

CHURCH.



Some stories are
about finding romance.
Soulmates. *True love.*
This isn't one of those stories.

STYLO FANTÔME

CHURCH.
Stylo Fantôme

Published by BattleAxe Productions

Copyright © 2018

Stylo Fantôme

Critique Partner:

Ratula Roy

Cover Design:

Najla Qamber Designs

<http://najlaqamberdesigns.com>

Copyright © 2018

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment
only.

It is the copyrighted property of the author,
and may not be reproduced, copied, re-sold, or re-
distributed.

If you're reading this ebook and did not purchase it,
or it was not purchased for your use only,
then this copy must be destroyed.

Please purchase a copy for yourself from a licensed
seller.

Thank you for respecting the hard work of this
author.

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[DEDICATION](#)

[EMMA.](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[CHURCH.](#)

[3](#)

[EMMA.](#)

[4](#)

[CHURCH.](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[CHURCH.](#)

7

EMMA.

8

9

CHURCH.

10

EMMA.

11

CHURCH.

12

CHURCH.

13

14

CHURCH.

EMMA.

15

CHURCH.

16

16

17

18

MORE FROM THE AUTHOR

SOUNDTRACK

Book Two

The Kane Series

DEDICATION



For Nanci and Jennifer and Rebecca.
Thanks for all the laughs.

CHURCH.
Book One

EMMA.



My mother got married again.
She has awful taste in men, and that includes my father.

It shouldn't matter to me. I'm old enough to not need parents. I shouldn't even be living at home.

But when you're white trash that's been done dirty since before you were born, you just get *stuck*.

I don't know, maybe I didn't get enough nutrition as a kid.

Maybe I got dropped on my head.

Her new guy *is* a step up, I suppose. He won't hit me. Or touch me. Or look at me.

He won't do anything, judging by the way things have been going. He goes to work somewhere, I don't know where. He wears the same tie and the same short-sleeved button up shirt everyday. There's a coffee stain on the pocket. I stare at it when I'm in a room with him.

A guy going to work everyday is a step up for Margo. Most of her husbands usually live off her disability checks. Not Jerry. Jerry is solid middle class. Lives in a three bedroom bungalow in a cul-de-sac in an okay neighborhood, in an okay town.

Of all the motel joints in all the world, though, he had to walk into hers. It was love at first check-in.

Margo is pretty, I suppose. Big tits, blonde hair, nice eyes. A cheap Marilyn thing. The closest Jerry's ever been to a pretty girl is probably a b-rate porno. B-rate because hey, this is Jerry we're talking about. Wheat bread is the fast lane for him. That made my mother like the Indy 500. Like a sweep in Vegas. She batted her eyes once and he was all in. He proposed after the first time they had sex, or at least that's what she claims.

Whatever. It meant we got to live in a real house for once. It meant I had my own room. It was Jerry's old office, I slept on his pull out couch. He didn't use it anymore, but his scratched up metal desk and his boxy old Apple were still in there, taking up my breathing space. No closet, so my clothes hung on a rack. No dresser, so I used the empty desk drawers. It wasn't so bad.

At least he didn't touch me.

But there was a second bedroom. After I dropped off all my shit in the office, I stood in front of the other room. It was a guest room, with a double bed all made up. Perfect particle board furniture is standing untouched in there. An empty bulletin board hangs above a clean desk. Why am I in the fucking office when there's a spare fucking room?

Yeah, I asked that same question, and I got an answer, too.

It's not a spare room.

It's Paul's room.



Emma straddled a bench in the dining hall. She absent-mindedly picked at her thumb nail while she stared out the big windows. They were dirty. They were always dirty, she'd noticed. Smudged brown from the grease in the air, they gave the world a dusky filter, no matter what kind of weather was outside.

“Hi.”

Startled, Emma looked across the table.

“Oh. Hello,” she managed to blurt out, a little startled to see Stacey Cummings sitting down across from her. Emma had barely spoken to anyone, but she was very observant. Stacey seemed like the type of person always doing her best to make everyone feel included, a one-woman-welcome-wagon, as it were. She was the leader of a lot of different school organizations, and she was always throwing parties and get-togethers. She seemed to love a charity case, and few people needed charity more than Emma.

Emma supposed she could be getting attention from worse people. Stacey certainly wasn't the most popular person in town, but she was liked and

accepted by pretty much everyone. It didn't hurt that she was also blonde, tall, and shapely. The two of them shared a freshman level math class together, but had barely spoken before that morning.

“It's going to rain today,” Stacey commented, nodding her head at the windows.

“You think?” Emma mumbled, her stare drifting back to the outside.

“Emma, right? I'm Stacey.” Emma stared at her for a moment, then shook her hand. “I've been meaning to say hi, but I was on academic probation after last quarter, I was just so busy scrambling to bring up my grades. You're super new, right?”

Super duper new. Part of her new life as an upstanding suburbanite daughter was going to college. She'd started courses a couple weeks before, at the beginning of the second quarter. It was only a community college, but hey, it was a step up from flipping burgers at McDonald's. Jerry's business had hooked her up with a scholarship, so even though she was twenty-two, Emma was finally hitting the books.

She went to class and she got good grades, but it just seemed like a waste of time. The only reason Margo wanted her daughter in school was so Emma could get a degree. A degree she could then hopefully use to get a job that would get her out of her mother's hair once and for all.

So she went and she did well, but she also put in job applications everywhere. The moment she got a decent one and made some money, she'd be out of that house so fast, they'd forget she was ever even there.

It was a small city, so the college was small. A lot of the students knew each other from the area. They hadn't quite known what to make of Emma. Someone who was old enough to be graduating joining the freshman ranks.

Stacey was twenty-one, enjoying her third – and hopefully last – year in the school. She babbled away while they sat there, explaining how she was getting her bachelor's degree in marketing, asking what Emma was studying. Of course, Emma didn't really know yet; she'd just started, after all. Six months ago, college hadn't even been on her radar. She'd figured she could take this first semester to sort of get her bearings and figure out what kind of degree she should work towards.

Stacey nodded her head the whole time, saying she understood, claiming she'd been the same way. She still remembered how hard her first weeks at school had been, and she'd lived in that town her whole life – how hard it must be for Emma, being the new girl! Stacey was officially going to make it her personal mission to welcome Emma into the town's social life. In fact, she was throwing a party that night, and Emma just HAD to go.

“I won't know anyone,” she responded to Stacey's invitation.

“Well, duh. And you never will if you don't go out and meet people,” she pointed out.

“I hate meeting people.”

“That's silly! If you don't meet people, how can you ever know anyone?” Stacey laughed, shoving her gorgeous hair over her shoulder.

Emma didn't laugh. Stacey didn't understand. Emma had met lots of people in her life, and almost every single one had screwed her in some form or fashion. She didn't do so well with people. Maybe it was because she wasn't exactly *normal*. She'd never been popular, and she wasn't some bubbly blonde. She'd long since learned that she and the general public didn't mix, and it suited her. If she didn't interact with other people, they couldn't hurt her.

And even more so, *she* couldn't hurt *them*.

But she could tell Stacey wasn't going to let this go. She was terminally chipper, determined to make everyone else around her happy and sunny. She didn't realize that some people on this earth were put there just to be gray.

“I'll think about,” Emma finally offered. “I have a lot of work to do, though, a lot of catching up. I'm a quarter behind all of you. Give me your address, and I'll let you know if I can make it.”

“Deal.”

Before they could continue with the conversation, though, there was a commotion at one of the exits. They glanced over and watched as kids crowded around the doors.

“I wonder what's up?” Emma asked. Stacey shrugged and stood up.

“Let's go check it out.”

Most of the people has disbursed by the time they got up there, but a couple guys were still hanging out in a circle. Stacey elbowed her way right into the middle, leaving Emma to stand in her wake.

“What's going on?” she asked, shoving a platinum strand over her shoulder. The guys all looked like geeks and seemed a little shell shocked at her presence.

