



# *Divine Intervention*

*JC Wallace*



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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## DIVINE INTERVENTION

By JC Wallace

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## Photo Description

Photo 1: A man in tight leggings with a muscular body faces away from the camera. His head is down and he's holding his hands in front of him.

Photo 2: A very attractive man looks at the camera. He is young, with smooth, unmarred skin. His eyes are blue. He is in good shape, strong, and he takes care of himself. His body is lean, muscular, and he doesn't have any scars. He is beautiful and he knows it.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I see two guys—both strong willed.*

*MC1: big, dark and brooding. A car accident a year ago has left his body broken and scarred. As an active sportsman, he used to be proud of the way his body would do what he wanted. With a perfectionist nature, he always drove himself to perform harder and better. Now he's a recluse, unwilling to look at himself or be seen by others. He knows he's ugly and useless, so he has no interest in the latest of his sister's attempts to force him into the world. He managed to scare the others off before they even got through his door. He intends for this one to be no different, especially once he sees how perfect the guy would have been for him before the accident. His sister has set him up!*

*MC2: a massage therapist with a special interest in rehabilitation. He's been enlisted to gain access to the fortress and force the man to rehabilitate his body and attitude. Mission accepted. Caring and compassionate, but tough, MC2 has no intention of being chased away. His stubbornness is legendary amongst friends and family. What he isn't prepared for is the powerful attraction he has to try to resist. He can see the amazing man behind the gruff exterior, although sometimes even the gruffness can be so very hot!*

*I'd love angst, heat and a HEA.*

*Sincerely,*

*Mel*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** hurt/comfort, lawyer, medical personnel, PTSD, sportsman, accident, recluse

**Word Count:** 41,370

# **DIVINE INTERVENTION**

**By JC Wallace**



## Chapter 1

*Five hours.*

Five hours of pain, icy sweat, gut-churning nausea, and muscle spasms.

Five hours on a hard, unforgiving tile floor with no respite, my remaining pride and dignity slowly being sucked away.

A waking nightmare that never ended.

Struggling across the floor, I fought to stay out of my head, out of the darkness. But that was hard when the suffocating pain from my back radiated out in a fiery spiderweb over my nerves. Relentless and all-consuming, it was hard to focus on where I was. Too easy to fade into my head than remain in the present.

While I should have been grateful for the reprieve, there was another nightmare waiting for me in the darkness. The images, and sights, and smells filled my head: blinding headlights, the deafening crunch of metal, shrill screams, shattering bones, tearing ligaments, coppery blood. My body seized with terror, shaking, fading. Once again in my mangled Maserati... dying, slowly. And then those amber eyes in the darkness. Hands, strong and sure. A low, reassuring, husky voice.

Safe in those eyes, I hadn't been alone... because of them, at that moment on the floor, I no longer felt as lonely.

"Fuck," I whispered, opening my eyes, shaking my head to clear the fog.

Now wasn't the time to get lost. Three more feet, and I'd have my hands on my cell phone. It was my own fucking fault for chucking it across the kitchen after hanging up on my sister, Wendy. Ended the argument, but now I was sorry I had thrown my phone. I groaned, but not from the pain. If Wendy found me there, helpless, locked in spasms on the floor, that would be a nightmare of a different kind. God, why couldn't my sister leave me alone like everyone else in my life had? What else could they do when a once vibrant, successful, and beautiful man had been mangled and shredded during one split second on a dirt road?

*Worthless, ugly, pathetic, useless...*

*Disgusting.*

Yeah, I looked like a monster, even if others didn't agree with me. They told me I looked good or it wasn't as bad as I thought. Those were the lies told to ugly people, those who weren't pleasant to look at. And I could see the disgust in their eyes. I'd rather lock myself away from the world, away from their critical, uncaring stares, their averted glazes, their pity, their need to treat me as an invalid. I hadn't needed them and told them as much. And they'd listened. Every single one of them but my sister... until now.

Who told the last person who gave a shit about them to fuck off?

But I'd done just that earlier while waiting for my toast to pop. My anger-filled rant might have been what set off the familiar seizure-like spasms in my back. The muscles had knotted, stabbing me with pain until I'd wanted to scream. Each effort to move had ended in a brief, dark salvation from the pain only to start again when my vision cleared, worse off than I had been.

While I just wanted the world to leave me alone, the realization that I was in serious trouble had become undeniable. *Fucking useless body*. No one would come to check on me, no one would wonder if I was all right, if I was in pain, or if I was even alive. And why would they? No friends, no other family except my sister who hadn't written me off, and I'd finally alienated her as well. I had sealed that deal with my bitter and vile anger. I loved my older sister, had no desire to hurt her, but her constant nagging, begging me to get help along with her expressions of pity and disappointment were as sharp as a knife cutting through my skin.

Another spasm hit my lower back and brought tears to my eyes. The last physical therapist Wendy hired for me had quit. Maybe with a little help from me. Maybe I should have allowed her to help me.

*"Only you can help yourself, sonny boy."*

I squeezed my eyes tight as another wave of nausea forced a smelly pool of bitter bile to heave from my stomach. I licked my parched lips, rolling my forehead on the cool tile. Death at that moment would have been too much of a reprieve. But I was strong, had always taken care of myself, had always been self-sufficient, needing no one, even as a child. Proud, defiant and able. I wasn't going to fail, wasn't going to prove them right.

Gritting my teeth, I lifted my head, my blurred vision on the black phone resting on a sea of light-colored wood. I grunted and rolled onto my back. I bent my knee and dug my heel down, pushing my body forward. Stars shot through my vision, the pain so strong I felt as if my mind and body were

separating. Another push and I'd moved farther in those few minutes than the last five hours. I fought the darkness, willing myself, screaming at myself in my mind...

*Come on you fucking useless piece of shit! Dig down, pull it from your balls. Get that fucking phone, you pansy ass loser! You're nothing but a waste of skin, of air. You're nothing!*

Sweat streamed down my face, teeth threatening to crack under the pressure of my locked jaw, tears leaking from my eyes, muscles screaming, and vision fading. All the while I fought off that fucking annoying childlike voice that wished amber eyes would come and save me, again.

\*\*\*\*\*

"I really don't give a fuck what you say anymore, Paul! I've had it! I've tried to be patient. Tried to tread lightly because of all you've been through, but you've pushed away everyone I've found to help you. You didn't even give them a chance and look what happened. You were on that floor for over five hours!"

My sister slammed her fist against her palm. Her normally white complexion flushed red, and her narrowed ocean blue eyes brightened with anger. The volume of her voice didn't match her petite body. She pushed her long blonde bangs from her eyes and pointed her finger at me from the other side of the ER cubicle. She probably would have punched me had she been closer. "Do you know what it was like finding you like that, half out of your mind in pain and fucking smelling like puke all because you're too fucking stubborn to let someone help you!"

Of course I was stubborn. I was also a strong, self-sufficient man. People were only out for themselves, as my father had taught me from an early age. "*Don't count on anyone, sonny boy, because they won't be there when you need them most. Look out for number one.*" Over time, that truth had become second nature to me.

If I needed something done, I did it myself. If I had a problem, an issue, a dilemma to solve, I didn't run to others like some needy, incompetent person. People like that disgusted my father and the last thing I wanted was to lose the respect of the man who'd raised me. The last year, the humiliation and shame had cemented the truth that my so-called friends couldn't be relied upon—not that I'd needed them. So, I did everything for myself, because I was stronger than they were, more capable and...

I opened my mouth to speak, but Wendy raised her hand. “Don’t even say it. If you tell me you can take care of yourself one more time, that you don’t need help, then I’m out of here.”

My eyes widened slightly. While, in the past, she had threatened to tie me down until I got my head out of my ass, had even threatened to have me declared mentally incompetent—which she could *try* to do since she was a lawyer like myself and worked for our father’s law firm as I did. But through everything, not once since the accident, had she threatened to give up on me. Even if I had tried to convince myself earlier that she truly had, I hadn’t really believed it.

Wendy was my older sister by only two years. When I was eight, our parents split. Having been given the choice, Wendy had chosen to live with our mother. Convinced I’d done something to cause my mother’s abandonment, I hadn’t expected Wendy to leave as well, but she had. My father had informed me that I’d be staying with him. No choice. That was my first lesson that, sooner or later, everyone left.

When I didn’t answer, Wendy heaved a sigh and turned away. “I’m not sure what to do, Paul.”

I tried to reach for the nurse’s call button to break out, but it was out of reach. I was certain that hadn’t been by accident. Just being in the hospital was enough to cause me to break out in hives. Four weeks I’d been stuck in that cinder-block-wall prison called a hospital. Dozens of torturous surgeries had reconstructed the left side of my face and repaired my shattered pelvis and the disks in my back. Just that antiseptic smell, which barely masked the stink of illness, was nauseating. Wendy had experienced firsthand many of my premature “discharges” from the hospital. One more might send her fleeing from me for good.

But if I didn’t get out soon, I’d freak out.

“You know,” Wendy said quietly, continuing to stare at the scuffed floor, “I get it. You’re strong, proud and confident, a brilliant lawyer...”

“*Was* a brilliant lawyer,” I mumbled.

“You *are* a brilliant lawyer. You’re self-sufficient, did it all on your own and took pride in that, no thanks to Dad drilling that shit into us constantly. I got it as well. But you and your damned competitive nature, you had to be the best at it, like everything you’ve ever done. But, Paul...” She peered at me

from under those bangs, swept over her suspiciously shiny wet eye. Was she... crying? “No one is meant to do it alone every minute of their life. Letting someone help you won’t make you less of a man. It takes a stronger man to accept help than to go it alone.”

I couldn’t stop the snort that came from me. “And who told you that one?”

While Wendy had been on the periphery of our father’s lessons, I had been in the full immersion program on self-sufficiency, eradicating weakness, and winning at everything. There had been constant reminders from my father that needy and whiny people didn’t win, didn’t succeed, weren’t loved. Which was funny when I thought about it, because my father had never showed me an ounce of parental love, even when I became the very man my father had raised me to be.

And, being the real man that I was, when Wendy sniffled and tears filled her eyes, I had to fight my instinct to flee. God, even the sound of sobbing made my skin crawl. Luckily, the nurse walked in and took one look at my sister and wrapped a comforting arm around her shoulder.

“It’s okay, sweetie,” the nurse cooed.

Fuck, I needed to get home. The pain had receded to a manageable four on the pain scale, my muscles had unknotted, and my throbbing headache had dulled. I wondered if they’d notice if I snuck out. Although, it was hard to sneak out when you had to shamle along with a limp. Also, I’d have to get a cab. Even if I had a car there, I didn’t drive anymore. The one time I’d tried after my accident had been a nightmare. Even riding in a car had been a white-knuckle roller-coaster ride of flashbacks and panic. Luckily, that had settled down to an uneasy anxiety while I was a passenger—always in the backseat on the right.

The nurse handed Wendy a tissue. She hiccupped and blew her nose.

“Are you okay, dear? I’m sure your brother gave you an awful fright.”

*Awful fright?* I had been the one stuck on the floor for most of the day.

Barely managing to stop myself from rolling my eyes, I did what I suspected a brother should do at a moment like this. I ate crow and apologized—for what, I wasn’t sure.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to give you a *fright*.”

I ignored the death glare from Wendy, who hadn’t bought my apology, and asked the nurse when I could go home.

The smile she drew up was suspiciously smug. “Well, Mr. Breaux, the doctor on call has reviewed your chart. He found your level of care since your accident immensely lacking. The episode today is proof that you’re in need of a specialized level of care that you haven’t been able to attain at home.”

“Excuse me?”

That was when Wendy’s expression of death morphed into one of a big fat *take that*. Oh, she’d been busy while I had been recovering on the hard-as-cement gurney.

“I hope you aren’t suggesting that you can keep me here against my will. I’m a lawyer as well, and unless I’m not competent or a danger to others, I can walk out of here at any time.” I crossed my arms and scowled.

“Agree to see someone at home, and actually *let* them help you, and you can leave now,” Wendy told me. “Don’t and Dr. Grunell will order a few lengthy and extensive tests.”

I clenched my jaw, until I feared I’d break a tooth. Whatever Wendy had gotten the doctor to agree to, she wouldn’t win, but she could make my life a living hell for the next twelve to twenty-four hours. There really couldn’t be that many qualified professionals left in the area to give me the therapy I needed. Whoever she found would most likely be easy to get rid of. She thought she had me, but she hadn’t seen anything yet.

I always won.

“Fine,” I muttered.

Wendy stepped closer to the gurney, eyebrows rising, a hand to her ear. “I’m sorry. I didn’t hear you.” God, she could be such a snot sometimes.

“Fine. I’ll work with whoever you manage to find,” I gritted out.

I was already planning how I would frighten the next one off.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 2

I rose tentatively from my bed and then shambled across the bedroom into the bathroom, my back threatening to seize again but obeying for the moment. The spasms came from nerve damage in my back, exacerbated by stress, lack of sleep, eating poorly, and of course, a lack of regular therapy. Lately, the spasms had become more frequent, more painful. And having such a large house—thirty-six hundred square feet—to navigate didn't help.

The house only served as a daily reminder of the weaknesses I couldn't overcome. I couldn't traverse stairs anymore, severely limiting my access to over half the house. Last time I'd been on the second floor, I'd crawled up the stairs in a moment of determination and bravado. Those had quickly been replaced by humiliation when my pain had prevented me from getting back down. That had required a demeaning, lecture-filled call to Wendy, and two of my former friends Josh and Mike to carry me back to the second floor. That was the last time I'd seen either of them.

"Fuck it!" I shouted, my anger settling in already. A day without anger was as likely as a day without pain.

I focused on getting washed up and brushing my teeth. Then I shaved by feel since my mirror was long gone, a victim of my hatred for my appearance. It was bad enough I had to look at my body, once toned and fit, now a wasteland of sagging muscles. I didn't need reminders of the zigzagged, jagged scars on the left side of my face. I had hoped they would disappear from my memory over time if I ignored them. No such luck.

By the time I had coffee brewing, I was exhausted. Sitting at the massive, granite-topped island, I grabbed my box of pills, counting out the dozen or so for my morning dose. Pain meds, muscle relaxers, antiseizure (I'd had several in the month after my accident, but not since), and pills to counteract the side effects of the former. My bitterness rose like a serpent threatening to strike.

Without an outlet, the relentless rage would double on itself and cause me even more pain. In the past, I'd taken care of my stress, my ire, and my self-hate through extreme exercise and sports. From football, hockey, and baseball in high school through college, then intramural leagues, I'd been unstoppable. When I'd needed more, yearning to test the endurance of my body, I'd started rock and then ice climbing. The thrill of hanging from a sheet of ice a thousand

feet from the ground was like nothing I'd ever experienced before. After two years of training, I'd conquered Lhotse, the fourth highest mountain in the world, just nine months before my accident. Plans of K2 and Everest died in my Maserati on a dark night in May of the previous year.

Clenching my fists, I closed my eyes, fighting to regulate my breathing. If I didn't, I'd end up in the same mess as yesterday. In my box of pills, I had Ativan and Valium and antidepressants, but I refused to take them. I deserved my anger, needed it to survive.

The ringing of the doorbell startled me. Looking at the clock, I frowned. The therapist my sister had found wasn't due until one. I flicked on the computer monitor and pulled up the camera for the front door. I'd wired the house and property with security cameras, along with an intercom system. I wasn't walking all the way to the door only to find some Mormon missionary spouting about the good Lord. He'd done fuck-all for me.

A young man who looked like a teen in his father's suit glanced nervously around as he waited for the door to open. One of my father's new lackeys no doubt. Probably fresh out of law school, he'd drawn the short straw and been sent to the dragon's den. While I loved to play games with the fresh meat—I'd sent many running to their cars and peeling away—I didn't have the energy. The way the man was twitching, he'd no doubt heard the stories.

I hit the button for the intercom. "Leave it in the box."

The man jumped, and his head swiveled around, searching. Annoyed, I repeated my direction with greater force. The man complied and booked it off the porch. What had been placed in that box was just what I needed to take my mind off of my upcoming appointment.

Sitting at the massive dining room table, I opened the thick manila envelope. Spread across the table in neat piles were hundreds of documents supporting my civil case. For over five months, since I'd been well enough to think past the pain, I'd been collecting information and formulating strategies. Using several junior lawyers and paralegals from my firm, I had directed them in interviewing and collecting evidence against the man who'd hit my Maserati with his truck. That case had kept me going, kept me sane, kept me living, knowing that the man who was responsible for destroying my body, taking my life away, would pay.

As I sifted through the legal papers, a bright orange sticky note caught my eye. My father's handwriting was scrawled in bold black letters.



*Three heart attacks, congestive heart failure and still driving?*

My breath caught in my throat. Negligence and poor fucking decision making was what had cost me everything? I clutched my head, squeezing my eyes shut. I could see the headlights of the F-250 swerving into my lane, giving me only seconds to react, as I yanked the wheel to the right.

*Why to the right? Why not to the left? To the fucking left.* Maybe I wouldn't have endured the cuts to my face if my driver's side door hadn't been hit straight on by the massive vehicle.

The doorbell startled me again, my heart slamming into overdrive. I was sweating, shaking and in the midst of a cloud of panic. Deep breaths. I wasn't in my car... *not in my car, not in my car... home... I'm home...* And some asshole was laying on the doorbell. Familiar anger replaced the panic.

"Hold your fucking horses!" Luckily, the front door was only a few feet outside of the dining room. "Fucking asshole," I muttered.

Reaching the door, I wiped my forehead on my shirtsleeve. I seethed. My rage from the revelation about the man who'd hit me comingled with the annoyance of someone trying to infiltrate my self-imposed prison. Pounding the code into the keypad, the lock clicked and I yanked the door open, knowing the fury that was on my face. But I didn't care.

"What?"

A short, strawberry-blond man opened his mouth, eyes wide for a moment, gaze frozen. I raised a brow, my jaw clenched. Something about this man was familiar, something... But the way the man stared at me was fucking annoying, and I lost the memory of who he could be.

"Mr. Breaux, I'm—"

"Did you get enough of the freak show? Do you want me to take my shirt off so you can see some more?" I growled, trying to slam the door.

The man threw up his hand, and the door bounced open. I growled again, and the man stood taller, a determined expression replacing his gape.

"Mr. Breaux, I'm the rehabilitation therapist. Your sister, Wendy, set up the appointment. I'm... um—"

I stepped forward, using our slight height difference for intimidation. The pain in my back throbbed as I straightened my spine, catching my breath, and forcing my expression to hide my agony. When I was mere inches from the

man, I scowled. A light breeze tickled my nose, and the smell of vanilla and something musky grabbed my attention. My *total* attention. Almond shaped eyes, amber, with flecks of light, a smattering of freckles over the bridge of his slim nose, pale skin, and the lower half of his face covered with ginger scruff. He smiled at me while I had taken the moment to get lost in the attractive face, fit body and...

*Fucking dimples.*

“Jacob Divine.” The man shoved his hand toward me for a handshake. I glared at the offending gesture. “We have a one o’clock appointment.”

I was momentarily at a loss for words until I caught sight of his smug grin.

“Yeah, today isn’t a good day. So I’ll call you when I’m ready.”

Again, I was blocked from closing the door. Actually the door was pushed from my grip and Jacob Divine—*Divine*? Where had I—?

High school. Holy shit, it was Jacob and he was... stepping into my house?

“What the fuck?”

I watched as he stepped into my entryway, eyes on the two story ceiling and walkway around the second floor. He carried a battered, brown-leather messenger bag over his shoulder. In one hand, he held a hard, black case.

“Man, this place is just... wow! How long have you lived here?”

I slammed the door and the noise echoed through the room. I winced as a sharp pain stabbed through my pelvis.

Jacob turned with another look of surprise. I didn’t like him in my home, didn’t like the arrogance of the man who had just barged into my life. Didn’t like how my cock responded to that familiar slim body, now-wide shoulders, those dimples.

*Jacob Divine.*

“Are you hard of hearing?” I asked, stalking to him. I didn’t care if we’d gone to high school together.

Jacob looked as if he were thinking then said, “No.” Then he was back to gaping as he looked around the room. “Where should we do this? Living room? Through here?” He pointed and without waiting for an answer left the hallway.

I cocked my head, stunned with the small man’s behavior. When my thoughts caught up, I followed, ire filling my chest, my head. I was going to grab the man and throw him out when I halted at the entry to the living room.

Jacob had stripped off his black jacket. A white, button-up shirt tucked into a pair of dark blue jeans placed his ass on display. I gritted my teeth and looked away. It had been over a year since I'd felt anything resembling arousal or desire. I still got morning wood, but the thought that I could ever be intimate with another person died when I looked at the damage to my body. My face. I couldn't let this man who would make me vulnerable stay in my home. It felt like an invasion. It felt like I had been stripped bare.

"I don't want to do this right now." I'd meant it to come out with more force than it had.

Jacob set his bags down and then pulled a file folder from the messenger bag. He stood, narrowing his dark eyes at me, then smirked. "Wendy said you'd say that. I'm sorry about your accident. I'm not sure if you remember me from high school. We would have graduated the same year if I hadn't—"

"I seem to remember a Jacob Divine," I said lying through my teeth.

His affect changed immediately to one of disappointment but only for a moment. How could I forget him? He'd followed me around like a lovesick puppy for three years. But I had been too busy being the best at everything to want anything to do with him. Well, part of that was true. I had wanted him but...

"Good. It's nice to see you again." He opened the file he was holding and scanned something inside. "Your doctor sent your records... MRI and CAT scan results, current list of meds." He paused and shook his head, frowning.

"What?" I wanted to slug the interloper. I wanted to do something else to him, too, which in turn made me want to slug him even more.

Jacob looked up as if he'd forgotten I was there. "Oh, the medications you're on. Some of them can cause muscle spasms, which seem to be your biggest issue due to the nerve damage."

I didn't know what to say. I took the meds the doctors prescribed. No one had ever given me any indication they could cause the exact issues I was suffering from. I could only shrug.

"Your last MRI looks like it was over four months ago?"

I nodded. What was wrong with me? Why was this man still in my house? By then, he should have been long gone, chased away by my caustic tongue.

"You need another one. I'll call your doctor to order one and then discuss your meds and—"

“No! Just... Just stop!” Right then, a spasm clenched at my back. I held my breath, eyes down, breathing through my nose.

Jacob stepped up before me, his tan loafers in my line of vision.

“Spasm?” The voice was low, gentle, soothing, and so familiar.

I nodded sharply. I should lie down, but the tightening spasm froze me in place.

“Hold still.”

I wanted to laugh at the absurdity of that direction, but if I opened my mouth, I might scream. Jacob left the room. The front door opened, and I thought he’d left. A rise of sickening panic hit me, and I wanted to shout to him, beg for help. Fuck my weak side, and I didn’t have the energy to shove it away.

