the nearness of him. “Now, you are going to be a good little whore and sit here while I go get something. I won’t be leaving the room; so if I see you move even an inch, your friends will be dead before we try this again.”

Chris' heavy footsteps echoed as he crossed my floor back into the bathroom. I could hear him fishing through the drawers by the sink and they opened and slammed as he searched them. He returned to the bed and I looked over to see that he was carrying a pair of scissors with him. The adrenaline in my body was surging for me to move, but I had to force the instinct aside by remembering my friends in the other parts of the apartment.

“I appreciate the outfit choice, *Paige*, but I'm afraid all that material is going to get in my way. It's a shame really that I will have to cut it off of you

to get where I intend to go.”

I instantly hated hearing my name on his tongue and my stomach rolled as he spoke. When his hand ran up the inside of my thigh, my body shuddered in disgust. I continued to glare at him in refusal of showing him anything other than anger. He was looking for fear and I was too stubborn to give him that satisfaction. His face continued to hold that horrendous smirk and he began to cut away at my skirt. He drove a line starting from the bottom of the material and slowly sliced as he moved his way towards the top.

Once he was done cutting off the skirt, he started at my top. It took

everything I had within me to hold still while one end of the scissors scraped up my torso. I could feel wisps of blood leak out from the scratches he was inflicting on my skin. My glare never left him and, if that was the only victory I had in this situation, I was going to hold that glare on him for as long as I could. He was obviously intent on taking my body, but I would be damned to let him break me emotionally in the process.

My shirt broke free and I was almost completely exposed to my attacker. He stood back to admire his work and then tsked when he saw how the scissors had marked me. The scissors dropped from his hand to the

floor and he moved closer to continue looking me over.

“I knew I was right when I said I would enjoy this.” A nasty grin broke out on his face as he leaned down and took one of my breasts in his mouth. He bit down hard on the tip and I couldn’t keep from crying out from the pain. He lifted his head again and laughed when he saw a tear that had escaped my eye.

“Oh yeah, baby, I’m going to enjoy this more than you can even imagine.”

His movement was quick when he grabbed me and flipped me over. His hand came down on the back of my head, pushing my face into the mattress. I

could barely breathe and I turned my head slightly in a struggle to keep from losing oxygen. He used his other hand to remove the remainder of my clothes until I was left in nothing but my underwear. His hand slapped against my ass hard and the combination of the sound and the sting caused my body to jump in surprise.

“Look at you. It turns me on to see you writhing in wait for me. Try to be patient, baby, I plan on taking you slow.”

My body recoiled every time he touched me and I had started to give up hope. I wanted to believe that there would be a way out of this, but my

optimism failed when I recognized that the likelihood was slim that my friends and I would survive.

Chris began to rub his hand over my ass and then used his finger to pull the material aside. He pushed his fingers over the center of my core, but didn't apply enough pressure to penetrate me internally. I bit down on the gag still tied around my mouth to keep from screaming. The only triumph I would gain would be a complete lack of response to his actions.

“Oh, baby, you feel so fucking nice. My dick is rock hard just looking at you. This is definitely more impressive than Annie.”

My adrenaline kicked in again at my anger of what he had done to Annie. There was no staying still for this, regardless of his threat against my friends. My body bucked up to try to dislodge him and I forced myself over to face him. My sudden movement must have taken him by surprise because he momentarily stilled. I took advantage of his brief shock and used both of my legs to kick him in the face. I saw blood burst from his nose and he fell backwards from the force of the kick.

“You fucking Bitch!”

Chris pushed himself from the floor when we heard two car doors slamming in the parking lot. I heard my

name being called and my relief was palpable. Chris balled his fists when he realized that somebody was coming. He punched me in the head repeatedly and a cracking sound echoed within my head with each hit he gave me. He was running out of time, and he glanced over to my window to look for a method of escape.

Someone was slamming into the front door and I could hear the wood splintering as they came through. “Paige?!” “Annie?!” Two voices; there were two men trying to force their way into the apartment.

Determining that he was now outmanned, Chris ran to my window and

threw it open with such force, the glass shattered. I watched as he climbed out and jumped to a tree limb just below the outside sill. He was out of my sight by the time I finally heard the front door crash open.

A familiar voice bellowed, I'm assuming when he caught sight of the condition of my house. I heard my bedroom door slam open and Daemon came into my vision. My thoughts were scattered from the beating Chris had delivered to my head. The only thing I could think when I saw Daemon was that he really did look like a white knight from the illumination of the candles. He ran to my side and quickly looked for a way to untie me.

“Paige?! Oh my god, Paige. Talk to me. Please, talk to me.”

I must have taken a few more hits to my head than I realized because I chuckled at the irony that he was asking me to speak while I was gagged. Daemon quickly took notice of that issue as well and he reached behind my head to untie the gag.

I'm not quite sure what happened next as my awareness fizzled in and out of focus. I could feel Daemon cutting at the bindings on my feet and when he broke through, blood rushed to my toes causing a pins and needle feeling. He started on my hands and I could feel

more tears stream down my face from being released from those cords. When he finished removing the bindings he grabbed a blanket from my bed and covered up my naked state. His face was strained with concern and he didn't look sure about where he could touch me.

“Paige? Paige, talk to me, tell me he didn't...” His voice wavered as he imagined what had been done to me. “Please, just tell me he didn't hurt you like that.”

The blackness was creeping up on me and I couldn't keep my eyes open much longer. Daemon's words became muffled and I felt like I was traveling

down a tunnel of some sort. No matter how hard I tried to communicate with him, either through words or a simple motion of my head, my body and voice would not cooperate with my efforts.

Daemon looked directly in my eyes for the last moment I could keep them open.

“Paige?”

And then...there was darkness.

~

Three months had passed since Buddy's mom left The Center. It was my sixth birthday. I missed my friend so

much. When I last saw him, he had promised me that he would see me again.

Because it was my sixth birthday, my parents decided to take a rare day off to celebrate before I had to start homeschooling. I woke up that morning to my mother cheerily singing Happy Birthday while placing a small present on my bed next to where I still lay cuddled with my stuffed animals and other toys. I eyed the box while laughing at my mother's dramatic rendition of the birthday song. As much as I loved my mother for her beauty in and out, even I had to admit the woman could not sing. But that was just one more thing that made her

special. Rather than shying away from singing along, she would accentuate just how bad she was without shame. She sang any song loud and clear, so pitifully out of tune that anyone near her would have to laugh after cringing at the first couple of notes. She finished her song and then nudged the small package over to me. I grabbed the present and tore into the shiny red paper to discover a white velvet box inside. I removed the top of the box and gasped when I saw the small dragonfly necklace it contained. The necklace was simple for the most part, but the head and tail of the dragonfly looked like rubies that reflected the light streaming in from my bedroom

window. I jumped out and threw my arms around my mother. Momma laughed while pulling the necklace from the box. After sweeping my long blond hair from around my shoulders, she fastened the clasp behind my neck.

