

A man with a beard, wearing a dark suit jacket, a light-colored shirt, and a dark tie, is shown from the chest up. He is looking towards the left. A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a black strapless dress, is shown from the back and side, embracing the man. Her hands are resting on his chest and neck. The background is dark and out of focus.

Save  
ME

**HATE YOU HARDER #4**

**HARMONY GREY**



HATE YOU HARDER #4

by

HARMONY GREY

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## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:

Thank you so much for picking up a copy of  
SAVE ME - HATE YOU HARDER #4.

I hope you enjoy the continuation of Emily & Carter's  
story.

Feel free to come and join my reader group -  
[HARMONY'S HONEYS](#)

I hope to see you there :)

Much love, Harmony x

# CHAPTER ONE

## EMILY

The cold, stagnant air grows thick and heavy around me as my mind slowly comes back to some low level of consciousness.

My head hurts.

Damn, my head hurts so fucking bad right now. Like its marching alongside my heart and to its own wicked beat. Everything... every single piece of me is sore—a dull heavy ache crushing my body, my lungs almost collapsing, suffocating me from the heavy weight of my sudden distress.

As I try to open my eyes, even just a little, I quickly give up and admit silent defeat, closing them again, scrunching them tight as a violent wave of nausea washes over me.

What the hell happened to me? My mind is hazy, clouded over by a misted fog as I try to think back on what happened to me. The harder I try to clear the fog and try to retrieve my hidden memories, the louder my brain pounds deep inside my skull, groaning out in protest.

I have no idea where I am. Not a single clue, and I'm not ashamed to admit that I'm feeling mighty scared right now. I'm absolutely petrified. I'm cold. Ice-fucking-cold—straight to the bone, and when I force my eyes to open some more, all I'm greeted with is darkness. A total blackout—like I've fallen down and been swallowed whole by the shadows.

*I want to scream.*

I want to cry out. Desperate to see if there's anyone around who can help me—who can save me, but I find I can't even do that. I can't do shit.

My mouth opens but it's quickly met with resistance. The words I'm desperate to scream won't form. My throat is

dry and scratchy, and nothing more than a small, forced, pitiful low muffle escapes me.

I try my hardest to push through the excruciating pain in my head, desperately trying to remember something... anything. It doesn't matter how small or how irrelevant it may seem—it could help trigger something to awaken my hidden memories.

I need to figure out how I came to be here... came to be this way, but no matter how hard I try to force down the barrier, I keep coming up blank—hitting an almighty brick wall time and time again.

The last thing I remember is being in class with Parker. Nothing all too strange with that picture. I have class with Parker most days, yet a sudden deep sense of dread consumes every fiber of my being.

My heart drops deeper into the pit of my stomach as I try to move.

I'm weak. Almost limp and lifeless, but that isn't what's sounding the alarm. No, the small fact that it looks like I won't be going anywhere fast suddenly hits home, knocking all the air from my lungs and shocking me right down to the core.

I cannot move my arms and legs—period.

Have I been kidnapped? Taken against my will and held hostage?

*'Don't be fucking crazy.'* I scold myself. There's no way I've been kidnapped. No fucking way. If I had then surely I'd remember it, moment for moment, right?

My heart quickens, picking up speed as it pounds faster and harder in my chest as the sudden and unwelcome realization of what could be happening to me slowly begins to sink in and hits home.

In the deepest depths of my soul I know that what I'm thinking is true. My intuition is telling me that I have been kidnapped, only I have no recollection of when, why or by who.



Wincing, a sharp burn radiates up my arm as I frantically try to pull my bruised and swollen wrists out of their restraints. The pain intensifies, and the pain licks the flames of my damaged flesh, yet it does nothing to deter me. My whole body responds as my sense of fight or flight kicks in, and I start thrashing around on the cold, damp stone floor, desperate to find a way out of this nightmare. Even though my mind is quick to remind me that an escape isn't even possible.

It's not possible because one: I have absolutely no idea where I am, and two: because I'm bound, tied up, held hostage. I'm well and truly an unwilling victim—a true prisoner to my vicious captor.

'Hey pumpkin,' an all too familiar voice hisses down my ear, causing all the small hairs on my body to stand tall, while a deep rooted fear seeps deep into my aching bones. 'I wondered how long it would take you to wake up.' He laughs a little, clearly amused. Only I don't share his mood. 'Welcome back to the dark side.'

My blood runs cold, and the sudden urge to vomit consumes me when the strong smell of stale tobacco and liquor invades my senses. Even if he hadn't uttered a single word to me, I would have recognised him instantly. I swallow down hard on the bile, forcing it back as it creeps up and threatens to spill over into my mouth.

I try to shout out again.

To scream at the top of my lungs, but another low and painful murmur escapes me, and all he can do is laugh again beside me, clearly relishing in the sight of my new-found discomfort.

If I wasn't bound and gagged, if I had a way to freely move my body then I'd make sure this sick fuck regretted ever trying to mess with me. I know it's nothing but wishful thinking on my part, but I need some kind of image, some form of hope to cling to if I'm ever going to make it through this hideous ordeal.

'You know, pumpkin... one of these days Carter might just do the decent thing and actually listen to me.' His voice is

like ice, and laced with venom.

There is definitely no love lost between these two, that's for sure.

'*Carter?*' I think to myself and an unwanted image of my devious step brother rushes to the forefront of my mind. I don't understand what Carter could possibly have to do with any of this—especially when it concerns me.

Carter hates me. He hates me with a ferocious passion. Me and the whole damn world knows it too. My memory may be failing me right now, but I'm sure I'd remember if we'd suddenly become best friends.

I know it's pointless even thinking of asking him because I can't talk and I doubt he'll make any sense of my muffled moans. Plus, I'll only be wasting what little energy I have left. So, I decide to stay quiet, not that I have much of a choice, and wait it out for Max to continue, and he sure doesn't disappoint.

'Maybe now that I finally have you with me, now I've finally proven to Carter that he isn't as untouchable as he likes to believe, maybe now he might just take me seriously and back the fuck up. Maybe now he'll quickly realize he has no choice but to listen to what I have to say.'

Slowly, with each vile word he utters, memories of recent events begin to unravel and unfold in my mind, and then they come thick and fast, crashing into my head at rapid speed and I'll be honest—I'm really struggling to keep up with them.

### *The party.*

The party which I should have avoided, only I was too reckless and stubborn to ignore Carter's hidden warning. Then there was Max. Max storming into the house with a bunch of wannabe thugs, each and every one of them hot on his heels—like Max was some fucking God. Then everyone fell silent as Max tried to call the shots like he owned the goddamn place. But after endless threats they soon grew bored. They upped and left—Max included.

The next thing I remember is being back at school, recklessly making out with Carter in the car... Parker trying to keep me confined in class, and boom... It hits me.

The image slams into my mind like a goddamn freight train.

*Max.*

This sick, twisted son of a bitch was waiting for me. He'd somehow managed to sneak inside the walls of Woodville High and he was hiding out, laying in wait for me in the girl's bathroom. Nausea sweeps through me like a tidal wave, crushing and drowning what little hope I had left for survival. Max wants to make Carter pay for something and he's going to use me as his bait, as his measly pawn to seek his vengeance.

My head is still pounding, but finally figuring out the missing pieces to the puzzle makes me feel a whole lot worse than I thought it would. I wish I could go back, rewind a few minutes—back to when my mind was blissfully blank of all things Max and Carter.

I have a gut feeling that I was in a better position by not knowing. Ignorance is pure bliss as they say.

'Oh, I hate to see you all tied up like this, Pumpkin.' Max purrs down my ear. 'But I'm still unsure if I can trust you. If I remove the gag, how can I be sure you won't scream? If I untie you, how can I be sure you won't try to run?' He knows I have no way of answering his stupid fucked up questions and it sure sounds to me like he's asking himself—trying to reassure himself because we both know I'm not in a position to be answering him anytime soon.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CARTER

‘What do you mean you don’t know where the fuck she is?’ I demand.

My voice is deep and feral—a voice I barely even recognize. I won’t apologize either, because I asked Dean to do one thing. I asked him to carry out one measly ass task—one simple instruction, and the motherfucker couldn’t even get that right. He couldn’t even bring himself to do it for me.

Parker and Dean—a pair of absolute grade A clowns. Ironically Emily’s best friend and my best friend—or at least that’s who they’re supposed to be. Who the fuck knows, maybe they don’t give a damn after all. I guess that would explain how and why they so carelessly allowed Emily out of their sight; even for a nanosecond. When I specifically warned them—both of them not to lose sight of her. No matter the problem, no matter the reason, they were supposed to stay with her at all times.

Didn’t the weekend mean anything to them? Are they really that fucking stupid to think Max’s threats were void, totally empty? It’s no secret that Dean isn’t Emily’s biggest fan. He never has been and he probably never will be. Plus, he doesn’t owe her a damn thing. Hell, the whole of Woodville knows I’m not Emily’s biggest fan either, but as my best friend, Dean owed it to me to look out for her and to do exactly as I asked.

I fucking demanded that he kept a close eye on her. Surely Dean would have known I wouldn’t have been asking him lightly. There is always a reason, and a fucking good reason at that behind every thing I say or do... at all times, and Dean knows this better than anyone.

Even knowing all this, Dean still had to go and fuck everything up, didn't he?

I mean he didn't need to go out of his way or act all on top about it. Watching Emily from a distance would have been good enough, so long as he could still see her. To make sure she was safe. Jeez, I could really smack some much-needed sense into him at times, but I quickly remind myself that it probably wouldn't have mattered what I'd asked of him anyway, because all would have been forgotten... as soon as Parker was back at his side.

I know he doesn't see it yet, he's too blinded by Parker's pussy, but I do.

*I see everything.* Clear as fucking day.

Parker is the distraction which Dean seriously doesn't need in his life.

After what feels like a lifetime, Dean finally holds his hands up, cautiously stepping closer toward me, his brows knitted together and I see a mixture of fear and worry simmering in his eyes. 'She needed the bathroom, man,' his eyes soften slightly as he tries to plead with me, to help me try to understand that this was all just an innocent accident. One he had zero control over. Dean knows me, and he knows that I'm about to lose my shit, and he's going to be the one who suffers for it. 'What was I supposed to do, hold her down until I had your permission?'

Dean is quick to argue with me, and I sure as hell don't like it. I narrow my eyes in warning, letting him know he needs to lower his tone and fast, but he doesn't seem to notice. Instead, his eyes instantly dart toward Parker, no doubt silently pleading for her to back up what he's telling me, and a rare sharp stab of jealousy penetrates my cold and emotionless heart.

I Swear to God, if anything happens to Emily— anything at all, then I promise it will all be on Dean's fucking head. Then we'll see if Parker will be around to save the day. I'll make sure I'm the one who takes Parker down first.

What's that glorious saying... *an eye for an eye... a tooth for a tooth?* Whatever becomes of Emily will happen to Parker... ten fold, and at my merciless hands.

'Yes, damn fucking straight that's what you should have done.' I deadpan and there's zero emotion in my voice.

'What? Are you actually being serious?' Parker jumps in, quick to try to stand her ground. Parker has always been a mouthy piece of shit. Little miss fucking know it all, constantly trying to stick her nose in where its not wanted—or fucking needed—right in other people's business. Fiesty as fuck. Usually, I can ignore her. I've sure gained a hell of a lot of practice over the years, but not today. Not now. Not when Emily's life is more than likely on the line.

'Does it look like I'm laughing?' I snarl back, my acid laced tongue sizzling, whipping out and attacking anyone and everyone around me. Every single fiber of my being is telling me Max has somehow managed to get hold of Emily. He's made it his sole mission to come back for her, just like he promised he would.

I shouldn't have left Emily's side. I knew I shouldn't have left the safety of her well-being to the likes of Parker and Dean. I should know by now that if I want or need something doing, then I'm as good as doing it myself. At least that way I'll know it's been done and done to my standards.

'Do either of you realize what you've done?' I demand on a heated whisper, and my head spins as a wild rush of adrenaline charges through my body.

'Excuse me?' Parker snarls back and as she moves toward me, her eyes widen, swimming with an instant dislike. Hell, the feeling is totally mutual. Parker doesn't bother me in the way she'd like to believe. I really couldn't give a damn what she thinks of me. I'm not here to play her stupid games or to try to please her. No, that's Dean's territory, not mine. Parker means absolutely nothing to me. The girl's totally irrelevant. 'I think you need to calm the fuck down and show me a little respect.'

Now it's my turn to laugh. 'Oh, yeah?' I snap my eyes toward Dean and raise a questioning brow at him. 'Have a word, man. The pussy is for poking, not talking.'

All the color drains from Dean's face, telling me all I need to know about their relationship. Dean is a whole lot deeper than I initially thought... way deeper than I first initially feared. Parker has sharpened her claws and stuck them deep into Dean's unsuspecting flesh. She's gotten into his head, buried deep under his skin, and his brain is proving to be totally nonfunctional.

This guy... my guy, he's only ever going to think with his cock when she's around, and that is so not what I need from him right now.