My legs shook, nausea grew, and sweat coated my skin. The door slammed, and Jacob returned with a large, black vinyl square, and I knew it was a portable massage table. Within a minute, he had the table set up right next to me. Again, Jacob stood before me. I waited for his direction, because the pain had stolen my ability to think.

Jacob cupped my face. I started but didn’t move. The warm touch, gentle and caring, stung my eyes.

“Paul?” Jacob placed his thumbs under my chin and slowly lifted my head.

When my eyes met his, I sucked in a sharp inhale. Thrown back into the dark of my Maserati, pain flooding every cell, and those amber eyes. Latex-gloved hands cradling my face, holding my muscles and broken bones within my torn skin.

*“It’s going to be okay.”*

“It’s going to be okay,” Jacob whispered, an echo from the past. “I promise.”

Past and present comingled and I wasn’t sure what was true, what was reality, what was a memory. I panted, eyes locked on those from the past.

“You... It’s... You were...” My breaths came hard and deep, my pain morphing into that huge cloud around my body, touching every fiber of me. But I was safe...

Jacob nodded. “I was there.”

\*\*\*\*\*

### Chapter 3

I was safe once again with the man with the amber eyes and... I fucking hated it.

I didn't want to feel safe with this man. I jerked my head back from his hands. Jacob looked surprised but then dropped his arms. "Can you lie down on the table? I can help if you need me to."

I shook my head. I could do this myself. I didn't need help from anyone... even if he was the person who'd saved me after my accident and whose nameless face and touch had gotten me through the last horrific year. If he was anyone who mattered, it wouldn't have taken him a year to show up. He was no one to me.

"I got it," I growled, the anger rushing back.

No matter how much I hurt, I would get on that table on my own.

"Lie on your stomach, please."

Luckily, I didn't whimper or cry out in pain, but once I was on my stomach, my back clenched again.

"Okay, I'm going to pull up your shirt and feel around your back. Is that okay?"

I nodded, the feeling of vulnerability all-encompassing as my shirt was gently raised. When fingertips swiped over my skin, I shuddered and sucked in a breath. Even though the pain was overwhelming, the sensation of that touch couldn't be ignored.

"I'm going to press on the area around your incision. So it will be uncomfortable."

Painful, is what he meant. I knew the drill. Tons of doctors, physical therapists, massage therapists, probably even the fucking janitor, had touched me. And each time my skin had crawled because I knew that, with the damage to my body, no one would ever voluntarily touch me again. Yeah, I was feeling pretty fucking sorry for myself, and it wasn't going to change anytime soon.

I nodded sharply and drew in a deep breath, holding it. His fingers were gentle, no doubt taking into account my current pain level which was around a seven. And now a man I'd been attracted to in high school—a very *hot* man—

the man whose memory from the night of my accident had brought me safety over the last year, was touching me. He had been the paramedic who'd held my face together, had stayed with me until we reached the hospital, and wouldn't let me believe I was going to die.

Unbelievable.

"I thought you were a rehab therapist," I said in an accusing tone.

He paused. "I am. I'm also a paramedic." He continued his massage. "Your records indicate both sensory and motor damage." He paused and ran his hand over my hips and I shivered. "Are you cold?"

My face flushed with heat. "No," I muttered and his fingers continued their journey over my skin. When they reached the area of my spine, the pain flared and I tensed, sucking in a breath.

"That hurt?"

"Yes," I gritted out.

"You definitely have some neuropathy since I'm barely touching your skin. The types of nerve damage you have can cause sensitivity, numbness or tingling, prickling or a burning sensation. That's the sensory damage. The motor nerve damage causes weakness and fasciculation, which is just a fancy name for twitching." He moved to the center of my back, and I felt when he ran his fingers over the incision from my surgery. I jumped. The line was sensitive as hell.

"Sorry. We can work on decreasing the sensitivity of the scar." There was a pause. "Any scars you have," he added, no doubt referring to the ones on my face. The intimacy we were sharing and his reference to the foul scars marring my face lit a fuse inside of me.

"No," I said adamantly, wanting to get away from the vulnerability he was causing.

He sighed. "The muscles on this side of your lower back are as hard as a rock. I'm going to work them. It's going to hurt, but try not to tense or fight me. Focus on something that relaxes you. Part of this therapy will be psychological, using your mind to regain control of your muscles, to avoid the tensing."

It hurt like hell, and I tensed and fought back, involuntarily.

"Relax," he said in a gentle voice. "Focus on the muscles. Imagine them relaxing... releasing their tension." His voice was melodic and comforting and

so fucking sexy. I exhaled and closed my eyes. “Visualize your muscles here—” he dug his fingers in, and I flinched, “—and imagine them releasing their grip. Stress is a great factor in muscle spasms despite the cause of the damage.”

He worked into the muscle, and I gritted my teeth. God, I couldn’t focus and found myself drawing into the safety of my head, away from the pain, searching for those reassuring eyes, but they weren’t there. They weren’t because my trust in them had fled the moment they’d showed up at my door. They no longer meant safety, but proof of another person who’d abandoned me.

“While nerve damage is permanent, rehabilitation can, in most cases, decrease pain and increase functioning. The work isn’t easy. Long term nerve damage can cause muscle atrophy without therapy.”

*Atrophy?* My muscles had already withered away, as flaccid as my cock—which was getting hard from his touch, the memory of him. The pain and the cocktail of meds I was taking generally took care of any hardening of my cock, even when I tried to get aroused—gay porn, toys, a paid “escort”—nothing had raised me until now. And it pissed me off.

And excited me. And then pissed me off again.

“You’re tensing,” Jacob practically scolded then his hands were gone. What was he doing? When he crouched in front of my face, I couldn’t do anything, say anything. Those eyes were level with mine. Long, reddish lashes swept his pale skin each time he blinked. The amber was ringed by something darker, maybe a deep blue. “How’re you doing?”

Fucking hornier than hell, and I had to struggle to keep from pushing into the hard table beneath me. If I could just have a few minutes, I knew I could orgasm. I’d had maybe a total of ten—all less than satisfying—since my accident. The frustration stung my eyes with tears, and I blinked rapidly.

“Are you in pain?”

I barked out a laugh. “There isn’t a moment when I’m not in pain.” Whatever I had thought would be his reaction, Jacob running his fingers through my hair wasn’t it. I closed my eyes stuttering out a breath. I hated him so much.

“It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?” His voice was low, caring, and seductive.

When I realized he was petting me and that I was pushing against his hand, I pulled away despite the pain shooting through my back. He was disappointed and maybe a little pissed, but the hurt on his face only increased my rage.

I pulled myself up from the table, turning to hide the bulge in my pants. As I walked away from him toward the bathroom, I called out, “When I get back, I want you gone or I’ll—”

“You’ll what, Paul?” He’d shouted loud enough that it flash lit my anger, masking the agony my quick exit was causing.

I whirled around and fisted my hands at my sides. “I’ll have your license for your inappropriate behavior. I’ll drag your name through court proceedings, and when I’m done, no one will let you touch them!”

Jacob’s eyes widened for a moment with what appeared to be fear and then he frowned. “Nothing I’ve done here was remotely inappropriate. And if you think you can threaten me, *Mr. Breaux*, you’re sadly mistaken.” He was eerily calm and composed. When he looked down, he smirked and met my eyes again. “Many men get hard on my table. Straight ones... big, alpha males.” He stepped closer. “Gay ones. It’s a natural reaction. Does it bother you that I could cause that reaction in you?”

The confident look on Jacob’s face gave way to the fact that he thought he knew something. “You don’t fucking know anything about me.” And he never would. I turned my body, my legs ready to give out right there, but I wouldn’t allow it. I’d made it the last leg of Lhotse with a twisted ankle, had to crawl the last twenty feet. I could make it ten feet to the bathroom.

*That’s it, sonny boy. Dig in and get the prize!*

“I’ll be back on Friday same time, Paul. Twice a week I’ll be here. And fail to answer the door and I’ll call Wendy. And, by the way, that anger of yours is going to kill you eventually.”

I slammed the door on him and immediately fell to the floor.

“Fuck,” I whined as sweat ran down my face and I trembled. Maybe it would kill me right then.

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A few days passed without incident, and then it was Friday. I hadn’t been able to get Jacob out of my mind. He had definitely grown into a man, but still had that boyish quality about him. Back in school, we hadn’t interacted much, but he’d always watched me, and I’d definitely noticed him—especially in gym class when he’d remove his shirt. His pale, sleek body, slim and straight, had been perfect. People might think because I was such a jock that I wanted someone who was built and athletic. No, I had a twink fetish, even back then,



and he fit the bill. Images of his body—hairless, sleek, smooth—his innocence, were threatening to get a rise out of me.

The summer before he'd left school, he kissed me at a party. I was wasted but not totally out of it. He dragged me around the side of my friend's house, plastering his body against me and practically devouring my lips. One of the most erotic, clandestine, dick-hardening kisses I'd ever had. If we hadn't been interrupted, I was quite certain I would have fucked him right there. I still couldn't believe those amber eyes belonged to Jacob.

While I had to admit he'd starred in more than one of my fantasies over the years, the clashing of reality with fantasy had unnerved me. I had to get rid of him, because he was a threat to the walls I'd built the past year (some my entire life). I could take care of myself.

I watched the camera feed from the front door and saw the moment Jacob stepped onto the porch. He rang the doorbell. I didn't move, just took him in, burning his image into my memory. He looked around and then rang the doorbell again. How long would he ring until he gave up? Many of the therapists I'd coaxed into quitting generally looked relieved when I didn't answer the door upon their return. Not Jacob. He was visibly annoyed. Another stab at the doorbell and his foot began to tap.

"Just leave," I whispered, while part of me wanted him to come in.

He dug into his pocket and pulled out his cell. *Shit*, the jerk really was going to call Wendy. And I didn't need her coming here to berate me. I hit the intercom.

"Hold your fucking horses."

Well, at least he'd raised my defenses. Better to fight him with. I made it to the door and yanked it open. "What are you doing here?"

"Good afternoon to you as well." He didn't hesitate to enter without an invitation.

I slammed the door again, but this time, he didn't react, just kept going into the living room. Maybe I should just head to another room and leave him in there to wonder where I was. Nah, he'd come and find me, probably snag me by the ear and drag me back. So anger wasn't getting rid of him, maybe another tactic.

I grinned and went into the living room. He was perusing the few pictures on the mantle. Fucking nosy was what he was.

When he heard me enter, he looked to me. “Beautiful Maserati.” There was a picture of me leaning against my 2014 cobalt blue Gran Turismo. Beautiful wasn’t the word for that car. It had been magnificent. “I’d love to get a look at it sometime.”

I gritted my teeth and pursed my lips. “Well, by now it’s been stripped, crushed, and melted down. Probably some economy car now.” At least after the accident it still had some use, unlike me. If I had died, maybe some of my parts could have been recycled. “But you should know that since you saw it all smashed to hell around me last year.”

“Right,” he said but didn’t apologize for his faux pas. “In the dark that night, I assumed it was black. Thought maybe you’d bought a new one but... yeah, you’re missing the...” He pointed to my face in the picture. “Missing the scar.” He looked away from me, shifted from foot to foot, and then went to his folded table. “So, how’re you doing?” He started to set up the table.

Today, he wore a thin, white T-shirt and black jeans with black boots. And I wasn’t unaffected as he stretched and strained. Looking away, I tried to think of how much I wanted him gone. How much I had to hate him to get him to leave.

How much I didn’t want him to leave.

“Great. Awesome, in fact, so this is a waste of both of our times. I’m sure you have better things to do. So you can leave.”

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## Chapter 4

Jacob actually laughed heartily at that suggestion, and my chest fluttered and warmed. This man was dangerous to my self-control. I kept my neutral expression, which didn't seem to bother his mood.

"How about you let me decide what you need and don't need."

Was there some sort of double meaning to those words?

"After all, I do have those degrees that say I'm qualified to do just that." He raised a brow and patted the table.

I sneered but thought of the plan I'd formulated when he'd first walked in. Right. Switch tactics, keep him off his game. I pulled my shirt off and watched as his eyes perused my body. I fought to stop from covering the few scars on my shoulder and where my spleen had been removed. He didn't seem overly disgusted. Maybe even interested.

Perfect.

"This okay?" I asked when he didn't move.

He shook his head then said, "Yeah, um... lie down on your stomach. We'll start out with a massage to get the muscles relaxed and then work on some strengthening exercises."

I lay down, getting comfortable. He fiddled in his bag, and when he touched my back, my eyes closed. His touch was firm and sure, moving in a rhythm that was distracting. Images of him as that high school boy morphed into the man he'd become. I was supposed to be scaring him away, but as he spoke, my muscles relaxed. I was too comfortable.

"I had a Maserati when I was in college. A 1969 Ghibli Spyder that had sat in some guy's barn for twenty years. Ran good, but the body was rusted, and the seats had been the home to some rodents, but, damn," he sighed, "it was still something else."

I grunted. "Bet you had lots of sex in that car." Thoughts of taking Jacob over the hood were next, and I shoved those away.

His hands stilled for a moment. "Um, yeah, right."

So talk of sex made him uncomfortable. That was the time to jump in.

“Nothing like a hot car to get a man panting for you. Back in college, I nailed them left and right in my Jaguar, a graduation gift from my father. It was as if he gave me a license to fuck every day.”

Jacob was silent, but I thought I felt a tremble in his hands as they worked my upper back. “I was too busy studying to do much else.”

“Doesn’t take long to fuck ’em and leave ’em. Some guys want it rough and dry in the bathroom, hard and dirty in the back of the library, in the bushes... in the backseat of a car.”

And I’d given them what they’d wanted when I had the time. While I was letting on to be a man whore, I truly hadn’t been. If I’d gotten laid more than a few times a month, I was satisfied, but Jacob didn’t have to know that. As he continued to massage me, I let out a series of low groans and moans. That stopped him.

He cleared his throat and asked me to stand. I was hard with my sex talk, and my engorged cock was clearly noticeable in my shorts. When Jacob saw my stiffy, he looked away, wiping his hand on a towel.

“Okay, let’s start with some stretches.” Jacob set his eyes on anything but me. “Always stretch before doing anything, get your muscles ready to work.”

I nodded and smiled as seductively as I could. Hard to do when your core was filled with anger, ripe and ready to spill out. But Jacob would run after this. Certainly.

I stepped closer. “Okay.”

He moved around to my side and had me bend at the waist and arch my back. Both of his hands were on me. I ground my teeth together as he continued to position me for different stretches. When he stepped behind me to position my shoulders, I rubbed my ass against his groin. He jumped back.

“What’s wrong? Just a little friendly rubbing between old schoolmates.” I looked over my shoulder at him. “Most of the men I screw like a little foreplay.” That brought a pained look to his face. Not the reaction I was looking for at all.

He looked away, and when he turned back, our gazes caught. I saw him visibly swallow. His vulnerability both ignited my libido and brought back my irritation. He was allowing himself to be manipulated by me, allowing me to exploit his weakness. What would it take to get rid of him?

He was the first one to break the stare. If only we could have met again before the accident, I would have... Well, no sense in dwelling on that.

“We’re done,” he said and went to fold up his table.

“Done?” Suddenly, I panicked thinking my plan had worked. I was a fucking messed up yo-yo. Jesus. He had me all fucked up inside, as if I weren’t already screwed up enough.

“I’ll be back on Tuesday, same time.”

And the relief was unwelcome. “Maybe I’ll be here.”

He looked down at the half mast of my dick. “Oh, something tells me that you’ll be here.”

When the front door slammed, I picked up a wooden statue I’d acquired in Africa from the coffee table and hurled it into the picture of me and the Maserati. The picture exploded in a shower of glass and hit the floor.

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Relentlessly, I jerked my cock as I watched the hot bear pounding into the young, olive-skinned man on the computer screen. My frustration grew as my cock only got semi-hard. I switched to another tab where two biker guys were coercing a young guy in his twenties into fucking in a dirty alley. The man was slim with undeveloped muscles, and just my type. I was beating myself raw and still nothing.

“Hell,” I said in frustration.

It was as if my ability to get hard without seeing or thinking about Jacob fucking Divine had disappeared. I’d never had an issue with getting aroused and jacking off to porn before the accident. Since then, I had been hit or miss. Now Jacob came into my life, and my cock stood and begged whenever he was near. I closed my eyes. Jacob. A little shorter than my six feet two inches. Tight body. His smile, warm, cocky and innocent at the same time. I put him on his knees before me. He was naked and glorious. I rubbed my cock, and he licked his lips, but I kept him waiting.

When I fed him my cock, I moaned feeling the warm heat, his swirling tongue. He stared up at me from under his lashes, pushing my shaft all the way to the back of his throat. I choked on another moan as he looked up at me.

“Fuck, yes,” I hissed, thrusting my hips in short bursts. He placed his palms on my thighs, leaning into my thrusts, his gaze never leaving mine. At that

moment the past and present collided, and I knew he was different from every other man who'd ever been on his knees before me. The way he looked at me, the way he'd always looked at me... He wasn't a convenient hole. He wasn't some faceless, nameless hookup. Just as my balls let go of my seed, I knew he had gotten way too close. My eyes popped open as cum splattered over my stomach and chest. My high was short-lived when I realized that Jacob was the reason I'd had that orgasm.

*First man to really touch you in a long time.* "Of course he'd have an effect on me." And when I got him to leave me alone, then what?

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On Sunday night, sleep wasn't coming, so I was in the dining room, where my anger and frustration could get results. Clyde Spaulding, sixty-seven years old, retired bricklayer from Niskayuna. Driver of the truck that had hit my Maserati. He'd suffered a nonfatal heart attack. Not fatal. In his massive F250 Ford, he'd escaped serious injury. Broken foot. Some contusions. The accident had been deemed no-fault by the police. The man had had a heart attack. No criminal charges, no tickets.

Nothing.

Nothing for ruining a promising life. Nothing for turning me into an invalid, scarring me so that no man would want me. Jacob popped into my head, and I roared, pounding the table. I wouldn't put up with his holier-than-thou savior attitude anymore. Fuck him if he thought I would bow down to him for swooping in to rescue the helpless cripple.

In high school, he'd been leaner, more boy-like in his body and face. And I'd found him attractive. Something about him had drawn me to him. We had nothing in common aside from both of us being gay and the fact that he'd apparently had a crush on me. I could say the same about myself, but I hadn't had time for relationships. While I'd fucked other guys, I'd never committed to anyone long-term. My longest relationship had lasted for only three months about two years ago, and even then, I'd only seen Trevor one or two nights a week.

I shook off the memories. I had better things to focus on. A man with congestive heart failure and two previous heart attacks had to be a risk for driving. I snorted. He was a risk all right, and I was the evidence. Pulling my laptop to me, I clicked on my email. Earlier, I'd sent a request to a friend at the DMV. I was looking for anything the basic records wouldn't show. I could go

the normal evidentiary route and get the info, but I was impatient. I grinned when I saw the reply from my contact.

Taking a drink of water, I opened the email and downloaded the attachment. When I scanned its contents, my entire body went into attack mode.

“Gotcha.”

Picking up the phone, I dialed my father’s number. Even though it was after midnight, he would be working. On the second ring, he picked up.

“Paul.” The greeting was short, emotionless. Not a “how are you” or an “are you okay after your trip to the hospital,” but I was too high on my discovery to mention anything.

“I found the evidence that just won my case.” I couldn’t help the prideful arrogance in my voice. “Clyde Spaulding’s doctor did request that he have his license revoked. For some reason, the paperwork never went through.”

“And it only took you five months to get that information. I see you got my note yesterday then. A year ago you wouldn’t have needed my help to go in the right direction.” Again, emotionless, to the point, cold as if he were talking to one the bottom-of-the-ladder interns.

Opening my mouth to answer, I then clamped it shut. Running my hand over my head, I deflated like an untied balloon let loose.

“Yeah. I...”

“I have no clue what’s happened to you.”

“I... um...” *Had a fucking accident that ruined my life. How about you, Dad? Remember you didn’t even come to the hospital. Called only once.* “I’m sorry I didn’t do better.”

“I had such high hopes for you. You were on track to be a top-rated attorney, not just in this firm but the entire state.”

Disappointment.

“Collins, a first-year intern, uncovered that information months ago.”

Failure.

I surveyed the piles of evidence on the table. Months and fucking months of collecting, sending the newbies out, and my father had been pulling their strings, holding back information, testing me. And he was right.

“Collins will pick you up at ten AM sharp for the doctor’s appointment your sister told me about. Next time don’t wait until the last minute to let me know about needing a ride.” And then he hung up.

I set my phone onto the table. He was my father. Someone I’d strove to impress and emulate, subsisting (since I was old enough to remember) on scraps of his praise and attention. Scraps.

I closed my eyes.

*I’m self-sufficient. I don’t need anyone. I don’t need anyone.*

The chanting filled my head. Burrowing in and rooting out doubt, self-pity, the aching agony of being so fucking alone. My jaw clenched, and my muscles bunched and pulsed, spasmed. Despite the agony, I stood, extended my arm, and wiped the table clean of the last five months of failure.

I didn’t need anyone.

Especially not Jacob Divine.

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## Chapter 5

Nine fifty-nine on the dot, Mark Collins pulled up in front of the house, driving one of the Town Cars from work. I watched through the sidelight of my front door as he fixed his hair in the mirror and straightened his tie. An arrogant move for a peon. A peon who'd bested me at my job.

I frowned and pulled on my ball cap and shades. I flicked up the collar of my jacket. Between that, the glasses, and the hat, the scars on my face were less noticeable. Nothing could help the limp. I had an ugly, geriatric-looking cane I was supposed to use but wouldn't be caught dead with in public.

Wendy had set up this doctor's appointment, texting me the date and time a few days ago. That was the only contact we'd had since the hospital. Maybe she really was done with me. If she had been, she wouldn't have bothered setting up the appointment, right? I'd been willing to let the appointment go by without notice. Of course, Wendy had used my father, knowing I wouldn't tell him no. I exhaled deeply and left my house for the first time, voluntarily, in over two weeks.

Mark jumped out of the car and opened the right back door for me. "Good morning, Mr. Breaux."

Fucking eager shit.

"Yeah," I muttered and got inside, using all of my strength to hide any hint of difficulty or pain.

Settling in, I ignored any attempts at small talk until Mark mentioned my civil case. "If you need any help with depositions, research, anything, let me know."

God, had I ever been that willing, that disposed, that annoying.

No. My father had berated those behaviors out of me at a young age. *Be indifferent but knowledgeable, unavailable and then they will do anything to get you.*

Wasn't doing me any good right then. No one wanted me. Not even...

I nearly groaned. Jacob had to go. I'd have to talk to my father. It was the only way Wendy would back off and the man would disappear.

"I don't need anything at the moment."