“Your daddy and I saw this in the store a month ago. As soon as we saw it, we knew it was made for you. I’ve never known a little girl who spent as much time as you chasing dragonflies and collecting lizards and all the other critters that come your way.” She hugged me to her and sighed into my hair. “I love you my little Paige. Now hurry up and get dressed! Your father and I are taking the day off and we are going to give you the best day of your

life.”

“Where are we going, Momma?”

My mother gave me a sly smile and then tapped me lightly on the head.

“Now if I told you that, it wouldn’t be a surprise. But you will need your bathing suit, so be sure to pack a bag.”

My mother walked out of my room and made her way to the kitchen to cook my birthday breakfast. I jumped from the bed, knocking my favorite stuffed cat to the floor. I picked it up, placed it back amongst its friends and muttered a small apology for having knocked it down. I ran through my room and collected my bathing suit, a towel, and got dressed

in a pair of cut off shorts and a t-shirt. I made my way to the kitchen and breathed in the delicious smell of the bacon that Momma was frying. The bacon popped as it cooked and I would laugh every time my mother dramatically jumped away from the pan so that she wouldn't get burned by the flying grease.

Daddy walked into the kitchen and whistled when he took a look at Momma. Even with her hair up in a messy bun, and wearing nothing more than a pair of shorts and a baggy t-shirt, my father couldn't keep from picking her up and swinging her around before planting a kiss on her lips. "Good morning, Mrs. Stone. As

usual, you have put the sunlight to shame by your beauty. I'm not sure how it's possible, but I think you are more beautiful today than you were yesterday." Momma's cheeks flamed red as she laughed at Daddy.

Daddy turned around and saw me at the table. He ran over to me and picked me up and hugged me so tight I could barely breathe. "And if it isn't the little birthday girl. Are you excited for your surprise?" I looked up into my daddy's face and couldn't contain the joy about having a full day with my parents to myself. I laughed when my daddy flipped me up onto his shoulders and I wrapped my arms around his head.

“I am excited, Daddy. What is my surprise?” Momma tsked and looked at Daddy in such a way as to remind him that he wasn’t allowed to spoil it by telling me where we would be going. “Come on, Daddy, you know you want to tell me. You never could keep a secret for long.” My father let out his deep laugh and held my legs while he spun me around.

“I would tell you my sweet Paige, but if I did that I would have to deal with your momma later, and she can be very scary. I think I’ll just wait and let you find out when we get there.”

We packed all of our supplies into

the car and then began our road trip to my “surprise” destination. My parents never admitted where we were going, and since Florida has so many different water related choices I had no idea where they were taking me. Momma cranked up the radio that was playing some old southern rock tunes and she and Daddy sang along to the songs that reminded them of their youth. Daddy would poke fun at Momma for her awful pitch and out of tune singing, but he caressed her arm and kissed her hand while doing so. Momma wasn’t shy, she just kept on singing with the rest of us.

When we were thirty minutes into our drive, Momma’s cell phone started

ringing. She picked up the phone to check the caller I.D. and then shrugged. Daddy looked at her in silent question of who had been calling. “Must be a wrong number. The caller ID only says ‘private’.” She put the phone down and had just removed her hand from the device when it started ringing again.

Daddy turned to Momma. “Guess you should answer it honey; if for nothing else but to let them know they have the wrong number.” Momma shrugged again and then answered the phone.

A look of concern came over Momma’s face. “Oh my God, Kristi?!”

Honey, what's wrong?!" Daddy glanced over to Momma. "Kristi, sweetheart, where are you? Can we help you? Where's Buddy?" As soon as Momma uttered those words I knew that something was very wrong. I looked to both of my parents and started chewing my lower lip, worried that something had happened to Buddy and his mommy. "Kristi, tell me where you are. James and I will be there to get you. You just have to tell me where you are." Momma was silent while she pulled paper and a pen from her purse. She scribbled down an address and quickly handed it to Daddy. "Kristi, we are on our way, just stay where you are. While you wait for us, you need to

call the police. Please Kristi, promise me you will call them. Just hang tight, we are on our way.”

Something had to be terribly wrong because Daddy made a U-turn and then started speeding back in the opposite direction of where we had been heading. Momma turned to me and began to apologize. I held up my hand to stop her and said, “Momma, if Buddy needs help, I don’t care what day it is. We need to help Buddy.”

As we were driving, Momma and Daddy began discussing where they could drop me off before rushing to Buddy and his mommy. They quickly decided that there just wasn’t enough

time to find someone to watch me.

We arrived at a run-down apartment complex in an area of town that I had never been to before. “What is this place, Momma?”

Momma gently put her hand to my mouth to shush me. “Don’t worry, Baby Girl. We are going to get Kristi and Buddy and then we’ll be leaving. I just need for you to stay quiet and calm until we can leave, ok?” Even though my head was screaming with all the horrible thoughts I had about what could have happened to Buddy, I nodded my head. “That’s my brave girl. We’ll be out of here before you know it.”

When we arrived at the back portion of the complex I saw Buddy's mommy running, screaming down a flight of stairs. Buddy followed closely behind her and even from a distance I could see the tears that ran down his face. Momma quickly instructed me to stay in the car and then she and Daddy jumped out and ran towards Buddy and his mom. As my parents reached them, a man started coming down the stairs. He was waving something in his hand and screaming words that I couldn't understand from where I sat. I moved to the front of the car to get a better look at what was going on.

The man approached my parents and hit Buddy's mom with whatever it

was he held in his hand. Momma grabbed Buddy and pointed to our car. Buddy began running to where I was while Momma quickly got on her phone to call someone. Daddy got between Buddy's mom and the screaming man right as Buddy threw open the car door and climbed inside. I turned my attention to Buddy and threw my arms around him and held on as tight as I could. Buddy didn't say anything but just kept crying and shaking. I held him silently and tried to comfort him.

Two loud blasts happened; one a couple of seconds after the other. Buddy jumped up and started to scream when he saw what had happened. "Mommy!" he screamed over and over.

He tried to open the door to the car and run over to his mom but I grabbed his arm and held him in. "Please, Buddy; Momma and Daddy are there, they'll take care of it, just please stay in the car with me." I looked out the front windshield and I didn't understand what was going on. Buddy's mom and the screaming man were laying on the ground and my momma was crying while wrapped in Daddy's arms. There was a dark liquid quickly pooling around the area where Buddy's mommy was lying down.