*I need Dean to be focused and firmly on point.*

Bringing my gaze back to Dean, I ignore the hushed murmurs of the crowd which is building behind us, eager to hear all the gossip, and what's causing such a scene. Somehow I manage to keep my composure instead of turning to face them and unleashing my bubbling wrath on each and every one of them.

I clench my jaw and speak through gritted teeth. 'I tell you what,' I nod towards both of them, 'how about you two focus on each other like you've obviously been doing already and I'll go and try to figure out what happened to Emily.'

Dean put his hand out and rests it on my shoulder before offering me a reassuring squeeze but I'm quick to shrug off his unwanted concern. 'Don't you think you're overreacting a little?' He questions, and for the first time in all the years I've known him I stop and wonder if this motherfucker even knows me at all.

'Overreacting?' My voice rings out loud and clear, echoing around the walls of Woodville and I sense the heated eyes of my peers—my subjects burning into my back, but not for the first time today I decide against paying them any attention. I'll ignore them for now because each and every one of them are completely irrelevant right in this moment. And to my surprise I find Dean isn't too far behind them. 'You think

I'm overreaching?' My chest puffs out, my shoulders set as my body instantly prepares itself for a fight. Best friend or not, Dean needs to wake the fuck up and realize what the hell is about to go down here, and he needs to wake up and realize it fast.

'Carter...' I'm in no mood for pointless small talk so I'm quick to cut him off. 'Listen to me, and listen to me good because I'm only going to say this once. 'I bite out, really struggling to keep a handle on my emotions. 'Do you think I asked you to keep watch over Emily for the fucking fun of it? For shits and giggles?' Dean has the audacity to shrug his shoulders back at me, carelessly, as though the thought of Emily being in some kind of danger hasn't even crossed his delinquent little mind. Man, this guy is really beginning to test my patience and my weirpower. It takes everything I have not to reach out and shake some goddamn sense into him.

'Hold up...' 'All too soon Parker is suddenly back in my face, and it's not a feeling I am too comfortable with. "You asked Dean to keep tabs on Emily?" She hurls, somewhat disgusted by my request and she's savage, practically foaming at the mouth. I don't know how the fuck Dean puts up with this chick or her shitty little attitude problem. Parker must be a freak in the sheets, that's for sure. 'Don't you think that's a little twisted, even for you?'

'Are you shittin' me?' I growl out as a wild rage of anger and frustration begins to seep in and take hold, crippling my body. I shouldn't even be standing here, wasting precious time—time where it could and should be spent trying to find Emily. Yet here I am standing here doing exactly that with these two dead beats.

'Calm down man. You're starting to sound super weird.' Dean laughs but his humor doesn't meet his eyes, and I don't miss the shot nerves floating between us.

'Have you both forgotten what happened at the weekend? "I demand, trying my damned hardest to try to make them see the importance of what's possibly happened to Emily—on their fucking watch. 'Or did you just think this was another big show? An act purely to pass the time?'



‘But you said...’ Parker begins as the dreaded realization creeps onto her face.

‘Fuck what I said.’ My retort causes her to flinch but I don’t even give a damn. Parker is not my fucking problem. No, my problem is her so-called best friend. ‘I said a lot of things... Look I didn’t want Emily on pins all fucking day. I didn’t want her looking over her shoulder every five seconds.’ I realize my mistake as soon as I voice my words aloud. Maybe if I’d been honest with her, maybe we wouldn’t be in this mess right now. She’d be here right where she belongs, and more importantly, she’d be safe. Safe from me, and safe from Max. ‘I thought if I kept her calm enough, assured that Max wasn’t someone to worry about then she’d be okay.’

I know it’s not a bad thing, but why do I suddenly feel like the bad guy—the fucking villain in all of this?

‘And is he? Someone we need to worry about?’ Parker asks, her usually confident voice now trembling slightly.

My main concern right now—actually my only concern is to protect Emily and I’ve failed on that front—on an epic fucking scale. The easiest thing for me would be to lie to Parker, straight to her face.

I could try to pacify her so she doesn’t freak the fuck out and have the mother of all bitch fits, but what’s the point? The truth is gonna come out anyways—it always does. Plus, the damage has already been done.

‘Of course he’s someone to be worried about.’ What kind of question is that? Does Parker think I would have gone to all this trouble if Max wasn’t a threat? ‘I wouldn’t be standing here otherwise.’

I try my best to keep the malice out of my voice but it’s sure proving difficult. I am so done with having to explain myself, especially to people who refuse to listen to what I have to say. ‘I know Max better than most, and I know him well enough to take his threats seriously.’

‘So why haven’t you done anything about it? Why haven’t you stopped this from happening?’ Parker demands.

‘What the fuck do you think I’ve been doing?’ Does Parker really think I’ve just been hiding out on the sidelines? ‘I made sure Emily was around me all weekend. I never let her out of my sight no matter how bad she pissed me off or got under my skin.’ We all know that happens all too often so neither of them should be surprised by this. ‘I didn’t let her out of my sight—not even for a second. Fuck, I even made sure I was the one who brought her to school this morning—even if she didn’t like that idea all too much.’ I watch Dean as he slowly begins to piece the missing pieces of the puzzle together.

Before Max and his bullshit threats, there was no way on this earth I’d willingly been seen out with Emily in public. I’d rather die than be seen with my annoying as fuck step sister. Hell, there’s a lot of things I wouldn’t have done with her but the past couple of weeks have made me see Emily in a completely different light. I have seen, witnessed and experienced a whole new side to her. A side I never imagined she’d become.

‘So, what are the chances of Max having her already?’ Dean asks. I force myself to swallow down hard, struggling to form the words as a multitude of worse case scenarios begin to form and run wild in my mind.

My heart races, while a cold sweat breaks out and takes over my body at the sudden thought of Max close to Emily. Quickly closing my eyes, I desperately try to block out the unwanted images and inhale deeply through my nose as I try and fail to compose myself. My eyes dart between Dean and Parker before I finally say, “Do you really want to know?” My voice is cold, calculated and totally void of any emotion, and I really hope Dean will be wise enough to take the hint and not push me to give them the answer. An answer they both won’t want to hear.

But as usual, Dean doesn’t seem to be the one who wants to cause problems. ‘Yes... yes we fucking do.’ Parker protests, once again doing what she does best—sticking her fucking nose in where its not wanted and refusing to keep her fucking big mouth shut.

Shaking my head, I slowly turn to face her and look her straight in the eye. ‘Well, considering that son of a bitch was hanging around outside in the parking lot before the morning bell rang out, I’d guess the chances of Emily not being at the mercy of Max O’ Keefe are getting slimmer and slimmer by the second.’

Silence descends around us, thick and heavy. Not a single one of us wants to voice aloud what could have happened to her. If I know Max as well as I think I do, then I know for a fact if he does have Emily hidden away somewhere then it’s a given she’s going to suffer dramatically at his hands. My blood boils over at the thought of Max laying a single finger on her. I swear, If that son of a bitch hurts her in any way, shape or form, I’ll torture him slowly and I’ll bathe in the screams of his pain, before burying that motherfucker alive.

I’ll happily do time for making that sick and twisted son of a bitch pay. Surprisingly, Dean is the one who breaks the silence first. ‘So, what do we do now?’

‘Honestly?’ I look directly at Parker, knowing all too well she isn’t going to like what I’m about to say, but I’m going to say it anyway. ‘Now we fucking pray... and we pray hard. We pray for a fucking miracle.’

## CHAPTER THREE

### CARTER

I need to get hold of my father, and I need to get hold of him fast.

I left Parker and Dean, standing open mouthed in the crowded halls of Woodville High. They both looked shocked, completely perplexed and dumbfounded, but as I said before—neither of them are my problem. Plus, I think they're both old enough and apparently wise enough to figure out shit for themselves.

I have much bigger things to deal with, and finding Max is right up there at the top of my priority list, coming in at first place, alongside making sure Emily gets as far away from that monster as possible.

I need her found and in one piece.

I need her safe.

I need Emily back home where she belongs. I need her as far away from Max O 'Keefe as possible. I need to find her and I need to keep her close to me. I can't explain it, I just know I need to make it happen.

I swear, when I do get her back, which I will, I'll never let her out of my sight again. I will never be so reckless and foolish to entrust her safety and well-being with anyone other than myself. I've let her down—big time.

Fuck. I've gone and let everyone down. I know that and man, it hurts like a motherfucker. It hurts a whole lot more than I ever thought it would. Looking back now I know I should have been more open with Emily. I should have been up front and honest, but those traits have never been my strong suit.

I should have been man enough to tell her the truth about Max instead of allowing my stupid ego to get in the way, to take over, determined to shield her from his vicious ways. Determined to keep her hidden in the shadows—out of sight from the big bad world which we live in. Hell, Emily's had to live with my bullshit over the years so I'm sure she'd be able to handle it, but I wasn't thinking straight. My mind wasn't level. Damn, if only I'd had the balls to tell her just how vicious and dangerous Max can be, Emily would have been more aware of her surroundings—or the dangers that awaited her. Maybe then Emily would have been on the lookout, on her guard, instead of me foolishly making out that everything was okay. That I had everything under control.

I know Max, and I know he can talk a good one when he wants or whenever he needs to. And yes, I also know that Emily is far from naive, but Max has a wicked way with words. He holds the power to lure people in and he somehow manages to twist things to his own narrative—to his advantage—and that's what I'm worried about.

Max made it perfectly clear that he also had his nasty little beady eyes set on Emily too, and one way or another I should have known he'd keep coming back for her. Over and over again. He would have been relentless in his pursuit, until he eventually got what he so desperately wanted.

Fuck Max.

FUCK Ricardo.

FUCK Dean for not looking out for Emily when I specifically asked him to. I'm pissed for sure. Am I being too hard on him, allowing my savage emotions to run rampant and take over? *Maybe.*

It's fair to say Dean has never let me down before but then I've never had to trust him with anyone else's life but my own. And now, regardless of his intentions, he's gone and fucked everything up. For me... for Emily... for all of us.

My phone vibrates in my pocket as I push down hard on the gas, and when I look at the screen on my dash my old man name flashes in front of me.

*Shit... shit... shit...*

My heart drops to the pit of my stomach. Does my old man know? Does he know that Emily is missing—already?

Hell, It wouldn't surprise me because my old man has eyes and ears everywhere. He doesn't miss a goddamn thing, which is probably why he's the best in the game. No one fucks around with Ash James or his territory. Well, unless your name is Max O' Keefe and you have the mother of all death wishes.

A heavy sigh escapes me as I reluctantly reach out and connect the call. I'm going in blind because I have no idea how my father is going to be on the other end of a line. A deep rooted sense of dread runs deep, straight down into the deepest depths of my darkened and corrupt soul. Here goes nothing...

'Hey son...' surprisingly his voice is calm and collected, but I don't allow that to fool me. I know my old man and I know his tone of voice doesn't always match his mood.

His tone doesn't mean shit. He could be happy as fuck while on the other end of the line someone could be having their finger nails peeled off with plyers. Like I said, his tone stands for nothing. My old man is a mass manipulator. A calm and collected chameleon. One who wears many faces in order to fool his audience, and I'm no exception.

My father has the biggest game face of them all.  
'Where you at, kid?'

*Fuck.*

My hands grow clammy as the panic begins to set in. My father's asking questions already and I can't get a read on him. I have no idea if he's in the know already. This is it. This is my moment. The moment where I have to play the part when I tell my biggest lie to date. Only time will tell if it pays off. I know the idea is stupid—actually it's beyond stupid. It's down right reckless and fucking crazy, but what other choice do I have?

Maybe I could tell him the truth, or at least what I know. I could begin to set the wheels in motion so my old man can start putting some plans into place. But every fiber of my

being is telling me that's the reckless route. A route I don't really want to be going down. Once I've started down that path there's no way I'll be able to come back from it.

The logical side of my brain is telling me it's pointless disturbing the beast. Especially if he isn't already ruffled—if he isn't already aware of any kind of threats heading his way. Maybe I could keep quiet for a while, in the hope he doesn't yet know a goddamn thing about what's gone down over the weekend while he's been away. It's no secret that my life has never been easy, but someone out there is definitely hoping to take me down one way or another—to make me pay for something—an unknown debt I'm not aware of.

'Son...' my father's voice booms out of the speakers, snapping me out of my trance and averting my attention to the issues at hand.

'Is everything okay?' I question, trying my damned hardest to play the dumb card, desperate for more time as I try to prepare myself to face the inevitable.

Yeah. Everything's all good on my end, kid. We just got back so I thought I'd check in' My Knuckles whiten as my hands grip the wheel, so tight I almost disrupt the circulation. I didn't know my old man was back in town. Now it's definitely going to be game over—if it isn't already. Looks like today's the day which just keeps on giving.

'I had no idea.' I say and surprisingly my voice is neutral. 'Are you at home or the office?' I'm cautious. I need to plan my next move wisely.

'I've just left the house, on my way to the office now to check no one's burned it into the ground.' A small laugh escapes him and I shake my head. We both know no one would be foolish or brave enough to mess with the Carter Empire—it's headquarters while there's still oxygen rich air in my old man's lungs. 'You sure everything is good?'