Mark looked up into the rearview mirror, and I was sure I saw him smirk. Luckily, we pulled into the hospital parking lot just then. When he stopped in the unloading zone, he turned and lifted his glasses. Yeah, that sincerity on his face was nothing a criminal or civil lawyer should have.

“Well, when you do, give me a call at the office, or on my cell.” That’s when I saw the card in his hand, which he extended over the seat.

Not a chance in hell.

I exited the car without his help or the business card. I heard the driver door open at the same time as the double doors before me.

“Call the office when you’re done,” Mark called out.

Entering through the automatic doors, I kept my eyes down, heading to the check-in desk. The flurry of activity in the waiting room caused me to look up without thought. The waiting room was filled with more people than usual. Many were couples or groups of adults sitting close, appearing to clutch one another. Clearly they were distraught, wringing hands, hugging, crying. I glanced to the left and peered through the doors to the emergency room, which shared a waiting room with the outpatient clinic. With the limited view I had, there were doctors and nurses racing around the halls, their paces frantic, frenzied, locked in professional mode.

As I stepped up to the check-in desk, an elderly woman had her gaze locked on the doors. She shared the same expression of distress that the rest of the people in the room held.

“Oh,” she said, finally noticing me there. Her gaze focused on the visible part of the scar on my left cheek.

Annoyed, I gave her my name and the doctor I was seeing before she could request the information herself.

“Dr. Reynolds is running late today. There’s been an accident on the interstate. A bus from the elementary school collided with a tractor trailer. Just awful,” she said and clutched at her chest. “We’re offering patients the choice to reschedule.”

She appeared to be searching me for some reaction to the news of the accident. Immediately, I wondered if the driver of either vehicle had been negligent. Drugs, not enough sleep, on the phone... heart attack? Could be worth millions for those parents and kids...

“Mr. Breaux?”

“I’ll wait,” I said.

It hadn’t been easy for me to get ready and make the trip to the hospital, and if I left, I wasn’t coming back. Besides, wait an hour then call the firm for a ride and no one would think I hadn’t seen the doctor.

I watched those around me through my mirrored shades, wondering if their loved ones were injured permanently and what I could get them for their pain and suffering. At one time, I hadn’t personally been able to equate the amount of money with the actual suffering, hadn’t known the truth of the trauma and the pain and the endless nightmare of enduring someone else’s mistake. Now millions didn’t even seem to scratch the surface.

The doors opened to the emergency room as a nurse called for a family to enter. Through the already crowded hallway of the ER, I could see the doors to the ambulance bay. I watched those doors open and a gurney enter. Paramedics in their black uniforms wheeled in a small child, maybe five or six? I couldn’t see the paramedics’ faces, and then the gurney was gone. Memories of that night when I’d been wheeled into the ER threatened to settle on me when someone called my name. Gratefully, I followed a short, pleasant nurse through a door as she apologized for the chaos. As if I cared.

“Dr. Reynolds has an order for an MRI to be done before your appointment. Wait here and someone will come and get you shortly.”

Before I could protest, she was gone. Jacob had to have something to do with that. I sat, the pain from being on the hard plastic chair in the waiting room catching up with me. In my pocket were my pain pills, but I couldn’t take one for another two hours. Shifting in the chair, I pulled out my phone, checking my emails as people bustled by. The double doors at the end of the hall were constantly opening and closing. I’d been at the hospital for almost an hour. Thinking I should stand and stretch, I prepped myself for the task when those doors opened again.

“Come sit out here.” A handsome man in blue scrubs stepped through guiding a paramedic in a black uniform with short sleeves.

*Jacob.*

A very shaky Jacob lowered himself onto a seat near the door. The man sat next to him. Jacob was pale, too pale, and his hands were clasped. Even from that distance, I could see that they were shaking. He wiped at his mouth, his stare fixed on a point straight ahead that I wasn’t even sure was in that hallway.

The man beside him rested his hand on Jacob's shoulder and murmured something I couldn't make out. But Jacob remained stolid, blinking only periodically, and I wondered what had happened to him. Had he been hurt? I pulled off my sunglasses and raised the brim of my hat to get a better look. Blood covered parts of his forearms and there were splatters on his cheeks. His hands were clean, probably from wearing gloves. But my eyes went back to the blood. Red and the black uniform and Jacob and the hospital, and I was losing my grip on reality.

So much darkness. And pain. And blood. I was no longer in the hospital.

*So much blood. Everywhere in my car. Where had all of the blood come from? How could it all be mine? So much lost would mean I was dead or nearly dead. If I was, then why was the pain so great? There were flashing red and blue lights. Voices everywhere and then a deafening noise filled the air. A fireman in his black jacket with the reflective stripes and wearing thick gloves held something that looked like a giant pair of jaws.*

*"Hey... Hey. Look at me... Over here!" Someone was talking to me, but I had a hard time focusing. "Hey!" To the right a man leaned through the broken passenger side window. "That's right. Focus on me. What's your name?"*

*What was my name? All I could think about was dying. I couldn't breathe. My face felt as if someone had taken a knife to it. Burning, stabbing pain. I wondered if I even had a face anymore.*

*"Tell me your name!" he shouted louder.*

*"P-Paul BreauX." The words were garbled. His eyebrows rose, and then he was impassive again.*

*"Paul. I'm Jacob and I'm a paramedic. I need you to focus on me. We're going to cut you out, and it's going to get loud. Don't be scared."*

*Too late. My focus was fleeting, probably along the lines of a rabbit being chased by a fox. Fuck me, I had to get out of that car. Had to get out. Had to—*

*"Paul! Focus here!"*

*His hand reached over and touched my arm enough to ground me. Pain, oh fuck me, the pain licked at every one of my nerves.*

*Metal crunched, the sound intensifying until it punched through, and then the roof was removed. I reached for the hand on my arm, grasping hold as my vision started to fade.*

*"I think... I'm going to pass... out."*

*Dread, panic, my heart racing, passing out should have been impossible. But the blood. People passed out from blood loss. People died from blood loss.*

*"You're doing good, Paul. Listen, I'm coming around the car."*

*"Don't leave me!" I gripped his hand.*

*"No way. I'm coming over to your side so I can get closer and check you out. It'll take me two seconds. Okay?"*

*Unsure, fearful beyond thinking, I was able to agree. Nodding sharply, he disappeared into the darkness.*

*"Here I am." The man was beside me. What was his name again?*

*"The t-truck hit me," I muttered.*

*My face felt wrong, as if it were in pieces, and not working properly.*

*"Yeah," he said as he started to pack gauze around my face.*

*"Something's wrong... my face."*

*I looked to where the rearview mirror had been, but it was missing. The entire windshield had practically exploded.*

*The paramedic kept packing the gauze, and I had to wonder where it was all going. Those amber eyes, caring, steady and sure, were settling. "You have some cuts from the glass." The paramedic looked to the left, talking frantically with someone. I needed his eyes back on me.*

*"P-please..."*

*The paramedic turned back, and his face was so kind. His eyes. Amber, bright in the lights that were illuminating the darkness around us.*

*"Okay, Paul. We have to get you out of the car. But first we have to get a collar around your neck..."*

*And there was a bunch of other info, but my focus tunneled on his eyes. I was going to die. Die in my wrecked Maserati. But I wasn't alone. I was woozy, my head swimming, worse than when I'd misjudged the altitude while climbing Lhotse and had nearly blacked out. The darkness encroached, stealing the vision of my savior.*

*"Help me," I croaked, my terror reaching new levels.*

*Then those amber eyes were right in my face. So close. So close I could feel his hot breath on my lips. Such an intimate position in the middle of hell. And I tried not to, but my eyes closed.*

*“Paul, you’re staying right here with me. Right here, and I’m not leaving you. Take some deep breaths. Calm down.” But I couldn’t breathe. “Paul. Come back. Hey, Paul!”*

*I opened my eyes, my chest heaving, needing air. Where was all of the air?*

*“Hey, Paul, look at me. I’m right here.”*

I frowned, and Jacob came into focus before me. The worry on his face was vast, and I wasn’t sure why he wasn’t holding my face. The darkness had disappeared. The man in blue scrubs stood behind Jacob with assessing eyes. A nurse next to him was ready to spring into action. I looked around. White walls, bright florescent lights, antiseptic smell. The hospital. My appointment.

Jacob’s eyes never wavered from mine. I looked to his arms.

“So much blood,” I whispered.

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## Chapter 6

“Shit.” Jacob looked to where my gaze was focused and then to the doctor. “He’s okay. Thanks, Thom.” The man nodded but didn’t move. “I’m okay, too. Promise.”

The man and the nurse went back through the doors.

“What happened?” Jacob asked, his hand rubbing over my thigh. I hadn’t noticed his hand there.

Humiliation, unlike I’d ever felt, rose with the bile in my throat. I averted my eyes and moved my legs away so his hand fell off of my thigh.

“I’m fine. Sorry.”

*Please go away.*

His fingers found my wrist, touching my skin. “I’m just taking your pulse. You’re very pale. Are you feeling nauseous?”

I shook my head.

“Pain level?”

Why did he have to touch me? “Five.”

“Okay.” He was silent a moment his hand still on my pulse point. I had to look at him to see what he was doing. His gaze locked on mine. “You were unresponsive for a while. Your eyes were open, and I’d say you had an absence seizure or something similar, but that’s not what happened, was it?”

Clenching my jaw wasn’t helping the situation so I blew out a breath then shook my head.

“I didn’t think so. You mentioned the blood.”

Just the word churned my stomach. “Guess I don’t like the sight of blood.”

He hummed disbelievingly, and while I wanted to be angry, I couldn’t summon any ire. When had that ever happened? I had enough anger to fuel a nuclear explosion. A pool of molten lava in my core. Right then, there was nothing but the shaky aftereffects of a flashback. Fuck, I was exhausted.

“You look like hell,” he stated without emotion. So clinical. So detached. An assessment, not a judgement.

“So do you,” I countered.

He nodded but still remained crouched on the floor. “You here for your MRI?”

“And to see Dr. Reynolds.” Why I had given him that information, I’d never know.

“Done any of those yet?”

I narrowed my eyes. “What’s with the twenty questions? I’m fine.”

He released my wrist, and the skin where his warm fingers had been became cold. I didn’t like it. He licked at his lips, a nervous gesture that in court would have me on the attack. “I’m off duty now. I was going to head for a shower and if you want... I mean... I could come with you to your appointment with Dr. Reynolds. I’d like to talk to him about your meds. Not to butt in, just for ten minutes or so.”

I was shaking my head before he finished. I didn’t need him. I didn’t need anyone. And as soon as I could arrange it, he would be gone.

“Some of the meds are contraindicated with your type of injury. What I’m seeing is that your inconsistent care has led to different doctors prescribing meds that might make your symptoms worse. At least let me help you with this, even if I don’t treat you any further.”

Damn him and those amber eyes. Acting as if he cared. But if I allowed him to do this, it sounded as if he wouldn’t push treating me anymore. May be a good compromise so I nodded. His hand returned to my thigh. The smile he flashed was as brilliant as the sun, and something fluttered in my chest.

My hand moved of its own accord, intent on touching his. *What the hell?* I crossed my arms to stop the movement.

“Paul Breaux,” an older man in scrubs called out from down the hall.

Time for my MRI thanks to the man in front of me who had me all twisted up inside. I hated it.

“I’ll meet you at your next appointment. At...?”

“It was at eleven, but with the bus crash I was told they were running late.”

The tension was visible as it filled Jacob, even his hand twitched, but he held his professional face. “I’ll find out where they’re at after I shower and meet you here when you’re done. Okay?”



Anything to get away from him for a while and get a grip. I was slipping further, putting more of myself out there, and it was dangerous. I wouldn't allow myself to be rejected. I knew how I looked, how unattractive I was, and I'd do well to remember that.

When I nodded, he walked away. I didn't notice how his ass looked in those snug, black pants. I didn't.

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My choices around this man were quickly going south. He was in my house again, invited by me. *By me*. What the fuck was I doing? Feeling. That's what I was doing. Even though he was trying to be upbeat and smile, I could see the storm in his troubled eyes, something large, something that unsettled the air around him.

As we entered the house, he trailed behind me. It had been so long since I'd had true company that I needed to stop and remember my manners. Since it was almost two, I went for food and drink.

"Not very hungry. Right now I'd take a beer... Sorry, I'm sure you don't—"

"Fridge under the bar in the living room."

Jacob had changed from his uniform and was in a pair of faded jeans and a red T-shirt. The man could wear anything and look good. Which wasn't the point. I had no clue what the point was. He was there, and I was stuck with him.

I went into the kitchen and dropped my bag of new meds on the counter. While I had sat in the appointment, Jacob and my doctor had debated medications for over forty-five minutes. That had left me with time to stare at Jacob. Stare? More like ogle. When he'd turned and looked at me, a sly smile on his face, I knew I'd been caught.

Now he was in my house. He walked into the kitchen with two beers in his hand. When he set one on the counter before me, I raised a brow.

"Doctor's orders," he stated flatly. "I know you haven't had your pain meds since this morning... Do you need more?"

My pain was at the normal level of around a four or five. I could wait as long as I got off my feet.

"No, I'm good."

"So have a drink with me."

I chewed on my lip and contemplated the beer. “Okay.”

He nodded and walked to the French doors, and as if he owned the place, he opened the doors and stepped out onto the patio. When he flopped into one of the lounge chairs, I had no choice but to follow.

I sat in the lounge next to his. I glanced at him. He was reclining, legs crossed at the ankles, his head back, eyes closed. He’d look relaxed to the outside world, but I could see the twitch in his jaw. I recalled the vacant, desolate stare at the hospital before his attention had been pulled to my mental frailties. I took a long drink from my beer. I didn’t want to ask about the accident and didn’t think I had the right to since I’d never shared anything about myself. But he looked so wrecked that I should have asked him how he was doing. Instead I blurted out, “I have a new Maserati sitting in the garage. I don’t know why I didn’t tell you that before.”

He turned his head and just stared as if he didn’t know what to say.

I shrugged. “My dad took the insurance money from my wrecked car and bought the same exact car: same year, make, model, interior... everything. I didn’t want it, but it’s out there.” Its current owner was too terrified to drive.

“You didn’t want the same car?”

I snorted. “I didn’t want *any* car.”

Took a second for him to understand, and he only nodded.

I stared down into my bottle of beer and pursed my lips in shame. “My dad said I had to get back on that horse. You know, conquer my... fear.”

Jacob shifted his upper body toward me. “You’re afraid to drive.”

Four words and he’d said them as if they were nothing but words, but for me, they were a definition of who I’d become.

“About four months after the accident, I decided I’d had enough of depending on other people to help me.” That was about the time I’d made sure to alienate everyone as well. “So I hopped into the new Maserati and took off before I could think twice.” That had been mistake number one. Mistake number two had been leaving my cell at home. “I didn’t think... I just didn’t... I took the same route as I did that night.”

I looked pointedly at him, and he raised his brow. “*Oh.*”

“Let’s just say I didn’t handle it well.” Under-fucking-statement of the year. “I had to pull over. I had flashbacks and... a panic attack. Lasted over an hour.

I was sweating, hyperventilating, and shaking. The poor man who was nice enough to stop and check on me thought I was either having a heart attack or on drugs. He had to pry my hands off the steering wheel and yank me out of the car. Took me a while to come back to reality.” If you asked me right then, I had high doubts that I’d ever drive again.

“It’s not surprising given the trauma you experienced. During the whole time I was on the scene and in the ambulance, you only lost consciousness for about twenty minutes. You were awake for most of it.” His voice was low, soothing, understanding... and hard to handle.

“You remember that?”

He nodded and closed his eyes, as if the memory was too overwhelming. And I was sure he was also remembering the kid from earlier that day.

I took a drink of beer and knew I was going to regret this but...

“Was it bad today?”

His jaw twitched but there was nothing more for about a minute. Maybe I’d dodged that bullet.

“Yeah.” His voice belied the pain he was trying to hide. Tight, agonizing.

I couldn’t imagine doing what he did. Seeing bodies mangled, torn apart, bleeding, dying. To me it sounded like self-torture.

He took a drink then opened his eyes and sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “He was only five.”

*Was. Fuck.*

“He was trapped under the bus. When they got him out, he was awake, but he wasn’t crying. He was definitely in shock.” He stopped and drank more of his beer. “His leg had been crushed, severing the artery in his thigh. When they pulled him out... well, they didn’t know about the injury until the lack of compression allowed it to bleed.” I saw him swallow repeatedly, his Adam’s apple rising and falling. A quiver in his chin. “I tried to clamp it, but the bone had shattered and shredded the artery.”

What could you say to something like that? *I’m sorry* wouldn’t cut it. He’d failed to save that boy’s life. I knew it would be something that I myself could never forget. What did he do with all of that shit in his head? Suddenly, I wanted to hug him, comfort him.

He sighed. “Most of the time, I can go into that space in my head where I detach from the situation, distance myself from emotionally reacting...”

I was a fucking scholar at doing just that. Suing people despite their situations, their plights, their circumstances.

“But this... this fucking senseless death... and so young. Didn’t have a chance.” His words stuttered out on something resembling a choked sob. Another drink and he turned his head away.

Without thinking, I sat up and swung my feet over the side of my chair, facing him, but I didn’t touch him even though I wanted to.

“I don’t know how you can do that every day. Seeing people at the ends of their lives, knowing you can’t do anything. I’d feel so helpless.” And until my accident I’d never known what helpless felt like.

“Most of what I do when the rig goes out is treat people, get them to the hospital, and then I move on. What I did to keep them alive on the way is, like, a reward in a way. I mean I’ve brought in people who I knew weren’t going to make it, but they were *alive* when I brought them in, my job was done, all I could do but... I can compartmentalize it, lock it into a box where it can’t touch me. Sometime it doesn’t work though.”

“Do you like being a paramedic?”

I should have been running by now, because he was close to crying and fuck I hated tears, but there was something tethering me to him. Right then, I felt like the buoy holding Jacob’s head above the water. If I abandoned him now, he’d drown. And why should I care?

He sniffed and wiped at his nose with the back of his hand. “I do. I think it’s the adrenaline rush, the high. I’ve always been sort of a junkie when it comes to that.”

I snorted, and he actually looked at me. No tears, thank God. “I’ve climbed six of the ten tallest mountains in the world. Gone BASE jumping in Africa and South America. Free diving in the Dominican Republic—one of the most dangerous sports in the world. All for the adrenaline rush.” I rolled my beer bottle between my palms and watched the liquid move inside. “And a truck two miles from my home is what ended it all.” Caustic acid dripped from those words, and I scowled to show my disdain.

“Life is unpredictable. You just never know when...” Jacob sat on the edge of his chair, his knees touching the inside of my knees. I didn’t move. My

breaths were shallower, and I could barely hear them. I watched him as he put his beer on the floor. “Times like this I don’t even feel alive anymore, and I need something to remind me that I am.”

I wasn’t alive anymore, hadn’t been for a year, my life suspended in a constant veil of pain and self-loathing and anger. God, how I wished it would stop, wished time would go back to that day and I could turn left instead of right, away from the direct impact of that truck on my driver’s side door. Maybe if I’d met Jacob again before then, wasn’t such a freak...

When he touched my arm, I jumped. His eyes were intent on mine. His hand, warm and alive, and it felt so good, so connected, as if the universe itself was pumping me full of energy.

When our eyes connected, my stomach fluttered and the hurt in his amber eyes was replaced with lust.

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since I was here last.” The words were whispered, and I was sure I’d heard wrong but still answered.

“Me neither.” Some other part of my brain was taking over, and I had no control.

“You were right about my unprofessionalism when I touched you. I may have let my fingers linger too long. Ran them over your skin because I couldn’t help myself. Are you going to hold that against me, counselor?”

I swallowed hard, trying to find my voice, but I could only shake my head. My dick pressed against my zipper, and it was painful and exhilarating at the same time. I wasn’t myself, buried beneath need and desire and want. Was it so wrong to let my defenses down? To feel for a moment?

“It’s okay,” Jacob whispered and ran his hand over my thigh. “It’s okay to let down the walls.”

As if he knew what I was up against, he leaned forward first. I focused on his lips: pale pink, shapely, kissable. I was helpless to stop him from kissing me. Hell, I didn’t want him to stop. Needed that kiss like the blood in my veins. Tension flowed from me as our lips tentatively began to explore each other. His were warm and so supple, and I increased my pressure, a surge of want pushing me forward. A tidal wave of lust crashed on me, soaking me through.

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## Chapter 7

Jacob's tongue sought entrance and I opened, practically groaning from the first taste and the moist heat. It had been so long. So fucking long since I'd been intimate with anyone other than my hand, which usually ended in frustration and little satisfaction. Rising and falling, we were lost in ourselves. My stiff cock begged to be released. Just another man touching me was going to have me shooting my load, but I didn't care. Less than ten orgasms in a year, my head might explode. But, again, I didn't give a shit. I needed to come.

Air became a commodity as my desire grew, but I refused to relent. The sounds of our lips together were obscene, smacking and slurping, and that sound was something I hadn't known I'd missed. When Jacob groaned into my mouth, the smoldering burn in my groin burst into flames, and I practically leaned him back onto the lounge. His resistance was fleeing.

I rested my groin against his, rubbing and rutting against his hardness, and oh fuck, the heavens were opening up. His hands were frantic, rubbing any patch of skin he could find. His hips bucked up into mine, his desperation clear. He wanted this as much as I did. My back protested, but I told it to fuck off. The ecstasy flushing over my skin and through my veins took precedence. I was so needful, so wanting, that I couldn't have stopped if a meteor hit the Earth.

He yanked his head back, pupils large, and the amber was just a thin ring around the black. His once pale lips were deep red and swollen. "Don't... fucking stop," he panted out, chest heaving as his hips bucked hard.

His hands grasped the back of my neck. I wrapped my arms around him, pulling him tight to my chest, my thrusts increasing, and that ball of pleasure that had been so elusive grew larger. I was going to come: a satisfying, leg trembling, heart-stopping orgasm.

When Jacob's breath caught and the veil of orgasm fell over his face, that was enough to shove me over the edge. Without thought, I cried out, my eyes clamping shut, my body tight as my balls pumped semen into my underwear. The warm liquid of victory. I rode the pleasure, which had invaded every cell of my body. My pulse racing, I wanted to laugh out loud in relief.

When I came out of the foggy aftermath, my forehead was on Jacob's shoulder, his hand rubbing soothing circles over my back. He cooed something to me, but the roar in my ears was still too loud. He was also—

Every one of my muscles tensed. Adrenaline hit my bloodstream and cleared my head. His fingers were on my face tracing my scar—my fucking ugly scar. A daily reminder that no one would ever want me. Jacob could never want me, so this had to have been pity. I couldn't see any other reason beyond my own fucked-up theory. Within seconds, I stood and was moving for the doors to the kitchen.