“Hey, Stacey,” one of them, the clear leader of the group, said coolly. “You didn't hear?”

“No, Chet. What's up?”

“Church is coming back.”

Stacey's eyebrows went up. Everyone nodded. Emma felt like she was missing something important.

“Church?” she finally asked.

“Not *a* church,” Stacey started to explain.

“*The* Church,” Leader of the Geeks interjected, and everyone cracked up.

“She's new, okay?” Stacey snapped, and that shut everyone up. “And what do you mean?”

“I mean, he's coming back and he's gonna go to school here.”

Ah, so Church is a someone, not a something. Who would name their son Church?

Stacey burst out laughing.

“Why on earth would Church go here?”

“Dunno. All sorts of rumors. Maybe you should ask him when he gets here.”

Stacey snorted. “As if.” And then she was walking away.

“You gonna explain all that to me?” Emma asked, hurrying to keep up with her new “friend”.

“Church is ...” Stacey took a while to choose her words. “Strange. I don't know how else to describe him.”

“Um, try hair color? Height? What makes him strange?” Emma suggested, and Stacey laughed.

“He's got amazing eyes, but I can't really remember his hair. Dark, maybe? He's good looking. *Really* good looking, but that doesn't matter.”

“Why doesn't it matter?”

“Because he's ... *strange*. Look – he's smart, okay? *Really* smart. I'm talking Mensa candidate, Ivy League, perfect SATs, all that shit kinda smart,” Stacey explained.

“So because he's smart, he's strange,” Emma filled in the blanks.

“No, that makes it sound horrible.”

“Bingo.”

“Seriously!” Stacey laughed as they walked outside. “I can't explain it. He's super smart, but was super quiet growing up. I don't think I've ever heard him talk, and I went to school with him from like third grade to graduation. He never joined any clubs or teams or anything like that. Marci MacIntosh swears she slept with him once, and there was a rumor he beat up some kid for teasing him, but those are probably the only normal things I've ever heard about him.”

Emma didn't say anything, just thought about everything she'd heard. So this Church character was very quiet and super smart, and possibly acted like a typical boy.

The suburbs are weird. They think normal is strange out here.

“Remember,” Stacey started speaking as she unlocked her vehicle and opened the door. “Party tonight. You promised.”

“I didn't promise. I said I'd try.”

“Close enough for me. C'mon, it'll be fun. I'm fun, I swear. Give me a call if you need a ride!”

Stacey prattled off her phone number, then dropped into her seat, giving one last little wave before starting up her car.

*Why does she want to be friends with me?
Can't she see I'm not like her?*

Later that night at home, Emma's mother was excited to hear her daughter might possibly be going out for the evening.

“A party, how wonderful! It's a pity you couldn't live in the dorms,” she commented, glancing meaningfully at Emma.

Jerry's amazing scholarship program hadn't covered rooming costs.

“Don't worry, *Margo*,” she sneered back. “I'll be gone soon enough, and then you can really pretend like your old life never happened.”

“Don't call me that! The way you talk to me is awful, Emma,” her mother complained as she took a seat at the dining room table. Jerry sat in his usual spot, his face buried in a newspaper.

“That's the point of all this, right?” Emma asked, gesturing to the faded carpet and wood paneled walls. “Big step up for Margo Hartley! Don't want any of your new friends to know you came from a trailer.”

Jerry glanced up at that statement and his wife's eyes flicked to him before going back to Emma. She scowled and stood back up.

“You shut your mouth right now,” she hissed, grabbing her daughter by the arm and roughly yanking her across the living room. “After everything I've done for you? Everything *we've* done for you? And this is the thanks I get?”

“Is that a fucking joke?” Emma laughed loudly. “I should *thank you* for everything you've done for me? How about we start with John, hmmm? Shall I thank you for husband number two? For all the things *he* did for me? Or should I say *to me*. Moving to suburbia and pretending to love some piece of middle management doesn't change what a shitty fucking mother you are, or what you let grown men do to -”

She got slapped across the face.

Emma and her mother fought all the time. Constantly. But it had never turned violent. She'd had plenty of visions of kicking her mom's ass. Taking a baseball bat to her, even. She'd never done it, though. She'd always lifted her chin and taken any arguing in stride, because that's what an *adult* would do.

Apparently fucking not.

They stared at each other for a second. Margo looked a little horrified at her actions. Or maybe she was scared of what her daughter's *reaction* would be.

Emma didn't move. Her cheek was on fire and she was breathing fast through her nose, but she held herself in check. Just stared fire down at her mother.

“Oh, baby, I'm so sorry, I didn't -”

Fuck that, Emma would rather get hit again. She turned and walked away. Once she got through

the front door, she slammed it behind her. She hurried down the walk, and when she heard the door open and her mother call out to her, she just kept going.



SOMETIMES, EMMA *almost* felt like a normal young woman. Once upon a time, she'd liked drinking and dancing and meeting boys and having fun. She was sexual, almost boldly so. She'd never been afraid to approach a guy, to be the first to make a move, to lead when most girls would only follow.

And it had always worked. She was pretty, she supposed, but not overwhelmingly so. Not classically, like Stacey, or even uniquely. She was almost ... *wholesome* looking, which was hilarious. She had mossy green eyes and sandy brown hair, which almost looked ruddy sometimes, but not quite. It hung long and straight, refusing to curl under any conditions, but it was amazingly thick, so she was content with it.

A smattering of freckles blanketed the bridge of her nose and spilled over onto her cheekbones. Sometimes she covered them with makeup, other times she didn't care. Her mouth was angry and full of razor sharp words, but its appearance was the opposite. A top lip that turned up at the crest,

giving her a permanent pout and a funny little smile. Wide, round, expressive eyes accompanied a button nose, which completed the “Made in America!” look.

For whatever reason, though, people seemed into it. She was on the tall side and lean, with long limbs. She'd been asked multiple times if she'd ever modeled, and all through junior high, her mother had pushed for it. But then Emma had grown a back bone and told her mother to fuck off.

Those days were in the past, though. *All* of them. No more parties and no more boys. She'd spent so much of her life thinking if someone just paid attention to her, just thought she was pretty, it would be enough. It would make her a whole person. So she'd always thrown herself into relationships and friendships. Life at home had always been so awful, she'd needed something amazing to counterbalance it.

It never worked out that way, though. The nightmare inside her home, inside herself, it was just waiting on the outside, too. It just disguised itself better. Her disgusting mother and her army of exes had taught Emma to think of herself as a piece of meat. As a tool to be used and discarded. So any attention was good attention, right?

Wrong.

She was tired. At the ripe old age of twenty-two, she was *so fucking tired*. Tired of the world

chewing her up and spitting her out. She wasn't good enough for anything. For anyone. It had started to make her fester. Rot.

She wasn't a quitter, though, so after Margo had gotten married to Jerry, Emma had made a decision. If she wasn't good enough to be loved by anyone, then *no one* was good enough for her love, either. Not her love, not her attention, not even her time.

If she could just get through the next year. Get a job, get some money saved up, then she could get away. Go somewhere near the ocean, away from people and crowds. Away from this obsessive need to be loved. Maybe, just maybe, if she could hold still for a moment without the weight of the world crushing her, she could finally learn how to love herself.

Or maybe I should just let it all crush me and then I won't have to worry about anything ever again.

Bad thoughts to have, she knew. CPS had been called on Margo enough to ensure Emma had spent a lot of times in and out of counseling offices. She had a whole buffet of psychological problems – addictive personality, low self-esteem, thoughts of self harm and suicide. She knew all the terms, they were like old friends.

So instead of dwelling on the latter ones, she turned to addiction. She pulled a shiny silver cigarette case out of her back pocket and flicked it

open, revealing a couple of hand rolled cigarettes. She delicately picked one up, then snapped the case shut. After she slid it back into her pocket, she pulled out her lighter and flicked it on, inhaling the flame into the tip of the paper. She took a long drag, then exhaled the smoke on a deep sigh.