'Yeah, course, pops.' I brush away his concern easily, although on the inside I'm The opposite of calm. My body is buzzing to life as a rush of adrenaline courses through my

veins. 'I'm headed out to see you, actually.' I tell him, and it's not a complete lie because I was headed to the office anyways.

It's done. Whether I wanted to do the deed or not, the seed has been planted. I've set the wheels in motion. I'm going to have to tell my father the truth and nothing but the whole damn truth. Although my father might be quiet now, he'll know something is up because I never go out of my way to see him. My old man dances to his own tune. He plays by his own rules. My old man calls all the shots. People don't seek out Ash James. They only go to him when they've been summoned.

That's just how he's always been, and even though I'm his son—the heir to his empire, I'm no fucking exception. Silence fills the line and it does absolutely nothing for the panic which starts to take over, threatening to crush my chest and collapse my lungs.

'You sure you're okay, kid?' I could laugh at the irony. Sure everything was peachy about thirty minutes ago, or at least that's what I foolishly thought. How the fuck am I supposed to explain this bullshit mess to my father? How do I tell him that Emily is nowhere to be found—that she's disappeared on my watch? He's gonna have my balls for this. And that's before he finds out it's all at the hands of Max O'Keefe.

Fucking Dean and his cock.

Sure, it's not all down on Dean. I know I've played a part in this too, but if Dean had listened to me—if he'd been thinking with his brain and not getting his dick wet then this whole mess would have been completely unavoidable.

Emily would be safe. We'd both be back home now, no doubt after yet another heated argument about her not wanting me to take her home, followed by a heap of bullshit around how she doesn't need babysitting.

How fucking wrong she was, huh. As crazy as it sounds in my own mind, I'd give anything to have a heated blow-out with her right now. Just to hear her smart ass mouth and watch her sassy attitude, but I can't.



I can't do any of those things because I have no idea where she is. How the hell am I supposed to find her if I don't even know where to start looking.

My fist connects with the wheel, sounding the horn and a couple of pedestrians who are passing by almost jump out of their skin. I've almost forgotten my old man is still connected on the line when he suddenly says, 'Carter... What the hell happened?'

'Jerk-ass drivers, I lie fluidly, but the sour taste on my tongue feels all kinds of wrong. I can't do this anymore. I need to do the right thing—by me, and by Emily. I need to fess up and admit that I, Carter James, royally fucked up. 'Emily...' I just about manage to say her name, and even though it falls on a whisper, a desperate plea, my old man hears me loud and clear.

'What about Emily?' He asks, his voice laced with an unfamiliar emotion. 'Is she with you?' Shock. That's the emotion I'm looking for. My old man's voice is riddled with shock. He knows all too well that me and Emily don't see eye to eye at the best of times. Even though he never voices his concerns out loud—he knows. My old man is a master observer, and he sees everything.

'Emily,' I say again, her name once again leaving my lips on a hidden plea, and I'm surprised to find I'm not even sorry about it. I'm past caring about keeping my emotions in check. I think it's fair to say that ship sailed long ago. All that matters right now is finding Emily and making sure she's okay. Not just for her sake, but for mine too. I bite the bullet, deciding more eyes on this are far better than just my own. 'She's gone.'

'What do you mean, she's gone? Gone where?' My father bellows down the line, his stern voice is as cold as steel as it echoes out around my car, penetrating my ears and attacking me from all angles. and I flinch. I flinch like a grade A pussy. It doesn't matter if my old man's next to me or a thousand miles away, when he uses that tone I know it can only mean one thing. Validation that I've fucked up-massively. This is my fathers way of warning me to be scared—to be very

fucking scared. When my voice refuses to form a reply my father says, ‘Carter... Carter talk to me, goddammit. What the fuck do you mean she’s gone?’

‘At school...’ I stammer out, but my voice is barely a whisper.

‘School? You’re supposed to be looking out for her. He shouts some more, and I hear my breathing become shallow, my fists clench and unclench around the wheel, only they don’t grip all too well as my hands become clammy while a sudden and overwhelming sense of dread descends around me.

‘I was...’ I begin, swallowing hard as I struggle to form the words, but my old man is quick to cut me off—to shut me down.

It’s real nice to see he’s automatically jumped on the defensive. Acting like every single fuck up is my fault and my fault alone. My father needs to remember that Emily is human. She’s her own fucking person.

Man, there’s only so much I can do, so much he can expect me to do. He’s acting like I should have kept her tied up, only allowing her daily release for school. My mind foolishly drops right down into the gutter at the wrong fucking moment as an influx of unwanted images of Emily tied up crash into my head and my cock chooses this moment to stir to use.

‘*NOW is not the time, Carter.*’ I mentally scold myself.

‘Get to the fucking office... Now!’ The line drops and I instantly know my old man is gonna bust his nut. Me on the other hand, hell, I don’t need telling twice. Without so much as a second’s thought I slam my foot down on the gas while silently hoping and praying by the end of this visit I don’t lose any of my limbs. I’m not scared of anyone.

*Anyone except my father.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CARTER

My old man is waiting for me as soon as I pull up into the parking lot behind his rundown garage—his makeshift office, and my blood runs cold. His sharp angular face is set, and he looks fucking murderous. His dark eyes narrow when he looks at me, while casually taking a long, deep pull on his smoke. My mind is racing, a multitude of different scenarios running wild, setting my whole body on edge. I know I don't have much time to think about it.

I have to man up and face the facts. Cold, brutal facts. The harsh reality that is my life. Shit is about to go down, and it's about to go down a whole lot more than anyone could have ever imagined.

Max O 'Keefe has just started the war of all motherfucking wars.

A war he has zero chance of winning, but he's foolish enough to start anyways. The guy is seriously deluded if he thinks for a second that me and my old man are about to sit back and let his bullshit slide.

Killing the engine, I slide out of my car, and I can't even bring myself to look at my father. I'm not man enough to face him. I can't bring myself to see the look of utter disappointment which I know will be waiting to greet me.

Shit. Why do I feel like a little boy again? A little boy who's desperate for his father's approval. I shouldn't be feeling like this. I shouldn't be hiding from anyone—because I haven't done anything wrong. I'll admit, yes I should have kept my guard up. I should have been more aware. I should have taken more precautions, and I should have kept a closer

eye on Emily, but I truly believed I had that base covered. Hell, I thought I had all bases covered.

I complied with what my father asked of me. I didn't let Emily out of my sight all weekend. I even dragged her reluctant ass to school this morning. Granted, she came willingly this time, but I still would have dragged her kicking and screaming in the end if I had to.

The sound of the gravel crunching under my feet echoes in my ear, and it's like I'm stepping on a minefield—each step bringing me closer and closer to my untimely demise, as my father looks on without an ounce of emotion in his body. All the while my heart pounds along to its own erratic beat.

'Pops...' I begin, my voice small, vulnerable and unsure... unsure of what his reaction is going to be. I know it won't be pretty, but Ash James has always been an unpredictable motherfucker.

My father doesn't offer me a warm welcome. He doesn't nod at me, nor does he embrace me. Instead, he narrows his eyes disapprovingly before tossing his smoke to the side. 'Keep that fucking mouth of yours shut until we're inside.'

Is he being fucking serious? Does he truly believe I'm that much of a liability? I know how this works. I've seen it play out before my eyes a thousand times before. So now what, I'm just the stupid dumb-fuck for a son? Like I'd even think about shooting my mouth off for all to hear.

I nod, and say no more. I keep my head high as I walk straight past him and make my way inside. The damp hits me first, instantly knocking me sick. My chest tightens as my lungs struggle from the toxicity from the moldy spores as they poison the air around us. Now probably isn't the best time to mention it, but I think it's high time he did a complete overhaul on this place. My father has always down right refused to have a fancy office—the more run down the better, apparently it wards off any unwanted attention, but this joint is really turning into a shit fest.

I know this is just his base, a place to carry out business—a means to an end, a place for a purpose, but damn, the smell is burning my fucking nostrils. I walk silently down the corridor, sensing my father's heavy presence close behind me. As I move closer down the dimly lit hall I see the door to his office is slightly ajar and I hesitate a little before pushing it open.

My eyes widen and my mouth falls open before quickly closing again just as fast. Clenching my jaw super tight and I draw in a deep long steadying breath through my nose as I take in the sight before me.

I actually thought I was heading to the office so I could speak to my old man. So I could talk to him... try to explain what happened, and then hopefully we'd be able to sit down and try to piece together the events and try to work out what the fuck happened—to figure out what it is that Max truly wants.

Instead a blazing fire rushes through me, burning my insides and intensifying the anger which has been simmering away when I take him in. The last person I was expecting to see sitting in my father's office staring back at me, a smug ass smile plastered across his scarred face. The backstabbing rat.

'Ricardo.'

His name leaves my lips on a ferocious growl and the motherfucker has the audacity to snigger back at me. His leg is crossed over his right knee, his posture very comfortable as he leans back in the chair and his black beady eyes watch me closely, like I'm some exciting Marvel.

'I wondered how long it would be until I saw your pretty little face again.' He smiles.

Every fiber of my being is desperate to reach out and smack the smug look from his face, and I swear if it wasn't for the fact of my old man being close behind me, he'd be done for.

'What the fuck are you doing here?' I demand, my voice cold and heavily laced with venom. I seriously don't

think I have ever wanted to hurt someone as much as I do right now, and to be fair, that's saying a hell of a lot seeing how I've hurt quite a few people over the years. Before Ricardo has a chance to reply, to hurl some smart ass remark my way, I feel my old man's firm hand press down hard on my shoulder, urging me to keep a clear head.

'Now, now, boys... play nice. Youboth know I don't tolerate bitching in my office.' He raises a stubborn brow when I turn to face him. 'Is that clear?'

I nod once, a small form of acknowledgement... while keeping my eyes fixed solely on Ricardo. 'Crystal.' I bite out through clenched teeth. My old man knows me. He knows I'm a little pocket rocket, the same way he used to be, but he also knows that no matter what's happening, I'll always respect him. I won't do something that he doesn't want me to do—no matter how hard the struggle, or how hard it is to keep a handle on my emotions.

'Good,' he replies on a laugh before walking right past me and sliding down into his big black leather chair behind his large old antique desk. Ricardo is still watching me closely. His black eyes are filled with a mixture of excitement and anticipation, while the smug grin is still plastered across his face. My father clears his throat, before lighting up another smoke. 'I'm glad I have you both here.' He brings his hands together which means my father's here to talk and we're here to listen—whether we want to or not.

This meeting is non-negotiable. 'It seems we have some important business to attend to.'

'I'm not discussing business with him.' Has my father lost his fucking mind? Doesn't he remember what I just told him over the phone? Fuck, I bet Ricardo has just managed to worm his way out of his sweet ass bullshit once again. A small laugh escapes me and I wouldn't have been able to hold it back even if I tried.

'Something funny, kid?' My old man asks, his tone loud and firm. My father might be my father, but one thing I've noticed all over the years is that he never, ever calls me by

my first name whenever we're around his associates—no matter how corrupt his associates may be.

'Yeah.' I reply flatly. I am so fucking done with biting my tongue all the goddamn time. If my old man wants to act like I'm just another one of his mugs who follows his orders in a military fashion then I may as well start acting like one. 'Something's funny, all right.' I raise my hand and point a finger in Ricardo's direction. 'This fucking mug.' I burn my eyes into the fool sitting before me and the motherfucker doesn't even falter. There's zero emotion etched onto his scarred face, and his black eyes are blank. If anything my annoyance at his presence in my father's office only seems to heighten his fucked up amusement, and that drives me in-fucking-sane. 'Didn't you hear what I said to you on the phone? Or is this some kind of fucking joke to you, pops?' I bite out, my anger getting the better of me.

My father pierces his eyes into mine and he leans slowly across his desk, bringing his big hands together. He's pissed. Hell, he's so fucking pissed right now and I know I should be worried about what's about to happen next, but the truth is, I really don't give a fuck. I couldn't give a damn about what he says or does. The fact I straight up told him Emily is missing, and he's just sitting here like it doesn't even matter.

My old man knows people and he knows things—things only other people could ever dream of knowing, yet he still sits here as though Emily isn't in danger. Danger that's most likely hanging over her innocent little head as we speak.

'Does it look like I'm laughing, kid?' His eyes narrow and his voice is serious now. It's clear to see that even though my old man might not show it, I've sure hit a nerve. A nerve which he isn't all too comfortable showing in the presence of his right hand man—the rat Ricardo, but I don't care how he feels right now.

'Well you sure could have fooled me. It doesn't look like you're all too fazed about what I just told you.' I exclaim, hoping to get some kind of reaction out of my father or Ricardo. But neither one of them is taking my bait. 'You're

still fucking lurking with the enemy, pops. What the fuck does that tell you?’

Now my father does laugh, but this isn’t his usual easy, care-free one. No, this is a sadistic laugh—one which should warn me that I need to quit while I’m still ahead. But then we both know I’ve never been one to do as I’m told or what’s expected of me. I don’t think there’s ever been a period in my life where I’ve willingly followed the rules.