“Wait... Paul, where're you going?” I heard him scrambling to stand, the metal legs of the lounge chair scraping over the rock of the patio.

My hand on the doorknob, I resisted the urge to throw it open immediately and get away. “You know the way out.”

I went into the house and made it to my bedroom, locking the door behind me. Immediately, Jacob was pounding on the solid wood, demanding I let him in, begging me to talk to him. But I couldn't face his piteous eyes, his charitable expression. He'd gotten the cripple off, and now he could feel good about himself.

Before I disappeared into my bathroom, I heard him say, “Please, talk to me. I really like... I really just want... Please.”

Just the fact that he couldn't commit to finishing those statements told me everything I needed to know. I wouldn't be so stupid again.

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My phone had stopped ringing around eight o'clock the night before. Six voice mails and a bunch of unread texts, all from Jacob no doubt. He had been relentless at my bedroom door. Even after I'd finished my shower, he still knocked, although not so frantically. Finally, he told me to call him, adding please, and then he was gone.

The entire night, my feelings for him were trying to surface, take over, and convince me that I needed him, wanted him to return. Memories from high school tried to make themselves known, and I shut them down. He had been my one regret back then, and regrets only made people weak.

I mourned his loss until my anger flared with thoughts of being used as someone's good deed for the day. I needed to focus that anger, and with Jacob gone, my case against the driver of the truck would have to do. I would work the case until I found something that my father's lackeys hadn't uncovered.

For three days, I searched relentlessly, denying that it was a bid to avoid thoughts of Jacob. I called Mark incessantly, no matter the time of day, sending

him running all over the city, scrounging up info and delivering motions to the courthouse. Many times Mark had tried to discuss my case with me, as if he could help. He'd helped enough by finding the information my father had used as proof that I was failing as a lawyer. But I was back in the game, and I'd prove my father wrong. What I didn't want to admit to myself was that I hated every minute of working on the case. In the past, such work had brought me great satisfaction. Not now.

When I opened up my email, I sighed. Another one from Jacob. There had been one for each day since our encounter. Yeah, I had read the first one and its lies. He tried to convince me that he felt something for me. If he'd felt anything, he wouldn't have abandoned me for the past year after saving me. It was one of those rationales where you know it's totally without merit, but I allowed the false evidence to mount. I ignored the fact that he had just been a paramedic doing his job. Nope. He'd done the worst thing in the world to me... Tried to get close.

On day four, my back decided my stress level, lack of sleep, and subsisting on coffee and toast was enough. Spasms hit me early in the afternoon as I was hunched over the table where I'd nodded off. My breath caught, and I knew I was in trouble. My only recourse was to lie on the floor until it passed. I'd carelessly thought the new regimen of medication would save me from the nauseating, back-stabbing spasms. Stupid thinking for sure. Sweat poured off of me as wave after wave of nausea gripped me. I always regretted my lackadaisical behavior after the fact when I was in the clutches of agony. I'd never been lax about anything in my life until my accident, especially my health. I was fucking pathetic and repulsive and... I had to piss like crazy.

There was a click at the front door and someone entered. What the fuck? Who in the hell? It had to be Wendy since the alarm didn't go off. Only she and my father had the code, and he'd never been in my house. I was going to change the code once I could get off the floor. God, she was like a psychic knowing exactly when to catch me and prove I was helpless. Maybe if I was really quiet, she'd leave. Footsteps sounded on the tile of the entry.

"Paul?"

I snapped my head to the side, trying to see into the entryway.

*Fuck me.*

Jacob.



“Paul, we have an appointment.”

No way. He was supposed to run away, leave me alone.

I heard him enter the living room. “I’m not leaving so you might as well come out so we can get this over with.”

With the throbbing pain, I wasn’t thinking clearly, but I knew to keep my mouth shut. If he looked into the dining room from the living room, he wouldn’t be able to see me. That was wishful thinking of course when he came around the table and stepped up next to me. I really couldn’t take his reaction filled with pity and feeling sorry for me anymore.

I glared up at him. Surprisingly, he glared right back. Hard, cold eyes surveyed me in my prone position from head to toe. He then surveyed the table, covered in paperwork, empty coffee cups, and endless plates of half-eaten toast.

When he looked back, I balked at the disappointment in his eyes. “This is what happens when you don’t take care of yourself. I’m sure you didn’t bother to open any of the emails I sent you with exercises to do each day and what to avoid, like large amounts of caffeine and not getting enough sleep. Stubborn ass.”

I held my glare because it was all I had for a defense at that moment. My jaw was clenched from the agony, and the energy to unclench the muscles wasn’t there.

Jacob’s hands went to his hips, and he sighed, looking around the room. “Getting you up probably isn’t going to happen given the amount of pain you’re in right now. Probably around an eight or nine?” He didn’t wait for my answer. “Take any pain meds lately?”

I had to think. When was the last dose? Maybe last night or early yesterday morning. Since he was there it had to be one o’clock.

Not waiting for my response again, he said, “That’s what I thought.”

And then he was gone. His glare off of me, I tried to relax so I could get up from the floor before he came back—if he came back—and meet him at his level. No such luck. When he returned, he held a syringe in one hand. I moved my upper body away from the needle.

“Relax. It’s just a muscle relaxer.”

His stare was intense on me as he waited, no doubt for my agreement. The muscles in my back took that moment to fist into a tighter knot. I nodded. He

was quick and efficient and the shot was done. I blew out a breath, waiting for the aching to lessen.

When I could take in a solid, deep breath, I asked, “What happened to leaving me alone?”

“I lied. I was going to wait for you to come to me, but then my sadistic side jumped the gun. I haven’t really gotten to inflict any pain lately, so here I am.” He shrugged, and I wondered where the cold, unfeeling, hard man before me had come from. Although, a true sadist wouldn’t have given me a muscle relaxer, which was definitely doing its job. My head was swimmy, and my back was slowly unknotting. I never really knew how bad the pain was until it started to fade.

“Who pissed in your coffee?” I mumbled, but he ignored me. He didn’t have to answer. I knew it was me who’d done the pissing. So fucking what if I rained on his pity party for me. I didn’t need it.

“Feeling better already, I see. Let’s see about getting you off that floor.

He reached for my arm, but I pulled it away. “I don’t—”

“Let me guess. You don’t need my help. Well, too bad.” He scowled deeply and held out his hand. Damn, I wanted to keep him waiting, but soon I was going to embarrass myself and piss my pants.

I huffed and then grabbed his arm. Straining my arm muscles, I tried to do most of the work, which probably ended up being about 20 percent to his eighty. He was strong for a small guy.

And fucking hot.

My stupid brain kept going back to our mutual frotting session. My cock wanted more. Not that I could get it up with the muscle relaxer and the throbbing ache in my back radiating down my legs. When Jacob was gone and the meds had worn off, I would pay someone to get me off, someone who wouldn’t make demands on me and interrupt my life.

*Yeah, right.*

I wobbled until I got my bearings, then headed for the bathroom. Jacob sprinted past me and blocked the door. “No way. You’re not avoiding me this time.”

Sneering, I leaned close to him. Well, as close as I could without crying out in pain. “Gotta take a piss. Want to hold it for me?”

My eyes followed the red flush that rose up his neck and into his cheeks. I could smell his cologne and practically feel his skin on mine. And those eyes... He was going to ruin me.

He stepped aside. I escaped behind the door, breathing deep. I couldn't seem to go knowing he was out there. Several minutes of hovering over the toilet bowl, and I finally squirted out an unsteady stream of piss. Even peeing was becoming an ordeal. Maybe it was the new meds. I washed my hands and exited the bathroom to find him once again reading something in a folder.

"Your MRI results," he stated, without looking up.

Great.

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## Chapter 8

I was silent and waited. Was I supposed to beg him for the information? That would be a cold day in hell. I crossed my arms, swaying a little from the relaxer. I hated the drugged feeling, but I had to say the agony was lessening by the minute.

“The muscle atrophy in your back has worsened since your last MRI, which explains your increased spasms. Without regular therapy, the spasms are causing additional muscle damage and weakness.” He looked up at me with a stern expression. “Within a year or so, you might be in a wheelchair.”

I blinked, the words not quite settling anywhere, just kind of spinning around my head. *Wheelchair?* After the accident, my doctors had thought I might never regain full use of my legs and I’d need a wheelchair. But I had shown them and walked. He had to be wrong. “I can walk just fine.”

Jacob closed the folder in what appeared to be disgust. “Yes, you can walk now, but it’s not anywhere close to ‘fine.’ Just watching you, I can see that it takes a significant effort and that every step hurts. Tell me if I’m wrong, but your muscle spasms are increasing in frequency. The most that you walk each day is around the lower level of this house. You can’t climb stairs. You can’t walk more than twenty feet without experiencing tingling and burning in your legs.”

Jacob stepped closer until he was about a foot away. Too close, and I focused unerringly on his eyes as he continued.

“You sleep like crap because your back spasms and, when you close your eyes, you see yourself back in that Maserati, trapped and alone. You already said you don’t drive. You don’t go out in public unless it’s to the doctors. You won’t look at yourself in the mirror, probably don’t even have them anymore, thinking you’re some kind of monster when you’re not. Instead, you’ve locked yourself in this massive house, feeling sorry for yourself, and hiding to avoid the stares of others. How close am I to hitting a homer, Paul?”

“Fuck you!” was the only response I could get out.

My anger rolled like thunder through me, and I was looking for something to strike. I swung a fist at his face and, yeah, missed by a mile because I couldn’t control the motion of the swing. That and the stupid bastard moved. I spun and went down like a rock. My breaths heaved, and my fists clenched, and I was so fucking pathetic.

Jacob squatted over me but didn't move to help me up. "You're a coward. The mighty Paul Breaux, ruthless lawyer, alpha male jock who won state championships and climbed some of the world's tallest mountains, is nothing but a scared weakling who couldn't handle it when his perfectly built world came tumbling down. Winner's roll with the punches, take what's thrown at them, and find a way to win. Look at you on the floor like some worthless piece of crap. Why even bother to get up?"

"No!" I didn't want to hear how wretched I was. I lived it every day, and this asshole was pushing me down further.

"You look pissed, Paul. Why don't you get up and do something about it? Or are you just going to lay there like the useless waste of skin that you are?"

I shook my head, my eyes clamped shut. I didn't need my failures thrown into my face, didn't need anyone to tell me I was disgusting, a waste of air... a fucking coward. The rage flowing through me heated my skin, and I ground my teeth, huffing out breath after breath. I was tired of being the one who lost everything, who'd woken up broken and nowhere close to the man that I used to be.

"Fuck you!" I roared, pulling myself up.

Jacob stood and moved away. I was on my feet and looking for a target.

"Who the fuck do you think you are coming into my house acting like you know anything about what I've been through? My entire fucking life was stolen... ripped away from me! I'm the one who has to live every day in a broken body that won't do what it used to! I've pushed myself to the edges of human endurance. I was strong. I could do anything I put my mind to, and more! And a fucking truck took it all away! Everything I was or could be is gone! And I don't have anything left. There isn't any future. My mind, these fucking drugs, I can't think. I can't be the lawyer I was. And, yeah, when I close my eyes, sometimes I'm back in that fucking crumpled car with my face torn open, knowing I'm going to die."

My voice faltered as Jacob looked on stony-faced, while grief rained over me. A part of me begged my mouth to stop, but once that door I'd stuffed all of my emotions behind opened, there was no stopping it.

"God, I don't know who the fuck I am anymore!"

I turned and punched the wall, over and over until the drywall dented and then crumbled under my fist. I was grateful that Jacob didn't try to stop me. I

wanted to punch the wall until the entire house came down in a rumble of despair and misery and pain that had leached into its walls over the past year. The house was contaminated, just like I was, with a year's worth of unexpressed emotions and unshed tears. Right then, those tears stung my eyes, but I refused to give into their incessant attempts to spill.

"I don't know what the hell to do, and some days I just wish I had died in that accident. I don't need anyone's fucking pity, because I have enough to spare. I'm scarred and sickening!" Why couldn't anyone see that? "No one will ever look at me and not see my weakness. It's carved into my face and my body and no one will ever want me. Who the hell would ever want me looking like this?"

I heaved a breath, humiliated, defeated, exhausted and... Done, was all that I could think.

Done.

Running my hands over my face and then through my hair. I averted my eyes from Jacob, who was no doubt enjoying my mental break. I tried to convince myself that the hatred strumming over my nerves was for Jacob. In reality, the person I hated most was myself. Hated me for being everything that Jacob said I was and more. Before my accident, nothing could beat me, absolutely nothing. When it came down to it, that really wasn't the truth. The only thing that could beat me, was me.

Jacob stepped closer, and I tried to move back, but I hit the wall. He followed, and I thought he was going to hit me or tell me off or something just as bad. Instead, he slowly raised his hands, and cupped my cheeks, forcing me to face him straight on. In his eyes there wasn't anger or pity or sorrow, but something faintly resembling hope.

"I want you." Three simple words, followed by a press of his lips to mine. His eyes closed and then I followed, ready to deepen the kiss, but he pulled away. He left a ghost of a tingle on my lips. Did he really want me? *No one could*—I cut that thought off as he picked up his messenger bag and started to walk out of the room. Half the way there, he stopped and turned to me. "Call me when you're ready to win."

With that, he left, the front door closing behind him. This time the metallic click of the lock didn't sound so much like the clank of a prison cell door being closed.

For hours after Jacob left, I sat on the patio staring across my backyard. *Time to call the gardener*, I thought, as I surveyed the weeds encroaching on the mulched shrubs. Maybe trim them up. There was a crack in the stone of the patio. The furniture was looking ratty. Yeah, I kept trying to find things to focus on. My mind had dumped all of the detritus from my accident and the last year into my brain at once. I was numb. Lost. Jacob and his steel spine. He hadn't backed down, hadn't hit the road, and was still pushing me. He'd stood up to me and gave as good as I had given. I didn't know if I liked it. I had a suspicious feeling that I did.

*"Call me when you're ready to win."*

I snorted. No one had ever accused me of not wanting to win. Before my accident, most people I knew asked me if I really *had* to win all of the time. Wasn't that the definition of success? Winning? My father had made certain that I understood winning was success. Failure wasn't an option—wouldn't earn me his love. But no matter how much I won, I never came closer to getting that unconditional love parents are supposed to give their kids, despite their success. So maybe the game was skewed. A game I couldn't ever win.

*Shit.*

Every relationship I'd ever been in had been based on winning that love. Trevor had continually told me his love wasn't a contest or a game. I hadn't gotten it, even when I realized he wasn't happy with me. I ended it before I could be the loser. How many relationships had I ended before they could end on me? Not just romantic ones but every single one. My friends had fled, and I thought it was because they couldn't handle what had happened to me. I believed that they couldn't stand seeing my weakness because they were successful people. I'd surrounded myself with winners. Maybe I'd pushed them away first. That included Wendy as well. I'd pushed her hardest and now she was MIA. When major realizations hit, they hit hard and hurt like hell. Blame, apparently, is a two-way street, and I'd never taken on any of it.

Because I had to win.

By the time the sun set and the chill of the evening set in, I knew I had a decision to make. I still had to win, but I had to redefine my definition of what that meant. The thought roiled my stomach, but I couldn't keep going on as I had been. Even during my five hours on the kitchen floor, some part of me had been screaming that I was an idiot, couldn't keep isolating myself, that I needed help. I would rather bite my tongue off than ask for help. It was such an

ingrained and reinforced behavior. It wasn't going to wane anytime soon, but maybe I could at least connect with the last person on earth who still cared about me.

Tomorrow. I'd call Wendy tomorrow. Right then, I was exhausted and there was still too much flotsam floating around in my head. Sleep would be a welcome state.

If only that had been true. The entire night I tossed and turned, drifting in and out of sleep, terrified to let go of the anger that had kept me moving the past year. Afraid that, without it, I wouldn't be anywhere close to the person I had been, despite the fact that it was destroying not only my body but my life.

Jacob was also in my head. Despite the years that had passed since our first encounters in school, there had been something that had connected me to him. That had been reignited as I'd been convinced I was going to die. Vulnerable and open and trusting that he was going to save me even though I hadn't known it was him doing so. To keep him in my life, I was going to have to be vulnerable and open again. Unless I was dying, I didn't know how to do that. How did you change something that had been practiced and entrenched for over twenty-eight years?

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## Chapter 9

Near dawn I grabbed my phone, and before I could change my mind, I pulled up Wendy's number and called. Each ring I prayed that she wouldn't pick up, prayed that—

"Paul? What's wrong?" Even after everything I'd put her through and how awful I had been, she still sounded scared, afraid for me.

"Hey, I'm fine." Now that she was on the phone I didn't know what to say. Why hadn't I thought this out more?

*Because you wouldn't have called.*

"Sorry if I woke you."

She sighed heavily. "No. It's no problem. I told you to call anytime."

Patiently, she waited for me.

"I have a new goal."

"Umm, okay?" The tentativeness in her voice shouldn't have been there, but it was. How many cues from others had I ignored in the past, set on my own agenda? I guess with self-realization came the ability to see how I'd affected others. Wasn't that a bitch?

"I... well... I'm thinking... Jacob said..." I ran my hands through my hair. "I'm thinking I have to stop pushing people away. I need to let people help me." Those were the toughest words I'd ever said.

I waited for the chastising, for the "well, duh stupid," but Wendy said, "I want to help you. You're my little brother, and I love you."

Well, fuck. That telltale lump pushed up into my throat, and my eyes burned, and if I cried, I'm not sure I wouldn't hate myself.

"I don't know how to do that."

"I know, Paul. Dad made sure you didn't need anyone. Bastard." She'd whispered the curse.

Here I was, lost and needing direction, and I was actually asking for help. Oh, hell. I was sure I couldn't do this but didn't have a choice. Jacob had said that he wanted me. And I was pretty sure I wanted to see if anything could happen between us. Would he still be interested once the newness wore off?

Once he saw the real me? I laughed silently to myself. I think I was the one having the trouble seeing the real me, not Jacob. If I didn't take the chance, I'd never know.

"Start by taking better care of yourself and seeing your doctor regularly. Eat right, sleep when you should, and forget that civil case you're building. We both know why you're doing it."

*To get my father's attention.*

I didn't think I could stop working on my case, but the other stuff? I'd trained for half a year to climb Lhotse. As long as I had a goal, succeeding should be easy.

"I can work on some of those things."

"It's a start," she said with resignation, knowing it was the case I wouldn't be giving up. "Do you need help with any of the other stuff?"

"No, but..." How did I get Jacob to see me as anything but an ass? "Jacob. I'm not sure how to... you know."

There was silence, and I swore I could hear her smiling through the phone. "Jacob? What about him? Do you need another appointment?" Her teasing tone had me blushing. "Or do you need a booty call?"

Now I was flaming. "Jesus, Wendy."

She cackled. "Yeah, that's what I thought. When he called me yesterday, his anger about your fight seemed a little off, more personal, less professional. So I'm guessing you need a different rehabilitation person?"

"Wait, what?" Why would she even suggest that?

"Hey, doofus, you want to date him, right? He can't do that while he's treating you. Even if he did kiss you."

*Oh...*

"Oh, right." I had threatened to sue him for just that reason. He was never going to want anything to do with me.

"Yeah, he *does* want something to do with you. Believe me, Paul."

I didn't realize I'd spoken that thought out loud. "But my limp and scars."

"Paul, I'm going to tell you this because I love you, and because I think you're in the place to hear this now. And, God knows, I've wanted to say this many, many times in your life, but I knew you wouldn't listen. Ready?"

I rolled my eyes. “Just say it.”

“You push people away...”

“I know this already.”

“Shut up and listen for a change without thinking of ways you can tell me I’m wrong.”

Did I do that? I could ask, but I shut up instead. She was trying to help me after all.

“You push people away because you’re afraid they’ll see the real you. The person inside and they won’t like him. You used to count on people to like who you show to the world. To you he’s gone. Now, you think you’re only the person inside, and he’s not good enough. But he is.”

I shook my head, because I didn’t agree. The man I used to be was great and powerful and accomplished—and lonely and sad.

“Maybe you should get to know him. He’s a pretty great guy,” she said

What would I do without my sister? “I’m sorry,” I whispered.

For a moment the only sound was our breathing. “Don’t say that. If you want to show me anything, show me that you’re the man I believe you to be.”

I could only try. “I have to go, but thanks, Sis. Thanks for standing by me.” Had I ever said sorry in my life and meant it?

She sniffed, and I was only partially repelled.

“You’re my baby brother. As I told you. I’ll do anything for you but stand by and watch you destroy yourself.”

And thank God for that.

“Okay, find me another therapist.”

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Phase one of my plan was delayed by another set of spasms, which I was sure would send me right back to believing I was better off as I was. But I wrote down what I needed to do and read it over and over. Then I went online and found a picture of Jacob (*yeah, kinda creepy*) on the city’s Emergency Services website. Damn, being able to look at him, really look at him, I saw the teen I used to know, but now a man. A good man. Someone I would be proud to call mine. This was my inspiration. But I knew I couldn’t do this for him, or anyone else. This had to be for me.

I emailed Jacob, too chicken to call him in case he rejected me. I asked that he not come the following week. That gave me two weeks to get my body and head into a better place. In my email, I asked Jacob to meet me at my house at five PM on July twelfth. I asked Wendy to convince Jacob that I wanted to see him for a therapy appointment only. I wanted my plan to be a surprise. She reluctantly agreed.

In the meantime, I focused on myself as I waited for Jacob's reply. My plan was to ask him out to dinner on a date. I was actually going to go out into public (if he accepted) for the first time since my accident for something other than a doctor's appointment.

My gut was tied up in knots, wondering if he'd tell me to fuck off. Bile rose in my throat each time I thought of putting myself on display for others. But I shoved those thoughts away. I took my meds as scheduled, changed how I ate, switched to decaf coffee, and walked. The first day I made it halfway across the back lawn. Three times a day I went out and made it farther each time. My muscles ached, my back was sore, and my feet hurt like hell. I was so out of shape that I was breathless after twenty minutes, but I still did it whether I wanted to or not.

I printed off the exercises that Jacob had sent to me, and I did those, too. They were tough and I had to dig deep to do them, but I didn't stop. Wendy started to send me those cheesy inspirational memes, with sayings like "It's your attitude, not your aptitude that will determine your altitude" and "Challenges are what make life interesting; overcoming them is what makes life meaningful."

Gag me.

So I started sending her back *uninspirational* quotes. "Adversity: that which does not kill me postpones the inevitable" and "If you can't learn to do something well, learn to enjoy doing it poorly." She decided that I was well on my way to being "cured" if I could follow that advice. Easier said than done.