There. That was better.

Stacey's party was in full swing. There seemed to be a keg in one corner of the living room, and a bar of sorts had been set up on the back deck – a table covered in bottles of liquor. Stacey had been standing at it for a while, pouring drinks and handing out shots, but she'd eventually wandered inside to join the rowdy crowd on the makeshift dance floor.

It all looked like a good time. A great time. A year or two ago, Emma would've gotten right in there with everybody. Would've danced on a table, downed a fifth of vodka, and fucked some stranger in the bathroom. Because hey, fucking a stranger is better than feeling alone and empty, right? *Right?*

She closed her eyes and took another drag, holding the smoke in her lungs for so long it started to burn.

Emma wasn't technically *at* the party – she was outside it. Stacey had practically begged her to come, and after Emma'd run out of Jerry's house, she hadn't had anywhere to go. So she'd walked the whole way to Stacey's house, prepared to go inside

and pretend to be a normal girl. For just a little while.

But once she'd gotten there, she hadn't been able to handle it. All those bright and shiny faces, so foreign to her. She hadn't had a happy life, like all those other people, and she couldn't pretend anymore that she had. No, what she really wanted to do was walk into the middle of the party and scream. Just scream and scream until someone called the police. Maybe hit someone, or break something. Wake them all up and let them know that no, nothing was perfect, and none of this would last, because sooner or later, the good times would end. They *always* ended.

Her eyes narrowed into a glare as she spied on the party. No, she wouldn't go in there. She would hold out for something better. That's what this year would be about – striving for greatness, in whatever form she could get it. Getting away from Margo, becoming a more evolved human being, getting what she deserved. She'd experienced the lowest lows life had to offer. She was ready for the highest highs, or at least certainly something higher than some stupid fucking college kegger.

So instead of joining the festivities, she walked a circuit around the house, just observing everyone. Getting a glimpse of what normality looked like. When she finished her cigarette, actually started feeling a little giddy about having all her thoughts in

order. Greatness, *yes*. It was coming, she could feel it. She dropped her burnt out butt to the ground and stubbed it out with her foot, then headed across the back yard. It was cold outside, most people had gone in, but there were still a couple half empty bottles left out on the deck. Making sure no one was looking outside, she snagged a bottle of vodka and took it with her. It was a long walk home and Margo would be at the end of it – Emma would need something to keep her warm.

By the time she got to her neighborhood, it was after midnight. Every light in the house was off, including the porch light.

What a bitch.

She smoked another cigarette, standing under a street lamp and taking sips from the bottle the whole time. Then she threw her butt into Jerry's begonias before heading inside.

She'd been wrong. Once in the house, she saw the stove light had been left on. How thoughtful. She glared at it while she struggled to get out of her jacket.

She waited till she was in her room to take off her pants. She stumbled into a book shelf and almost fell over, but finally managed to wrestle the skinny jeans away from her legs. When she stood upright, she looked over everything. It just depressed her and made the alcohol roll around in her stomach.

Fuck that lumpy couch, I'm sleeping in Paul's room.

Grabbing the liquor bottle, she marched into the hallway and promptly ran smack dab into someone.

There was a man standing there. A tall man. She blinked up at him, trying to figure out if she was drunk, or if this was a home invasion. A lamp was on in Paul's bedroom, casting light onto the stranger's back and leaving his face in shadows.

She should've been scared. She should've screamed, or swung the bottle at him, or at least run away. But Emma didn't do anything. She stood there in her long sleeve shirt and her underwear and she just stared up at the shadowy figure.

His pose struck her as odd, and she finally realized he'd been in the act of pulling on a shirt when she'd bumped into him. The shirt was over his shoulders and arms, and he was in the process of unrolling it down his torso. He was completely motionless, though, clearly as caught off guard by her as she was by him.

She flicked her eyes to the open door at the end of the hall. Paul's room. Then back at the stranger. What kind of home invader stole a t-shirt? Or froze at the sight of a girl, for that matter? She glanced at the door again. Then back at the man.

“You're Paul,” she blurted out, her voice sounding loud and flat in the quiet house.

He didn't respond, just slowly pulled his shirt the rest of the way down. Then he froze again. She frowned and reached out for the wall, feeling along it in the dark. When she got to the light switch, she flicked it on.

Oh, wow.

Emma had assumed Jerry's son, Paul, would've looked like him. Not too tall, but not too short. Heavy. Pasty. *Boring.*

But this guy was the complete opposite. He had shockingly bright blue eyes, almost glowing against his pale skin. His hair was a thick, messy mop, hanging clear into his eyes with the way his head was tilted down. She realized she was having to tilt her head back to look up at him – at her height, she didn't have to do that often, so he was very tall, indeed. And even though it had been dark when he'd had his shirt up, her shadowy glimpse at his half naked torso had shown her lean and well defined muscles.

He's fucking gorgeous. He can't possibly be Jerry "Potato-Head" Logan's son.

"Are you Paul?" she double checked.

He stared at her for another long second, then she saw his lips press together tightly. He gave a curt nod, then moved around her and headed towards the living room.

Maybe he's lying and I just let some burglar get away ...

He didn't make some great escape, though. When she came out of the hallway, he was in the kitchen. She moved so she was standing in front of the breakfast bar and she watched while he went through the cupboards.

“There's nothing good,” she warned him. “Margo's on a health kick, which means *everyone's* on a health kick.”

He glanced at her and she sucked in a quick breath of air. He was so intense, she was afraid he'd steal her breath away. She finally turned her head, pretending like she was looking for a stool, and he moved his search to the fridge.

“I didn't know you were here,” she tried talking again. “I mean, no one told me you were coming home.”

More silence. He lifted a carton of coconut water out of the fridge and didn't bother with a glass, just put the spout right to his lips and started drinking. She watched his jaw stretch and the muscles in his neck chord up and bunch together.

“You know, I've never even seen your picture. Jerry's not real big on hanging shit up, huh? But not even in your room. Not that I went in there. Just stood in the doorway once. You don't look at all like your dad,” she realized she was babbling. Paul lowered the carton and looked at her again while he put it away. She found it unnerving, his direct stare, but she refused to look away this time.

“I must have startled you,” she offered. “It's late, I shouldn't be wandering around the hall in the middle of the night. You probably thought I was an intruder or something.”

Smooth, Emma. Super duper smooth.

Paul moved towards the breakfast counter. It wasn't a big kitchen, not at all, but it seemed to take him forever. She couldn't get over the feeling he was *prowling*; his movements seemed almost ... predatory. By the time he finally reached her, she realized she'd started holding her breath. He braced his hands against the bar top, then leaned down so he could see beneath the cupboards.

“You're not wearing pants.”

She'd been waiting for him to speak this whole time, yet she was still startled by his voice. It was soft. Quiet. Unnerving. Just like him.

She glanced down at her lap and was shocked to feel a blush coming over her face. She never blushed. She'd once jogged around an entire trailer park in the nude, just to win a bet. She didn't get embarrassed or nervous or shy.

Paul Logan made her feel all three.

“Yeah,” she finally chuckled. “Yeah, good point. What kind of intruder doesn't wear pants? I mean, besides the really weird kind.”

He didn't say anything else, and she got the feeling conversation was done for the night. He stood upright, his head disappearing from view, and

she listened as he started rifling around in the cupboards above them.

Oh well. Just one more person in her plastic life. Someone else to be rude to her or treat her badly or use her or ... ignore her. Please, god, just let him ignore her. She got off her stool and started walking away, taking a swig from the vodka bottle. Two steps later she froze, stared at the alcohol, then whirled around.

“Welcome home, Paul,” she said, and she sat the bottle on the counter before walking away.



Emma felt like shit the next morning, and not just because of the vodka.

Jerry's pull out couch was old, some sort of relic from the 1980s. All lumps and pokey springs. It was some kind of bullshit, making her sleep on it when there was a perfectly good unused bed in the room next door.