‘Ricardo isn’t the enemy.’ My father sounds so goddamn sure of himself and I really wish I shared his confidence. ‘And, you’ll probably do well to listen to what he has to say. Maybe you could actually learn a thing or two.’

His words fill my ears but my mind is struggling to process the bullshit which is free falling from my old man’s mouth. Is he actually being for real? How the hell would I be able to learn something from this grade A jerk-off? My father doesn’t yet realize that this guy—the one who he seems to trust so goddamn much—he’s the one who decided to break into a house... a house which was full of kids, laden with loaded weapons, just for shits and giggles. To try to prove some stupid point. And this is without mentioning that Ricardo seems to be the one doing O’Keefe’s dirty work.

‘Look, Pops... I didn’t come here for a lesson or to listen to this dick’s bullshit.’ I bite out, before clenching my jaw tighter than tight and I can feel the pressure beginning to build.

‘Watch your mouth, kid.’ He warns, but my father no longer holds the power over me that he used to. When Emily went missing, the fear which bubbled deep inside me unknowingly broke me free of any previous holds—including my old man. Plus, why the hell should I do what my father asks of me when he doesn’t give me an ounce of respect in return?

I focus my attention solely on my father, burning my eyes into his. ‘No.’ I snap back. ‘How about you listen to what I have to say for a change? I came here to see you and now



you're just gonna sit back and listen to a load of bullshit that this rat is hurling at you?'

'I gotta tell you Ash...' Ricardo chuckles before shaking his head. 'This kid sure has your balls and attitude.'

'Tell me about it.' And now they're talking about me like I'm not even in the fucking room. A small smirk dances onto my father's lips as he pulls out three glasses from behind his desk, before reaching down and pulling out his vintage liquor from the drawer. Obviously my father has plans for us to be here for the long haul.

'Now isn't the time for a merry fucking catch up.' I'm quick to remind him, not that he's shown any signs of listening to me since I arrived here..

'Oh, I'd have to disagree, kid. I think now is the perfect time.'

'What about Emily?' My voice cracks a little when I say her name, showing all of my vulnerabilities, but I don't have time to think about it too much. I'll have to worry about that later. 'Or have you suddenly forgotten that your darling step daughter has gone missing?' I glare at my father, but the stubborn son of a bitch refuses to meet my gaze.

'Emily is missing?' Ricardo asks, quickly turning his attention away from my old man and focusing it all on me. 'Since when?'

'Sorry, but how about you remind me how this has anything to do with you?' I demand, almost foaming at the mouth. 'This is family business and family only.'

My father slams a hand down on his desk and says, 'Ricardo is family.' He nods in Ricardo's direction, signaling for him to ignore my unexpected outburst.

My old man might be happy to pacify Ricardo but there's no way I'm about to stand here and allow this sneaky ass piece of shit worm his way back into the family. Not after what he's done. No fucking way. 'Oh yeah, sure he is, but only when it suits him.' I snarl, the venom heavy on my tongue. 'Isn't that right?'

‘Ricardo doesn’t need to answer to you, kid. All you need to know is that there were reasons, reasons which don’t yet concern you as to why he did what he did.’ My father raises his eyes at me, daring me to argue with him.

I find he’s rendered me speechless. What the hell does my father do this to me? Ricardo had his reasons. Bullshit. Does this mean my old man knew what went down at the house while he was away. Does my father know he’s been involving himself with O’Keefe?

‘Wait... what you’re trying to tell me is that you were in on it? All this time you fucking knew what was about to happen?’ My voice is hard and I barely even recognise it as my own. If I thought I was pissed then it has absolutely nothing on what I’m feeling right now.

‘I was aware he was watching the O’Keefe kid, sure.’

‘Really?’ My father sounds so goddamn calm. ‘Well, it sure seems like Ricardo here goes wherever it’s more beneficial to him at the time. Now if that isn’t a true definition of a snake then I don’t know what is. I stand, well and truly fed up with this bullshit I’m being forced to listen to. I really can’t take much more of it. I actually thought I’d be able to come down here and have a serious conversation with my old man, but he obviously doesn’t give a damn about Emily or her well-being at all.

‘Where the fuck do you think you’re going?’

Setting my shoulders, I look my old man square in the eye. ‘I’m going to do what you should be fucking doing instead of sitting here playing ghetto gangsters with the fucking enemy.’ I know I’ve well and truly overstepped the line, but fuck if I care. If my father wants to stand back in this, then so fucking be it. I’ll make sure I go and find Emily myself. ‘I’m going to find out what’s happened to Emily. I’m going to find out what Max wants with her and then I’m going to make that son of a bitch pay.’

‘Oh, sit the fuck down kid, and quit with the dramatics.’ My father laughs. The son of a bitch is actually laughing at me—like I’m nothing—like I’m no one.

‘Quit with the dramatics? What the hell is wrong with you?’ I ask and it pains me to admit that I don’t even know who this guy is anymore. He sure as hell isn’t my father. My old man would not be sitting here, throwing back liquor in his office while his business or office was under attack. Yet, that seems to be exactly what he seems to be doing.

‘You think this is dramatic?’ I exclaim, and the tension in my jaw is quickly reaching breaking point. ‘Why don’t you tell us the real reason you’ve been busy going between us and the O’Keefe’s. And while you’re at it, why don’t you tell us the real reason why Max is sniffing around Emily. Surely you owe us that much?’

Ricardo doesn’t answer me straight away. Instead he leans forward in his chair, and his beady black eyes hone in on me some more. ‘I don’t know what he wants with Emily. Maybe she’s just someone who was in the wrong place at the wrong time.’ He pauses to take a long pull on his smoke. ‘But from what your father tells me, you were the one who was supposed to keep her pretty little face away from the house, no?’

An instant rage begins to bubble deep inside of me and I have no idea how long I’ll be able to contain it. I’m still adamant I should have blown this motherfucker’s head off when I had the chance. At least then he wouldn’t be turning into my problem right now. A problem I don’t fucking need.

‘That has nothing to do with you. And if you’re so fucking clued up on everything then why would you come to the house at all?’ I keep my face as impassive as possible, and his game face doesn’t change at all. ‘I warned you before, if you crossed the line with me again then I’ll make sure you take your last breath at my hands... and that promise still stands.’

A loud and unexpected rumble sounds from my old man’s throat. ‘I told you... he’ll do more than fine when the time comes.’

‘You’re not wrong.’ Ricardo snarls back before looking at me as though I’m something disgusting he’s just

stepped in, and the feeling is so damn mutual, for sure.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CARTER

Ricardo didn't leave my old man's office for another hour.

Why he even needed to be here is completely beyond me. I don't say anything for some time, preferring to sit in silence while I desperately try to gather my thoughts. I have so much going on in my head right now that I don't even know what's right or what's wrong. One thing I do know is that my head feels like it's about to split right open.

My father doesn't press me, and for that I'm grateful. It still doesn't mean I'm happy with the way he's decided to handle things, but he's still allowing me adequate time to try to process the jumbled mess in my brain.

Although he isn't talking, he's still more than happy to sit back and drink his liquid lunch. I watch as the amber liquid glows from his desk lamp and he casually lights up another smoke. Eventually, after what feels like a lifetime of awkward silence, my father breaks it.

'Tell me what's on your mind, son.' He asks. His voice is surprisingly soft, and somewhat caring. Hell, this motherfucker is about to give me whiplash, for sure.

'Oh, so it's son again now? I thought I was just a kid. A fucked up, dumb-ass kid?' I raise my head and look straight into my father's eyes. I always try to hide my emotions, never wanting my old man to know that deep down, hidden deep beneath the surface is a little boy who actually has feelings and sometimes runs scared... especially when he doesn't have a fucking clue as to what is suddenly going on around him. Man, that sounds fucking hella stupid when I think about it.

'Carter...'

'No, pops. You don't get to do this.' My voice breaks and I hate that I'm struggling to keep a handle on my

emotions. ‘I get that you have to act a certain way when you’re around people, and that’s totally fine. I get it... truly, I do, but I came to you about Emily and all you’ve done is sit back and waste precious time. You’re acting like she doesn’t even matter. Like she’s never fucking mattered.’

‘Of course she matters.’ He barks back at me, a little on the defensive, and yes, he might well be telling the truth for this part, but nothing else seems to be making sense. Nothing is adding up, and I think it’s high time he started talking and fast. ‘But I have to admit I never thought you’d be one to be so worried about her.’ he raises a questioning brow at me and my heart beats louder in my chest.

I ignore the blatant dig and dive straight to the point. ‘So why aren’t you doing anything about it?’ I don’t want to come across as too pushy but my voice fails me, displaying way more emotion than I initially intended. I know there’s a small part of my mind reminding me that it’s actually okay to display emotion. Why shouldn’t I? Emily is my step sister after all. Surely my old man would be worried if I stood back and didn’t show a little concern.

My father watches me some more, his dark eyes narrowing as he tries to figure out what’s going on inside my head. Hell, he’ll be here for a lifetime trying to figure that out, because even I don’t know at the best of times. ‘What’s the deal, Carter? I thought you didn’t want to babysit Emily?’

‘I don’t.’ I exclaim, and it’s not a lie. ‘But her going missing is a whole lot bigger than me wasting my time watching over her.’

‘Alright kid... let me tell you. I’m doing what I need to do right now and that’s all you need to know.’

I watch in silence, totally dumbfounded at his laid back attitude as he pours himself another large measure of Jack. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ I demand and I can feel the heat of my temper beginning to rise again.

‘Exactly what I just said.’

‘Ah right...’ I nod back at him, my chest starting to rise and fall at a rapid rate. ‘I get what this is... you don’t trust me, do you?’

He laughs a little and twirls his tumbler in his big hands, almost like he’s thinking over what he’s about to say to me. ‘Carter. I’m your father and you should know me by now—better than anyone else.’ Hell, he isn’t fucking wrong, but I’m starting to feel like I don’t know this person at all. ‘Son or not, right now I can’t trust anyone. And yes, unfortunately that includes you.’

His words hit me a whole lot harder than I thought they would. Thinking my father doesn’t fully trust me is one thing, but hearing him confirm it loud and proud is a whole other level. The fact that my old man doesn’t trust me—me of all fucking people stings so fucking deep, I struggle to breathe.

After everything I have done for him over the years. No matter how many times I have put my back out, desperately trying to prove to him time and time again that I am loyal and I am the rightful and deserving heir to his golden empire, and for what? For it to make no difference whatsoever. ‘Gee, thanks Pops.’ I finally reach out and take my drink, and it’s much needed. I throw it back and welcome the intense burn as the flames lick their way down my throat, giving me the much-needed distraction I’ve been craving all fucking day.

‘Allow me to rephrase that...’

‘Don’t bother. I heard you loud and clear.’ I narrow my eyes and for the first time in my life an instant dislike simmers in my veins. Who knew this is how me and my old man would end up. We used to be so fucking tight. Obviously I’ve just been a means to an end too. Like everyone else in his life.

‘Carter, it’s not that I don’t trust you. I don’t trust the people who are around you. Do you understand what I’m saying?’

I slam my glass down on his desk, ‘Whatever. You just as good as told me that you don’t trust me, so don’t be a

pussy and try to backtrack now. The damage has already been done.'

'I know you're angry son, and I know that's why you're allowing the emotions to run wild and control your mouth. I think you and I both know you wouldn't usually have the balls to disrespect me like that otherwise.' My father pours us both another glass of Jack, and his eyes never leave mine. 'I don't know how far people will go to push you. I don't know what it will take to break you, and these people won't stop at anything until they've found your weakness. If I let you in, and tell you something you shouldn't really know...' he whistles before continuing, 'the whole goddamn world knows your my son, and if someone were to get hold of you, torture you until you finally told them what they wanted to know, we would all be fucked, Carter.'

'Wow... and that's all you're bothered about? Someone getting information out of me, information you want kept sealed, and not the torturing side? Nice, pops.'

He holds his hands up in a partial surrender and when he speaks his voice is pleading. 'Please, son. I know this is a big fucking ask, but I need you to trust me. I need you to trust me now more than ever.'

A low and unexpected rumble escapes from deep within my chest. Trust him? Now that's a big ask, for sure. In the past I would have trusted him instantly. No fucking questions asked, yet now with the way he's handled the Max and Ricardo situation I'm not sure I'll ever be able to trust him again.

I shake my head as a multitude of emotions run wild and wreak havoc on my body; the main one being disbelief. You know, just when you think you know someone, they come and shoot you straight in the balls when you least expect it, and you find out you never really knew them at all. 'I wish I could.'

My father leans forward in his chair, his big strong arms resting on the desk and his watchful eyes bore into me. In the past this would have made me think carefully about my



next move, not all too sure what was about to go down, but I suddenly find at this moment I actually don't give a shit. I don't give a damn what my old man thinks about me, and why the hell should I?