The first rehab therapist I had scared off, John, had agreed to come back (I was pretty sure Wendy had bribed him), and I got to work. I think the sadistic bastard held a grudge, because he worked me until I was sweating, shaking and ready to drop. He was like a drill sergeant, which I needed, and it felt good to be building my strength and endurance again. He made me work on the stairs. I was up to ten. While I could have done more, he made me limit myself to avoid further injury, because once I got started, I ignored the pain, riding on the "no

pain, no gain” mentality. He didn’t agree. The spasms still came but had lessened in frequency and intensity by the time two weeks had ended. It was finally the twelfth. Time to man up and see if I could mend fences.

I walked into the bathroom, my nerves already jangling as the time for Jacob to arrive neared. After showering, I went to the sink, staring at the empty space where the mirror had been. I ran a hand over my face, the stubble uneven since I always shaved without my reflection to guide me. I eyed the door of the closet where I’d stashed the mirror upon returning home from the hospital after the accident. I dared to open the door and glared at the mirror covered with a towel as if it was something terrifying.

After a minute, I closed the door unable to return the mirror. I couldn’t do it. I wasn’t ready. Shaving by feel, I took extra time to make sure I got every hair. Despite moving on and getting ready to meet Jacob, the failure of not replacing the mirror felt too much like defeat.

Dressed and in the living room, I watched the clock. Thirty minutes became twenty and then ten and then the doorbell rang. It was as if that sound had gone off in my chest. My pits were sweating and my hands shaking. But I went right for the door and didn’t hesitate opening it.

Jacob’s brow rose upon seeing me. His gaze swept over my body as tangible as his hand. I shuddered. In his eyes, resided the coldness he’d shown me two weeks earlier.

“Hi, Jacob. Thanks for coming.” I smiled wide and stepped aside to let him enter.

He eyeballed me out of the corner of his eye as he stepped in. As usual, he was the image of perfection in his powder-blue V-neck sweater and gray pants. He looked better than I remembered. If he rejected me tonight, I’m wasn’t sure how I would take it. The chances of him doing just that were good given the fuck-off vibe he was giving me.

He walked straight into the living room. He didn’t have his table with him which I ignored. With his back to me, he set his messenger bag down on the couch and said, “Okay, let’s get started.”

When he faced me, he really got the chance to take in all of me. Again, his brow rose. I stepped into the room but didn’t get too close to him. The flustered and confused look on his face was adorable.

“I didn’t ask you to come here for therapy.”

That deepened his brow. “You didn’t?”

The dimple on his chin was so inviting, begging to be licked. My mind was sharper than the other times he’d been there. It was as if I was looking at him through a different lens. Eating better, sleeping regularly, and exercising had really done me some good. I had a long way to go, but I could see the benefits already.

I shook my head. “I hired another therapist.”

The shocked and hurt expression he tried to hide caused pain in my chest.

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## Chapter 10

He quickly brought neutrality to his face. “You could have told me that by email. No need to drag me out here.”

He turned and snatched his bag. When he whirled around, I was right in front of him. He stepped back and bumped into the couch. I smiled wide upon seeing him so flustered and angry and hurt. Those were the cues that he still cared enough and that I might have a chance.

“That’s not why I asked you to come here.”

He crossed his arms. Cool, but not as cold as when he first walked in. My eyes wandered to his lips, wanting to taste, but if I jumped the gun, I would scare the rabbit out of the fox’s den. My stomach flipped somersaults. I could have used some bravado right then, that winner’s attitude I had in the courtroom, but I was pretty sure that would be taken the wrong way.

“I wanted to see you because...”

Fucking terrified.

He relaxed a tad and gave me an assessing gaze.

“Because I missed you.”

There was that shocked expression. He gaped like a fish for a moment and then clamped his mouth shut. I took the opportunity to speak.

“You were right about a lot of things. I was angry... *still am* angry, at everyone. The world, the universe, fate, for taking my life.” I rested my hands on my hips and looked down at the floor. Looking at him and admitting my weakness was a double whammy I couldn’t handle right then. “So pissed off all of the time that I couldn’t see what I was doing. I’m still not sure how clearly I’m seeing, but I know this...”

When I looked up, his frown had softened, but there was still wariness in his eyes. “You know what, Paul?” Less venom, his tone sounded open to discussion.

“Back in high school, I was an ass, a self-centered prick who chose popularity and winning, over my heart. I don’t know what would have happened back then if I’d made a different decision about you. But I was letting my need to be the best mess with the connection I felt.” Jacob dropped his arms

to his side, and I took that as another good sign. “And you came back into my life at a time I was at my worst, and you still saw something inside of me. You were willing... And I just shoved you away.”

He chewed on his bottom lip, just as he’d done back in high school. I had to suppress the urge to run my thumb over his lip and soothe the bite. “And you just thought I’d come here and accept your apology and excuses and what?”

The urge to tell him off hit me hard. I stepped back, and scrubbed my palms over my face, regaining control.

*You knew this wouldn’t be easy.*

“No. I’m pretty much convinced you’ll tell me to go to hell, which I deserve. I knew I would have to prove myself worthy of you. So I gave myself two weeks to put up or shut up. I started taking care of myself and doing the exercises you sent to me. I’ve been walking the backyard to build my endurance. I’m up to twenty minutes, and I can do ten stairs.”

“It wasn’t just your physical health that was the problem.” Now he was opening up, his expression, his body language were closer to when he first came to the house. The tightness in my chest relaxed a bit. If we could talk, we might have a chance.

I rubbed at the back of my neck and shifted. I felt as if I was being turned inside out and put on display. Nothing would be private but I had to go that extra mile for Jacob. “I have an appointment with a counselor next week. Frank Eversoll.” Where I would be under a microscope. I didn’t want to go, but everyone I saw, from Wendy to my new rehab therapist, were ringing the same bell. Better to give in than to fight them. They might actually be right.

Again, he crossed his arms, and a flash of defensiveness colored his eyes momentarily. His beautiful amber eyes. “What about the new rehab specialist?”

Was that what had his underwear in a knot? Thinking about him in his underwear wasn’t the place to go right then.

“I couldn’t ask you out to dinner if you were treating me. You know that whole nasty rule of dating a patient. I wouldn’t want to have to sue you now, would I?”

“Dinner?” The corner of his mouth quirked. Oh, I could tell he liked that idea. Using that hint of a smile I moved closer. I was slowly remembering how to do this. How to use my powers for seduction instead of pushing people away.



“Yeah,” I said, my voice low, throaty. I reached up and ran my hand down his arm and thought I felt him shiver. “I’d really like to take you out. This was kind of an ambushed date invitation.”

That brought another quirk to the corner of his lips. “And why should I go out with you?”

*Yup, make me work for it.* “Because I’m pathetic and you should feel sorry for me?” I grinned.

He snorted and narrowed his eyes.

“Because I’m crippled and deserving of charity? Because I’m the best thing—”

He rested his fingers on my lips. “I get it.” And I wasn’t sure what he meant. “You have two modes right now. Angry, pissed off, leave me alone guy, or aggressive, overconfident bravado guy.”

I dropped my arm. I was so fucking this up. How could I be anything he’d want?

“If I didn’t see someone in the middle somewhere, someone I’d like to get to know, I wouldn’t accept your invitation to dinner.”

It took a moment for me to catch up, but when I looked, his demeanor had changed.

“When I walked in here tonight, your entire energy was different. The air in the house felt less oppressive, less... I don’t know, angry and sad, less like a house of mourning.” He looked me over. “You look good. You’re less pale, the dark circles are gone. And your eyes are quite sexy when you’re not angry.”

His gaze locked with mine, and a shot of lust raced to my groin. Just a look from his gorgeous, soul-seeking eyes was enough to set me on fire. For once I could enjoy the beginning of a relationship and that excited, energetic rush.

When Jacob reached out his hand, I hesitated and then took it into mine. Our palms slid together. The touch, which I’d anticipated as being sensual, was comforting instead. “I’d love to go out to dinner with you.”

I felt triumphant, as if I’d won Olympic gold.

That is until we were in his car headed to the steak joint we’d agreed on. That was when the adrenaline rush from my focus of convincing him to go to dinner morphed into a welling panic. First off, I’d sat in the front seat. Right

side of the car but the wrong seat. But that was overshadowed as I thought, what the hell was I doing going out to dinner, in public, where there would be people? I wasn't wearing a hat, or sunglasses, or a collar to pull up and hide my hideous scar.

*You'll be fine. Stop being such a pussy. You can do this.*

Jacob peered over at me, and I forced a fake smile on my face. Really, I wanted to puke. He smiled in return. Within minutes, we pulled into the restaurant parking lot. There were a lot of cars there. Again, I questioned my sanity in thinking up this plan. Too much too soon. That was me. All or nothing.

"Ready?"

My muscles jerked as I started from his voice. I surreptitiously wiped my palms on my pants. "Sure."

I exited the car before I dug my fingers into the sides of the seat and refused to leave. As we entered, my pulse kicked into high gear and the tightness in my chest increased. I kept my head down, avoiding eye contact with anyone. This was a higher-class restaurant, requiring reservations. I glanced quickly at the hostess (luckily it wasn't Jerad that night, who knew me well) and mumbled my name. That had been stupid, because she didn't hear and had to ask again. She smiled, her gaze quickly darting to my scar and back to my eyes. She probably had to work to keep from staring at it, but she remained professional. I wanted to run.

Instead, I motioned for Jacob to precede me as we followed her to the table. My limp seemed more pronounced to me, the constant pain in my back increased. I pictured myself as Quasimodo, and everyone staring at the freak walking by. I rested my hand on Jacob's lower back, the connection increasing my fortitude.

I'd requested a table in the back, away from the crowd. Unfortunately, being a Friday night, all of the tables were filled. Before the accident, I'd come here at least once a week to wine and dine clients or with men for a prefuck meal. I glanced at the tables praying no one recognized me. So far, the faces weren't familiar. What if someone I used to know saw me?

The hostess seated us next to the large window overlooking the garden outside. She laid the menus on the table and let us know that our server would be there momentarily. I fiddled with my silverware, my napkin, rearranging it

several times in my lap. Eyes were on me, I knew it, even though my gaze was locked on the table. My leg shook. I grabbed my menu pretending to peruse the contents. Oxygen didn't seem to be making it to my lungs.

"Paul?"

This was a stupid idea. My skin crawled, my stomach ready to spill. I had to get out of there. Yeah, that was the only thing I could do, because if I didn't...

"Paul." The forcefulness in Jacob's tone snapped my head up. My eyes focused on him, and the concern on his face calmed me slightly. "Switch places with me please?" I frowned and he said, "Switch seats with me."

Before I could decline, he stood. I wondered why he was trying to call more attention to me. I did as he asked, and when we were seated, he smiled. It took a moment for me to realize why he had us change seats. My scar was on the left side of my face, which now faced the wall. A short term fix if no one spoke to me. He reached across the table and laid his hand palm up. My hands were clasped in my lap. I pried them apart and slid my palm over his. The contact was exhilarating as well as reassuring.

"It's just you and me," he whispered. "Talking, getting to know one another."

I was caught in his gaze, unable to look away. I nodded. "Okay, let's see. Ummm... What did you do after graduation?"

He smirked. "Well, first of all, I didn't graduate from Wilmont High. I moved to Arizona before our senior year."

"I remember." When I'd looked for him that year, I'd been disappointed to hear that he'd moved. I'd forced myself to forget him by secretly screwing about four different guys on the football team. I never understood closeted jocks.

He nodded in approval, hearing I knew that he'd moved. "Went to school at Southern Cal and was premed. Decided I didn't want to be a doctor, so I finished the physician's assistant classes and passed the exam. Worked in the ER for a while. Then wasn't sure that's what I wanted to do. Wandered around the states for a while and then South America."

I raised my brow at that.

"You aren't the only one with the lust for travel and adventure," he said with a chuckle. "Did some stints with Doctors Without Borders. Wandered

around the rain forest for a while. It's one of the most fascinating places on earth if you can put up with insects the size of dinner plates and snakes as long as three Cadillacs. Then I ended up in Bogotá. Met a guy named Franco from Mexico. A doctor." He sighed and glanced out the window for a moment. "Spent nine months in that place because of him. Believe me, Columbia really isn't somewhere you want to spend nine months without a good reason."

He was silent for a moment.

"He was married, kids, the whole nine yards. I can tell you that I didn't see that one coming. He never mentioned a family, told me he loved me."

"Yikes, that's just... wrong."

He nodded, our hands still rubbing together as the waiter stepped up. *Fuck.* It was Charlie.

"Mr. Breaux!" Charlie was a young guy, maybe twenty-two, now working his way through college. I'd left him some hefty tips in the past to help him along. He was a good kid. I feared he would ask...

"I was sorry to hear about your accident. It's good to see you again. Now what can I get you to drink."

He took our orders and left without another word, much to my surprise.

"Seems like a nice kid."

"Yeah, I used to come here all the time." Used to, and if I was asked right then, I would have to say it would be the last.

"It's hard," he said.

Two words that hit me straight in the chest. I chuckled harshly. "Hard isn't quite the word but yeah. People judge others by their exterior package. Doesn't matter who you are inside, only that you fit what they perceive to be desirable."

"I don't believe that's true. If I had done that, in your mind, I wouldn't have pursued you."

I licked my lips. I needed to know. "Did you pursue me?"

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## Chapter 11

“I refuse to answer on the grounds that I might incriminate myself.”

I laughed and let it go at that, deciding to take his answer as an affirmative. We ordered, and for the first time in over a year, I was doing something I’d only dreamed of doing again. With my anxiety down, I had to say my hiding for the past year seemed like a waste of time and quite foolish. Dessert arrived and we shared a piece of raspberry truffle cheesecake while laughing and reminiscing about our school days.

“Did you really steal the entire lacrosse team’s clothes at the away game in Saratoga?” I asked, finishing the last bite of cheesecake.

He gagged on his water and his eyes widened. “How did you know that was me?”

I chuckled and pulled my napkin off my lap and set it on the table. I was fuller than I think I’d ever been. “I had my spies. I have to say it was brilliant. And I was glad I wasn’t on the team. So where did their clothes end up?”

He grinned maniacally. “I’ll never tell, but let’s just say the next morning there was a farmer scratching his head when he went to check on his cows.”

I laughed out loud, a deep soulful laugh, my first in forever. Tears filled my eyes as I imagined cows draped with the lacrosse team’s clothes. Slowly, the rest of the tension I’d held drained from me. Even though my back ached from sitting for so long and my legs tingled, I was having a great time. Jacob beamed at me, and I couldn’t help but think that he was simply gorgeous.

I threw money down on the table and said, “Let’s get out of here.”

Jacob smirked and jumped up. He waited for me to stand, as my legs were wobbly, but I forced myself forward. Again, I motioned him in front of me, and this time it was so I could get a look at his ass.

“Mommy, that man’s face is scary.”

I froze, my breath stuck in my chest. A little girl, maybe three or four, stared at me, wide-eyed, from her chair. She sat at the table with a man and woman who looked at her with their mouths gaping...

Scary. Me.

Jacob came back and frowned when he looked at me. I may have been a little pale.

“We’re so sorry,” the man said. He was young and had to be the little girl’s father. “Emily, say you’re sorry to the nice man.”

The girl continued to stare at me. Being the adult that I was, I should have said something, anything to reassure her. “I... um... didn’t mean...”

*Didn’t mean to scare her with my grotesque face.*

“What’s wrong?” Jacob asked, staring daggers at the man as if he’d done something to me.

The girl’s mother quickly jumped in. “Please accept our apologies. She’s only three and doesn’t know any better. Emily, say you’re sorry to the nice man.”

Before I could assure the mother that it was okay, the girl squeaked out an apology. I nodded and thinned my lips, unsure what to say. I managed a weak smile and looked to Jacob for help. This was exactly my fear, and now everyone in the restaurant was looking at me. Gratefully, Jacob took my hand and led me outside.

When we got to his car, he turned to me. I foolishly kicked the tire, pain radiating up my leg and into my back. Clutching my hands, the anger welled in my gut, trying to take over again.

“I’m sorry, Paul. She’s just a little girl. She didn’t know any better.”

I leaned back against the car. “I know that,” I snapped then lowered my head and took a deep breath. I continued again, in a calmer voice. “I know that. I’m... she’s not the one I’m angry with.”

His confusion was evident. I wondered if he thought I was mad with him.

I stuffed my hands into my pockets. “I just stood there, like a deer waiting to be slammed by a semi. Seriously, I should have said something to the little girl, got on her level, and told her it looks bad, but I’m a good person. What if I can’t do that with anyone else? How will they know? How will they know that I used to be someone important and reliable and good and not a monster? How Jacob?”

My anger morphed into self-pity, a deep mucky hole filled with it. I was wallowing, barely staying above the surface. He stepped up to me, toe to toe. “I think what’s important is that you know who you really are, and that the people

around you also know. Give yourself a break. It's your first time really coming out in public." He chuckled. I looked up at him from under my lashes. "And you went all out and took me out to dinner. Most people would have started with a trip to the corner market. Not you, Paul Breaux. Your first time, you had to make a statement." He smirked.

I couldn't help but see the humor in his words. All or nothing, right? And except for one little girl, most people hadn't seemed to notice or were polite enough to hide their reactions.

"I couldn't have done it without you," I said and took his hand. Our fingers twined together, and for a moment, we just took one another in.

He sighed. "I had it so bad for you in high school, but you probably knew that."

I knew but said, "Really?" He had been there every time I'd turned around.

"Oh God, I thought you knew. I stared at you every chance I got. Stalked your classes, spied on you at practice. You were such a—"

"A jock?" I smiled weakly, trying to keep the conversation light. I had known that he wanted me back then, and I'd wanted him as well. Knowing I'd chosen to ignore those feelings felt like I'd betrayed him.

"No. There was something else there. You were serious about sports, wanted to be the best, but you weren't arrogant, didn't act better than everyone else. It was like you were there doing your own thing and letting everyone else do their own thing. I don't think I ever heard you pick on or bully anyone."

I had to agree with that. "My biggest competitor has always been me. I was too busy being hard on myself, making myself better, pushing myself harder. Too entrenched in being the best to pay attention to anyone else. I was very self-absorbed." Still was.

Jacob took my other hand in his. "There were times when I watched you play sports. At the beginning of a game, you always looked into the crowd, like you were searching for someone. You had hope on your face to start, but after a while, I saw the sadness." He glanced nervously away then back to me. "I had always wished that you were looking for me. But I knew that you weren't. When I saw how sad you were, I wanted to tell you that I was there for you. I know it's stupid and you never—"

"But I *did*. I know you won't believe me, but I did notice you. Felt a connection." His eyes were intent on me. "I'm sorry that back then I was all

about me. And my dad. When I looked around at a game, I was hoping to see my dad, hoping he would show just that one time. But he never did.” I rubbed my thumbs over the backs of his hands. “I noticed you. I felt you watching, knew you were there. And I was stupid enough to ignore you. Even when you kissed me at Bobby Brewster’s party.”

Despite the fading sun, I could see the red coloring his cheeks. He groaned. “I thought you wouldn’t remember that. You were pretty wasted.”

“I remember it. You pulled me around the corner of the house and practically attacked me. And if I recall, it was one great kiss.”

Too bad we had been interrupted by Brad’s sister, who liked me at the time. I pulled Jacob closer, and he stepped between my legs. Our torsos, our groins, were touching right there in the parking lot as he leaned into me. I didn’t care who saw us. I watched his eyes as I leaned closer, waiting until the last minute to close my own. He didn’t move away.

When our lips touched, I moaned. Soft and giving just like I remembered. And as if ten years hadn’t passed, we were groping one another. My cock rubbed against his as he pushed his hips into mine. He felt so right in my arms, and I wanted so much more. When a car door slammed and someone laughed, we jumped apart, chests heaving. I touched my lips, tingling as if they’d been shocked.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said.

“I couldn’t agree more.”

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I slammed Jacob’s back into the door, my hand trying to type the code into the keypad with our lips attached. Before we’d even made it out of the car, we’d started. Frantic kissing, tongues tangling, hands yanking and rubbing, bodies grinding. It was animalistic and intense. All thoughts of pain fled with the appearance of my passion and adrenaline. I’d pay for it later but, for now, I was on a high better than any pain med.

I swore as the security pad beeped incessantly after I’d entered the code wrong for the second time. Once more and the police would be called. It wouldn’t be fun explaining the reason to the cops. I detached my lips from Jacob, who whined but then found my neck to lick and nibble on. My legs were like jelly from that action. Another try with the code and success!



I opened the door and pushed Jacob inside, then once again we were conjoined at the lips. He tasted sweet, and the way he gave it back to me, I wasn't sure we'd make it into my bedroom. I didn't know if he wanted to top or bottom; right then such logistics didn't matter. Even if we didn't agree, we could blow each other and rut a few out. Really I was praying he'd let me fuck him. It had been way too long.

We danced our way, me leading, as we started to remove shirts and belts. I worked the top button of his pants as he sucked on my neck. We continued to move slowly, hindered by my limp but also our incessant need to keep kissing. I'd forgotten how frenzied those first few times fucking someone you were really attracted to could be. Desperate for skin and touching and licking and sucking and thrusting. We couldn't get enough of one another.

As we reached the bed, Jacob's shirt was gone, his pants were around his ankles, and his cock was straining against his tight, dark blue briefs. I licked at his chest, hairless and smooth. I wanted to lick every inch of his body, desperate for the connection.

He pushed my pants off my hips, and I yanked his underwear down, his cock slapping against his abdomen. I couldn't take my eyes off of him as he removed the rest of his clothes and then stood before me. I ran my hands over his taut stomach, up over his pecs, his unblemished skin. So unlike mine.

"Stop," he commanded as if he could read my doubts.

When I looked up, his lust filled eyes were enough to make me come right there. He pushed on my shoulders, and I sat on the bed. He removed my shoes, socks, and pants. My shirt having been shed somewhere on the way. He ran his hands up my thighs, his palms hot against my skin. My cock stood proud from between my legs, jerking as he came closer. He slipped between my thighs and knelt. The site of him kneeling before me caused my pulse to pick up speed.

"You're perfect," he whispered.

Before I could deny his claim, he licked from the base of my cock to the tip. I hissed and tried to keep from bucking my hips. He wrapped his fingers around my shaft, moving it as he swirled his tongue around and under the head. I dropped my head back, the pleasure of his actions rushing me headlong into another part of my mind. Amazing how Jacob had gotten this reaction from me when no one else had. Maybe it was knowing the person cared for me. Or maybe it was just Jacob.

I ran my hand through his hair, tangling the curls around my fingers. His head bobbed under my palm, the sensations reaching fingers of pleasant tingles into my groin. Just when I tensed, my balls tightening, he slowed his sucking, his tongue teasing me relentlessly. I groaned, lifting my hips, encouraging him to suck me again.

“Mmmmm.” Jacob took me down his throat, farther and farther.

“God damned... yes. Your mouth.” Fucking magic. Thrusting, I was heading toward a mind-shattering orgasm when he pulled off. He rose up, still stroking my dick, his lips stretched and red. “Lay down, and I’ll return the favor,” I said.