Paul's room.

She pushed herself up and glanced around the office. Had she dreamt last night? It had been very late, the memory was fuzzy in her mind. Surely Jerry couldn't produce something as beautiful as the vision she'd seen in the hallway.

Snorting at her own thoughts, Emma climbed off the makeshift bed and rummaged around her room. She pulled on the first clothing she came across, then raked her hand through her heavy hair, settling out most of the tangles before heading out into the living room.

“She graces us with her presence!” her mother chirped as she made her way to the breakfast counter.

“If I sit down,” Emma spoke slowly. “Am I going to be hit again?”

There was a heavy silence. Not that Jerry noticed. Jerry just sat at the table and read his newspaper.

I like you more and more every day, Jer.

“I don't know,” her mom hissed in return. “Are you going to open your mouth again?”

Emma glared at her mom. Her mom glared at the egg whites she was scrambling in a pan. God, she wanted to hit her. Wanted to smash her face into the hot, greasy pan. Leave a big burning mark on her skin, the same way she'd left a big burning mark on her daughter's soul.

“Our chats are so productive, I'm almost sad to leave,” she finally snapped before turning around.

“Really? I always feel such ... *elation* when you go.”

“Big word, Margo. Is vocab part of you and Jerry's foreplay?”

“That is enough!” Margo snapped, slamming her spatula down. “I don't have to take -”

“Oh, Emma,” Jerry suddenly came to life, shocking them both into silence. “You're up. Good. I'd like you to meet my son.”

Emma blinked rapidly in surprise as Jerry actually stood up from the table and spoke to her. Well, spoke to her-*ish*. Jerry had never once made actual eye contact with Emma. He seemed

somewhat scared of her, which she rather liked. So to have him standing and facing her and looking in her general direction, it was a big deal.

“I'm sorry, who?” she asked, not hearing everything he said.

“His *son*,” Margo snarled from behind her.

Jerry broadly swept his arm across the space, gesturing to the living room. Emma turned her head and sure enough, there sat her vision from the night before, taking up a small corner of the couch. She hadn't even noticed Paul when she'd walked into the room.

Which was bizarre, because once a person *did* notice him, they couldn't look at anything else.

He had an interesting way of looking at things; very direct, yet not quite looking at anything in particular, either. This morning, it seemed to be settled on the window across from him. He didn't look at Emma once as she walked closer to him.

He looked different in the light of day. More solid, yet also more ethereal. He was good looking. *Pretty*. The wild mop of hair from the night before had been tamed, styled and brushed away from his forehead. He wore a slim fitting button up shirt, untucked, over a pair of dark jeans. Next to his feet sat a leather bag, portfolio style.

Emma stared down at him for a second, willing him to look at her.

He didn't.

“You look different,” she said. But he didn't respond. All she got was a flick of the eyes. A glance at her legs, then he was back to the window. He didn't say anything, but she could almost hear his thoughts in her mind.

“You're finally wearing pants.”

“Paul is quiet,” Jerry said in an awkward voice. Emma glanced over her shoulder at him.

“I've noticed.”

“He didn't start to speak until the age of three, and he still hasn't said much since then.”

“Really,” Emma turned her gaze back to the enigma on the sofa. “Strange. I heard you were in an Ivy League school. What are you doing back in this dump?”

Still no response.

“He was attending Columbia,” Jerry explained, and there was something very much like pride in his voice. “But I ... we got a letter, from his school. Best for him to take a break.”

Huh. A letter from school. Suspension? What could Jerry's darling son have possibly done that got him suspended from Columbia? She watched him, wondering what was going on his head. Wondering what his deal was. Wondering if he could hear her thoughts the way she felt like she could hear his.

“Don't you have school, young lady?” her mother barked out. Emma sighed.

“It must be nice to ignore the whole world,” she whispered to Paul, then she looked back at the kitchen. “Yeah, I'm leaving right now, don't worry, *Margo.*”

“*I told you,* don't call me that.”

“I have a wonderful idea,” Jerry suddenly sputtered. Both women looked at him. “Paul can take you.”

Emma and Margo glanced at each other, and for once, they seemed to be on the same page.

“Oh, honey,” her mother cooed. “I don't think that's a good idea. Paul's so busy and he has so much on his mind, I don't want Emma bothering him.”

“Yeah, and I would *totally* bother him. He doesn't have to go out of his way. I have a bus pass, I'm fine, really, it's no big -”

Paul ended the conversation by abruptly standing up. Emma turned to face him and for a second, just a split second, their eyes connected. That shocking blue met her tranquil green and cut her right in half. Her breath caught in her throat.

Greatness ...

Then his gaze slid away and landed on the front door. He stood still, clutching his portfolio in one hand.

He's waiting for me.

“It's not out of the way – Paul is going to the same school,” Jerry explained.

“*You're* going to a community college?” Emma directed all of her questions and statements at Paul, though Jerry was the one doing all the responding and answering.

“Well, he's going to be working there. We felt it was best if he had something to occupy his mind while he's ... taking a break here.”

Paul didn't say anything, but it was like there was a sudden frisson of tension in the air. She stared up at him and noticed a muscle ticking in his jaw.

He's annoyed. Jerry thinks he's taking care of his son, but I'm willing to bet Paul hasn't needed anyone to take care of him in a long time.

“I just need to grab my bag,” she spoke softly, staring at that muscle on his jaw. “Two seconds.”

When she finished speaking, Paul walked away, not giving any indication he'd heard her. As he went out the front door, Emma went back to her room. She slipped on a pair of shoes, grabbed her backpack, then glanced in a mirror. She didn't exactly look chic, but she'd do until she could get to a bathroom at school and tidy up.

When she went back out into the hall, Margo was blocking her path.

“You stay away from Paul,” she hissed. “Do you hear me? Jerry doesn't care about anything in this world, except that boy. You mess with him, you're gonna mess things up for *all* of us.”

“How would I 'mess' with him?” Emma asked.

“Oh, you'd find a way. He's special, alright? I know he's supposed to be some kind of genius, but I think he's some kind of retard,” Margo grumbled, and Emma winced. God, her mother was a disgusting human being. “He doesn't even know how to talk.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because he doesn't talk. *Ever*. To anyone.”

“That's not possible,” Emma shook her head. “You don't go to school and college and get good grades without speaking.”

“This boy does. I've met him five times, and I've never heard him speak a word. So if you start flirting with him or trying anything with him, I will kick you out on your ass. You hear me? It's just sick, messing with someone who's mentally ill,” Margo informed her.

He doesn't speak to Margo, and he doesn't speak to his father, and he doesn't speak to anyone else. But he spoke to me. What does that mean?

“We're all a little 'mentally ill', Margo, so chill out and worry about yourself and Jerry's life insurance policy, okay?”

She could tell her mother was thinking about slapping her again, so Emma moved past her and went out the front door. She didn't bother saying goodbye to Jerry. His face was back in his paper.

There was a car parked down at the curb, she hadn't noticed it the night before when she'd come home. Paul was sitting in the driver's seat, stiffly holding onto the wheel. Emma watched him for a second, then jogged down the driveway and climbed into the car.

“Sorry my mother's a bitch,” she said as she put on her seat belt.

Paul didn't say a thing, just started the car and immediately drove off.

It was strange, but she didn't feel as uncomfortable as she had the night before. In the bright light of day, she could see him clearly. See herself a little better, too. She looked at him while he drove, let her eyes slowly wander over every visible inch of him. He didn't seem to notice, or even care. Either way, he wouldn't tell her to stop, so she kept doing it.

Jerry and her mother had said he didn't speak, yet he'd spoken to her. And even when he wasn't speaking, she felt like she could understand him. Like he was speaking a different language, a very subtle one, only communicated through minimal body language. But it was there, and she was tuned into it.