He isn't taking me seriously. He isn't listening to a single thing I have to say and if it turns out I'm right... If Max has Emily held captive somewhere then every fucking second counts. The psycho could be doing absolutely anything to her and my old man doesn't seem to be bothered by it. He doesn't seem the least bit fazed in the slightest.

'Carter...' His tone is laced with warning, but I am so done with his bullshit. My father is used to everyone bowing down to his commands, and respecting him like he's royalty, but damn, that shit works both ways. If he isn't prepared to listen to me then he can go fuck himself. You receive what you put out into this world and I think my old man needs to remember that.

I shake my head while a small laugh escapes me. 'Don't sit here and act like you care.' My heart pounds so hard and so goddamn fast deep in my chest and I wonder for a split second if my father can hear it too—if he can sense the adrenaline rushing through my body.

'Don't try to assume what I'm thinking, son.' He raises a questioning brow at me, daring me to argue with him, the same way he would with one of his minions.

'I think it's clear to see you're not thinking all too much, are you?' I hurl back without so much a second's thought and I can feel the heat of my rage intensifying some more. How the fuck did we get here? Never have I ever felt so much hatred towards my old man, yet here we are. If he wasn't my old man I would have taken a swing for him by now, for sure, but pissed or not he's still the one who taught me what it means to respect people—even if this son of a bitch isn't respecting me. 'Didn't you hear what I said? Emily has gone missing.'

Silence descends around the room. A heavy atmosphere suddenly swirls around us, before all too soon my

father explodes. He throws himself up out of his chair and smashes his hands down on the desk. ‘Of course I fucking heard you.’

‘And yet you continue to just sit here hidden away in your office...’

His eyes grow dark and I know he’s reached a point of no return. My old man has finally snapped. Sure, I wanted him to listen to me. I wanted him to hear what I had to say and to take me seriously for once, but damn... I know my old man better than anyone, and when he loses it—son or not—there is no way I want to be the one who’s on the receiving end of his fists. ‘You just don’t know when to quit do you?’

‘Quit?’ I bite back, standing up ready to match him and I can feel the vein in my temple start to throb. ‘Are you fucking serious? Emily is fucking missing and you want me to quit? What the hell happened to you, pops? Why don’t you seem to give a shit that your step daughter could be with the enemy?’ I shake my head when his eyes grow wide. ‘It makes sense that Max is the one behind all of this bullshit...’

My father shakes his head and for a nano-second he looks like he’s at a loss for words. But I know my old man, and I know that he’s just trying to calm himself. He’s desperate to keep a handle on his emotions, the same as me, but I can see he’s failing miserably. He’s trying to find some composure so that the ugly beast which is rooted deep inside of us doesn’t come crashing to the surface.

‘I’m already on it, kid.’ He sighs wearily, and he looks like the words have pained him to say aloud. ‘But I don’t want to discuss it.’

‘But...’

‘But nothing. I’m not discussing it here, period.’

I feel my face scrunch in confusion. ‘Why?’ Like my father, I just don’t know when to give up. No matter what he says to me, no matter how many times he warns me to stop, I just keep pressing and pressing until my target eventually combusts. I can’t help it—it just seems to be my natural

response. I guess some would say that my old man has taught me well, but then I didn't think I would be standing here trying to use his tactics on him personally.

Before my old man has a chance to answer me, my cell rings to life in my pocket, but I refuse to back down. Whoever is calling me can wait, or leave a fucking message. I'll get back to them eventually. Instead, I keep my own dark eyes fixed firmly on my father's; silently waiting for the instruction I never knew I needed.

'Answer it.' He booms back at me before lazily reaching out and pouring himself another healthy glass of whiskey. 'Whatever it is, deal with it then get the fuck out of my office.' He doesn't even look at me as a wave of anger ripples through his body.

'But...' I begin, but not for the first time my old man is quick to cut me off.

'We're done here. Just know that I'm dealing with it and I'll speak to you when I get back home.' With a wave of his hand he signals for me to leave his office, and no matter how pissed I am, deep down I know better than anyone to argue with him. If he says he's dealing with it, then I need to believe that he'll stand by his word.

## CHAPTER SIX

### OLIVIA

‘Why am I here?’ I beg and my throat feels like I’ve just swallowed a thousand shards of glass. I know it’s probably best for me to remain silent, to allow Max to think that he’s the one who’s in total control. Hell, he’s in control anyways, but the stubbornness rooted deep inside of me just won’t let up. I need to believe that I am the one in control. That I’m the one who decides what happens here, because if I allow myself to believe the truth; that I’m well and truly fucked, there’s no way I’ll survive this. ‘If this is to get back at Carter then you must know you’re wasting your time.’ I bite out, trying my damned hardest to ignore the pain, while desperate to make him see that I’m nothing more than a useless pawn in his sick and twisted games.

Max doesn’t say anything. Instead he watches me for a moment before throwing his head back on a sick and sadistic laugh. ‘Oh, Pumpkin, you really are naive.’

I swallow down hard, my throat engulfed with flames but I somehow manage to push through. ‘I’m not naive. I’m telling you the truth. Carter isn’t going to come looking for me. He probably hasn’t even noticed I’m not around.’ A dull ache forms in my chest when I realize that what I’m saying is true. Carter won’t come looking for me—period. He’s probably found someone else to terrorize and fill his time with by now. The sooner I face up to the facts, the better. I’m all alone, out here in the middle of God only knows where, tied up and held captive by this monster, and there’s not a goddamn thing I can do about it.

Parker probably thinks I bailed on her and headed home. Plus, she’s probably too occupied with Dean to even notice I took off without saying anything. After all, no one has time for the third wheel.

This is it.

I don't even know what Max plans to do with me or why I'm even here with him in the first place, but a strong sense of dread in the pit of my stomach confirms what I knew from the off—whatever happens, and whatever Max's reasons—this isn't going to end well for me, not at all.

'Oh, Pumpkin. Believe me when I say that Carter will come for you.' He smiles down on me and my stomach twists some more. 'Don't you worry your pretty little head about that. Carter will come.' He sounds so goddamn sure of himself as he continues. 'I'm not sure when, but he'll be here.' He licks his lips as he looks at me and my entire body recoils in disgust from the close proximity. 'But just think of all the fun we can have while we wait.' Max leans his body in closer, the stale tobacco and liquor invading my senses some more and I frantically wriggle my body, desperate to get away from him, but it's no good. I'm the one who's tied up. I don't have use of my arms and legs, and he's way stronger than me. His eyes blaze up and I can tell that my reluctance to join in on his so-called fun only heightens his excitement.

'Get... off... me...' I pant with each breath, struggling to breathe as he brings his full body weight down against me. Swallowing hard, I push back the acidic bile which creeps up and builds at the back of my throat, but just the smell of him has my stomach in bits.

'Hmmm... you look pretty damn cute when you're angry.' He teases, his hand gripping my tangled hair and a sharp pain shoots through my head. Fuck, this guy is crazy, and he hasn't even started with his sickening games yet. All I can do is hope and pray that by some miracle Carter will realize I'm not home. I really hope he has the brains to put two and two together and figure out Max has stayed true to his promise. That being said, Carter has never been the brightest tool in the box. Sport seems to be the only thing he's actually good at.

Even if he did realize I wasn't home, who's to say he would automatically think of Max? As far as Carter is concerned, Max isn't a threat. He told me as much this morning.

My heart drops to the pit of my stomach, like a dead weight. Oh Carter, how fucking wrong you were. I guess there's a small chance, although when I say small, I mean very small, that Carter could have been telling me to forget all about Max to stop me from worrying. Maybe that's why Dean was on me after class. I vaguely remember Dean saying something about Carter telling him to look out for me, but I automatically assumed Dean was just being his usual asshole self.

My heart picks up pace, and I can feel the blood rushing to my ears as a wave of adrenaline courses through my tired and aching body. What if Carter knew Max was still loitering around Woodville? What if he knew that Max was coming for me?

A small spark of light, a small glimmer of hope builds within me. If that's the case then Carter will come looking for me. If he truly spent so much time keeping guard over me then he will know I'm missing by now. He'll know that Max is the one responsible for my disappearance, and he will come for me. My unlikely Knight in shining armor will come to rescue me.

A small laugh escapes me at the thought. It sounds fucking crazy, and that's because it's exactly that—downright fucking crazy. If Carter does end up looking for Max then I need to remember that his beef is with him and only him.

I was nothing more than someone who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I was just someone who was around when Carter needed to empty his sack. The two of us should have never happened, but it did. No matter how hard I try to wish it into my reality, none of us can undo what happened between us. It doesn't make it right, and it sure as hell doesn't mean Carter is about to drop everything to come and rescue me.

Knowing the evil, nasty step brother I'm used to, he'll probably end up telling Max to keep me and have his wicked way with me. My whole body shudders and recoils at the thought.

‘Something funny, Pumpkin?’ Max asks before bringing his dirty wet lips down against mine. I want to push him off me. I need to get away from this monster and fast, but seeing how he has me tied down, there’s not a goddamn thing I can do about his unwanted and unwelcome advances.

His vile and repulsive heated breath invades my space once more and a violent sense of nausea consumes me. One thing which is quickly becoming apparent is that Max O’Keefe is never going to let up while he has me trapped here. He’s going to do whatever the hell he likes with me and there’s not a goddamn thing I can do about it. I’m trapped. I’m tied up, and I have no way of protecting myself from anything—especially this vicious monster.

Holding my breath, I wait for his lips to press down against mine and this time I’m ready for him. I might not be able to escape from this monstrosity right now, but there’s no way in hell I’m going to allow him to take advantage of me by putting up some kind of fight. I can’t do much, sure, but I have to try to do something—anything.

I’m not stupid. I know I don’t stand a chance, but if I were to just lay here, that’s as good as giving in, right? I squeeze my eyes shut and open my mouth a little, waiting with a deep sense of dread for his nasty ass lips to touch mine, and when I open my eyes just a little, the sinister smirk I see etched onto his mouth lets me know that he really thinks he’s onto a winner.

Hell, this son of a bitch couldn’t be more wrong.

He pauses just as his lips reach mine and whispers, ‘Now, if you play nice, Pumpkin, you might just find you’ll enjoy yourself.’ He’s so goddamn sure of himself. I don’t know who’s been boosting up his ego but whoever it is really needs their heads and eyes checking. Just when I thought Carter was the worst person I could ever come across, the universe likes to go and drop another surprise into the mix. Hell, Carter is bad, but I know for a fact, even though he’s a grade A asshole, Carter would never ever do something against someone’s will. That is something I’d usually be more than

happy to bet my life on. But, I guess it looks like I won't really have much of a life after this horrific ordeal.

Inhaling through my nose, I close my eyes again, desperate to ignore this monster above me. It's a hard feat, but I have to try to shut him out. I don't see why I should even bother giving him an answer. I don't see why I should have to waste what little energy I have left. The second his lips connect with mine, I strike. I bite down hard, ready to tear flesh if I have to and he lets out an almighty groan. Like a wild animal who's just been injured.

My heart is beating so goddamn fast. It pulsates against Max's slender frame as he forces all his body weight down on mine, almost crushing me and I can feel my chest suffering from the pressure. I'm only a small thing, sure, and Max doesn't really pack too much muscle, especially not as much as Carter, but he can sure cause me some damage.

'I'm going to let that one slide, Pumpkin.' He snarls in my face and I can tell it's taking everything he has to hold back and control the wild rage which must be running through his body. I don't know this guy—hell, I don't ever want to have the displeasure of knowing him, but I know him well enough to guess he isn't the type of guy who appreciates it when things don't go his way. 'Just know this...' his eyes grow wide and an instant dislike simmers there. 'While you're here with me, you will do what I say. And that's an order—not a request.'

My whole body tremors violently at his words. I'm such a fool. What the hell did I think I'd achieve by trying to defy and hurt him? I need to remember that I'm his captive. I'm here because he needs something from me. He will do as and what he pleases with me until he gets what he wants from Carter. That much he made perfectly clear, and what did I recklessly go and do?

I just went and made this fucked up situation a whole lot worse for myself in the long run.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CARTER

‘I won’t lie.’ I spit out. ‘You was the last person I thought I’d be hearing from.’ I allow the surprise to ooze out in my voice as the cold air whips around me as I step out of my truck. The gravel crunches beneath my boots, and after a couple of steps I come face to face with Ricardo. When I look at him I see that his scarred face remains impassive. There’s not a flicker of emotion—none whatsoever.

But then I guess that’s what I should come to expect from such a traitorous rat. It still baffles me, absolutely dumbfounds me as to why my old man is still listening to his bullshit. Surely if I can see through the cracks then my father should be able to, no?

Why can’t my old man see that this guy is the one who’s playing with fire? What my father chooses to believe isn’t really my problem. I can only try to tell him for so long, and I know all too soon the shit is well and truly going to hit the fan. Here’s to hoping my father snaps out of his crazy ass funk before that happens and it’s too late to do anything about it.