He shook his head and went in for a kiss—possessive, searing—and I melted into him. He released my lips. “I need you to fuck me, now.”

He crawled on the bed, ass in the air as he looked over his shoulder with that classic come-and-get-me look. Grabbing the lube and a condom (thank God they hadn’t expired), I crawled behind him, caressing his ass, licking and biting. I ran my hands between his legs, squeezing his sac, wrapping his dick in my hand, letting him thrust into my fist.

He moaned as I ran my tongue over his lightly furred ass, pumping his cock. He arched his back, and I released his dick. I pulled his ass cheeks apart, rubbing my fingers over his hole. Another arch of his back, and I licked his crack. He jerked then hissed. Another lick and he pushed back into me. I licked him from stem to stern and back again until he was whimpering and begging for me to fuck him.

I popped open the lube and drizzled it over his hole, starting by pushing in one finger, then two, then three. His hole was stretched so obscenely wide around my fingers; the thought of my dick doing the same excited me to no end.

“Jesus, Paul, fuck me now.”

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## Chapter 12

My hands actually shook as I rolled on the condom. Lubing my cock, I sucked in air from the sensitivity. My legs already ached from being on my knees for that short amount of time, but I wasn't stopping. Lining up my shaft, the anticipation was great. Slowly, I pushed against his hole, the muscle resisting... resisting... giving a little... I didn't want to hurt him. Jacob took care of that when he rammed back and forced the head of my cock into his ass.

"Ah, *fuck!* I hope you know I'm not going to last long. Jesus, it's been forever." That familiar ball of nerves was already tingling through my groin, building to completion.

He peered at me over his shoulder again, a challenge in his gaze. "Then you'd better make it hard and good." He squeezed his ass muscles on my cock.

I gritted my teeth. "Just remember you asked for it."

That was all the warning he got before I shoved my dick into him hard. My groin hit his ass. My balls slapped against his taint. But I didn't stop. Fast would be good given the pain flaring in my back and creeping down my leg. I focused on the slide of his ring around my cock, the moist, perfect fucking heat, the musky smell of two men fucking, the way he whimpered and moaned as I pounded into him unmercifully.

"Jerk yourself off," I commanded as the sweat started to run down my face. Damn, I was out of shape. Used to be able to go for hours. Three minutes and I was pretty much done.

Jacob reached beneath himself, moaning, no doubt, as he touched his cock.

"That's it, baby. Need you to come on my cock." Needed it more than I even realized.

"Fuck, yeah. Pound me... harder."

Jacob's hand was flying over his cock, making lewd slapping sounds in time with my thrusts. The image of him pleasuring himself brought forth my orgasm, an entire body-encompassing explosion. I threw my head back and gripped his hips hard, pushing in deep, and then deeper, feeling as if my balls were going to turn inside out and squirt out of my dick. Jacob groaned loudly and his asshole pulsed on my cock. I yearned to taste it, lick it off his fingers, but it was that moment that my back decided a spasm was needed.

Quickly, I pulled out, and Jacob yelled. I wanted to apologize, but my breath caught. Fucking body.

“Hey, give a guy some warning first,” he said in a joking tone.

I closed my eyes, the pain mitigating any semblance of the post-orgasmic bliss that I should have been floating on. Instead, I was slammed onto the hard, cold floor of reality.

“Shit. Here, lie on your stomach.” Jacob guided me down onto the bed, the pain was intense but not as all out gut-wrenching, nauseating, totally-in-control as in the past.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think about your back,” he said as he knelt next to me.

“I’ll be okay.” I would, but it was going to take time and a lot of living in my head until the pain subsided. “You can go. I’ll be like this for a while.” I clenched my teeth. I didn’t want him to leave me in this fucking tomb of a house alone. I also didn’t want him to see me like this. This was supposed to be a new beginning, and fuck all if I could have anything good.

Jacob’s fingers worked the muscles in my lower back. But I was tense and pissed.

“You need to relax. You’re fighting me.”

I drew in a deep breath. “I’m not sure if I can.” My voice sounded so weak, so fragile.

“Then talk to me,” he whispered. His fingers were relentless, chasing the spasms. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

I immediately shook my head. I couldn’t in that vulnerable state. Probably couldn’t even if I weren’t in a shitload of pain. Jacob changed his angle, his attack precise and targeted and so sure. I wish I could feel that way again in my everyday life.

“How about if I talk?” He didn’t wait for my answer and said, “I used to try and place myself in the situations I found my patients in. You know, so I could empathize more. I would think, what would I feel and think and do in that situation? After a while, I found that wasn’t enough.”

He grunted as he worked on a knot that felt like an iron ball. I grunted back but remained still, focusing on his voice.

“I wanted to know how I would react in their situation, but I didn’t have their frame of mind, their scope, as I call it. So I get to know them, ask them

questions about their lives, their families, their triumphs and tragedies. And hopefully I can understand.”

“Sounds smart,” I muttered. Very smart actually. As a lawyer, my view was one sided with a single focus. Win for the client no matter how I felt about who they were suing.

“It is. Because I can barge into someone’s life and tell them how to get better, exactly what to do, and how to do it. If they don’t, I can berate them for failing, or not trying, not wanting to get better. But what good does that do?”

I decided I loved to hear him talk. As he did, my muscles strained to let go inch by inch. I chuckled then grimaced as he hit a tender spot. “But... that’s kind of what you did... to me, right?” I blew out a breath.

“Well, that was my plan.”

I opened my eyes, despite not being able to see him. “Plan?”

He was silent for a moment then said, “You’re a winner, Paul. Even if you’d forgotten how. You’ve spent your life being coached, being pushed, being told exactly what you’re doing wrong and how to do it right. Me coming in here with any other attitude wouldn’t have worked. When you gave up on yourself, if I coddled you, felt sorry for you, you would have definitely kicked my ass out for good.”

He wasn’t wrong there. “I did try to scare you off, but you don’t listen very well.”

“My mama always said I never did. What I didn’t count on was the feelings I had for you back in high school still being so strong when I saw you again. Being there at your accident... seeing you so...”

*Damaged... wrecked... broken?*

“Hurt. I thought maybe those feelings for you had come back to the surface because you’d been injured. I had a need to help you. I came to see you a few times in the hospital, and like a coward, I didn’t make it through your door.”

I waited for more, but he remained silent. “Why?”

“Because, you were hurt, and I felt like a perv. I didn’t want you to think I was... I don’t know. Taking advantage of you. Back in high school, I was sure you knew I wanted you and that you thought I was pathetic. Maybe I’m not making any sense.” He laughed but it was hollow, almost sad.

So that was why he’d stayed away. Maybe it had been a good thing.

“If you had made it through the door, within a day you would have hated me. I was a miserable, mean person who lashed out at anyone.” God, the way I’d acted, I’m surprised I hadn’t been dumped out onto the street by the nurses, much less the people I had called friends. “I pushed everyone away. So maybe it wasn’t a bad thing that you didn’t come and see me. Then you wouldn’t be here now.”

The sorrow of that thought washed over me with cold realization. If Wendy hadn’t stuck by me, I wouldn’t have made it to this night with Jacob. I felt like I should buy her a car, or a pony or something, to make up for my asinine behavior. Nothing would ever be enough. And Jacob. He’d stuck in there even if it had only been for a couple of weeks.

“Do you want me here now?” Jacob’s words were tentative, meek.

I rolled, able to move again. I looked up into his eyes.

“When I was in my wrecked car, I was terrified.” I closed my eyes as that familiar fear crept over my skin. “I never told anyone about what it was like for me. Whenever they asked, I always told them I couldn’t remember. But you and I both know I remember.” My lip quivered, and I took in a deep breath.

“Even though I was there, I still don’t know what you were thinking, what you felt. I imagine pretty damned scared.” He ran his hand over my skin, and I leaned into the touch.

“Every second. It was a moment of sheer terror when those lights headed toward me. I yanked the wheel hard. And then it was like an explosion. I was thrown hard in my seat belt. There wasn’t any pain until it all stopped.”

There was a tickle in my nose, as if I could actually smell the acrid odor from the air bag going off. Jacob ran a soothing hand over my stomach, gentle, calming. He was there again, comforting me through my accident.

“I think I was stunned for a minute, you know? And confused. When my head cleared, I hurt everywhere and my face... God, I was sure I’d lost half of my face.” I swallowed hard, smelling that coppery smell of blood and tasting the tang of it on my tongue. “While I sat there, I knew I was dying. And in those moments, you see things so clearly. Things you hadn’t really seen before. And you start wishing that you’d done things differently.

Jacob nodded as if he understood that. Maybe people that had been in his ambulance had expressed similar wishes.

“What were your wishes?” Jacob asked.

Tears flooded my eyes. He placed his palm against my cheek, over my scar. Just having him next to me highlighted how heartbreaking my solitude had been. No wonder my body hadn't healed given how dead my heart was—even before the accident. It had taken an angel with amber eyes to revive the organ, to pump life back into me.

“You would think I would have wished for... that my wish would have been to be closer to my family and my friends, that I had cared more.” I was really crying now, but I managed to laugh morosely. “Not me. I fucking wished I had worked harder and won more cases.” I gasped on a sob. “Been more successful... Wished I'd made it... to the top... of Everest.” Who the hell wished shit like that when they thought their life was over?

More tears and I was sobbing. I hadn't cried in years. Tears of pain at times, yes, but crying soul-crushing tears of sadness. No. Not even when my mother had died.

Jacob leaned over me, working his arm under my shoulders. For a brief second, I tried to stop him, but he did that soothing, shushing sound. I wrapped my arms tight around his body, my face buried in his shoulder. And I cried like a fucking baby as he told me everything would be all right, while running his hands over my back and arms.

I shook my head. The crying had a stranglehold on my throat, but I managed to choke out. “I don't... want to be... a-alone anymore.”

I couldn't believe I'd confessed something so personal, so needy. But that long denied need had risen from deep in my soul where I'd buried it years ago—maybe as long ago as childhood. Finally, it had seen the light of day in the arms of Jacob Divine.

“Hey, you're not alone. I'm here. And I'm not going anywhere. I promise.” His hands were so comforting on my touch-starved skin.

I focused hard on shutting down the tears. My head pounded, and my throat hurt. My nose had leaked snot all over Jacob's shoulder. I was a real prince charming.

“Y-you will... I'll push you out of my life, too.”

He chuckled, and I felt the vibration against my chest. His skin was so warm, so alive, so amazing. “Just try it,” he whispered. “I don't think you understand how I feel about you. How, when I look at you, I can see into your soul. I see you, and you're everything I want and need. I'm yours, if you'll accept me, for as long as you'll have me. Just try to scare me off.”

I hated that he offered himself to me no matter what I did to him, no matter how I treated him. He deserved better. He shouldn't settle for a situation where he believed he'd get what he could and then be tossed aside. I should have been the one begging him to give me whatever he saw fit, begging him to stick around and love me. I should have been the one worshipping this person who saw past my scars and the damage that hid the real me.

I held him tighter, and once again, I was crying rivers of tears, my chest heaving with sobs. I wasn't sure I was ever going to stop. He didn't seem annoyed or pissed. He was patient as his fingers massaged the back of my head, sending tingles over my scalp. I never wanted him to stop touching me.

When my sobs lessened, I was exhausted and mortified I'd fallen apart in front of him. Soon, I fell asleep in his arms.

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## Chapter 13

Of course, as it usually goes, morning always throws a different light on whatever happened the night before. We were still entwined in bed, my head resting on his chest, his arm around my shoulders. My hand was on his stomach, rising and falling. My leg thrown over his. Intimate and entangled like lovers.

Were we lovers? Were we in a relationship? We'd made love twice, slept in the same bed together. And I had shattered into a million pieces right in front of him.

Anger tried to take hold of the shame and disgrace I felt. I'd emasculated myself in front of the man sleeping next to me. I'd shown the one trait I despised most in others. *Weakness*. I closed my eyes, feeling sick to my stomach. I couldn't get my body to move, couldn't stop touching him, feeling his arm around me, the gentle rhythm of his breathing, the steady beat of his heart. So I lay there, embroiled in a session of self-loathing, grinding my teeth, ramping up the tension in my body.

"Are you awake?" he asked in a husky, sleep-filled voice. I shuddered.

"Yeah." I realized how tight my hold on his body had become, and I relaxed my grip. I quickly sat up and turned my back to him, sitting on the edge of the bed. I raked my fingers through my hair, no doubt setting it on end. "I'm sorry. I can't believe I carried on like that last night. You shouldn't have had to deal with that."

I gave him room for escape, to get out without feeling as if he had to stay and coddle me.

"If you mean the sex, it was fantastic."

I shook my head.

"Hey, it's okay," he assured me and touched my back with his fingertips. I automatically moved so his hand fell away and stood.

"I can take care of myself." I searched the floor for my underwear and pulled them out of my pants.

"I wasn't saying you couldn't." His voice was steady... cautious.

All I could see was my weakness, flashing like a neon sign for everyone to see. I hated it. I hated myself. Self-loathing should have been my middle name.

I pulled on my briefs. “I’m sure you have things to do.” The coldness was coating my heart and my insides once again. I had no clue why, what had changed, but I seemed helpless to stop it.

“No, I—”

“I’m going to take a shower.” Escape was my only goal, my pinpoint focus on the door to the bathroom. Once I locked it behind me, I could regain my equilibrium.

“Paul, stop!” Jacob’s shout stopped me in my tracks.

I had to turn because his voice had filled my entire body and resonated over my nerves. He stood in all of his naked gloriousness by the bed. His flaccid cock nestled between his thighs. His hair stuck up, and he looked beautiful.

“You’re doing it again.” A simple statement that shouldn’t have confused me so, but it did. He walked toward me. “You’re trying to push me away.”

I almost shrugged out of habit. Other than that, I didn’t know what to do or say. When he was right in front of me, he cupped my cheeks. He seemed to like to do that. And I loved when he did, because he looked me right in the eyes.

“What did I tell you last night?”

I snorted because I wasn’t sure what he was looking for. Luckily, he didn’t wait.

“I said I wasn’t going anywhere, and I meant it. So you just get that stick out of your ass and get me some coffee before I turn into a raging bitch.”

I sort of gaped at him, his expression stern, and then realized he was right. “Shit,” I whispered trying, to look away. “Why would you bother?”

Without hesitation, he said, “Because you’re worth it.” Then he laid a searing kiss on me until my legs trembled and my lungs screamed for air. When he finally relented, he smacked me on the left butt cheek, the sting invigorating. “Now, how about you do something about my low caffeine level, hmh?”

I groaned. “I think I’ve met my match.” *In more ways than one.*

He picked up his pants and then raised a brow. “Chop-chop... Get going.”

He waved his hand at me, and I smiled, wide, heading off to start the coffee and wondering what I’d gotten myself into. I also wondered how long before I fucked it up again.

Jacob stayed the entire weekend. We did absolutely nothing except make love and talk. We talked about anything and everything we could think of. By Sunday afternoon, I knew most everything about him *and* every inch of his body. While our form might not have been the best, we definitely would have scored tens for creativity while fucking. And there wasn't a room left untouched, well, any rooms downstairs. Upstairs would come when I could climb them easily.

By Sunday night, I was exhausted. I lay on the couch in the living room, recuperating, while Jacob was in the kitchen creating something that smelled so good for dinner. I was amazed by how quickly he'd become a part of my home, which just a week ago, I had thought of as a prison. The simple comfort of having Jacob there was addicting, and I hated the thought of him going home tonight, of him leaving me. My mind was busy running through scenarios for him to stay. Where was a snow storm or hurricane when you needed one?

"How's the pain?" he asked as he came into the living room carrying my pill box and a bottle of water.

He wore one of my T-shirts, a little big on him, and my boxers, as if he'd always done so. He sat on the coffee table in front of me. My back had loosened, the tightness that had started again from our "activities" was relenting, and the pain was minimal. Maybe there was something to that mind and body connection.

"Not bad. Although if we keep going, my dick might become permanently disabled."

He scoffed. "Now that would be tragic." He pulled out my evening pills.

Just taking those pills generally was an annoying reminder of my limitations, but with Jacob's hand feeding them to me one by one, his fingers touching my lips, I didn't mind at all. I took a drink after each pill. As he placed the last one on my tongue, I sucked his finger into my mouth. I heard the hitch in his breath.

"I thought your cock needed a rest." His glazed eyes and the tenting of his pants convinced me that I didn't care.

He pulled his finger slowly from between my lips, as my tongue swirled around the digit. Once it was out, I swallowed the pill.

"I'll take one for the team."

I rose up on my elbow and cupped the back of his neck, guiding him to my lips. Soft touches at first, then tongues getting into the act. He smelled delicious, like garlic and oregano. I could even taste it on his lips and his tongue. His hand smoothed over my chest then his finger found my nipple beneath my T-shirt. The pleasure was sharp and quick as he pinched the nipple.

Between our lips, he muttered, “Dinner’s going to burn if I get too distracted.”

I licked at his lips. “*Mmmm*, from what I can taste, it would be a waste. Maybe I should take you from behind while you’re cooking.” I ran my hand over his chest, down his stomach and squeezed his cock through his sweats. He whimpered, and I grinned.

“Ah shit,” he gasped as I squeezed his shaft again. “I-I... I invited your sister to dinner.”

I sat back and leveled a glare at him, my lust dissipating. “Excuse me?”

He dropped his hands into his lap. “I invited Wendy to dinner. It was a surprise.”

And just like that the bubble around us popped. My sister was coming over. Reality would storm back into my home. Not that I didn’t want to see Wendy. I did, but I’d wanted it to be just me and Jacob for as long as it could be.

He chewed on his bottom lip as I contemplated my reaction, because my gut was going for anger along with some yelling. My heart (*yeah, my heart was now having a say in things*) was screaming to stop and think of his motives.

“Are you mad? I was going to ask first, but she really wanted to see you, and I knew you probably wouldn’t agree...” His eyes widened, comically, with a realization. “Which I should have taken as a clue to ask.”

“Stop,” I said, a bit too forcefully, because he was working himself up.

The doorbell rang. The perfect opportunity to get away from him, because I didn’t want to yell and carry on. It was right there under the surface. If only he knew how much I hated surprises.

I worked my way off the couch and headed for the door, which I yanked open. Wendy grinned almost giddily. She was dressed as if she’d just come from the office, grey pantsuit, blonde hair in a neat knot at the back of her neck. She probably had. I’d worked most Sundays if I hadn’t been out playing sports or climbing.

“Imagine my surprise when I called Jacob and he asked me to come to dinner, wanting to surprise you.” She gave me a mock look of surprise. “Oh, wait, now that I think of it, you aren’t very fond of surprises, are you?”

I heaved a breath and gritted my teeth. Yeah, she’d known that already. She’d thrown me a surprise party for my last birthday. When a room full of guests had shouted “*surprise*,” I’d turned around and walked out. My father had to order me back in. That had only been to save himself from looking bad in front of the guests. Just my father being at an event to celebrate my birth had been somewhat of an apocalyptic occurrence, and since my life was lived to please my father, well, I stayed.

My sister’s goal in life had always been to push my rigid boundaries (and buttons) despite the consequences. She was expecting a blowout, but I wasn’t about to let her get the best of me. We were competitive like that.

I smiled back. “Thank you for coming to dinner. It’s so nice to see you.” I leaned in and kissed her cheek. “Come in.”

She huffed and then smirked. “Fucking liar,” she whispered and headed for the living room.

I closed the door and worked on my fake façade, smiling and rolling my shoulders, appearing relaxed even though I felt off balance and deceived. Jacob hadn’t known that I didn’t like things thrown in my lap without prior notice. What had he said about seeing other people’s perspective or situations? God, this relationship (Was it a relationship?) seemed to be a race to see how fast I could screw it up. Well, I wasn’t going to because my new definition of winning was going to be “not fucking it up.”

Satisfied, I strolled into the living room. I was met with a continuation of Wendy’s gushing giddiness and Jacob’s apparent trepidation for my reaction. I could have knocked him over when I strolled up to him, wrapped my arm around his shoulder, and laid a wet, sloppy kiss on his lips.

“Dinner smells awesome, baby. Let’s eat.” I left both of them gaping and went into the kitchen, a little too smug for my own good.

The table was already set, so I grabbed wine for my sister and a beer for Jacob. I got myself water because I’d just taken my pain meds. Jacob went to the stove to remove the food from the oven. Wendy came to the table, sidling up close to me as I uncorked the wine.

“Well, baby brother, I have to say, you’re looking really good.”

I was about to give her a smart-ass comeback until I looked at her. Shit, her eyes were glassy, and her lips were quivering, and my flight reflex kicked in.

“I... um... thanks.”

I planted my feet firmly but ducked my head in the guise of pouring her drink. I was the one who *needed* the drink. Every instinctual response from me was to push them away and let my anger loose. I thought climbing Lhotse was hard. Apparently, acting like someone who wasn't a self-centered asshole was more difficult than climbing a brutal mountain.

Jacob placed a pan of what looked to be lasagna on the table. “Ta-da.”

Wendy *oohed* and *aahed* and sat. I grinned at Jacob, and he visibly relaxed. “Thanks for cooking. It looks great.”

He nodded, and we both sat next to one another across from Wendy. She took a drink of her wine while I served up steaming squares of cheesy goodness. I was quite the glutton for Italian food.

“So, you two are fucking now?”

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## Chapter 14

Jacob choked on his beer, then gagged.

I rolled my eyes. “Behave,” I told her, pointing the spatula at her.

We tended to try and get the better of each other, but it had been a long time since we’d actually been at ease with one another to do so.

Jacob coughed into his napkin, tears rimming his eyes, face bright red. “You did that on purpose.”

“I plead the Fifth,” she said, eyes looking anywhere but Jacob.

“Bitch,” Jacob muttered and sniffed. It was Wendy’s turn to roll her eyes.

I frowned. I knew that Wendy had dated Jacob’s brother in high school, but these two were acting a bit too chummy. Deciding to hold my suspicions pending further evidence, I dug into my dinner, savoring the burst of garlic and the perfect balance of cheeses.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Jacob eyeing me warily, no doubt waiting for my culinary reaction.

I leaned close to him. “Perfection. You’ve definitely earned a reward later.”

He leaned closer, and I nuzzled his ear and licked the whirl, which I knew drove him crazy. He shuddered, and I thought of all the deviously pleasurable things I could do to him later. Then, I remembered he was going home after dinner, and I hated it. Hated it with every part of me, and wanted to beg him to stay.

I straightened in my chair and caught a glimpse of Wendy’s questioning, confused expression. She almost looked scared. After that, I was quiet. Not quieter than usual, but I was lost somewhere between *how did I become so pathetic, smitten and weak so quickly* and *how could I live without this man here with me*. He’d only come back into my life two weeks ago, and until Friday night, we hadn’t even been together except for a mutual rub-off.