“She married your father for his money,” Emma went on, turning in her seat so she could face him. He kept staring forward. “I know, ridiculous, right? Jerry isn't exactly a millionaire. But trust me,

compared to the losers Margo usually goes for, Jer is practically rolling in it. When she found out he owned his own house, that was it. She knew she was going to marry him. Plus, he has a decent life insurance policy and a sweet retirement plan. Margo's not a spring chicken anymore, she's playing the long con now.”

No reaction. It was absolutely beautiful. Where had this man been all her life?

“How do I know all that stuff? Because Margo knows all that stuff – she went through his office, here and at work. And she likes to act like she hates me, but she doesn't. She tells me everything. I'm her ... confessional booth.”

Whoa, that got her a reaction. That muscle of his ticked once again, and for the briefest of seconds, he clenched his jaw. What had she said? *Confessional booth*, did that mean something to him? Did a religious reference mean something? She shrugged and faced forward.

“So why do I stay in this parasitic relationship, you ask? Because Margo fixed it that way. Abused me my whole life, made me think I needed her to survive. Then, when I was eighteen and was just starting to realize I didn't need her, she took out a bunch of credit cards in my name. Racked up so much debt, she completely trashed my credit. I didn't find out until I was almost twenty. Couldn't rent an apartment with bad credit. With bill

collectors hounding me. Couldn't buy a car, not even a shitty used one. Didn't have any money, couldn't buy nice enough clothes to get a job. No job, couldn't afford a lawyer to sue my own mother for identity theft. No school, so wasn't smart enough to figure out how to get back at her.

“And then along came Saint Jerry. 'He'll send you to school' Margo promised. 'He'll give you a future' she whispered. All these things, just to help her look like marriage material. Tale as old as time, really – Margo uses her pretty young daughter to lure in some guy. But now, see, now that she's got him, and it's obvious that he doesn't want me, she's doesn't need me. So we made a deal. They take care of me, and I keep my mouth shut. Sometimes. Jerry lets me sleep on that shitty couch, and my mother ignores me for the most part, and it's not the worst thing ever. Not great, but not the worst. It isn't like it was before, that's for damn sure.”

Silence was the only response she got as the college campus loomed into view. Paul didn't go to the public parking lot, though, he surprised her by passing through it and parking in the faculty area. They both got out of the car and she watched over the hood while he collected his belongings.

“I still don't get why you would come here, even for a job. Why'd you come back? You have a life, a car. You could go anywhere,” she pointed out, her voice full of wistful longing.

When he stood upright, he finally looked at her. Stared at her. Bored holes into her soul. Again, he never said a word, but she heard him clear as day, read his body language like it was printed in neon letters on his skin.

“For reasons you don't need to know.”

“I can find my own way home,” she breathed, then she cleared her throat. “I only have two classes today, so don't worry about me.”

Paul turned around and strode away, heading for a side entrance.

Emma watched him for a moment, then turned as well. She was surprised to see a dozen or so students staring at her, frozen in place in the parking lot. She stared back, then glared and started marching to the front doors.

It didn't end there, though. There was a large, common area in the front of the main building. Plate glass windows looked out over the parking lot, and Paul had parked in front of the very last one. There were a few students scattered about inside, and when she walked in, they all turned to look at her and spoke to each other in hushed tones.

“What?” she asked loudly, lifting her hands up. There were a couple snickers and some people looked away.

What, did I go back in time to high school and not realize it?

Emma threw herself down at a table and glared at everyone. Okay, so they were staring at her. Why? It was a small town and a small college, her attendance had gotten her some eyebrow raises on her first day. But that had been weeks ago, they mostly ignored her now. She glanced out the window, at Paul's parked car. It was an old Honda Civic, 1990, burgundy. Nothing worth gawking at, really. The driver, however, had been very gawk worthy.

Wait a minute. This was a small town. Small enough that a new college student was noticed. That meant a local as odd as Paul would definitely be known. He'd gotten out, away, had used his big, beautiful, bizarre brain to go to a fancy university.

And then he'd come back. It was almost like he was a traitor. Like he'd committed some kind of crime, or some kind of ... *sacrilege*.

Wait, wait, wait a minute, I've heard all this before.

He was very quiet. He was very smart. He'd gone to an Ivy League school. He'd come back. He was going to their shitty college.

Some kind of sacrilege ...

She almost blurted it out loud, but then someone sat down next to her.

“You lied to me.”

“Huh?” Emma asked, startled out of her thought process. Stacey Cummings was back again,

sitting down next to her.

“You lied. You said you'd come to my party, and you didn't,” she repeated.

“I didn't lie. I said I would try, and I did.”

“So what happened?”

Emma really wanted to point out that she didn't owe this girl jack shit, let alone an explanation, but she stopped herself. She was trying to strive for greatness, she remembered. Not for being the world's biggest bitch.

“I got into a fight with my mother,” she was honest. “I still live at home. It got ugly.”

“Oh,” Stacey's whole demeanor relaxed. “That sucks, I'm sorry. I had figured you lived in the dorms or something.”

“Nope.”

“Well, if you ever need somewhere to crash, let me know, I've got lots of room at my place. It's my parents' old house and I'm all alone there most of the time, so I don't mind letting people stay.”

Emma watched the other girl while she spoke, wondering about her. Some people rescued dogs from the pound – she guessed Stacey rescued people from their shitty situations. She wondered why. What had happened to Stacey to make her feel like she needed to save poor unfortunates like Emma?

She didn't ask, though, seeing as how she'd probably need to take Stacey up on her offer at

some point. Stacey had set her sights on being Emma's new friend, on taking care of her. God only knew why, but it was certainly handy. It meant Emma could use her.

“That's awesome, thank you. Can I ask you about something? Did you see the guy I got a ride with?” she asked.

“Yes! I was just going to ask you, how did *that* happen? I didn't even know you knew him.”

“I don't, technically. We just met this morning. Or last night.”

“Where did you bump into Church at night around here!?”

“Church?”

“Yeah.”

“... what?”

They both stared at each other in confusion, then Stacey waved her arms through the air.

“Okay, rewind, start over,” she said. “You got out of a car this morning with *Church*. That guy we talked about yesterday! How did you bump into him?”

Ah, that's what Emma had been figuring out before Stacey had interrupted her. *Yes*, a sacrilege, quiet, smart – *Paul* was Church. How could Emma not have known that?

“I, uh ... I guess he's my step-brother,” she replied. Stacey's jaw dropped.

“Your step-brother is Church Logan?”

“Yup.”

“Why didn't you say anything yesterday?”

“Because I didn't know. I'd never met him, and Jerry only ever called him Paul.”

“Oh,” Stacey gasped. “That's right. Paul 'Church' Logan, I'd forgotten. No one's called him Paul since ... geez, elementary school?”

“We bumped into each other in the hallway last night, then he gave me a ride this morning.”

“Did he talk to you?”

Technically, Paul – or rather, *Church* – hadn't spoken to Emma that day. But in another way, he had, and he'd definitely spoken to her the night before. Still, she didn't want to share that with anybody. Not yet.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “So where does the nickname 'Church' come from? Jerry never talks about religion or anything.”

“Gosh, you know, it's just what everyone calls him, I'm not sure how it got started. Ms. Bluth, our social studies teacher in eleventh grade, said it had to be because he's 'quiet as a church mouse'. Some guys tried to start calling him Mouse, instead, but it didn't last long.”

“Oh yeah? Why'd they stop?”

“Remember how I said there was a rumor Church had beaten up a guy for teasing him?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, well, they stopped calling him 'Mouse' right about that same time.”

Emma turned away and looked back out the window, at the Honda Civic again. He was so quiet and still, it was hard to imagine Church beating someone up. But he was a tall guy, fit, in good shape. If he'd been looked like that in high school, he wouldn't have had any trouble smacking someone around.

*Strange. Stacey was right, he's definitely a **strange** guy.*

Biology was her first class of the day, then Emma had a half hour break between it and her next class – she'd purposefully picked classes close together so she wouldn't have a lot of down time. She didn't want to aimlessly wander around the campus for hours between classes, and she didn't have a job to go to, or money to spend anywhere, so it was better to have something useful to do with her time.