‘So... don’t leave me hanging. What do you want?’ Kicking the gravel, I step closer toward the giant. He doesn’t move. If it wasn’t so goddamn cold and I could see his breath, this motherfucker would pass for a statue. The motherfucker doesn’t even flinch as I come closer to him. ‘You sounded pretty insistent on the phone.’ I press some more when he doesn’t answer me.

‘I wanted to see you... alone.’ He replies and his voice is cold and void of any emotion. He stands, his big arms crossed over his chest, but this son of bitch doesn’t scare or intimidate me.

He might be standing alone, but I’ve seen and witnessed enough to know this isn’t usually how this works.

At least not in this lifestyle. Ricardo would be nothing more than a fool to meet anyone alone—and that's before I found out the son of a bitch was a dirty back-stabbing rat. No one scares me. And if Ricardo knows my father as well as he likes to make people believe then he should know that my father raised me better than to cower in front of anyone.

‘Well, here I am. In all my shining glory.’ I throw my arms out, kinda hoping he'll finally welcome me like the true heir he knows me to be.

‘Don't get smart kid.’ He growls and watching him get all worked up is kind of entertaining.

‘Why not?’ Do I really detect the hint of a threat in his tone? Damn fucking straight I do. Only this fool would be wise to remember that I'm not one to be threatened.

‘Because kid, I have something that you need.’

Now I narrow my eyes in return. What the fuck is Ricardo's game? ‘Like?’ My ears are up and now this motherfucker has my complete and undivided attention. Just the way he knew he would. Ricardo was at my old man's office and he knows that Emily is missing. He was there when we were trying to discuss it. I don't know if he was at his office when I was on the phone to him, but considering this guy is like a fly around shit, my guess is that he was.

He brings a big hand to his face and runs it along his bearded jaw. ‘Like that precious piece of pussy you seem to be rather fond of.’ He smirks back at me, fully knowing he has me right where he wants me. There was a reason he chose not to speak up back at the office. Ricardo wanted to keep this little piece of ammo to himself, and use it when the right time came. Son of a fucking bitch. ‘I'd say a little too fond of considering the little family set up, but each to their own and all that.’

‘Emily?’ Her name leaves my lips, and it falls as more of a plea. I could kick myself. Actually fucking kick myself for sounding so desperate. If Ricardo knows just how badly I want to know where Emily is then he'll hold back and use it as

even more ammo. I'm not stupid. I know how his dirty ass mind works.

I suppose I could always try to make out that I'm being a caring step brother and that I'm concerned about her welfare because of her mom, but I think we both know Ricardo isn't foolish enough to fall for that bullshit excuse. I could also try to play on the fact that she's an innocent party in all this, but Ricardo will once again know I'm calling bullshit. He can see the desperation swimming in my eyes.

'What do you know about Emily?' I demand, raising my brows at him, not sure where he's about to go with this, but I'm sure as hell about to listen to whatever it is that this rat has to tell me.

Annoyingly, he doesn't say anything. Instead he just watches me closely with a deep curiosity swimming in his eyes. What is with this guy, seriously? He's a fucking mystery, that's for sure. How my old man manages to deal with him is beyond me.

'Correct me if I'm wrong, but for someone who only thinks about himself, you're sure going out of your way to make sure she's okay.' He sniggers back at me and I can tell that the sick fuck is thoroughly enjoying my unfamiliar and unwelcome discomfort. 'Careful, kid. Carry on like this and people will start to think you actually have a heart and that you truly care.'

'Shut the fuck up.' I grind out through clenched teeth, fast losing what little patience I have left. I don't even have a chance to stop the words from leaving my mouth. I know this is what he wants. Ricardo wants to get under my skin. He's been trying to do just that since I saw him the first time in my old man's office. He's desperate to get some kind of reaction out of me, but that isn't going to happen. No matter how hard he tries to push me, I am not about to allow him to beat me and bring me down. I am Carter James—son of Ash James, and there is no fucking way I'll let anyone to tear me down and watch me crumble.

'Ohhh... did I hit a nerve, kid?'

I decide against answering him because if I do then it's highly unlikely I'll be able to keep a solid handle on my emotions and he'll soon figure out that he's right about Emily and my feelings towards her. Clenching my teeth, I take in a sharp breath and desperately wish that we could go back a few weeks. Back to when I hated Emily Valens with every fiber of my being. Back to when she got under my skin like no one else. Back to when it didn't matter if she was safe or not. Back to when she was totally irrelevant to me.

Now she's all I can think about and no matter how hard I try to back the inappropriate thoughts which keep crashing to the forefront of my mind, they just keep rushing back stronger and a whole lot harder than before.

'What do you know, Ricardo? I demand. My voice is harsh and abrupt but I don't really give a damn. I am so done with his bullshit. 'I'm not here to play games, so how about you do yourself a favor and start talking?'

A small smirk plays on his lips and it's easy to see that this son of a bitch can see straight through me—probably right down to the deepest depths of my darkened and corrupt soul. 'You remind me so much of your old man when he was your age.' He laughs before pulling out a pack of smokes from his beaten back leather jacket. He holds one out of me and I take one without hesitation. Not because I want to be social, but because I need something—anything to take the edge off the violent tremors which are currently going wild and coursing through my veins. 'He always thought he knew better too.'

'And what, let me guess... you're about to make out that he was wrong?' No matter how pissed I am at my old man right now, there's no way I'm about to stand here and listen to this piece of shit to bad mouth my old man. Especially when he isn't here to defend himself. 'Let me guess... you're about to tell me that you've been the big guy all along, or at least that's what you keep trying to tell yourself, hoping if you say it loud and clear enough then the universe will deem it to be true and cast it into your reality?'

A small chuckle escapes him. 'You've got a mouth on you, that's for sure. He laughs some more. When I look at him

his eyes are narrowed but there's zero malice in his voice. I don't intimidate him, but I should. At the minute I think he's trying his best to weigh me up, to try to get a read on me so he can figure out what he's actually up against, but he's wasting his time because everyone knows I'm a closed book and that's not about to change for anyone. There isn't a single soul on this plant who can break through my barriers.

A sharp pain stabs deep in my chest when I think of Emily.

Fuck, why the hell did I give her the time of day? Why did I allow her to get so deep under my skin? Life would be so much easier, so much sweeter and a whole lot less dramatic if I'd stayed away from her instead of trying to play the big guy. I guess this is all my fault. Isn't it always?

No matter what, I always end up going out of my way to try to prove a point—to everyone. To prove to myself that by Emily shooting her mouth off was a foolish move, one she wouldn't dare repeat again, yet now it looks like the only fool here is me, because after I had a taste of her, I quickly found I craved her more and more ever since.

A total revenge fuck gone wrong if ever there was one. And now, thanks to me, she's out there somewhere—no doubt at the hands of Max and he'll be doing God knows only what to her.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### EMILY

Silence.

An earth shattering silence consumes me. All I can hear is the loud thud of my erratic heart pounding fiercely and desperately in my chest. I still have no idea where I am. I have no real idea how long I've been wherever I am, and I sure as hell don't know how much longer I'm going to have to lay here and deal with Max constantly leering over my tired, achy and weary body.

My throat is hoarse, and my mouth is so dry. I would give anything and I mean anything for the tiniest sip of water right now. But I need to man up and face facts and realize that isn't going to happen. Max isn't about to make my life easy. He isn't going to give me a free ride. No fucking way. Max is going to make this as torturous as possible for me and he's sure as hell going to enjoy every single second of it too.

Max wants me weak, limp and practically lifeless. He needs me that way when Carter arrives. If I had the energy left to laugh then I would. This guy is so fucking deluded if he thinks Carter is going to be out there somewhere looking for me. I mean, it's a nice daydream to have, possibly the only thing keeping me going, but the reality is that's never going to happen. Not today... not tomorrow... not ever.

And this is all coming from a guy who claims to know my step brother. Carter still probably hasn't even noticed I'm missing.

Now that I'm away from him, no longer a bad presence under his nose, it really wouldn't surprise me if he's worked his way back into Holly's good books. One thing with Carter is, although he likes to make out that he doesn't need anyone in this life and he's the perfect one-man band, in all the years I've had the displeasure of knowing him, Carter has never once been on his own.

He had Dean and his teammates. They're always at his beck and call, ready to follow out his commands at a moment's notice. Carter has never been one to shy away from female attention. A deep sense of unease crushes my chest when I think of Carter with someone else. I know I have no right to get jealous. Carter isn't my boyfriend. He doesn't belong to me. He can do what and whoever the hell he likes.

We're not an item and we never will be.

I mean, it's not even possible because even though we don't like each other all that much, we're practically family. But no matter how wrong the two of us may be, just the thought of him closer to me has my whole body and heart responding in all kinds of ways—all kinds of wrong and fucked up.

My stomach tightens and I double over in agony. I can't even remember how long it's been since I had something to eat. I know it's pointless moaning about it either. If Max knows I'm suffering then he'll do everything in his power to make sure I'm suffering even more. That must be how he seems to think he's so goddamn powerful. So superior to everyone else around him.

How the fuck did I end up in this mess? I keep asking myself time and time again, and each time there's only one answer that comes rushing to the forefront of my mind. Carter fucking James.

'Are you awake?' My body stiffens at the sound of Max's voice as it filters through the damp darkened room and my blood runs cold. I should have known he wouldn't leave me alone for too long. But then I don't see why not because it's not like I'm a huge risk. There's no way for me to escape. There's no way I'll be leaving this damp hellhole anytime soon.

I refuse to answer him. And it's not out of choice. The sick fuck decided to place the gag back on my mouth. Instead I keep my eyes closed as I listen to the sound of his footsteps growing closer. I try my damned hardest to imagine that I'm anywhere but here—anywhere that's away from this weirdo.

With my eyes still squeezed shut, I know he's close when the stale stench of tobacco invades my senses again. If there was anything left in my stomach then I would bet my life that I would have thrown it all up by now anyways. Max probably would have been wearing it.

What is wrong with him? He fucking reeks. Has he lost all sense of smell? Surely this guy has to know how badly he pongs.

'Open your eyes, Pumpkin.' He growls and my heart begins to race rapidly in my chest. I don't want to look at him. I don't want to be reminded what kind of fucked up mess I've landed myself in. I don't want to do anything this monster asks me to do, yet deep down I know I don't have much choice in the matter.

I'm also not naive enough to think that he has me here for company until he somehow manages to get whatever it is he wants from Carter. No, I can sense that he has a whole bunch of other plans for me. Plans that I can't even bring myself to think about.

'Oh, Pumpkin. Don't tell me you're going all shy on me now.' I haven't even opened my eyes and I can already tell he's highly amused by this fucked up power trip he has going on. 'Just when I thought we were becoming friends.' Wow. Is this guy being for fucking real? Friends? Where the hell did he get that idea from? 'I thought maybe we could try to do something nice today. Something fun, you know, to help pass the time.'

I feel the coldness of his fingers touch my face, like he's just stepped in from outside and my eyes snap open from the sudden and unwelcome contact. When I look at him I see his darkened eyes watching me expectantly. What kind of game is he trying to play now?

'Oops, my bad. Here...' his hand moves towards my mouth and I instantly flinch back, half expecting his palm to connect with my face after a sharp slap. But surprisingly the slap doesn't come. Instead, he rubs his cold knuckles along my



warm cheek before dragging the gag away from my mouth.  
'That's better.'

I swallow down hard and my throat burns. It's dry and scratchy, like sandpaper, actually more like the seventh circle of hell right now. Better? I wish I could form the words to tell this son of a bitch how I really feel, but I don't have the energy and even if I did my words would probably fall on deaf ears anyways.

What would make me feel better though would be getting as far away from him and this place as physically possible. Yeah, that would make me feel heaps better. But I need to be realistic here. I need to snap up out of my fairytale daydream and face facts here. I am only going to get out of this hellhole if Carter decides to show. And the fact of that happening is getting slimmer by the second.

'What... ' I manage to croak out. 'What do you want from me?' I'm not ashamed to admit that my voice leaves my lips on a heavy, desperate plea. I'm beyond desperate to know what Max actually wants from me. Personally, I know I can't give him what he wants. There is no physical way I can give him what he needs—Carter.

Hell, no one can give him that. Carter is his own person, and if Max knows him at all then he should sure as hell know that Carter will only come to him if he chooses to. He could take all the people in Woodville and that wouldn't guarantee Carter would show. He has no personal attachments so bribery will never work. Never.

'All will be revealed in due course, Pumpkin.' His eyes glisten, filled full of warning and I know I'd do well to keep my big mouth shut, but keeping my mouth shut has always been one of my biggest downfalls.

Maybe if I'd found a way to keep it shut in the beginning, to try to get revenge on Holly then none of this would have happened. I wouldn't be here now being used as a pawn in some deadly game.

'I deserve to know the truth. I deserve to know why you've brought me here.' I pant out and even though the burn

in my throat intensifies, there's no way I'm about to back down without a fight. I want to know what's happening to me. I need to know why I'm here and why he's decided to play games with me.