Jacob nudged me with his elbow as Wendy was bringing her plate to the sink. “You okay?”

I smiled weakly. “Yup. I’m just tired.”

Not a lie, and my back was starting that telltale tingling that said I needed to lie down. But that was all second to my inner torment, which turned into thoughts that were irrational but satisfied that angry, loner part of me.

*Jacob's only here because he feels sorry for me.*

*Once he's sick of me, he'll move on.*

*No one will ever want me because I'm ugly and disgusting.*

They were so automatic I didn't even have to work to raise them, and I didn't deny their claims.

"How about you lie on the couch while Wendy and I take care of this mess?" Jacob offered, his hand rubbing circles over my back. I was addicted to his touch.

*Only because no one has touched me for such a long time. I don't need him. I don't need anyone.*

*Yes, I do. I need him,* I replied to that stupid part of my brain. I needed him so badly it scared me because it wouldn't last. It was just a given.

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In the end, Jacob did leave. I held on long enough and didn't beg him to stay. Now that he was gone, the house was once again large, imposing, and cold.

"I'll call you tomorrow," he'd said as he pecked my lips and walked out the front door.

I hated how up and down my emotions were. Vacillating between happy, horny, defiant, angry, sad, lonely. It was as if all of the emotions I'd ignored my entire life were fighting to get playtime. I was pulling for happy and horny, but I was just exhausted and my back ached. I decided sleep might give me a reprieve.

As I climbed into bed, images from that morning, waking wrapped around Jacob's warm body, pushed arousal through my tiredness: His desirable body with pale skin and a spattering of red hairs here and there... a large patch around his cock. Definitely a true Irish redhead. Not the bright, garish red some men had, but a warm amber, like his eyes. Well-defined muscles, not bulky, but enough to know he cared about his body. Long, slender fingers that had done wicked things to my touch-starved body.

Reaching into my boxers, I ran my palm over my cock, the dry friction edgy and satisfying. A few strokes with the vision of my lover, and I was hard and ready for him. So I replayed that morning in my head as I stroked my cock leisurely.



*I spooned behind him, my morning wood poking into his back. Floating in a dreamy state and almost awake, I rubbed my erection against him, nearly moaning from the perfect pressure. He shifted in his sleep, instinctually pushing back against me, his breathing still deep. I ran my hand over his chest, his stiff nipples tickling the sensitive skin of my palm. With one finger, I circled the end of the nub, ever so lightly, in tiny circles. His breath hitched, and I swore my cock pumped out a gob of precum into my briefs. My pulse roared in my ears and my cock filled just from teasing my lover in his sleep.*

*Lifting my head, I nuzzled into his neck. The musky sweaty scent from our night of lovemaking still remained. I licked his salty skin and then licked again as my hand caressed his stomach. I loved that his stomach was tight yet soft. Dipping below the waistband of his briefs, his cock was soft, giving credence to the hope that he was still asleep. I wanted to be the one who brought him from being unaroused to full arousal. I wanted to feel his cock grow under my touch.*

*I wrapped my fingers around his soft limpness. I shivered in anticipation. As I fondled him, I ground my cock gently against his ass. Slow easy strokes of his shaft, and he shifted again and grunted. His eyes were still closed, but I could see them shifting under his eyelids. I groaned softly as my thumb ran over his cock head. Gradually, blood filled his shaft, the excitement of that action more erotic than even fucking. I gazed at his placid face. His mouth twitched, his eyes still moving beneath his lids. This was perfect. This was everything.*

*He was everything.*

*Kissing his cheek then his neck, I sucked up small spots, increasing my jacking. He started to come around. His back arching, he pushed into my fist with a whimper. I hooked my heel around his calf and opened his legs farther. He moaned as I squeezed the head of his cock.*

*“Fucking beautiful,” I whispered in his ear.*

*He turned his head and sought out my lips. Reaching his face over his shoulder, I shoved my tongue into his mouth. He bucked his hips, spearing his cock into my fist, desperate for more. He moaned into my mouth. Our breaths forced through our noses, not wanting to stop. When he broke away, he begged me to fuck him, just as we were. He reached over and pulled a lubed condom from the nightstand, ripped the foil wrapper open with his teeth, and then handed it to me.*

*Quickly, I pushed down the front of my boxers and rolled it on. I lowered the back of his briefs and guided my cock between his ass cheeks. Painstakingly*

*slowly, I pushed into him. He groaned as I broke through. I hissed through my teeth as my cock made a steady entrance, sliding farther, farther. We were silent, nearly still, until my groin rested against his ass. I wrapped my arms tightly around him, pulling him against my chest, my leg thrown over his thigh, my face next to his, our breaths shallow and sharp. I rocked my hips, my movements fluid, almost rhythmic. This wasn't a race. We were making love, sweet beautiful love, and my heart was unfolding in my chest, opening in the sunshine of what Jacob was giving to me.*

*Reaching back, he placed his hand on my hip, not guiding, but just feeling the gentle glide. My hand found his cock again and he whispered, "Yes, oh... please," as I stroked him in time with my thrusts. Unrushed, unfettered by desperate need, we were, in that moment, satisfied to ride the pleasure. He arched his back again, groaning so sweetly.*

*"Come for me," I whispered, continuing my languid thrusts but increasing the pulls on his cock.*

*His chest rose and fell rapidly, his eyes clamped shut as I worked him. His cock surged under my palm, and his body tensed as he silently shot cum over his stomach. I stroked him through the spasms and then gasped, unloading my own cum into the condom. A swirling light filled my vision. In the beauty of the moment, three words almost fell off my tongue, and I nearly jerked away in surprise. No one could fall in love after two weeks, right? I bit down on my tongue. I was mistaking lust and caring and intimacy for love. But I knew right then that I could easily fall in love with him. It was just a matter of time.*

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By morning I was a wreck. Wandering my house, I had no clue what to focus on. My mind was all over the place, as if it had fallen apart and was trying to put itself back together. The confusion was numbing and even making coffee had been a trying task. The happy bubble from the day before had popped and dissipated. I had been left hurtling back toward the earth, and I hated the uncertainty and the lack of direction. I wanted to cry and laugh at the same time. I gripped my hair tight in my fists.

*Focus. Do something. Anything.*

I was spinning and trying to grab onto anything to make it stop. When had my life gotten so far out of control? The accident? *No.* Until Jacob had come into my life, I'd been fine.

*Jesus, Paul, that's further from the truth than anything you've ever told yourself.*

It was Jacob, wasn't it? But when he'd been there all weekend, I hadn't been spinning. He'd kept me level. Whenever I'd veered off the path, he'd brought me back. Did that mean I couldn't live my life without him? That I was dependent on him? The thought roiled my gut. Dependent, needy. That wasn't me. That just wasn't.

Right then, I didn't care. I had to feel that safety and comfort again. I had to call him, get him to come over, anything to right what was terribly wrong. Wait. Running to him wasn't okay.

*Get a grip.*

My head continued whirling, and I tried to take in a deep breath. Wasn't working. The argument of calling or not calling raged in my head. Then the phone rang. Nearly tripping to get to it, I tried not sounding desperate as I answered.

"Hello."

"Paul." My father. *Shit*. I'd been ignoring his calls.

"Hi, Dad." Shaky voice. He'd love that.

"I've been calling you for over a week. What the hell is going on?"

I sputtered and tried to answer but nothing came out.

"We need to talk. I want you in my office in an hour. Mark will pick you up."

"But, Dad, I..."

And then I realized he'd hung up. I cocked my arm back to throw the phone but stopped. Closing my eyes, I gently laid the phone on the counter. My father only ever called me into his office for one reason. To tell me I'd done something wrong.

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## Chapter 15

I'd convinced myself that going to see my father was good. It was something to focus on, something concrete I could do to get my head on straight. My father had always been able to see what I was doing wrong, where I was erring, and get me back on track.

I ran my hand over my chin. Stubble. Looking down, I was wearing some of the rattiest clothes I had—ripped jeans and an old, worn band T-shirt. No way was I meeting the old man like that.

Within forty five minutes, I was straightening my tie and smoothing my gray suit jacket. I'd even done a quick spit shine on my shoes. The doorbell rang, and I grabbed my briefcase as I'd done hundreds of times before heading to work. Opening the door, I found Mark standing on the portico. When he eyed me in the suit, he raised a brow and quickly recovered. Yeah, I bet I looked way different than I had a couple of weeks ago.

“Are you returning to work, Mr. Breaux?”

Confidently, I said, “Soon, Mark.”

He smiled, and I settled into the front seat of the car. Another surprise for him and for me as well. To distract myself from my fear about where I was sitting, I pretended to read a file from my briefcase. I also engaged Mark in small talk about the office: who was working what case, who was new, who was gone. He seemed genuinely interested in my thoughts. I was intrigued by his philosophies on some of the current cases. He seemed to understand not only the intricacies of the law but also the people involved. He reminded me of Jacob in that way.

My anxiety stayed low, and my distraction techniques had worked. As I entered the building, the security guard, Ernie, greeted me with a hearty handshake. He was an older man, always smiling, a real people person. He commented on how good it was to have me back, and I had to correct his assumption. Anyway, he was glad to see me and hoped that I returned soon.

As we rode in the elevator, I caught my reflection in the shiny brass of the doors. I hadn't truly seen my reflection since before the accident—well once, and that mirror hadn't survived the encounter. My gaze was glued on the scar reaching from my temple over my cheek, branching off onto my chin and jaw.

The distortion and yellowing color of the metal didn't highlight the deep red color. It was there for everyone to see. I'd forgotten and strode in there like the man I had been.

"It's not that bad. *Really*," Mark said quietly. Maybe he thought because I'd spoken to him in the car he now had the right to comment.

I reared back like a snake that had been stepped on and struck. "Who asked you?"

He flinched but didn't reply, turning his gaze forward. Immediately, I felt like an ass. He'd never been anything but nice to me, and I was an ass. Unfortunately, my panic was overtaking my mind. When the door opened, I turned left instead of right, heading to the bathroom. I needed a moment to compose myself and make a plan.

"Paul, where are you going?"

My father's voice stopped me in my tracks.

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## Chapter 16

When I turned, it seemed as if the entire office full of people were looking at me from their cubicles. Well, at least the paralegals and secretaries who occupied them. A few attorneys and, shit, Tucker Manley, who I'd attended law school with. One of the friends who'd abandoned—I mean—who I'd pushed away.

"Paul," Tucker (in all of his handsome, nonscarred glory) said, approaching me with his hand out. Automatically, I took it. "Great to see you. You look good."

I frowned at him. *Good?* I looked fucking hideous. "Thanks," I mumbled. Some people were smiling, some wide-eyed, some whispering. Jesus, I was on display.

"My office, Paul. Now." My father turned on his heels and disappeared through his door.

It was something he had said to me hundreds of times since I was a small boy. Right then, it felt different. Harsher. Colder.

I ducked my head and followed, suddenly wishing I hadn't bothered with the suit. You could put fancy hubcaps on a dented and scratched car, but in the end, it was still dented and scratched.

I closed the door as I entered his office. My father was already sitting behind that large oak desk I'd always been so jealous of. To me, it had been a sign of success. But wasn't it just a sign of having enough money to buy it? I rubbed my fingers over my scar. It would never go away. *Never*. For some reason, the souvenir from my accident hadn't seemed so permanent until that moment. I felt as if I'd been slapped. Hard.

"Sit down."

My body obeyed without thought. I hadn't seen my father but twice over the past year. Once, he'd come to my house under the guise of talking about my return to work. The other time had been by accident at the hospital. I had a doctor's appointment, and he was visiting Frederick Latmore, a senior partner in our firm, who'd suffered a second heart attack. He was another twelve-hours-a-day seven-days-a-week work alumnus. He'd been forced to retire. His was the partner position currently open.

My partner position.

My father seemed grayer now, and more lines covered his face, but he was still fit, still in control. His imposing manner wasn't diminished by the monster desk but enhanced by it. Many a man had cowered before him, but not me. Not until now.

"I asked you to come here so I could see you in person. I've been talking to your sister."

I wanted to roll my eyes.

"I'm doing better," I stated flatly.

He pursed his lips. "It's been a year, Paul. From what I can see, you look well. I'm not sure what has kept you from your job for so long."

I waited and then wondered if he had actually phrased that as a question.

He stood and walked to the window, hands behind his back, standing tall, gazing out over the city. Sort of dramatic but he had always tended toward theatrical statements, especially in court. He was a masterful lawyer and always crafted each word and motion as part of a larger performance.

"What of your case?"

Four simple words that filled me with dread. I'd ignored it for weeks, even thought maybe it wasn't worth the fight. I needed to move on, but...

"I'm not sure it's worth pursuing." Straightforward and simple.

He turned his upper body and raised a brow. "*You* think?"

I shifted uneasily.

"For over five months, I've watched you struggle with this case that a first-year law student could win. Waited for you to get back into the game. Why do you think I've allowed this to drag on for so long?"

*Allowed?* I opened my mouth as that lack of focus hit me again. He allowed me to what?

"I run a billion dollar law firm because I employ the best. Because I weed out the weak and promote those who can win. When was the last time you won anything, sonny boy?"

Friday night. I won Jacob's attention. I won a chance to have him in my life. I won despite my weakness and my insecurity and my scars. And I wanted to believe that he truly wanted me despite the scars and the...

“I don’t know what’s happened to you. You were a promising lawyer on the way to the top. I’ve held Latmore’s partner position open for you, counting on you to pull it together. I can’t wait any longer.”

I glared at him, and for the first time, my anger rose. I’d always been too busy trying to gain his approval and love to get angry.

“So, I’m not going to make partner?”

“You can’t make partner if you can’t win a freshman case.”

“Give me another case and I’ll win it for you, just not that one.” It was too close to home, too filled with emotions and pain and bad memories.

“No. This is the case you have to win. If you don’t, Taylor will be offered the partner position. You have until the end of the month. The hearing starts on the thirtieth.”

“You can’t make him partner. That’s my position. I worked for it. I *worked* my ass off for this firm. I did everything you asked. Worked twelve hour days. I should have made partner two years ago, but you gave it to someone else.”

“They deserved it more.”

“What if I get a settlement?” Maybe that could work. Offer the insurance company of the driver a settlement and end it.

“Take the coward’s way out?” my father scoffed.

What was I doing? My goal for ten years had been to become a partner in this firm. Even before truly understanding what that meant, I’d wanted it. Now my father was going to try and take my dream away?

“Your sister says you’re seeing someone.”

I nodded.

He pursed his lips then said, “It’s time for you to decide what you want, Paul. You can have it all. Work, a relationship, the life you’ve wanted. Don’t throw away everything you’ve worked for.”

*Everything I had worked for.* I trembled, and I thought it had to be fear. I *had* to make partner. If not, I’d be a failure. A bigger one than I already was. All because of Clyde Spaulding. I turned my anger to him. He was going to pay for what he’d done. That’s what I needed to put all of this behind me. And when I was done, I’d have my old life back, have Jacob, and show my father that I could have it all and make him proud.



At home, I ripped off my tie and chucked my jacket. My ire had been rising with each passing minute. I'd absconded with Mark to assist me with the case. If I was going to pull this off, I was going to need his help. It was going to be a long night. In the kitchen, I set the coffee to brew. Glancing at the clock, I noted it was only three PM. When I returned to the dining room, Mark was sorting the papers that I'd scooped up off the floor and dumped onto the table after my hissy fit.

"Yeah, I kind of got pissed and well..."

Mark nodded but said nothing. I was sure he was afraid to get on my bad side, which was good. He'd work harder.

"We have a ton of work to do in a short period of time. I need someone who can put in the time and get things done without question. When I win this case, I'm going to make partner." That got his attention. *Good.* Every partner had his favorite junior lawyers. If you were one of them, you were golden and on track for a quick rise in the firm.

"I'm single."

The sign of a dedicated junior lawyer, and it told me everything I needed to know. He was in.

"Let's dig in."

We worked through the night with pots of coffee and leftover lasagna. At two AM, we finally had the paperwork sorted, categorized, and a plan for moving forward. It was then that we broke for sleep. I realized I'd missed my evening dose of meds and swallowed them down with a glass of water. That's when I saw my cell on the counter. I'd shut off the house phone and had been so engrossed in my work, I'd ignored my cell. Hitting the home button, I had six missed calls. Four from Jacob, two from Wendy. It was too late to call anyone so I headed to bed for a few hours of sleep.

I woke a little after seven, stiff and in pain but with a new purpose in life. It felt good to have a goal. Maybe my life was turning around. Since my father had been holding back documents and information the firm had obtained, a courier would drop off the additional files by seven thirty. I stood and stretched my back, which burned. My leg was partially numb so I walked around to get the blood flowing. My limp was more pronounced, probably due to taking my meds late. Hopefully, we could finalize what we needed to move forward with the trial. My father had kept up with the motions and filings. I wondered if he would have gone on with the case if I hadn't pulled my head out of my ass.

The doorbell rang as I was heading into the kitchen. The smell of coffee meant Mark must have risen already. He came out of the kitchen and headed to the door. “I’ll get it. Must be the courier. Head into the dining room, and I’ll bring you some coffee.”

To be young again and that energetic.

I veered into the dining room, reviewing my notes from yesterday, when I heard Jacob’s voice.

He rushed into the room, harried and concerned and looking so edible. I smiled, but he didn’t return the sentiment.

“I’ve been trying to call you and text you and email you since last night. I was worried when you didn’t answer.”

I smiled and pulled him close. He smelled fresh from the shower. “I’m fine. Working a case with Mark from the office. We lost track of time, and I didn’t get to bed until late.”

He looked to Mark and then to me and frowned. “You’ve gone back to work?” I could see that look in his eyes. *Are you ready?* they seemed to ask.

“This is my case. I’ve been working on it for months.”

Again the confusion. I released him and put down the papers I had been holding. “The suit against the driver of the truck that hit me.”

His eyes widened in surprise. “You’re suing, Clyde?”

I nodded and knew right then from his expression this was going to be an issue for him. But once I explained, he’d understand. “Yes. He shouldn’t have been driving that day. He’d already had two heart attacks and has congestive heart failure. He was an accident waiting to happen.”

“So you’re suing him for having a heart attack?” He crossed his arms in a surely pissed off style.

“I’m suing him for being negligent. And I’m suing his insurance company for insuring someone who shouldn’t have been driving. And I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s still driving. What if he kills someone next time?” Truthfully, he had to see the logic.

“Is there anyone you aren’t suing?” He jabbed his finger at me. “Do you even know what he’s been through? Why he was driving that night? Do you even know this man? Because I do.”

Jacob's ire only raised my own. "What does it matter why? He was driving when he shouldn't have been, and he needs to pay for what happened!"

Jacob was grinding his teeth. I could see his muscles bulging in his jaw. "Does this have anything to do with your father?"

I frowned. "What're you talking about?"

"I called Wendy, and she said you were going to see your father yesterday. I tried to call you all day yesterday. So you went to see him?"

I nodded and was about to tell him what my father had said, but he cut me off.

"Are you doing this because of him?" He looked exasperated, much like Wendy did when we had discussions about our father.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "What else did you and Wendy talk about?" I'd had my suspicions from the beginning that maybe she'd shared more about me with Jacob than I'd thought.

"What do you mean?" he asked and, if he hadn't sounded so guilty to me, I might have backed down.

I balled my fists at my sides. "I mean, how much of this was rigged by you and her?"

"What are—"

"How much did she tell you about poor Paul?"

"She didn't—"

"How sorry did you feel for me when you came here?" I stepped around the table, moving toward him, and that far off voice in my head screamed at me to stop before I screwed everything up. But I didn't listen. I had caught hold of what I wanted to believe was the truth, and I was going to "Perry Mason" it out of him. "Did you think I was an easy catch? Or did you see me as a challenge? Paul Breaux, your high school crush, big man above your reach, now a pathetic excuse for a human being. Was that your plan? Move in and 'save' me when no one else could, lower me to your level so you could finally have what you wanted?"

His eyes narrowed, but other than that, he was very still. "And what did I want, Paul?" His voice was low. I couldn't tell if it was because my suspicions were right, or he was so pissed that he was totally in control.

I had his jugular in sight, so I went in for the kill. “Me. You couldn’t get me when I was successful and good looking, so you saw this as an opportunity, thinking no one would want me anyway.”

The way he looked at me, as if he didn’t even know me, had never really known me at all, was wrong. He was supposed to scream back, defend himself, deny it all, but he just stared at me for a long moment as I stood my ground.

*Apologize you idiot! Beg him for forgiveness! Grovel at his feet!*

Jacob looked to Mark, who only stared at the floor uncomfortably.

Jacob backed up, eyes still on me, as if he was trying to believe I’d really said it. I had and I was sure I regretted it. I needed time to figure that out, but Jacob turned and walked to the front door. He grabbed the doorknob, head down for a moment, and then he looked at me. “I can’t believe I ever thought I was in love with you.”

And he left.

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## Chapter 17

I choked on a breath then composed myself. I was numb right down to my soul.

Mark cocked his head and was staring off into the kitchen. “Was that your boyfriend?”

The question was surprising. “I don’t think so anymore.”

“No, I mean before you cut him down to size and then reached into his chest and ripped his heart out.” Mark’s gaze wasn’t accusatory or harsh. Just questioning.

I gaped, mouth moving, but no sound coming out. Oh God, what had I done?

Just then, the doorbell rang, and I jumped as if someone had snuck up behind me and shouted “*boo*.” Maybe the last ten minutes had been some kind of fugue. Maybe that ugly scene hadn’t really happened, and this was my second chance. I rushed to the door and yanked it open. Not Jacob. It was the courier with the files I’d requested.

I walked away without saying a word, into the living room and out the back door. I didn’t know what to do, but I knew that no matter what I did, I’d severed what little I’d had with Jacob. What I’d accused him of, what I’d said, was unforgivable, even for Jacob. I was sure that he was lamenting the day he’d ever met me, now seeing that the man he’d thought I was had been a fallacy. A fantasy. A delusion.

Right then, I felt as if he’d never even existed.

All I had left was being a lawyer. So I returned to the dining room and settled down to work. I’d win this case and the next and then the next, and someday they would be talking about the amazing lawyer Paul Breaux, even better than his father had been. A star. A winner.

“Are you still going to work on this case?” Mark asked. He stood at the end of the table, the box the courier had brought before him.

I frowned. “Of course, I’m still going to work. We have a case to win. Then I’ll be a partner and I’ll show him what he’s missing out on.” That’s right. Jacob would lament the fact that he’d ever felt sorry for me, that he’d walked out.

Mark was quiet for a moment as I took the box and moved it to my side of the table. With this information, I would have what I needed to win my case. I didn't want Jacob Divine despite what my heart was shouting at my brain.

"He looked so crushed. You were so..."

I raised a brow at him in warning, daring him to go on.