Buddy started crying again and I pulled his face up to look at me. "Buddy?! Why is your mommy sleeping

on the sidewalk? Why did we have to come get you if she's tired?" Buddy grabbed me then and climbed into the back seat of the car, pulling me with him. "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." Buddy's voice wavered on his last words and I knew he was trying to protect me from something.

"Okay, Buddy, I won't look." He hugged me to him and we buried our faces into each other's shoulders. Within seconds we heard sirens approaching. Lights flashed as cars started pulling into the parking lot. Buddy and I continued to hold each

other while police officers jumped out of their vehicles and ran to where our parents were. We were still holding each other when the ambulances arrived.

After a while, Momma came over to the car and opened the door to find us huddled in the back seat. She had something dark splattered all over her clothes. "Buddy? Paige? I need you two to stay in the car a little longer. I'm going to start the car so I can turn on the air conditioner for you, but you have to promise me you'll stay right where you are and not touch anything." Buddy and I looked to Momma and nodded our heads. Momma turned the key in the ignition

and then turned the controls until cool air blasted onto our sweat soaked bodies. I didn't realize how hot it was in the car until my skin met with the chilled air. Momma shut the door and walked away.

“Are you coming back to The Center, Buddy, is that why we came to get you?” Buddy shook his head and didn't respond. He began to cry again and I tried to wipe the tears from his eyes but they were falling too fast for me to wipe them all away. After a few moments, Buddy looked at me. His blue eyes shown even brighter when outlined by the reddened skin around his eyes. “I don't know where I'm going, Paige, I don't know anything

anymore.”

He shifted his position so that we were sitting side by side. He looked out the front windshield and quickly turned back to me. “I know I promised to come back, Paige, but I don’t know if I can keep that promise. I don’t want you to be let down if I can’t come back.”

I shook my head profusely, refusing to hear what he was telling me. “No Buddy, when you and your mommy left the Center, you promised you would see me again, and look, you kept that promise. I see you right now. Just keep promising me that we will see each other again, and I know that no matter what, it will happen. Just

promise me Buddy!”

“I promise, Paige. I promise that we will see each other again.”

It felt like hours that Buddy and I sat in silence as we cried and held onto each other. Momma and Daddy would alternate coming back to the car to check on us, but as soon as they saw we were okay, they would turn and go back to whatever it was that was going on. Thoughts flew through my head about what could be happening. I settled on the idea that Buddy’s mom must be sick, really sick, and that’s why all these people were here to help her.

The sun began to set when

Momma and Daddy returned to the car. Their heads were hung low and they held on to each other to keep themselves standing. Buddy and I had fallen asleep, but woke up when we heard Momma and Daddy pulling things from the bags in the trunk. Daddy used a towel to wipe off his skin and Momma did the same. While Daddy changed into a new shirt, Momma came around and opened the door. She handed drinks and sandwiches to Buddy and me and promised that it would only be a little bit longer before we could leave.

A black vehicle pulled up a couple minutes later and a tall lady dressed in a grey skirt suit climbed out

of the car. Momma and Daddy approached the lady and they spoke quietly while frequently glancing back at us. When they finished their conversation, Momma came over to the car with the lady right behind her. Momma opened the door and asked for Buddy and me to step out.

Buddy climbed out of the car never letting go of my hand.

“Buddy, sweetheart.” Momma kneeled down to be his height and then turned to indicate the lady standing behind her. “This is Mrs. Morris. She’s here to take you somewhere where you can get help. I want you to go with her and listen to everything she tells you. I

promise you she is here to help and she won't hurt you, Buddy."

I looked to Momma and my words came out before I could stop them. "But Momma, that's a stranger. We're not supposed to go anywhere with strangers. I don't understand why we can't take him with us. Where is Buddy's mommy?" Momma's face fell and she barely shook her head while she pulled me to her. "Sweetheart, Buddy is going to need to go with Mrs. Morris and I can't have you arguing. She's not a stranger and I promise you, he will be fine."

I began to open my mouth to continue my argument, but Buddy

reached over and put his hand on my shoulder. I turned to look into his tear streaked face and kept shaking my head in silent protest to his leaving. Buddy gave me a slight smile. "It'll be fine, Paige. Just remember my promise. We will see each other again." Mrs. Morris gave me a sympathetic look and then placed her hand on Buddy's back to lead him to her car.

When they were almost to the car, I pulled from Momma's grasp and ran towards Buddy. I reached behind my neck and unclasped the necklace my mother had given me that morning. "Here Buddy, take this. It'll remind you of me and the promise." He began to refuse but I shushed him and forced

the necklace into his hand. "Just take it." He nodded in reluctant agreement and I threw my arms around him. "I love you, Buddy," I whispered. Buddy's body shook with the force of his tears and he looked down at me. "I love you too, Paige."

Momma walked over to me and took me by the hand to lead me back to our car. Before climbing in I looked back towards Buddy's direction. Mrs. Morris had already begun pulling away and Buddy turned to look at me from the rear window. He pressed his hand to the window and watched me as they drove off. My heart shattered at that moment as I watched the only boy I would ever love leaving me. I climbed

*in Momma's car and hugged my knees
to my chest.*

Chapter Sixteen

*Beep...beep...beep...beep...
beep...beep...beep...beep...*

The sound of my alarm clock wrenched me from a deep sleep. Slumber continued to pull me back down and battled against the annoying beeping of the clock. Each trip between slumber and wakefulness buoyed me farther to the waking side. I felt like a slow motion ping pong ball bouncing back and forth between two opposing players. Out of habit, my arm shot out from me with every intention to smash the offensive timekeeper into pieces. Something tugged on my arm and my hand couldn't

locate the clock *or* the side table. I pulled my arm back to my side and felt tubes and wires with my other hand. Why are there tubes in my bed? It's a struggle to open my eyes, and when I finally coax them into thin slits, my vision is blurry and I can barely see dark shapes in the dimly lit room.

Buddy. I dreamt of Buddy.
Why...?

Beep...beep...beep...

The alarm. I need to find that fucking clock and throw it out a window. With my free hand, I began ripping at the tubes and wires, when a large, strong hand clamped down on my

wrist.

What the hell?!

Where am I? My body was slow and my brain was foggy. I tried to remember what I had done the night before. I remember being at Tomb and drinking while spying on Daemon. Did somebody drug me? No, that couldn't have happened. I never left my drink unattended. I must have a nasty hangover and that is why my body aches so badly. But whose hand is that?

“Damsel?” A low timbre voice whispered to me. “Paige, are you awake?”

Daemon. That's right. He was supposed to come over after work. This makes sense now. My confused panic subsides and I start falling back to sleep.

Beep...beep...beep...