Max locks his eyes onto mine and cocks his head to the side as if he's really seeing me for the first time. 'I'll be honest with you... there's a hell of a lot of things I could tell you. There's a hell of a lot of things you deserve, but why should we rush things?' He smiles at me and I feel sick. If he thinks this is turning me on then he can think again. He either doesn't pick up on my disgust or chooses to ignore it as he says, 'As far as I can tell, it sure looks like me and you have all the time in the world.'

An icy chill shoots down my spine when he flashes a megawatt grin at me. Obviously he's in no rush for Carter to show. He's planned this, and he's planned it to his own fucking liking. Max is definitely enjoying every single second of this torture, and a small part of me is beginning to think that maybe I'm not his first victim—his first hostage.

The sadistic son of a bitch.

'Please don't hurt me.' The words fall from my mouth before I can stop them and I know I sound desperate but truthfully I'm beyond caring now. No one is coming to save me and I'm trapped here. I can't defend myself because I'm still tied up, so all that's left is for me to beg. If Max won't give me my freedom, I'm hoping he'll at least find it deep within himself to allow me to keep my dignity.

I didn't intend on saying anything, but now my plea is out there, floating silently in the air between us, swirling around us like a tornado, and there's nothing I can do to take it back.

I'm fully aware that I've just gone and given this psycho what he wants. What he's wanted all along. I have just allowed him to see that he puts the fear of God into me. And, now, because of my big fat mouth, he knows he's the one who's in control—that he's always been in control. Max knows that he well and truly holds all the power.

His cold hand settles on my cheek once more before he brings his angular face close to mine. 'Pumpkin, if there's one thing you should know about me, then it's I refuse to make promises that I know I'll never be able to keep.'

## CHAPTER NINE

### CARTER

‘Please tell me that you’ve found her.’

Parker is on me the second I pull up outside Dean’s. She runs straight out of the door, making a beeline for me before I’ve even climbed out of the truck. I guess I shouldn’t have expected anything less from her. She’s a fucking savage.

I kill the engine and climb out, bracing myself for an attack from Emily’s best friend but it doesn’t come. My blood is still bubbling after my unexpected meeting with Ricardo.

‘Does it look like I’ve fucking found her?’ I bite back as I slam the truck door shut, and almost take the glass out. I know deep down that Parker is worried about her best friend, but on a personal level I couldn’t give a damn. As far as I’m concerned Emily would still be here if these two had done what I’d fucking asked of them. A simple fucking task—never to let her out of their sight, no matter what.

I thought it would have been pretty straightforward, yet here we are. I have no idea where Emily is or what horrors she’s currently facing. Horrors at the hands of Max O’Keefe. Horrors that I can’t protect her from.

‘Come on, man,’ Dean offers, stepping closer but his eyes are narrowed when he looks at me. ‘Don’t speak to her like that.’ His voice is low but serious and I know it’s taking a lot for him to show loyalty to both sides. His fuck piece and his best friend. ‘This isn’t Parker’s fault.’ Dean doesn’t often go against my actions nor does he ever question how I deal with things. My word is God. It always has been, but something has changed for Dean, and it’s clear to see that thing is Parker.

My eyes grow wide as I take in my best friend, and it hits me like a sucker punch to the gut—knocking all the air

from my lungs. I instantly know Dean has fallen way too deep with this one. It has always been bro's before ho's, and now look what's happened. Dean is breaking away from the bro code, and for what? A chick? Dean can get pussy anywhere. Fuck Parker and her unwanted distractions.

‘Listen... I wouldn't be speaking to her period if I had my way.’ I bite out, struggling to keep a handle on my emotions. ‘But as it happens, I need the two of you to do something for me.’ I struggle to get the words out and swallow down on the hard lump which has formed in my throat. ‘And this time I need you to be on the ball—and that means the both of you.’ I look at both Dean and Parker to make sure they understand me loud and clear. ‘We can't afford anymore screw-ups. There's way too much on the line.’ I warn them both and my body shakes with anger, violent tremors which have been building all day intensify, pulsating through me with such force I have no idea how I'm going to keep it together. No matter how hard I try to stop them, I just can't push them down.

‘Wait... why do I get the feeling that there is so much more to this? Why do I get the feeling that Emily is in a whole lot more trouble than you're actually letting on?’ Parker sounds frantic, but she doesn't break eye-contact with me. She stands tall as she tries to stare me down, desperate to get some kind of answer out of me. ‘You need to tell us what's really going down and fast, Carter.’ Her voice is fierce and determined. She's stubborn as fuck and I have a feeling aside from Emily, Parker falls into the very few people who could actually give me a run for my money.

I laugh.

I can't help it. I'm fully aware that this isn't laughing situation, but Parker can be such a dumb fuck at times. Do you really think I'd be this stressed, this fucking worried if this whole situation wasn't serious? Do you think I'd be running around town trying everything I can possibly think of to try and find her? Fuck, Parker...’ I shake my head and let out an exasperated breath. ‘This is way about your head. Maybe you

should stay out of it. Actually, why don't you head home? Dean can let you know if we hear anything.'

'Oh no you don't.' She steps towards me and both her hands fall and land on her hips. I guess it was worth a try, but it's clear to see that this bitch isn't going anywhere in a hurry, and the sooner I face up to that sorry ass fact, the better this will probably be for all of us. 'I'm not going anywhere. Now you can try to push me to the side like you do with everyone else. You can try to belittle me as much as you like, but I'm not moving. I'm not going anywhere until I know that my best friend has been found safe and sound.' Parker's voice rises and her breathing comes in quick, fast bursts, and if I'm being honest she looks like she's about to reach breaking point at any given moment.

Hell, that would make two of us.

'Dean, bring your mutt back in under control.' I warn while biting down hard, and my hands ball into fists as I try to keep my anger under control.

Parker doesn't seem to give a fuck that I'm getting worked up. As usual, she's always got something to say and she isn't about to let up until she's said her piece. 'It's your fault she's found herself in this mess.' Her cheeks puff out as she tries her damned hardest to keep her cool, and it's clear to see she's failing miserably. I catch Dean out of the corner of my eye and the son of a bitch is looking all flustered. This guy doesn't stand a chance. He hasn't a clue how to handle someone as hot-headed as Parker, and I don't even know why he's trying. If we weren't in this fucked-up situation I would love to stand back and watch this shit-fest unfold. It's crazy, but if my whole world hadn't just been turned upside down and then some I might actually find it comical. Dean getting all worked up and flustered over a chick. Damn, I have to admit, I never ever thought I'd live to see the fucking day.

But I decide to ignore my best friend and his issues. They're miniscule right now. I refuse to take his bait. I have way more pressing matters to deal with, like finding Emily and bringing her back home—safe and fucking sound. But first, I

need to track down Max because I know without him I'll never be able to find her.

‘How the fuck did you work that out?’ I seeth, snapping back at her when I tried so goddamn hard not to. But it's impossible when Parker refuses to back down, and I finally give her the reaction she's been craving, desperate to get out of me. I really wish I could ignore her heated gaze, but it's getting harder and harder by the second.

‘Are you being for real?’ She demands, her voice rising a couple of octaves. ‘If it wasn't for you and your stupid *‘party of the year,’* Emily wouldn't have been placed in the direct line of fire.’ I know she's right, but I'll be damned if I'm gonna stand back and admit that bullshit out loud. ‘Look, whatever issues you two psycho's have, they should have been dealt with between the two of you. Not Emily. She shouldn't have been dragged into this mess. She's the innocent one in all this and you sure as hell know it too.’ Parker shakes her head and her nostrils flare in disgust when she looks at me. ‘My girl was in the wrong place at the wrong fucking time, and you know it. You're just too much of a pussy to admit it, and now Emily is probably about to pay the price for your foolish and reckless actions over the years.’ She narrows her eyes at me. ‘And if that's the case, then there is no way I'm about to be responsible for my actions and what I do to you. Your time is limited, Carter James.’

## CHAPTER TEN

### EMILY

‘I have an idea... why don’t we have a little fun to help pass the time?’

My blood runs cold. My body stiffens and my heart accelerates deep in my chest. A deep rooted panic kicks in just at the sound of his cold, callous words. What kind of things does this psycho like to do for fun? I’m guessing whatever it is, it’ll be the polar opposite of mine and then some.

This is the guy—the weirdo who decided to come after me, hunt me down and kidnap me just so he can get one over on his rival. Talk about some kind of fucked up ego trip. Yeah, I think his idea of fun is definitely not gonna match mine—not even a little.

‘I’m tired.’ I mouth almost inaudibly. My throat is still hoarse and it burns so bad. I am tired, that’s not a lie. Sure, I haven’t physically moved... hell, I haven’t been able to move, but I’m mentally and emotionally exhausted. I’m drained. I’m hungry. I’m thirsty. I don’t have anything left in the tank, but I’m fairly sure Max doesn’t care all too much about that. No, the weaker I am, the better this sick and twisted game will be for him in the long run.

I don’t have the energy to talk. I don’t have the energy to argue, and I sure as hell don’t have the energy to bed or plead with this monster, so how the hell does he expect me to have the energy to play games?

A loud clap of thunder sounds out around us, and the floor practically shakes from the force of it. Great, a major storm is about to erupt and I’m trapped God only knows where. I don’t even know if the structure of this building is safe. If I don’t die at the hands of Max, maybe mother nature will take me out and end my misery.

A girl can only wish, right?



‘You’re tired, huh?’ he asks like he cares, but the amusement at my vulnerability and distress is pretty damn evident in his tone. ‘That isn’t what I expected you to say.’

He didn’t? ‘What the hell do you want from me, Max?’ I snap, all too easily and I feel like kicking myself. I know I’m giving him what he wants and I hate myself for it. But I’m so done and I’m fed up with trying to pacify this psycho. ‘If this is all about Carter and I’m just some stupid little pawn, at least have the decency to leave me alone—until you’ve finally gotten what you want.’ Personally I don’t think it’s too much to ask. Me being here is supposed to get a rise out of Carter, how I don’t know, but he really doesn’t need to waste my time by harassing me. Leave me to sit here and feel sorry for myself instead of forcing me to relive my new-found reality.

‘Oh, Pumpkin,’ I watch through aching eyes as he bends down in front of me before bringing his slim frame close to mine and his face is super close—too close. ‘Why would I go and do that?’

‘Because any other normal person would leave me the hell alone. Any other normal person would respect my boundaries.’

At that he throws his head back on a laugh. ‘I think it’s safe to say I’m far from normal.’

Hell he isn’t wrong. If I ever manage to get out of this nightmare, I hope I never have to see this psychopath ever again.

‘There’s someone I want you to meet.’ His voice is soft and my body instantly shuts down, knowing this is some kind of messed up trap. When he moves closer to me, his vile breath hot on my skin, I flinch back but I know there’s no way of me escaping him. I flinch some more when his cold hand reaches around my back.

‘Get off me.’ I cry out, knowing without a doubt that this is it... this is it... the moment he finally forces his nasty ass self on me and there’s nothing I can do to stop him. I could try to scream but my voice is too hoarse. I could try to shout

and waste my energy but I already know it will be pointless. Max has already told me there's no one around to hear me. No one around who would care enough to help me.

'Calm down, pumpkin.' He hisses against my cheek. 'I thought you'd be happy. Now you can stretch your arms and legs.' What? I try to move my arm and to my surprise I can. Max has removed my restraints. But why? Who could be so important that he's willing to untie me?

A big wicked smile creeps onto his face as he looks at my dumb-founded face. 'Feels good right?' He nods his head like he already knows my answer before his eyes narrow and his face turns serious. 'But don't get ahead of yourself. If you try to run I'll tie you back up and make you pay for your mistake.' I don't doubt his words and decide to stay silent. My tired eyes looking up at him as he stands. I bet my face is a picture. Confusion and shock all rolled into one. 'I'm going to cover your eyes with this...' he holds up a piece of fabric and I don't argue. Maybe if he trusts me enough with this I'll eventually be able to gather enough strength in my legs to kick him in the balls and make a run for it. All I need to do is remain silent and pray that I can knock him off guard.

'Okay...' I reply as a new ball of fire burns to life in my belly. The sooner I get my plan moving the sooner I might be able to get the hell out of here. I don't have any plans except for kicking him where it hurts. All I can do right now is literally take one cautious step at a time.

Max holds his dirty tobacco stained hand out to mine and I slowly reach out to take it before he clasps my wrist and pulls me up. A wave of dizziness washes over me and my legs feel like jelly because they haven't been used in God knows how long. He unexpectedly places a hand on my shoulder to steady me, before walking behind me and covering my eyes just like he promised he would. Max might be a lot of things, but he's sure a guy of his word. Everything he has said he would do or was about to do seems to have happened so far. Another stark reminder that I need to be on my guard. One small slip up and this could all be game over for me.

‘Now, I’m going to guide you so be careful. One small step at a time, and don’t even think about playing any funny games.’

I swallow down hard, forcing down the pain as he grips my shoulders tight and pushes me forward.

I can’t recall how many small steps I took or in what direction, but it sure felt like a lifetime before we finally came to a stop in what I guessed was another room.

‘Alright Pumpkin. Get ready... I think you’re gonna be so happy to see this person.’