"Harsh. I mean, is this really all worth it if you lose him?"

I wasn't sure why he was talking, but he did seem to think I wanted his opinion on more than one occasion. "Who do you—"

"I know this guy had a heart attack and caused the accident, but don't we ever look at the circumstantial evidence?" He moved to the box and grabbed a file from inside, holding it up. He looked truly perplexed. "I became a lawyer to help people. I was the top of my class, but what I've seen at the firm... They ignore what's right and place guilt and..." He dropped the file and appeared weary, disillusioned. He looked so young. "And this case... I'm really sorry, Mr. Breaux, about what happened to you. It's awful, but Mr. Spaulding, he was trying to get to his wife. To be there with her." He choked a bit. "And then the accident happened and he didn't get to."

His eyes looked glassy. Was this kid really that naïve?

"I know I'm out of line, but doesn't that mean anything to you?"

I was confused by his compassion for the man. "He shouldn't have been driving, no matter what. He was negligent, and according to the law, negligence is grounds for a civil lawsuit." I knew the law. I knew my rights.

He sighed and ran his hands through his hair. "He was married for forty-nine years, and he wasn't there when she died."

My heart pounded in my ears, and I thought my vision was fading. Understanding hit me like a car slamming into a wall at eighty miles an hour. "Where was he going when he had his heart attack?"

Mark looked perplexed.

I had to know. "Where was Clyde Spaulding going when he caused... I mean, when he hit me?"

"To the hospital. His wife, she'd had a stroke two days earlier. Mr. Spaulding had taken a cab home that afternoon, and then the nurse called. She told him that she was failing fast and to get to the hospital. You know the stupid cabs around here. They take forever to get anywhere."

I closed my eyes. Forty-nine years and he hadn't gotten to say good-bye. She'd died without her husband by her side. The stress of getting to her in time probably had caused the heart attack.

Jacob's voice rang as clear in my head, as if he were standing right next to me. *I used to try and place myself in the situations I found my patients in... I found that wasn't enough... So I get to know them, ask them questions about their lives, their families, their triumphs and tragedies. And hopefully, I can understand.*

I think I made it to the bathroom before I lost what little coffee I had in my stomach. I was going to sue a man who was trying to get to his wife before she died. And I hadn't known. In all of the information I had requested, in all of the background I'd had others collect, that information had never...

"Fuck me," I whispered and spit more of the foul bile taste into the toilet.

My father had kept it from me.

I flushed the toilet then brushed my teeth. When I left the bathroom, Mark was still standing by the table. He looked like a kid whose card tower that he'd worked on for half of his life had been blown down. I went to the closet at the bottom of the stairs and pulled out two empty boxes.

Mark watched me return to the dining room. I picked up a pile of papers and dropped them into a box. Systematically, I shoved in every piece of paper. The entirety of my five months of work fit into two boxes. I stacked them on top of the box the courier had brought.

"Take these back to my father. Tell him there's no case. I won't be suing anyone." I turned to walk away and then paused. "And kid, get out of there now, while you still have that heart in your chest. If you don't, my father will turn it to stone and you'll..." I snorted. "You'll end up like me."

"Like you?"

"Heartless and alone."

In the living room, I grabbed a bottle of beer from the fridge, popped the top, and slammed the entire thing down. I had at least a case in there. I was going to get really drunk.

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The phone was ringing, but my eyes were glued shut. I wasn't sure what time it was or where I was for that matter. All I knew was that it was hard and uncomfortable, and if I didn't move, I was going to pay for it. Trying to lift my

head and failing, my head pounding, my mouth tasting like I hadn't brushed my teeth in a week, my stomach roiling, I went back to sleep.

Icy wetness covered my head. I sucked in a breath, and liquid went up my nose and down my throat. I flailed, certain I was drowning. Coughing and sputtering, I lost my balance and fell.

"Ahh!" And then I was down on my stomach on my stone patio. And I was drenched.

"About time you woke up."

I groaned. "Why the fuck did you throw water on me?" Why was my voice so whiny?

My sister stepped near my head and crouched down. "Because kicking you didn't get the response I wanted. Care to explain the comatose state, the lack of answering your phone, and why you're sleeping on your patio surrounded by more empty beer bottles than a frat party?"

I grunted and rose on my hands and knees. My head pounded so hard that I was sure my eyeballs were going to pop out. "Not that many."

"One is too many. You're on some heavy-duty meds. You aren't supposed to drink."

I shook my head and rose, carefully, slowly, until I could park my ass on the lounge chair. "Well, it's a good thing I haven't taken any since... I don't really remember. Although, I'd kill for some Ibuprofen."

Wendy's shoes clacked across the stone as she disappeared into the house. A few minutes later, she returned with a glass of water and three pills.

"Thanks. I knew I loved you for a reason." I swallowed them and drained the water.

"Yeah, well apparently I'm the only one. I heard you told Dad you weren't pursuing your case."

I rubbed at my temples. "Ahh, yes. The disappointment of the son."

"I'm pretty sure a few small islands off the coast of California disappeared from the earthquakes set off by his yelling. And you sent poor Mark to the lion's den as the sacrificial lamb."

I groaned. "Fuck, I didn't think. I was just so... I've had it, Wendy."



She was silent, and I peered at her through the slits in my eyelids. She wasn't dressed in her usual dress suit. Actually, she was wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. The only time I'd seen her dressed like that in the past five years was when she was playing on the women's softball team.

"It's about time. But I'm guessing that this," she waved her hand indicating the empty beer bottles, "has nothing to do with Dad."

I curled in on myself, my hands cradling my head. "I fucked everything up with Jacob."

She laughed. "What's new? Just call him and apologize. Jeez, Paul, do you have to be such a drama queen?"

I chuckled dryly. "Oh, there's no fixing this." I didn't think I'd been lower since my accident. I'd had a chance at happiness, and I ruined it because of my father. "Jacob didn't tell you?"

She shook her head. Foolishly, I told her what had happened, all of the vile and mean things I'd said. The look on Jacob's face. Something I'd never forget, because I'd hurt someone who meant something to me, who'd wanted me, and I threw him away.

The smack on my head was unexpected and hurt like hell. "Oww, hey!"

"Of all of the stupid, asinine, bullheaded, thoughtless, idiotic... *stupid* things to say. Do you just sit around making this shit up?"

I gaped at her. Making it up? "I didn't make it up. You two are friends, and I don't know what you're saying behind my back."

Another swat. "Jesus, Wendy, cut it out!"

"No, dipshit, the part about him taking advantage of you, seeing this as an opportunity to get what he always wanted. Well, from the first time he told me he'd kissed you, I told him he was fucking crazy for wanting anything to do with you. Do you think he'd listen to me? No!"

She paced and fumed and paced some more. "I told him you were shallow and self-centered and arrogant and, at times, a dickhead who had to be the best, fuck everyone else."

"Hey!"

"He wouldn't listen. What do I know? He kept telling me that deep down you were a different person. He'd seen it back in high school, and he saw it

even now. I don't know who he's talking about because a leopard doesn't change its spots, you know.

"Tell me how you really feel, why don't you?" Her low opinion of me was a harsh blow. She'd never been so harsh. It was like she didn't even like me.

"I told him you couldn't be bothered with a relationship. You saw it as being too needy. That you were all about your career and succeeding, and you couldn't possibly put anyone before yourself—"

"Yes, I can," I interjected.

"You couldn't possibly care about anyone but yourself."

"I can too!" I was angry that she thought so low of me.

"You'd never stop thinking about yourself long enough to fall for anyone."

"Yes, I can. I mean, *I did!*"

"You could never love anyone because you couldn't even love yourself."

Those words hit me hard, so hard I wasn't sure I could breathe. I didn't love myself. I loathed myself and what I'd become. Could I love someone if I didn't even love myself? I didn't know, and I hated not knowing.

I hung my head. "I care about him, Wendy. He came into my life and pushed the shit aside and made a place for himself. But I don't know how to keep him. I've never known how to keep someone because they all leave... I don't want him to leave."

"Then tell him," she whispered. "Tell him the truth, and that he's worth it, and that you can't be the man he thinks you can without him."

"But what you said... about me..."

She smiled. "That's what you think of yourself, Paul." Wendy sat next to me and put her arm around my shoulder. Instead of pushing her away as I would have in the past, I leaned into her. "One time or another, you've said all of it. That's what you think of yourself. And you know what? The only one you need to convince that you aren't that person, is you."

I heaved a sigh and sat. "Easier said than done."

"I didn't abandon you and neither did Mom or your friends. We were always there, but you built that wall so high around yourself that we were hard to see." She sniffed. "I love you, little brother, always have, and I'm here for whatever you need."

A tear escaped down my cheek, and I swiped it away. “Give me a ride to Jacob’s?”

She pursed her lips, her gaze on the floor. Then she slapped her thighs and stood. “Nope.”

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## Chapter 18

“What?”

“This is your mess to clean up. And I’m not getting involved.” I tried to interrupt, but she raised her hands and shushed me. “You are Paul Breaux, and you can do anything. Besides I have to go and find a new job.”

She walked toward the French doors, and I stood and went after her. “What do you mean ‘a new job’?”

She looked slyly at me over her shoulder. “You aren’t the only one who’s had it.”

I grinned. “Oh, hell. Dad must be shitting elephants.”

“And then some.” She winked and then left me to decide exactly how I was going to get to Jacob.

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I called, texted, and emailed Jacob enough times that I could potentially be arrested as a stalker. No answer after four hours. I’d called the ambulance service, but he was off for two days. The only other place I could check was his home. I paced around my car. The garage door open, keys in my hand. I was already shaking. I had his address. He lived in Latham while I was up in Niskayuna. Just get to Route Seven and it was less than twenty minutes away.

Easy, right?

I chuckled maniacally. What was I thinking? He probably wasn’t even home, and if he was, he wouldn’t open the door. But I couldn’t breathe thinking that I’d never see him again, even if it was just to apologize. I reached into my pocket for my cell phone—wasn’t leaving this time without it. Now I just had to leave.

“Just get in the stupid car!”

I yanked at my hair and glared at the shiny, new vehicle. What were the chances I’d get into another accident? If rational thinking were my only problem, I wouldn’t have one. Anger was my problem, and if I could just get angry enough, maybe...

Didn’t take long to tap into my rage thinking of how my father had worked me like a puppet on strings all my life. I yanked open the car door and sat inside. When the door slammed, I swore it took all of the air away.

“You’re okay. Nothing bad is going to happen. When you get to Jacob, everything will be fine.”

Focusing on Jacob, I put the key in the ignition and started the car. I flicked on the AC because I was sweating to death. Luckily, Wendy had backed the car into the garage when she’d brought it home after my last disastrous drive. As I pulled out into the sunshine, I called on something inside of me, something to let me do what I needed to do. Jacob was more important than my fear, more important than anything. Too bad it took me pushing him away to see that.

Five miles per hour down the drive and I was finally at the road.

“Here goes nothing.”

It was early in the day, so I wouldn’t be driving at night. *It hadn’t been night last time I went out either*, I reminded myself. Yeah, my brain really needed to shut up.

Pulling onto the road, I gripped the steering wheel with two hands. I was hunched forward, eyes darting about to avoid anything that might try to crash into me. My pulse raced and that familiar tingling started in my hands. My panic attacks tended to mirror some physical catastrophe I couldn’t control, like a heart attack or a stroke. One time, I’d even sworn I couldn’t move one side of my face, which the doctor said wasn’t physical but psychological.

I was doing twenty miles per hour in a forty-five. Stepping on the gas a bit, I sped up to thirty. Cars were blowing by me, and all I could think was, *Why are they going so fast? Don’t they know how dangerous driving is?*

That cooled my new found bravery. Me, Paul Breaux, terrified in my car. But I had every right to be terrified. I’d almost died in a car exactly like that one. First thing I was going to do after begging Jacob to give me a second chance was sell this car. I’d buy a huge SUV, a tank, or something larger where I didn’t feel so vulnerable.

A trip that should have taken twenty minutes had taken an hour and a half. The entire way my head spun. I did some hyperventilating, had some chest pain, was convinced my left side was totally numb and I was going to crash. Every car that came toward me I was convinced was coming right at me. I barely kept myself from veering off the road. When I finally pulled onto the end of what the GPS said was Jacob’s driveway, I parked the car, pulled the keys from the ignition, and threw them out of the window. Lowering my forehead to the steering wheel, I worked to collect myself piece by piece, sans

my dignity, because what I'd had of that had been strewn all over Route Seven. And I didn't care. I'd made it.

And then I smiled, albeit tremulously. I focused on slowing my breathing before I went to see if Jacob was home. I had to calm down. My racing heart couldn't take the added stress of coming all this way to have him not be there. It was highly possible that he wouldn't even let me in. I didn't even want to fathom that possibility.

"Paul?"

My head shot up, and I found Jacob leaning down, watching me. "Oh my God, Paul? Did you drive all the way here?"

"I... um... yeah... You didn't answer when I called or texted or emailed. I had to... I wanted to see you, but I..." I laughed. "I was trying to calm down before I knocked on the door."

He frowned, but I could tell he was assessing me, probably my current health or maybe even for drugs.

"I can't believe you drove all the way here. I'm sorry you wasted your trip on me."

My mouth fell open, and I felt as if a lance had been stuffed into my chest. "Wasted?"

He was indifferent, once again cold, and not very inviting. And had I expected him to be?

I turned and looked over the steering wheel. "I don't think I can drive home. I'm sorry." I scrambled for my phone. "I'll have to call someone to d-drive my c—" I choked then cleared my throat. I was terrified that I was going to cry right there. The stress of the trip and being rejected were too much. "Drive my car home."

"Okay," he said then started to walk back to the house.

*Go after him, you idiot!*

"Jacob!" I scrambled out of my seat belt and threw open the car door. "Please, wait!" I couldn't run so I did my best impression of the quick step and slide. "Just... wait!"

When he turned, that pain was back in his eyes, the pain that I'd caused yesterday with my baseless, selfish accusations. I had to do something,

anything, to right that wrong. He crossed his arms. The breeze ruffled his hair, and I couldn't help but smile slightly.

"Can we talk, please? I know you don't owe me that, but I'm begging you. *Please?*"

He looked away for a moment, and I could tell that he really wanted to deny me, kick me to the curb and get revenge. And I'd deserve it, take it (but not with grace) after I said anything to get him to want me again.

He nodded and started for the house again. I followed now, wishing I'd parked closer to the house. He lived in a small bungalow, one story, maybe a quarter the size of my monstrosity. The yard was a good size, and for the area, that meant higher prices. If he'd bought it, then he was doing well for himself.

He led me into a small living room with two leather couches and a large-screen TV. He motioned for me to sit which I did gratefully. I accepted his offer of water since I felt as dry as the Sahara. He sat on the couch across from me and waited.

"My sister says I hate myself." That wasn't even close to what I wanted or should have said.

"Okay."

I sighed. "I mean, I'm sorry for everything I said to you yesterday. I was so angry at my father and his stipulations for making partner, I couldn't..."

I watched as his attention waned, his body seeming to deflate. And I knew why. I was blaming someone else, again.

I stood and walked to him and got down on one knee before him. Eye to eye. And he looked surprised.

"I'm sorry for hurting you. What I said was inexcusable. But I have no one to blame but myself." That had his attention back, yet he was still giving me that stony-faced fuck-off look.

"What I said wasn't what I thought of you at all. It was what I thought of myself. You're the one who is too good for me. You're the one I didn't think I had a chance with. My scars..." I reached up and ran a fingertip over my cheek. "I let them define me. But what I found being around you was that I'm not just ugly on the outside, but on the inside, too. And I don't like myself that much."

It was as if I'd cut myself open and my insides, my heart, and my soul were bleeding out onto his lap. I was exposing myself, showing him what I'd never

shown another human being, and it was freeing. I was speaking for the first time from that scared and vulnerable and weak man I hid inside. At no other time in my life had I ever been so true to myself. And that brought tears to my eyes.

My lip trembled. “I don’t know why you said I had a good man inside of me, because I don’t see him. What I see isn’t very desirable or what anyone would ever want. And not just since the accident, but my whole life. I was able to deny all of that while I was busy conquering the courtroom and the world. But when that was taken away... Well, there was no denying it anymore.”

I sniffed and wiped a tear from my cheek but more followed. Jacob’s face had softened, and his posture was more relaxed. I hoped that meant he was considering what I was saying.

“Then you came along with your kind and caring heart, your generosity, your stability, your ability to focus on others, on who they are and what you can help them to be. When I let that beauty in behind my walls, and compared it to who I was, who I am, I didn’t like what I saw. It’s not an excuse for anything I did, really, because now I know...”

*Oh, shit.* My gut clenched, and my heart practically died inside of my chest. I knew what I had to do, and it was tearing my insides down piece by piece.

In an unexpected gesture, Jacob touched my arm and just made my task harder. “What do you know?”

I competed with the lump in my throat. I wanted the lump to win so I didn’t have to say what I knew was right, the only way I could say that I was sorry. This man who wormed his way into my heart didn’t belong to me.

Fighting to speak, I coughed. “I know that I have to let you go.”

His brow crinkled. “Let me go?”

More tears and I managed to nod. I touched his hand and caressed the skin, knowing it would be the last touch. What I was doing was harder than anything I’d ever done. Forget climbing mountains into the sky or diving into the deep. Forget winning the biggest case. Right then, my sweat and tears and my entire soul were going into putting another person’s well-being before my own needs, placing him first. I imagined it was close to having your heart carved out of your chest with a butter knife.

I managed a weak smile. “*You* are wonderful, and special, and perfect, and have a heart of gold. You deserve someone who can see that from the start. Not



someone who's only seen it after they've treated you like shit and then lost you."

He surveyed me for a moment. "So you're, what, letting me go for my own good?"

*Ouch.*

"No. You're already gone. What I'm saying is... I have to come to terms with that because... I can't be the person you need. Not yet. Maybe someday... maybe never." I had so much to work on, so much to turn around inside of me. My need to be the best, to please my father, to not accept help from anyone was only going to keep me from having someone in my life. "You have to know though, that it's you who made me want to be a better person, the person who crashed through my wall, and exposed me to the light, and now... all I want to do is grow." I laughed and wiped my cheek. "Look, tears. I've cried more in the past month than my entire life. My mother used to say they're a sign of life inside."

Right then though, they were a sign of mourning.

Fresh tears came as I leaned in and touched my lips to his, a lingering moment savoring his sweetness, his softness. *Why did a kiss good-bye feel so much like a kiss hello?*

Maybe it was my imagination, but his amber eyes looked a little glassy when I sat back. One last look and I stood and walked out of the house. And I knew I'd have to tackle driving home because I couldn't linger in his driveway and cry. Too dramatic.

"Paul! What the hell was that?" The door slammed, and he rushed to me, his hands in the air. "Jesus, I was giving you a couple of days to chill out and think about what you'd said and then apologize, but you come here all fucking noble and freeing me from your wretchedness."

He was in front of me, and I was dumbfounded by what he was saying. He looked pissed, but also there was something else I couldn't recognize.

"What you did in there, I can't decide if it was gallant and unselfish or stupid and self-centered."

"Umm... the first one?"

His hands clenched my biceps, as if he thought I'd bolt. That's when I recognized what that other expression was that I couldn't name. Fear.

“What are you afraid of?” I asked.

That seemed to stump him. “Why do you think I’m afraid?”

I laid my hand on his forearms, but he didn’t release me. “I can see it in your eyes.”

His brow creased, and he shook me slightly. “Because I don’t want to lose you.”

“You don’t? But you left, wouldn’t talk to me, you wouldn’t even email me. I had to come and find you.” I should have been pissed... But that was the old Paul. This Paul was seriously stunned.

He rolled his eyes and actually smiled. “I couldn’t just come running back. You would have seen me as weak and needy. Yeah, I was fucking hurt by what you said, and embarrassed, because I thought that I had been so wrong about you—for all of about two hours. But I knew who you were when I came into this... whatever this is, and I can take it.”

“No, don’t you see? You shouldn’t have to take it. You shouldn’t be taking table scraps from me when you’re serving me prime rib.”

He laughed. “Oh God, that’s one of the worst analogies I’ve ever heard.”

The lightness in his eyes was back, and I knew I would give my dying breath to keep it there. Then I frowned. “Shit.”

“What’s wrong, babe?”

I grinned, my stomach feeling all wonky. He raised a questioning brow.

“You called me ‘babe.’”

He ducked his head and blushed a beautiful shade of red. I tilted his chin up, and he met my gaze. I ran my thumb over his cheek. “I love it. And what I was thinking is that you still want me and I’m going to fuck it up again. And then I thought maybe that’s not what you meant and I’m only hearing something I want to hear.”

He smiled gently. “I’m saying that, I don’t want this to end between us. I know things aren’t going to be all roses and fucking all of the time. I mean, you say you’re going to mess up, but I will too. I tend to be a little too needy and clingy after what happened in Bogotá.” He paused and narrowed his eyes. “You don’t have a wife and kids somewhere that I don’t know about, do you?”

I raised my hand. “I swear I don’t.”

He released my arms and then wrapped his around me, our foreheads touching. His eyes glittered in the sun, a perfect jewel tone. “Then I’m in. And messing up, hey, I’m counting on that.” Then he whispered into my ear, “Makeup sex.”

“I have a long way to go, you know? I’m pretty messed up.” That psychologist I was going to see in a few days had no clue what he was getting himself into.

“Again, nothing I can’t handle. I heard you dropped the case against Clyde.”

“I did. You were right. I didn’t know him or what he was going through. I’m thinking I need to get better at that. And I kind of suck at it.”

“But it’s a step in the right direction.”

He pressed his lips to mine before I could utter another word. The kiss was languid, an exploration, and I felt as if it were truly our first kiss. When he released my lips, the lust-filled gaze told me that makeup sex was coming soon.

“Anything else you’d like to divulge, counselor?” His voice was sultry, the words drawn out and teasing.

And even though his lips were begging to be kissed, I looked into his eyes. Amber eyes. I knew right there, I could do whatever I needed for him. “I won everything the day you walked back into my life.” And that was all I needed.

**The End**

## Author Bio

*Jake “JC” Wallace started writing from a young age, but took a break for marriage, kids, and college (in that order). A few years ago, he rediscovered his passion and ventured out into the brave new world of publishing. He now has several novels and short stories published. At night and on the weekends, Jake writes about all things men, believing there is nothing hotter than two men finding and loving one another, whether for a night or forever. An avid reader of M/M romance, Jake loves a good twist of a plot, HEA, HFN, or tragic ending. He also writes what his bestie calls HUNK (Happy Until the Next Kidnapping). In his daytime hours, Jake works with individuals with autism and behavior problems. He is owned by a beautiful partner, three kids, two grandchildren, two dogs, and one cat. He lives in the Adirondack Mountains in Northern NY.*

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