The clock was irritating me to no end when I asked, "Could you turn the alarm clock off? It should be on the side table." My voice was horribly gritty and my throat felt like a desert. Small cracks formed across my lips as I spoke and the level of dehydration in my body was surprising. I must have drank more than I realized. A rhythmic pounding assaulted my head and my wrists and ankles were burning and sore. Wrists and ankles?

“She’s awake.” That low voice again, but louder. The sound of multiple footsteps crossed my room. Why are there people here? Why do my wrists and ankles hurt?

My eyes peek through my lashes and I see the forms of several people looking over me. Who are these people? Several voices speak at the same time and I fight to get up from my bed. Two large hands firmly grasp my shoulders and I am gently pushed and held down. I know instantly that it’s Daemon. Despite the pain coursing through my body, I still react with desire at his touch. The combination of sensations was confusing. My eyes blink repeatedly as I cleared my vision

to see why he was holding me.

“Damsel, calm down. You need to stop moving and talk to me before you can get up. Can you do that, please?” The comforting lilt to his low, seductive voice soothed me into submission.

Dreamily, I whispered, “Okay, just keep talking like that and I’ll do anything you say.”

Daemon chuckled softly and before he could respond, I felt other sets of hands on me.

“Ms. Stone, do you know where you are?”

The female voice that spoke to me

helped clear away my confusion and I was once again aware of the fact that Daemon and I were not alone. I rubbed my eyes and when I pulled my hands away a hospital room came into view. Daemon stood with two nurses by my bedside and my eyes locked with his while the nurses bustled around us checking monitors and medical equipment that hung on poles around my bed. Daemon's gaze never left me and the desperation and pain I saw behind those eyes caused an ache in my chest. Why am I here?

My eyes caught Daemon's gaze again and I noticed the dark circles that marked his normally perfect face. He was still wearing the clothes I last

remember seeing him in and a darker shadowing of facial hair has spread down his jaw.

“Ms. Stone?” The older brunette nurse spoke again. She wore purple scrubs and white tennis shoes and her grey streaked hair was pulled back in a purple ribbon. Even at her age, she was attractive and appeared to be kind. “Are you in pain, Ms. Stone?”

My response came out in a whisper, “No, I’m not in pain.”

I looked back to Daemon. “Why am I in a hospital?”

Concern wrinkled Daemon’s

brows and his eyes flicked to the floor before returning to my face. It seemed like an eternity before he finally answered. His voice was softer than I'd heard it before and I became worried.

“Paige, you’ve been hurt. Do you remember what happened at your apartment? Do you remember that I found you and brought you here?”

There was still a heavy haze that wrapped around my head, but Daemon’s words brought back what had happened. Images of Annie’s and David’s broken bodies and my bedroom, covered in candles started surfacing in my head; Chris surfaced in my head. Tears escaped the narrow slits of my eyes as I

remembered. Daemon grabbed my hands quickly and spoke so soothingly, it almost didn't sound like his voice.

“It's okay, Damsel, don't cry. You're safe.”

I shook my head attempting to tell him I wasn't crying for myself. Those tears were for my roommates. I needed to know if David and Annie had survived, but I was frightened to ask and find out that they hadn't. I would be fine. I would survive because I'd be damned to let Chris win, but David and Annie...would they? Daemon continued to speak soothing words, but I couldn't hear what he was saying, my thoughts were back in that apartment, back with

the battered bodies of my friends.

“David? Annie? Are they...?”
My voice was whisper soft. Vocalizing my fear of what might have happened to them was too much to say with any force or confidence. But I had to know.

“They are alive, Paige. They are here at the hospital, they’re safe.”

They’re alive. They made it through this. I wanted to go to them, to see them breathing, to feel their pulses strong in their bodies. But I was so tired, so sore. My head fell farther back into my pillow and I closed my eyes. Just keeping them open was exhausting and I resisted the sleep that was fast

overtaking me. Forcing my eyes open again, I turned my head to Daemon.

His expression was full of so many different emotions and I tried to identify them as they flitted across his face. Pain, desperation, anger; such intense anger. He noticed I was looking at him and his expression changed again into a mixture of consolation and concern. Seeing him sitting there tense made me realize he was holding back something, but I was too tired to pry. Maybe if I could just get another couple of hours of sleep; maybe then I could ask him more.

My eyes began to close again when I felt him lean down to whisper in

my ear. When his lips brushed my ear, a small gasp escaped my lips from his contact and I felt him pull away unsure of whether he had hurt me by his touch. My hands wanted to reach for him but I couldn't will my muscles to respond. I was drugged. Whatever painkillers they had coursing through my system were effective. I knew that if I wanted, I could float off this bed, but I had to stay here, with Daemon.

He leaned into me again but refrained from brushing against me. His voice was so soft, so low, that I could barely hear him. My brain attempted to unjumble his words long enough to understand what he was saying to me.

“Paige, please, you have to tell me. Did Chris do this? The police need to know. *I* need to know. Before falling asleep again, please tell me who did this to you.” His voice was pleading. He knew the darkness was pulling me back away from him and his voice was the only thing keeping me from letting go completely. My mouth opened to respond, but no sound could come out. I nodded my head and then my mind was once again wrapped in nothingness.

~

“Does she know?”

My mom’s voice broke through the fog of my sleep. She spoke quietly and

quickly and all I wanted was for her to hold me.

“No. She can’t know yet...”

She’s talking to someone, a man. I cracked open my swollen eyes and it felt like someone has sealed them shut with Velcro. It hurt to move, but I wanted the comfort of my mom. Their voices were hushed and barely recognizable. I moved my head to turn towards them and a groan escaped me from the pain of movement.

“Paige? Baby girl? Are you awake?”

A small hand slowly began

smoothing down my hair. My eyes cracked open again and her concerned face stared back at me. The lights in the room haloed around her, illuminating her light hair. My lips attempted to turn into a smile, but my face was assaulted with pain from the effort. Momma didn't speak again as I tried to wake up, but her hand continued to pat my hand to console me. My mother's eyes welled with tears as she took in my appearance. My body was beaten and marred.

I lifted my hands to examine the markings I could feel on my wrists. Bandages blocked my view and I pulled at one to free it enough to reveal the skin below. Dark purple rings wrapped around my slender wrist and I could see

where the bindings had ripped into the skin. I'm unaffected by their appearance, completely numb to the physical reminder of the attack. I remembered my refusal to let Chris win, to feel fear, to only feel anger. He may have controlled my body, but I controlled my mind. I won what I considered to be the biggest battle of all.

Momma gently recovered my wrist and turned my face back to her gaze. "Don't worry, Baby Girl, your body will heal. You will heal. You've always been so strong."

Her voice waivered as she spoke and I could tell she was struggling to

believe her own words.