A small tug on the back of my head tells me that Max has removed my blindfold, but when I open my eyes again I struggle to see anything. The room is so dark. My eyes refuse to focus. I shut them quickly again when I hear a low groan. A painful distressed groan.

Whatever this is, I don’t want to see it. I don’t want these kinds of messed up images ingrained into my mind for all eternity. But then when Max squeezes down hard on my shoulders again, I’m quickly reminded that I don’t have a say in any of this.

‘What’s wrong, Pumpkin. Don’t tell me a feisty chick like you has gone all shy?’ A dull ache burns in my jaw when Max cups my chin and presses down hard. ‘Open up, coconut.’ He snickers and I know I’m not about to like what I find waiting for me huddled in the dark.

I open my eyes again, trying hard to refocus them. Eventually a small huddled figure comes into focus and I cannot believe what I’m seeing before me. I feel like my whole world has come crashing down around me and there’s nothing I can do but watch the poor innocent soul wriggle in pain, his eyes black from beatings and dark dried blood is covering his face.

All too soon everything becomes too much and I feel my legs go from under me, and I welcome the blanket of darkness as it comes to claim me and I silently pray I never come back from it. I pray for this to be the end.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### CARTER

‘This better be fucking good.’ I demand as soon as I see that familiar white truck approaching me. It finally comes to a stop before me and the driver kills the engine before rolling the passenger window down.

I swear this motherfucker better have a fucking good reason for why he’s following me around town. He better man the fuck up and start explaining himself.

Fuck my father, and fuck his men. That’s what I say.

‘Jump in, kid.’ Ricardo growls out and his black eyes are dull and empty. Two pockets of nothingness in his scarred face as he waits for me to comply like an obedient dog. Hell will freeze over before I take orders from anyone, especially this jerk-ass.

‘I said jump in.’ He bites out again when I stand motionless on the sidewalk.

‘And I’m telling you to fucking do one.’ Didn’t he hear a goddamn word I said to him earlier? I am not here to play games. I’m not here to listen to the bullshit which freely falls from his and my old man’s selfish mouths. I’m here to hunt down Max and to find Emily.

He shakes his head before reaching out and opening the passenger side door. ‘Believe me kid, I think you’ll want to hear what I have to tell you.’ His thin lips twitch into a smirk, crinkling his eyes, but the scarred side of his face doesn’t move.

‘If it ain’t about Max or Emily then I don’t want to know.’ I breathe out as I square my shoulders. ‘I’m not interested in your bullshit, Ricardo.’

Fucking hell, Carter. Do not give this bastard any ammo. He'll lure you in like a fucking kid in a candy shop. I know that's what this motherfucker wants. Ricardo wants to get deep inside my head and play mind games with me. Usually I'd be more than happy to play along, because I am so much better at mind games than this son of a bitch could ever be.

'Get in the fucking truck before I drag your sorry ass in it.' His voice is cold, and stern, laced with warning and this snaps at my attention. This tells me that maybe Ricardo isn't here to play at all. Maybe he does have information. Information which I so desperately need.

This dick better not be wasting my time.

Reluctantly I step toward the truck and climb in, before slamming the door shut, signaling I'm not getting in through choice and I'm also not happy about it.

'That's a good boy.' Ricardo laughs as he starts the engine and puts his foot down on the gas.

'Don't push your luck.' I warn him, narrowing my eyes as my hands ball into fists at my sides. 'So spill... what do you have to tell me that's so important.'

'You sure you're ready to hear this, because I'm not gonna lie, kid. You ain't gonna like it.'

Do I like anything? Do I fuck, but that doesn't mean I don't put off shit that needs to be done.

'Tell me what you know...'

He pauses, his vein pulsating at his temple as he mulls over what he's about to tell me. It might be seconds, but it sure feels like a goddamn lifetime. 'I hate to say it, but it looks like you were right after all.'

'What?' My voice booms out around us and I barely recognize it. 'What the fuck do you mean I was right?'

Ricardo narrows his eyes at me, warning me to calm the fuck down but there is no way I'm about to stay calm in situation. No fucking way. 'I put out a few calls... called in a

few debts to see what I could find... see if there was anything about Max or Emily going round on the streets...'

'And... quit going around the houses and tell me what the fuck you found out goddamit.' Why is he taking his sweet ass time? This is a serious situation and he's acting all calm and collected like this is recess play.

'Max has been trying to get your attention.' He begins and all the blood runs cold in my body because I know where this is headed.

'He knows where I am. He could come to me any time of day. There's never been an issue in accessing me.'

'I guess he probably wanted to make a statement.' Ricardo takes his eyes off the road for a second and glares at me. 'You know how you young ones like to outdo one another...'

'So he decided to take Emily? He decided to take my step sister just to make some fucked up point?' If I'm being honest it wouldn't surprise me. This is Max we're talking about after all. Plus, my gut already told me this is what had happened, and would anyone listen to me? Would they fuck. 'He isn't going to get anything out of this. I don't know what his game is, but he sure as hell isn't gonna win.' I say and my voice is laced with conviction.

'About that...' Ricardo keeps his eyes focused on the dark dimly lit road ahead and I already know I'm not going to like what he's about to tell me. 'There's something else or should I say someone else on Max's agenda. It might be hard to believe, but this isn't all about you, kid.'

My brain struggles to process what he's trying to tell me. So Max is trying to mess with my head, and he's also made a beeline for Emily, yet he has a completely different agenda.

'So if this is about me, what the hell is he doing with Emily?'

'You see that's the thing. This bullshit Max is playing has everything to do with Emily. I guess you were just the fool

who led him straight to her door.’





# CHAPTER TWELVE

## CARTER

I spot the cabin the moment Ricardo pulls up on the dirt track and I know this isn't some fucked up joke. Ricardo hasn't been playing mind games with me, after all.

This is serious.

Deadly fucking serious.

Max is using Emily as some sick and twisted pawn in his evil vindictive games, and for once in my life it isn't because of me. At least not all of it anyway. I'm sure Max would have used Emily to get back at me, for sure. But now I know he has a whole new reason to want her. To torture her. To make her life a living hell.

Max has been out for revenge for a long ass time and now it sure looks like he's about to get it. Or it looked like he was about to get it, but thankfully Ricardo took his head out of his ass and for once the jerk-ass did good. He somehow managed to find out what Max was up to, where he was hiding out and what his fucked up reasons were.

I still don't know what Max's end game is but there is no way I'm about to stand back and allow him to ruin Emily just because he now feels like he's got rights to damage her. Anyone else I'd be like, yeah man, fair game... but not my fucking step sister. Not Emily.

Max can do whatever the hell he likes with me. But he needs to leave Emily out of his bullshit. After Ricardo's intel I know that's going to be a whole lot harder than I initially planned.

'Are you gonna tell me what the fuck has been going down here?' I demand in a hushed tone as wild and savage images of what could be happening begin to circulate in my head and no matter how hard I try I struggle to shut them

down. Two of my father's other men climb out from the back of the truck, fully armed, but I pay them no attention.

'I told you to keep your fucking mouth shut.' He hisses back. I get he doesn't want Max alerted, but what the hell does this motherfucker expect from me, seriously?

'Yeah, you did, but you should know me enough by now to know I'm not the type of dude to stand back and take orders from someone like you.' I narrow my stubborn eyes at him—my father's eyes and the son of a bitch's eyes sparkle with glee. The sick fuck is getting some kind of twisted kick out of winding me up. I would love to act like I couldn't give a damn, but I can't. Not now. Ricardo has gone way too far and he really needs to take a step back and check himself.

'Listen kid, if I'm telling you to keep your mouth shut then you keep it fucking shut, unless you want Emily's blood on your hands?'

'What did you just say to me?' I just can't help myself. He brings out a side to me like no other, and no matter what he says or does I just want to inflict so much pain on him.

'I told you to keep it zipped for a reason. And you really expect me to treat you like one of us, like you know what you're doing? I thought you told me you weren't a dumb fuck?'

'I'm not...' I begin but Ricardo is quick to cut me off.

'No? Well how about you start using that pea sized brain of yours and do the fuck as you're told.' He brings his face close to mine and the smell of his stale breath sends my head spinning, knocking me well and truly off guard. 'Maybe if you give me a couple of minutes to get us inside this cabin, maybe then things will start to fall into place. Then and only then will I be happy to answer your stupid little questions.'

What the fuck is this guy talking about? All I care about is getting Emily out of here in one piece. So long as O'Keefe hasn't laid a finger on her I'm happy to leave that son

of a bitch until another time and place... but if he has touched her...

‘O’Keefe!’ I shout out the second I’m inside the door. I don’t care what happens to me right now. They can string me up. They can torture the fuck out of me... they can put a fucking bullet in my head for all I care, so long as Max allows Emily to walk free.

This little shit-fest is not going to end the way he foolishly believes. No fucking way.

‘Someone shut the fucking dog up.’ I hear him snarl back. He sounds tired, like he’s had enough of me already, yet I haven’t even started yet. Max has always been such an arrogant prick, but then why should I expect anything else when it seems to run so freely in his family. My old man has never been a huge fan of Max’s father, and I’m pleased to say that the second generation is following suit.

This place is pitch black. I have no idea where he is hiding, and all I can do is try to follow my gut. My intuition picks up Emily anywhere. It’s never failed me yet so why should now be any different? Maybe because her life is potentially on the line, but then hopefully that will go in my favor and help me find her quicker.

I walk down a narrow hallway and see a small flicker of dim light before me. This is it. This is where the motherfucker is hiding. This is where his worthless life will come to an end. A savage end.

‘Who the fuck are you calling a dog?’ My voice bellows and echoes around the dark, damp cabin as soon as I come face to face with him. His eyes narrow when he sees me and a wild vindictive smirk dances onto his face. I know that smirk... It’s one I use often. One I like to call a victory smile.

Max doesn’t answer me. Instead he tilts his head to the side and his smirk grows wider. His dark eyes shimmer in the dim lighting, like a demon possessed. When I follow his gaze my blood runs cold and it feels like my heart has stopped. Emily... my Emily is crumpled into a heap on the floor. She isn’t moving and I can see if she’s even breathing.

‘What the fuck have you done to her?’ I demand. The room starts to spin and everything feels like it’s going out of focus.

‘I haven’t done anything to her...yet.’ A deep sense of rage consumes me when I take him in. The son of a bitch looks so goddamn proud of himself. My stomach tightens at the thought of Max going anywhere near Emily. I hate that he’s even breathing in the same fucking air as her. Not that he’ll be breathing for much longer. ‘I could have done it thoroughly, in case you were wondering. She’s not as reluctant as I initially thought. Little Emily didn’t put up much of a fight when I came for her.’

‘You’re lying.’

‘I’m not. I’d tell you to ask her yourself, but she’s a little out of it at the moment. Shame you didn’t get here sooner.’ A small sadistic laugh escapes him. ‘I did start to wonder what was taking you so long.’

This is all my fault. Whether Max wanted Emily for his own sick and twisted revenge on me or not. I’m still the one who led him straight to her. If I’d have known there was another connection to Emily then I would have been more resilient. I would have made sure she had more eyes on her. Hell, if my old man had known then he would have made sure she was watched twenty-four seven.

Max looks at me again and he looks so goddamn sure of himself. ‘I should thank you really, Carter. I’ve been looking for Emily for a real long time, and thanks to you... well, you brought me straight to her.’

‘What do you need with Emily?’ I call out, still not sure what he wants. ‘Do what you want with me, but leave her alone. Emily doesn’t belong in this lifestyle. She isn’t designed for it, and you sure as hell know it too.’

‘Ah, now that’s where you’re wrong.’ He slowly steps around Emily and that’s when my eyes are averted to another humped figure on the floor, this one looking far worse than Emily. ‘Do you recognize him?’

This cannot be happening. My heart goes wild in my chest as I take in the sight before me. How the hell has this happened? My father is going to lose his shit when he finds out about this. Especially when he learns all this has happened without his guy knowing, right under his nose and for God knows how long.

‘Carter, open your eyes and think with your brain instead of your cock for once.’ With his foot, he pushed the body over so I can get a better look, but I don’t need to see anymore. I already know who he is. ‘Emily has always been involved.’

‘What the fuck are you doing with Emily’s father? If he’s been missing a while you’ll have the whole of Woodville’s Police department hot on your heels.’ Max doesn’t even flinch when I point out the obvious. He clearly knows what’s on the line and he sure as hell doesn’t care.

Me on the other hand. I care a hell of a lot. A whole lot more than I thought I would when I see Emily and her father, hunched over, both of them limp and lifeless on the floor.

When I walked into this shitty cabin, I thought this was going to be a murder mission, now it’s turned into so much more.

COMING NEXT...

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## About the Author:

Harmony Grey loves to write about hot, damaged anti-heroes as they try to work their way back to redemption.

She's also an avid caffeine and book lover.

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## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:

Thank you so much for picking up a copy of  
SAVE ME - HATE YOU HARDER #4.

I hope you enjoy the continuation of Emily & Carter's  
story.

Feel free to come and join my reader group -  
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I hope to see you there :)

Much love, Harmony x