She stopped in a bathroom and fixed herself up a little. Brushed her teeth and her hair, then on a whim, she decided to put on some no-make-up make-up. Just powder to tone down the shine, and a couple slicks of mascara, helping her eyes to pop. A brush of chapstick to top off the look, and she was pleased. Wholesome Emma was back in effect. Late night, vodka drinking, secret spilling, batshit crazy Emma was hidden away.

“You're looking cute,” Stacey commented when they met up in their shared math class. Emma almost groaned. Apparently they really were friends. She wasn't sure how to feel about that, she hadn't wanted any friends in this new chapter of her life.

The class was in a lecture style hall, with raised seating. They walked up a couple levels and took two seats next to each other.

“Yeah, I kinda went straight from bed to school this morning,” Emma managed to chuckle as she took out her course work and started looking over it.

“I could tell.”

People were still milling about, chatting with friends or looking over homework, when Mr. Harker finally walked into the room. Everyone went quiet, but not out of respect for the teacher. No, they went quiet because of the man who walked in next.

“*What is he doing here?*” Stacey squealed in a whisper. Emma stared as Church walked across the room and sat down behind the teacher's desk.

“I honestly have no idea,” she whispered back.

“Students! Good afternoon!” Mr. Harker called out. “Welcome back to math. You may have noticed a new addition to the room, and no, ladies, he's not here for your benefit. Mr. Logan will be

acting as my teacher's assistant for the remainder of the semester.”

Emma studied Church's face, trying to see if the joke about his looks annoyed him. He didn't bat an eyelash, even though several of his new students were doing just that at him. Either they weren't deterred by his “strange” status, or they weren't from around there and didn't know.

“God, look at Marci MacIntosh,” Stacey groaned in a stage whisper. “She's gonna fall out of her seat if she doesn't calm down.”

Emma glanced down at the front row and took in the large chested girl who was leaning over her desk very provocatively.

“She's gonna fall out of more than her seat if she's not careful,” she snorted. Stacey laughed.

“At least it would add some entertainment to the day.”

“Wait ... MacIntosh ... isn't that the girl you said slept with him?” Emma asked, using her pencil to point between the two objects of their discussion.

“Yeah. Well, I mean, that's what she claims. Church doesn't exactly deny or confirm it, so who knows. But I can't imagine him having sex, could you?”

Yes. Yes, Emma very much could. It made her feel strange. Made her think about her mother's words. Church was different, that was for sure. She herself had wondered about him. He was clearly

non-verbal. He was also her step-brother, technically. Thinking about him naked and touching her and looking at her with those intense eyes, it couldn't be appropriate.

Something's wrong with me. More so than usual this time. I need to be very careful with him.

She decided to ignore him. He was as aware of her as she might be of an eggplant, so it was ridiculous, having sexual thoughts about him. She focused on the teacher, taking down notes on everything he said and struggling to understand it. Any kind of math had always been her weak spot. Soon she was lost in letters and numbers and symbols, trying to make sense of it all.

“Next class,” the teacher wound things down almost an hour and a half later. “We're gonna go over chapters eighteen through twenty-four. Pay close attention to the equations in chapter twenty-two. Oh! And make sure to have an *awesome* rest of the day.”

There were a couple laughs and claps at his last comment, but Emma didn't bother. She bent over and fought with her bag, trying to shove her textbook and notepad inside it.

“He was staring at you.”

She lifted her head. She'd actually forgotten Stacey was next to her.

“Huh? Mr. Harker?” she asked, glancing around.

“No, stupid. *Church* was staring at you.”

Her eyes immediately went to the big wooden desk in the corner. He was still sitting there, but he was reading over a test, using a red pen to make lots of notes all over it.

“He's working,” she pointed out.

“He's working *now*,” Stacey corrected her. “But about halfway through class, he turned and looked at you. He didn't look away until maybe ten minutes ago.”

“You stared at him staring at me for half an hour?” Emma laughed, standing and shouldering her bag.

“No, but I kept glancing back. I've never seen him stare at anybody, not like that, at least. I think he likes you.”

“How could he like me? He doesn't *know* me.”

“You live with him, don't you?”

“Yeah, but only for like five whole minutes.

The car ride this morning barely counts, and I bitched about my mother the whole time. He's probably staring at me because he's imagining the different ways he wants to kill me, get rid of his annoying new step-sister,” she joked, jogging down the steps to the door.

Stacey switched the subject then, going into her Welcome-Wagon role again, talking about another upcoming party. Some big deal on Saturday,

everyone was going to it, Emma simply *had to* go this time.

She only listened with half an ear. When they stepped into the hallway, she glanced back once, and found herself almost falling into Church's big blue eyes. That stare again, the one that cut through her. She felt like he was staring straight into her damaged little soul.

I don't care if he's imagining me naked or dead or anything in between. I just want him to always look at me like that.



EATING IN THE DINING hall was Emma's only option aside from going home – her scholarship had included funds for her student account. Textbooks, notebooks, pencils, pens, and shitty cafeteria food would never be a problem for her. Plus, it meant less time in Margo's presence, so it was a bonus.

She sat at the end of a table and nibbled at a sandwich. Stacey and a couple other girls had joined her. More friends, *yippee*. They'd started babbling about some big concert the year before and she stared at them. How could she be friends with these people? Around that same time last year, Emma had spent the weekend barricaded in her own bedroom, trying to keep Margo's very drunk and very rape-y boyfriend out. She had nothing in

common with these girls, they wouldn't understand her.

So she ignored them and let her mind drift away. She wondered when life was ever going to start getting good. Wondered if being homeless wouldn't be a better option than living with Margo. Maybe getting gang raped by hobos would help erase some of her other memories.

Emma wasn't sure how long Church had been standing in the doorway of the dining hall before she noticed him. Their eyes connected for only a moment, then he turned and walked out of the room. She swallowed thickly, then put down her sandwich.

“Is something wrong?” Stacey asked. Emma shook her head and collected her things.

“No, but my ride is here. Gotta go.”

“Please think about the party?”

“Maybe. See you next math class.”

Of course, she had no way of knowing if that's what Church had meant by coming into the dining hall. He could've just gotten lost looking for the parking lot. Or maybe he'd been in there the whole time and he'd just finished eating. A dozen different reasons sprang to her mind as she hurried down the corridor.

No, he was looking for me.

He was sitting behind the wheel of his Honda, exactly like he'd been that morning at home. His

eyes stayed trained on the windshield when she got into her seat.

My seat, because that's what it is now.

After they'd been driving in silence for a couple minutes, she took a deep breath. "You got in trouble, didn't you?"

Silence. A muscle ticked. His jaw clenched.

Bingo.

"No other reason to come back to this wonderful place," she sighed, tracing her finger along her window. "You did something bad. Not enough to get kicked out of school, but enough to worry people. Enough to make them think going home would do you good. Jesus, people are so fucking stupid. Like home is some magical place over the rainbow. A bandage that'll fix everything. What could coming home do for you? Home just makes everything worse."

They sat in silence after that, driving down the winding streets. It was late autumn and he didn't have the heat on in the car. She could feel the chill in the air. Frost was coming. She let her eyes fall shut.

"You're not scared of me."

She kept her eyes closed and let out a deep breath. He had a beautiful voice, rich and full. She was glad he didn't share it with anyone else. It made her feel special.

"No. I'm not," she agreed.

They turned onto their street, then he parked in the driveway. She took off her seatbelt and he turned off the car, but neither of them moved to get out. The chill seeped into their bones.

“Should I call you Paul? Or Church?” she asked, staring at the walk to the front door. Her mother had put up some ridiculous little flag with a pumpkin patch on it. Margo Hartley had never so much as bought a pumpkin in her entire life, let alone seen a pumpkin patch. Now she had one waving in the wind in front of her house.