I remembered my dream and tears escaped my eyes. That was the day that Buddy's mom died, the day I lost him. I never dreamed about *that* day; never. "Momma...I dreamed about Buddy....about the day his mom died. Oh, Momma why did I dream about that day?" My sobs came faster but I reigned them in. I would not cry.

"Oh, Baby Girl." My mother took me into a hug to comfort me.

In my peripheral vision, I noticed movement within the shadowed area of the room behind my mother. Thinking it was Daddy, I looked over to the corner

of the room where I had seen the movement. Momma turned to give me a better look and Daemon stepped out of the shadows. He looked terrible and in desperate need of a shower and sleep. His movements were slow and calculated as he moved to stand next to Momma. Her expression was troubled and he just stared at me. I wanted to know what he was thinking, why he appeared to be distant.

The room was quiet as I alternated looking between their faces. They seemed familiar with one another and I wondered how long they had been talking in my room. Momma's face looked slightly troubled and she fidgeted her hands.

“Momma? Have you met Daemon? He’s my...” I stopped. What do I call Daemon? I know we had agreed to be with only each other, but any word other than ‘friend’ felt foreign. My voice would not cooperate as I attempted to explain our relationship. Eventually, I gave up and changed what I had intended to say.

“...This is Daemon.”

Daemon flinched when he realized what I’d done. It was a cheap maneuver on my part, but so much easier than defining what this was between us.

Momma’s eyes flitted to Daemon

and back to me. “I know, Paige. We’ve met several times since I arrived here. Your daddy is downstairs getting some food, but he’ll be back up here shortly. How are you feeling, Baby Girl? Can I get you anything?”

At some point, moisture had ceased to exist in my mouth. The last thing I wanted to do was give my mom a chore, but I was in desperate need of water.

“I’m thirsty.”

Momma nodded her head once and then grabbed the pitcher beside my bed and walked out in search of water. Daemon remained standing silently

beside me. I wouldn't look him in the eye, still too embarrassed at my cowardice in defining our relationship. His stare was palpable. All I wanted was to look up into those crystal blue eyes, but my stubbornness and embarrassment kept my eyes trained to my hands.

“How are you feeling, Paige?” He spoke softly, but there was an underlying note of anger to his tone. It was obvious he was struggling to maintain his composure, to not reveal what it was he was thinking. I couldn't keep my eyes from his any longer and I looked to him in question when I recognized his mixed emotions.

“I’m fine.”

His shoulders slumped forward and he huffed out an exasperated breath. His eyes glanced to the floor before he trained his gaze back to my face. “You’re fine...” A humorless laugh escaped him. “Your roommates and you were assaulted, you were almost...” He reconsidered his words. “You were hurt. And you tell me that you’re fine.”

Put that way, my response seemed a little ridiculous. But I could tell he was angry about something, that he was holding something back. I didn’t manage anger well and I avoided it as often as possible. I felt uncomfortable and I needed to change the subject.

“Where are David and Annie? Are they awake, can I see them?”

Defeatedly, Daemon sighed. “At some point you and I are going to talk, Paige.”

I nodded. There was nothing I could say to that.

“David and Annie are here. Annie is awake. She’s not well. Physically, she will recover, but mentally...” His face looked pained. “...Her family told me that she may need psychological care after she leaves the hospital. She hasn’t told anyone exactly what Chris did, but the physical evidence is enough for the doctors to make an educated guess.”

My heart broke. Chris was demented. Within the short amount of time he had me, he had managed to inflict a significant amount of pain. Although I fought against it, I knew that his twisted perversions were serious enough to have terrified Annie. Tears welled in my eyes when I imagined what Chris would have done if he had more time with me. He had at least a couple of hours with her.

“And David?”

Daemon took my hand into his. His thumb absently brushed across my knuckles and he visibly struggled with what he had to say. “He had swelling on the brain. He hasn’t regained

consciousness yet.”

The bottom dropped out from underneath me. Shock took over my body and mind and I froze. David wasn't awake. He could still die.

My body shook with uncontrollable sobs and Daemon leaned down to take me in his arms. He didn't speak, didn't try to console me. He just held me while the pain rushed out of me. I cried for David and I cried for Annie. I cried for Buddy. But I didn't cry for me. Tears weren't needed for me. Chris hadn't taken me; not my body and not my spirit.

Momma reentered the room. She

gasped when she saw me crying and she hurried to the bedside. Daemon removed me from his arms and handed me over to my mother's embrace. I looked up through my waterlogged eyes as he turned and walked out of my room. He never looked back as he passed through the doorway and my heart shattered a little bit more.

Chapter Seventeen

Three days had passed as I recovered in the hospital. I was restless and irritable with all the attention from the staff. Checking vitals is an important task, but does it have to be at three in the morning? Sleep eluded me due to the three hour check schedule. I didn't understand the necessity of the nightly interruptions when I was already hooked to a machine that checked my heart rate and blood pressure automatically.

My parents left to go home yesterday. All my questions about who had been watching the Center were avoided. They wouldn't discuss

anything with me that they thought might upset me more than I already was. I attempted to reassure them that I was intact, that I hadn't been broken. They politely lied and told me they believed me, but I knew there was no way that they could. Their life had been dedicated to women that had been hurt. They knew the symptoms and they knew what was needed to recover. But I wasn't like them. I saw that heartache growing up. I saw the bruises and the cuts, the busted lips and the broken bones. I heard the regrets and the anger and the betrayal. My walls were built when I was young, and I was not going to let someone break me.

They asked me to go to a

counselor when I got out. They also asked me not to go back home; at least, not until Chris had been arrested. I was polite in my refusal of both. I knew they were worried, but I refused to live in fear. Chris was lucky to get in the first time, but he wouldn't do it again.

My thoughts of my parents were interrupted when a person entered the room. I had my eyes closed as I laid back on the bed and I was too lazy to open them for my visitor. It would only be Daemon or the nurses. Since goose bumps weren't running up my arm when the visitor approached, I assumed it must be a nurse.

I waited to be poked or prodded,

but several minutes went by without a touch or a sound. I opened my eyes to identify my visitor and my breath caught when I saw Alex's pain-filled silver eyes.

His body was ridged and he stood a few feet from my bedside. Every toned muscle in his body was held tight and his jaw was clenched. I watched as his eyes took in every visible injury on my body. Horror flashed across his face when he saw my wrists. Slowly, he stepped closer and he took my hand into his. His grip was soft and unsure, but he needed the contact to know that I was okay.

His eyes were stormy and bleak.

Too many emotions flitted across his face for me to keep up and I waited for him to speak. His eyes met mine and a pain erupted in my chest. Until now, I hadn't realized how much I missed him.

“What happened?” His voice came out in a whisper and I was confused by his question.

“What do you mean?”

It was obvious he was struggling to control his emotions and his hold over himself was weakening. “Why are you here, Paige? What happened?”

He didn't know. How was that possible? Someone must have told him

in order for him to have found me. But who? It occurred to me that all the people who would know how to get in touch with Alex were here.

“Alex, how did you know...?”

I was interrupted when goose bumps shot up my arm and I knew that Daemon had entered the room. My eyes opened wider as I looked from Alex to him. Alex followed the direction of my vision and turned immediately when he caught sight of Daemon.

“You fucking bastard! What the fuck have you done to her?!” Alex charged at Daemon and I tried to jump up to stop him. I was attached to the bed

by all the cords and gadgets and all I could do was yell to stop him.

“Alex! No! It wasn’t Daemon!”

The two massive men collided into one another. Alex attempted to overpower Daemon while Daemon only reacted to restrain Alex from touching him.

“Calm down, Alex, or you are going to get us both kicked out of here.” Daemon’s voice was controlled but menacing.

“I hope I do you sick son of a bitch! At least it will get you the fuck away from her!” Alex pushed off of

Daemon and they stood nose to nose glaring at each other.

I untangled myself from the net of tubes and wires stretched across me and sat up as much as I could. “Alex! Stop! Chris did this. It wasn’t Daemon.”

Alex’s head snapped to me and then back to Daemon. The tension between the two of them was palpable and highly charged. Whereas Alex’s intentions were written clearly in his body language and expression, Daemon just held a defensive stance. His face was emotionless and unreadable.

Alex turned to me again. “Explain, Paige.”

I sighed and reached out for his hand. He looked back to Daemon quickly but then accepted my hand and moved closer to my side.

“Chris broke into the apartment. He attacked all of us. David and Annie were hurt the worst. They’re here as well.” I paused. “Alex, how did you know where to find me?”

He didn’t answer immediately. His gaze kept returning to Daemon and his discomfort with Daemon’s presence was obvious. I considered asking Daemon to leave, but decided against it.

Alex finally settled his gaze on me. “I went to your apartment to

apologize for the way...” He hesitated and glanced over at Daemon before returning to me. “...for the way I had left things with you. The door was smashed and the place was a mess. There was blood...” His face twisted in worry and pain, but he shook off as he continued. “...I called your work and they told me that you hadn’t called in for any assignments. I went around looking for you and finally came here. I gave them your name and they told me where I could find you.”

Sadly, I could only focus on two issues that Alex inadvertently revealed in his story; my apartment was still open and the privacy policies of this hospital sucked. I couldn’t allow my apartment

to remain open and I started to push myself up even farther to get out of bed. I needed to get home and get the front door fixed so that the apartment could be secured.

Daemon appeared to have focused on an entirely different issue with what Alex said. “Alex, I understand you are probably in shock and that you are angry to see Paige this way, but I have to ask; why did you immediately assume I did this to her?” Daemon’s voice was clear and controlled as he spoke to Alex. It was obvious that he was attempting to reign in his anger at having been earlier attacked.

Alex turned to Daemon and his

face couldn't contain the contempt he was feeling. Daemon clearly had a better poker face and I made a decision that if I ever had a chance to go to Vegas, Daemon would be the person to take with me.

Alex moved closer to Daemon and pointed a finger dangerously close to Daemon's face. The muscles in Daemon's body tensed and that tick developed in his jaw that gave away the fact that he was grinding his teeth. "Because I overheard what she told David about you. You're apparently a control freak when it comes to women and although Paige is willing to go along with that, I'm not. The truth is you are nothing more than a sick fuck and I will

kill you before I allow you to hurt Paige; emotionally, physically or otherwise. You don't know her, you don't know what she's been through and the last thing she needs is for some power hungry prick to push her around and tell her what to do."

This situation had rapidly gone from bad to worse. Daemon held the blank expression on his face as he processed what Alex had just said. I couldn't tell if he was angry with Alex's threat, or if he was angry at me for having told David about him. The tension in the air was suffocating and I needed to get out of here. I don't handle awkward silences well either, so escape was my only option at this point.

Daemon moved to my bedside as I struggled to remove myself from the complicated maze of cords apparently used by hospital staff to keep me pinned down to the bed. “What are you doing, Paige?”

“I’m getting up and leaving. I need to go deal with the apartment. The front door needs to be fixed and I’m the only one left standing who can take care of it.”

Daemon placed his hands on me to attempt to keep me in bed and Alex shot him a murderous look. Daemon ignored Alex and continued to hold my gaze. “You’re not going back to that apartment,

Paige. You can't. Chris is still out there and until he is found, I'm not allowing you to go back there alone. I want you to stay with me until he is found and put in jail." He spoke with authority which only served to irritate Alex more.

"Like I said man, you will not tell Paige what to do." Alex stepped up closer behind Daemon and I cringed when I thought a fight was unavoidable.

Daemon turned on his heel and pointed a finger at Alex. He spoke slowly and articulately as he said, "I appreciate your protectiveness of my girl..." Alex flinched at those words but he maintained the stare down with Daemon. "...and I'm not telling her what

to do for any other purpose but to keep her safe. If you could look past your dick for one fucking second, you would see that and shut your mouth.”

This is bad.

“Daemon, I’m fine. You don’t need to go all caveman on my ass just because of Chris. The likelihood of him breaking into the apartment again is slim to none and I’m not hiding in fear from the sick bastard. If he shows up again...”

“Paige! Will you stop being obstinate for one second of your fucking life!” Daemon’s voiced boomed through the hospital room.

Oh crap. I've pissed him off now.

Alex's body tensed again when Daemon raised his voice. These two were going to brawl in my room if I didn't diffuse the situation and fast.

I opened my mouth to interject when Daemon cut me off. "No, don't even try to argue with me, Paige. There's a difference between being independent and being stupid and it's obvious that you have not been able to distinguish between the two."

My jaw dropped at his words. How dare he call me stupid?! My anger was beginning to boil inside me and there was no way in hell I was going to

allow him to speak to me that way.

Daemon continued. “I have been patient with you. I have sat back and kept my opinions to myself this entire time that this Chris situation has been progressing. I’ve known this entire time that you were being careless and ignorant when it came to the damage a man like that could inflict on you. You have no idea how pissed off I am at myself for having not locked you up when I originally wanted to. That man could have killed you, Paige. You came this fucking close to being raped and tortured. Had I NOT shown up that night, you wouldn’t be here to be as stubborn and aggravating as you currently are!”

“He’s right.” A female voice spoke and all three of our heads snapped in her direction. A short blond woman stood in the doorway to my hospital room. Her hair was cut into a straight bob and she wore a crisp black pant suit. She carried a file in her hand and some type of I.D. was clipped to the lapel of her jacket. “Hello, Ms. Stone. I’m not sure if you remember me, but I’m Detective Susan Troy. I spoke with you when you woke up after arriving here.”