What a life.

Emma listened as he took a deep, steadying breath. Could hear him release it through his nose. He was trying to calm himself down. She'd unnerved him.

Good.

“Church,” he finally responded, then he got out of the car and left her sitting there all alone.

CHURCH.



Women are not good for much.
Not that I'm sexist. Perhaps I should rephrase.

People aren't good for much.

Maybe men even less so – they can't do anything for me, most of the time. At least I can fuck women. And the very best kind of women, I can even use.

And suddenly, standing in front of me, is this *woman*. And again, the next morning. This *woman*. Right there for the taking, right after I'd come home for my new job. For my new plan. For my new *purpose*.

She has long hair just begging for me to pull it, and a mouth that rarely shuts, so maybe I should fill it.

But the best part about her? Her eyes. Big, beautiful, green pools. The windows to her soul, telling me all her little secrets.

You know what they say?

They say want me.

They say need me.

They say I'm damaged.

They say fix me.

They say I will do anything for these things.
Anything at all. Just make me *believe*.

Oh, Emma, I can do all those things for you. I
can make you a believer.

And then you will do anything I want. Anything
at all.

Sometimes, I swear, the universe unfolds
exactly as I need it to.



Emma laid flat on her back on the lumpy pull out bed. She was wearing a thin tank top and a pair of bikini briefs. She played with a strand of her hair while she stared up at the ceiling.

It was cold in the house. Margo had talked Jerry into taking her to dinner and a play in the big city. They'd be gone all evening. He hadn't turned up the heat before he'd left. Emma didn't even know where the thermostat was. Instead of searching for it, she'd stripped down and stretched out in her shitty little room, content in her loneliness. Wanting the cold to seep into her bones and take root there.

Of course, she wasn't *really* alone. Church was in his room. It's where he always was when he was at home. He never left it. He must've had amazing bladder control. Margo brought his dinners to him in his room. He often left his door open and Emma could see the plates of food sitting on the edge of his desk, getting cold.

Night time, though, was different. When the house was quiet and still and dark, he came alive. She listened as he scraped the food from the plates into the trash. He made his own meals and ate them

in the kitchen. He also showered at night, obviously not caring if it bothered anyone.

It didn't bother her at all.

She had math again on Thursday, and this time she'd made it a point to watch him. He'd very much made it a point to *not* watch her. He also didn't speak to her again, which was fine. She didn't speak much to him. She always babbled a bit during their car rides together, but never about him again. She thought he appreciated it, but she couldn't quite tell. He always got her for their ride home at the end of the day, so she took that as a good sign.

He had another job, too, or something that required a lot of his time. Tuesday, after their very quiet yet very explosive car ride home, he'd only stayed in the house for an hour. Then he'd driven off to who knew where, and he hadn't come home till the early hours of the morning.

Wednesday, he'd only been gone a couple hours, home in time for dinner. Same with Thursday. Friday, though, he'd been gone all night again. Hadn't come home till almost noon on Saturday.

Saturday.

He was in his room and she was in hers and they weren't doing anything. Oh, sure, he was plunking away at his computer. She was thinking about what she would wear if she bothered going to that big party. But they weren't *doing* anything.

She heard him get out of his desk chair. The bathroom light came on, shining in her peripherals. Then the door shut. A second later, a toilet flushed. Ah, so he only avoided the bathroom when Jerry and Margo were home and awake. *Interesting.* The door opened back up, but he didn't go to his room. She listened as he walked down the hall.

“There's a party,” she stated.

Her words stopped him in his tracks, as she'd known they would, right outside her door. She kept staring at the ceiling. He stared down the hall. She bent her legs, raising her knees, and rubbed her bare thighs together.

She couldn't see, but she liked to think she could tell his jaw had tensed.

“I like to dance,” she continued, still not looking directly at him. “There'll be lots of girls there.”

This is such a bad idea. I don't want to dance. I don't want to get involved with him

That wasn't true at all, though.

Yes, I do. I want to know everything about him. I want to know I'm worthy of his voice when no one else is.

“I don't have a ride. Or a date.”

He stood still for a beat longer, then she saw it. He cracked. His eyes flicked to her legs. It only takes a second to take in the human body. Long,

shapely legs. Burgundy panties. No bra. Dewy lips. Willing heart.

Then he was walking away and she was smiling to herself.

*I wonder what **he'd** like me to wear.*

Since he'd glanced mainly at her legs, she settled on a pair of shorts. Short, but gauzy and flowy, giving her a boho sort of look. She thought about skipping a bra, but then decided to put one on and a sheer blouse over it. She raked her hair up into a messy pony tail and slid her feet into a beat up pair of ankle boots.

Church was standing by the front door. He hadn't bothered changing and was still in the dark navy t-shirt and jeans he'd been wearing when he'd come home. Probably what he'd been wearing the evening before, too. She didn't hide her gaze as it raked over him. She was tall, just over five-foot-nine – closer to six foot in the boots – but he was still a couple inches taller than her. She gave him a big smile.

“We're going to have fun tonight.”

His eyes locked onto hers, then he opened the door. He didn't say any words, but once again, she read his body language loud and clear.

“No, we're not.”

She sat on her knees in his car, her seat belt tucked under her arms. She was focused on rolling a cigarette while he drove – not an easy task to do

in a moving vehicle. She'd perfected it at the age of nine because she couldn't stand Margo bitching about sloppy rolls anymore.

“I lost my 'real' virginity when I was fourteen,” she said, doing air quotes with one hand. “I was angry at Margo, so I fucked this kid in our neighborhood. I don't know why, but it seemed like a solid plan at the time. Talk about a shit show. Here I am, some angry tween, with this poor fifteen year old who'd never even seen a boob before. I probably scarred him for life.”

Church took in a deep breath, let it out as a sigh.

“Since it was such an epic fail, I waited two years before trying again. Chem teacher, big game, huh? I felt so fucking cool. He was great, but then he cried afterwards. It was weird, but it got better. By the third or fourth time, he stopped crying.”

For a brief second, Church's eyes fell shut. Emma smiled to herself.

“You've had sex.” She didn't ask, she said it as a statement. A Fact. “Definitely with girls. Silly girls who didn't know who they were dealing with. It's beneath you, you know. Someone like you should hold out for ... for *greatness*.”

His gaze slid to her and she suddenly felt like he understood her even better than she could possibly guess.

They arrived at the party. He parked behind some huge monster truck and turned off the car.

“Hey,” she spoke softly as she put her legs down. “You don't have to stay. Despite how I come off, I'm pretty good at faking being normal. I can get a ride home.”

He looked out his driver's side window, but she could read his mind. He was noticing that despite her claim, she couldn't even seem to manage being normal around him at all.

“Either way, I'm going inside now. I'm going to drink my face off and act stupid, because that's what girls my age are supposed to do, and I'd rather be a pathetic cliché when I'm young than when I'm old.”

She didn't wait for his non-response response, Emma just got out of the car and headed down the sidewalk. Her phone started vibrating as she grabbed it from her back pocket, and she saw an incoming text from Stacey.

Hey – you are coming, right? Don't bail on me again.

She snorted. Why? Why did Stacey want to be her friend so badly? Church didn't even talk and he could already tell how fucked up she was – fucked up people could always recognize their own. So what about Stacey? Did she want to fix Emma? Good luck. She stared at her phone for a second, then quickly typed out a response.

I'm coming. When I get there I'll find you.

Emma didn't go find her. She went straight down a narrow hall which led to the kitchen. There was an intramural rugby team at their school and most of the players were gathered around a large kitchen island. They all hooted as she strolled into the room.

“You new in town?” one guy asked, then loudly belched. She managed a smile while grabbing a beer from out of an ice bucket.

“Right,” she replied, twisting the cap off.

“Josh,” he offered a meaty hand. He was big, built like a defensive lineman. Her hand practically disappeared inside of his as they shook.

“Good to meet you,” she said, then she lifted her bottle and necked her entire beer. Josh's eyebrows went up.