I had no idea who this woman was and I briefly wondered how many times I had regained consciousness before I could remember having done so. Detective Troy eyed Alex and Daemon

before continuing into the room to stand between them. I was instantly thankful for her intuition that a buffer was necessary between the two men.

“Paige, after you advised who had attacked you and your friends, we determined Chris’ full identity. We obtained a search warrant for his apartment, however we have not been able to locate Mr. Baxter. We found items of...concern...among his belongings and I would prefer that you stay with family or friends until he is apprehended.”

Great. Just great. I didn’t need to look at Daemon to know that the arrogant smirk was pasted to his face.

“What items of concern did you find, Detective?” Although I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the types of items that had been found, I was overly curious to know specifically what Chris had been planning. Had he followed me? Had he done this to other people? Surely, two embarrassing moments hadn’t caused someone to snap to that extent. His words and actions from the other night hinted towards a deeper psychological issue and it was imperative that I understood the level of his depravity.

Detective Troy was a true professional. She held herself in an authoritative, yet unintimidating manner and the blank expression on her face

closely competed with the one Daemon had displayed earlier. Hmmm, maybe I should take *her* to Vegas.

“We found journals and photos that Mr. Baxter has been keeping over time. You and your friends were not Mr. Baxter’s only victims. He is a sexual deviant as far as we can tell and you are extremely fortunate that Mr. Pierce was able to show up when he did. Unfortunately, Annie was not as fortunate and we have been requested to refrain from asking her questions by her psychologists. Review of Mr. Baxter’s journals, however, has given us a better idea of what may have been done to her.”

“Fuck!” Alex’s face twisted in rage and he pulled at his hair from the frustration.

Detective Troy didn’t react to Alex’s outburst, except to turn her head slightly in his direction and state, “Mr. Simmons, I’m going to need for you to contain your composure while I speak with Ms. Stone. If you continue exhibiting excitable behavior, I will have you escorted out of here.”

Alex stilled. I was most impressed with Detective Troy’s authoritative demeanor and I regretted that I didn’t have paper and pen easily accessible at the moment so that I could take notes. Unfortunately, I had bigger

issues to worry about at the moment; like the fact that I was being cornered into staying with Daemon.

Keeping his temper under control, Alex turned to Detective Troy. “How do you know my name?”

“It’s my job to know the name of every person who contacts Ms. Stone until Mr. Baxter is caught.” Detective Troy eyed Alex, daring him to retort. I was really starting to like her. If the circumstances were any different, I believe Detective Troy and I could have been good friends. She was calm, collected, and didn’t put up with any person’s drama. Those were admirable attributes.

Alex stepped away from the bedside and began to quietly pace the back of the room. Detective Troy and Daemon stared down at me awaiting my response as to what I planned to do. I wrestled with indecision and it irritated me to no end that Daemon was correct in what he had said. It would be stupid of me to return to my apartment while Chris was running around free. I contemplated whether I could go to the Center, but quickly dismissed the idea when I realized it could possibly be dangerous for the people that stayed there. My only option was to stay with Daemon. The idea of allowing him to win this argument was grating on my nerves.

“Fine, I’ll stay with Daemon until

Chris is caught.” Alex ceased his pacing at my words. His gaze remained trained to the ground and his jaw continued to work over itself as he considered his next words.

“Paige, I’ll see you around. I’m going to go check on Annie and David and go.” Alex didn’t look at anyone as he strode out of the room. I wanted to call after him, but I couldn’t talk to him with the audience currently standing in my room.

I returned my attention to Daemon. “Like I said, I’ll agree to stay at your place. But I have conditions that I will speak to you about in private.”

Detective Troy must have taken the hint because she nodded once and said, “Good. Now that we have that issue resolved, I’m going to return to searching for Mr. Baxter. If you see him, or he contacts you in any way, you are to contact me immediately.” She reached into her folder to pull out a card to hand to me. “There are three numbers on that card where I can be reached. If none of those work and you are in immediate need of help, I encourage you to call the emergency line. This is a serious situation, Ms. Stone, and I hope that you will conduct yourself appropriately in light of the circumstances.”

I nodded my head in understanding before Detective Troy turned to leave.

“Have a good day, Mr. Pierce and Ms. Stone. I’ll be in contact if I discover any additional information regarding Mr. Baxter. I must warn you, sometimes finding people can take time. It will be best for you to secure Ms. Stone’s apartment and gather as much of her things as you can to take with you.”

She exited the room without waiting for a response.

“Conditions?”

Daemon gazed down at me with amusement in his eyes. My shock at his sudden change in demeanor was evident and he chuckled. Once again, the bastard chuckled. His inability to hide

his enjoyment of having won that battle was annoying. I wasn't going to make this easy on him. My determination to remain independent of him was fierce, but I had to succumb to the fact that he succeeded in getting his way. And damn if he didn't have that arrogant smirk back on his face. I was torn between slapping away the expression and grabbing his face to crash my lips against his. The odd lighting in the room caressed his face in such a way that every smooth edge of his cheekbones and strong jaw was accentuated and defined. My desire to reach out and run my palms against the stubble on his skin was almost irrepressible.

“Yes. Conditions.” My sigh was

heavy and I stated my demands. “I won’t stay in your room, number one. I’ll stay there as a guest, but we’re not playing house or anything like that. I’ll also be paying you rent for the time period that I remain there. I don’t take handouts, so I want to contribute to any added expenses.” Daemon opened his mouth to argue, but I cut him off. “Also, I’m not agreeing to stay there because *you* told me I have to. You’d better get the idea out of your head that you have any say in my decisions.” I glared up at him at that last part. There was no way I would allow him to think that he had any authority over my life.

Daemon remained quiet and still for a few moments. His eyes never left

mine and his expression openly challenged what I had just stated. His lips began to curl at one side and a dimple popped out on his cheek. The crystal blue orbs that stared back at me twinkled with his mischief and he leaned down closely to whisper in my ear. His hands came up to brush down the traitorous bumps that gave away his effect on me. My heart pounded and the increased tempo of the beeping machine behind me caused my cheeks to redden. His eyes flashed to mine as his body shook from his silent laugh. He knew exactly what he was doing to me and it irritated me greatly that I couldn't hide it better.

His voice took on a seductive and

low timbered quality as he whispered, “Think what you want, Damsel. The end result is that I’ll have you at my place and I get to watch over you. I’ve achieved what I wanted. But don’t think that I couldn’t have convinced you otherwise...” His lips were dangerously close to mine. My body trembled at his proximity. The feeling was staggering considering I was still sitting in a hospital room. No matter how I tried, I couldn’t tear my eyes away from his sculpted mouth. Memories of the things those lips had done to me was heating my body and tightening my muscles. When his scent hit me, I was almost completely undone. I leaned forward to kiss him, but when my lips had only

slightly brushed his, he pulled back just out of my reach.

His eyebrow smugly cocked over one eye and a sly smile played over his face. “You can stay in one of the guest rooms and I accept your challenge at not *playing house*. I think it will be fun to see who can resist who longer. I know how stubborn you are, Paige. But I also know your weaknesses. Can you say the same thing about me?”

My heart felt like it would come through my chest. Astonishment coursed through me at how his words both angered me and excited me at the same time. How can this man have such a hold over me? It wasn't in my nature to

be vulnerable to any person, yet even his words caused my breathing to labor and my body to still. My eyes swept over the impression of his muscular body that was revealed by the thin material of his shirt. My tongue darted out to wet my lips and I couldn't stop myself from reacting at the sight of him. He was masculinity exemplified and his body exuded a carnal power from within. I wanted so badly to reach out and touch him, but couldn't due to this challenge I had inadvertently demanded. How in the hell was I supposed to live with him and control myself enough not to tackle him to a bed? I was a frenzied ball of hormones any time he was around and now I was supposed to be living with

him? My frustration increased and I refused to respond to what he'd implied. I'd forgotten that while I had been busy stubbornly asserting my autonomy, he had been studying me, determining my triggers and dissecting my weaknesses. I had not been a worthy opponent in this control game he was playing. But that was about to change.

“I’ll go have your door fixed to close up your apartment. When you are released, we will go together to get your things. I appreciate that you have heeded *Detective Troy’s* warning.” His smile grew brighter and his eyes crinkled from the movement. I was fuming. Daemon had managed to shift this power struggle to his favor and I had no choice but to go

along with what he was saying. I knew better than to be ignorant of my safety and staying at my apartment was out of the question. The utter suckage of this situation was bitter on my tongue.

“Fine. We’ll discuss rent when we get back to your place. It’s probably best that you also see to your bike while you are at my apartment. The keys should be in my purse if you are able to find it.”

His smirk never left his face. He was enjoying this victory and I rolled my eyes causing him to laugh. My blood boiled some more.

“I’m glad you find this amusing

Daemon. You'll find it a lot less funny when I'm better healed and I can kick your ass for laughing at me." I gave him my best pointed glare.

Daemon smiled a heart stopping smile and my breath caught at his bemused gaze.

His body shook with his silent laugh. "Can't wait"

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I packed what little belongings I had with me into the bag. I was finally being released from the hospital and Daemon stood silently waiting for me to gather my things. After zipping up my

bag, I turned to Daemon and nodded my head towards the door. He took the bag from my arm and placed his hand on the small of my back to lead me out of the room.

“I need to see Annie and David before we leave.” My voice gave away my trepidation at seeing my friends.

Daemon’s expression remained stoic as he led me to Annie’s room. He leaned against the wall beside her door as I took a deep breath and pushed my way in. The room was barely lit when I entered. The ambiance was thick and sorrowful as if Annie herself was projecting her inner turmoil out into this room.

She sat on her bed with her legs bent and held to her chest by her arms. Her gaze barely made its way to mine as I crossed the room to sit next to her. I was saddened by the lifeless look in her emerald green eyes and the rage that had been smoldering within began to spark and grow. Even though I was also a victim to Chris' attack, my fury didn't burn as hot as it did when I remembered what he had done to my friends. I embraced the anger, wrapping it around me like a blanket that would only serve to remind me that I could not sit idle while Chris was still running free.

“Hey Annie.” My voice was whisper soft. Anything louder would have felt forced and foreign in the quiet

solitude of this room. “I was released today and I wanted to stop by and see you before I left.” It felt lame that I could not think of more to say to her, but her condition was so fragile, so unbalanced, that I felt like the wrong word or phrase would be enough to push her over the edge.

Her eyes blinked slowly as she processed what I was saying. Her posture was defensive and her lack of expression left me wondering if she was mentally with me in this room. I placed my hand on hers and wanted to cry when she immediately pulled away. Did she blame me? Had this been my fault? Had I been a catalyst for the level of violence exacted against my friends?

My heart dropped when Annie neglected to respond. I feared my presence at this moment was too much for her, that she wasn't ready to step back into life as it had been. "I love you Annie. I know it's hard to talk now, but I'll keep visiting. I'll be here when you are ready. I won't leave you alone in this." My voice croaked as I forced back my tears. She didn't need to see me cry. She needed my strength more than anything else. Having nothing left to say, I slowly got up and left the room.

The rage that had started to come alive and spark at the sight of Annie grew into a torrid inferno when I walked into David's room. His swollen and

bruised face was barely recognizable. Multiple tubes and cords ran from his body while his eyes remained closed. I was nervous that he had yet to regain consciousness. It was as if the light that animated him had been all but smothered by the acts of a depraved man. As I stood staring at David's still body, and as images of Annie, huddled and lonely, played through my mind, a righteous anger built within me. It was giving me purpose and strength, a calm and controlled resolve to set things back to right. I welcomed this animosity growing within me, it would drive me in my hunt for the man that hurt my friends.

Despite the warnings voiced by Detective Troy; despite the watchful eye

of an overprotective Daemon; despite each and every road block that was being erected before me; I would find Chris and I would deliver him to justice. Hunting Chris while living with Daemon wouldn't be easy. Daemon had me where he wanted me and it would take finesse, it would take time, and it would take a resolute determination to achieve what I had planned. But I would succeed. I had to; there was no other choice.

Daemon silently walked me out of David's room and towards the elevator to leave the hospital. My heart raced anxiously at the thought of what it would be like staying with Daemon. I have never lived with a love interest. I'd

never given up even the smallest part of my freedom to a man; especially not one as strong-willed as him. Although he agreed to the conditions I required as part of my stay in his home, I picked up on an underlying and unspoken intent on his part to not make it easy on me. I worried that we would constantly be bumping heads and stepping on each other's toes. I knew I was walking into a battle that I wasn't sure I could win. Daemon succeeded in our previous battle, but I was determined to be victorious in the next phase of this game. I was aware I was at a disadvantage. He knew more about me than I did about him; but that would soon change.

Daemon and Chris had both played their cards in two very different games, but I would now take control of those decks. Both men would soon learn what I was truly capable of, they would learn that they had underestimated the woman within me. Although their intentions were very different, they had both made their positions known.

This was not the end to the games that had been played against me...it was only just the beginning.

Paige's Story Continues in Book Two

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“Conflict” – Coming 2013

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