“Whoa, you want to get into trouble tonight, don't you?” he chuckled, but in a silly way. She was surprised at the innocence in his voice. He was a nice guy.

“Maybe. Or just get into something,” she turned towards him and grabbed another beer. This one she just sipped at.

“So what should I call you, New Girl?”

“Emma works most of the time.”

“Welcome to my party, Emma.”

She wanted to push his buttons to see if he was really a nice guy, or if he was just pretending. But

before she could say anything else, a hush fell over the kitchen. She realized Josh was staring over her shoulder. She craned her head around to see what was going on behind her.

Church was standing in the doorway. A winged unicorn could've pranced into the room and it would've received less shocked stares.

“Hey there, Church,” Josh spoke in a slow voice. “How's it going, man?”

Of course, Church didn't answer. He studied the whole room for a moment, his cool blue eyes seeming to assess everyone, and finding them all lacking. Then he walked forward. Grabbed a beer from the bucket before walking out a different door into the dining room. No one spoke for almost a solid minute after he'd disappeared.

“I can't believe he showed up. I didn't even know he was back in town,” Josh mumbled. She was mid-sip and choked on her beer.

“He gave me a ride,” Emma said, wiping at her chin. “My mother married his father, so we kind of live together for the time being.”

“What's it like?” Josh asked in a conspiratorial voice while he leaned down to her. Emma glanced around, then leaned even closer to him.

“Bizarre,” she stage whispered. “I'm not sure which is worse, the Japanese fetish porn, or all the tubs of cottage cheese everywhere.”

Josh stared at her in horror for a moment, then caught on. He barked out a loud laugh, startling her, and clapped her roughly on the shoulder.

“You're fuckin' with me. I like you, Em,” he chuckled, then dropped a heavy arm around her shoulders. “Let's stretch our legs. I'll introduce you to some disreputable characters and you can tell me all about this cottage cheese thing.”

They walked around the crowded dining room and living room. She met some other rugby players and some hard looking girls. She and Josh talked about cottage cheese, as well as sports and people and small town life and odds and ends. Things normal people spoke about, she supposed. She hoped. They eventually settled outside on the edge of the deck. It overlooked a pool and an expansive back yard, and Josh got back to what he really wanted to talk about with her.

“You wanna know about him,” Emma guessed as she took out one of her cigarettes. They were both staring at the same point. The sprawling yard gently rolled down to a small lake. There was a short dock, and sitting a few feet from it, his back to the party, was Church.

“I was surprised to see him here.”

“I'm guessing he doesn't party a lot.”

Josh shrugged, surprising her.

“He used to show up to the occasional one, back in high school, before he left for smart guy

school.”

“Church *partied?*”

“I don't know if I'd call it 'partying'; he'd show up and he'd take some beers and he'd go sit in a corner or sit outside. I always figured he was just trying to escape from somewhere or something,” he said.

“I'm surprised no one ever gave him any shit. The places I've lived, guys like him don't get treated so hot,” she said, finally lighting her smoke. Josh laughed.

“Oh, I think people have thought about it, but there's more to ol' Church than meets the eye. When we were like juniors in high school, he beat the shit out of Rory Callahan for making fun of him.”

“I heard that rumor. I wasn't sure whether or not to believe it.”

“Believe it. I was there. It was at the football field. Church was up in the bleachers, just sitting there, and this kid was down on the track, kind of taunting him. So Church gets up, you know how slow and cool he moves, and he walked on down, and everyone was laughing, and then he right hooked the guy. Shock of the century. Kid went down and Church went down with him, swinging away. He's a tall guy, but it had never occurred to any of us that he could defend himself. After that,

though, none of us sure as shit ever forgot,” Josh assured her.

Emma blew out a long stream of smoke and stared at Church's back. She pictured the fight in her mind. A younger Church, maybe no stubble yet. Maybe not quite as broad. His eyes igniting in that way only she knew was possible as he nailed some kid to the ground.

What a sight. I wish I'd been there.

“He's quiet,” she said. “But I don't know, I like it, so it doesn't bother me. When he's home, he stays in his room, but he leaves the door open. He gives me rides, he waits for me, he's here because of me. I like him, and I think ... I think he might like me.”

“Maybe,” Josh nodded, staring across the yard as well. “How do you like someone who never speaks, though?”

But he does speak to me.

“You're here!”

They both looked back at the house and saw a blonde tornado running towards them. Emma winced. She'd gotten caught up in making a new friend and had forgotten all about her old one.

See, Stacey? Don't be friends with me, I'm no good at this.

“Hey hey hey, Staceeeeeeeey!” Josh bellowed as he climbed to his feet.

Stacey practically launched herself at the giant bear of a guy and he picked her up easily, swinging her around. She giggled and laughed and playfully hit him.

“Put me down, put me down,” she insisted, and he did as told. Then she turned her fake-wrath on Emma. “This whole time I thought you'd bailed on me again! How long have you been here?”

“It's my fault,” Josh groaned. “I kinda kidnapped her in the kitchen, forced her into friendship. You're saving her right now.”

“He's awful, isn't he? How are you, though, you doing okay?” Stacey asked.

Jesus, this chick needs to become a mom like yesterday.

“He is awful,” Emma agreed, sprinkling her ashes on the deck. “But I think I'll survive.”

Thankfully, big bear Josh seemed to have something of a sixth sense for people and their emotions. He wrapped his arm around Stacey and led her back to the party.

“Catch up with me, pretty girl, I haven't seen you in forever,” he suggested.

“But I wanted to see if Emma was -”

“We'll bring back beers!” he called over his shoulder before he disappeared into the house.

Emma stayed in her spot for a while longer. A guy at the other end of the deck was giving her the eye, his gaze sliding up and down her long legs. She

returned his look with a wide-eyed stare until he got uncomfortable and turned away.

Stupid. She could've drooped her eye lids, bitten her lip, and he'd be at her side. She hadn't gotten laid in a long time, the dry spell was starting to get to her. Random cute guy at a party would've done nicely for her needs.

Would've been hell on her esteem, though.

Greatness. Go seek out your greatness.

She stood up and walked down the yard so she could be with one of the only boys at the party who *hadn't* looked at her.

She wasn't sure if he'd heard her approach or not, but before she reached him, Church climbed to his feet. When she got to him, she didn't face him. They stood side-by-side and stared out at the water, her cigarette smoke curling up between them.

"Can you swim?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. He didn't say anything, of course. She finally glanced up at him and his eyes were trained on the moon's reflection in the lake.

"Good. Sounds like a plan," she sighed, then she flicked her cigarette to the ground and started unbuttoning her shirt.

When her shorts hit her ankles, he finally turned his head and looked at her. She stepped away from the material and turned to face him while she adjusted her ponytail, making sure it was tight. His eyes almost seemed to glow in the dark

and she could see as they took in every inch of her body. She pulled off her boots and tossed them aside.

“Just so you know,” she warned him as she started walking backwards to the water, “if anything happens, I’m DNR.”

With that said, she turned and rushed into the lake. It was freezing, of course, and no one looked graceful fighting against the pull of water. As soon as it was past her knees, she took the plunge.

Sweet Jesus, it was cold. It stole the breath right out of her lungs. She *loved* it. She broke the surface and wanted to scream from it. Wanted to shout. But she didn’t want anyone to join them and ruin whatever moment she was hoping might happen. So she turned around and looked back at Church, her grin big.

“It’s much colder than it looks,” she called out to him. “Better get in before everyone else realizes what a good idea this is and joins us.”

He just stood there, his arms loosely crossed in front of his chest, a beer bottle dangling from his fingertips. He was definitely staring at her, though, and not at some point behind her. So she kept her smile big and stared at him for a second longer, then she turned and pulled further away from the shore.

When she couldn’t feel the ground under her feet anymore, she stopped and looked around. On

the far side of the lake she could see what appeared to be a small farm with its own boat house. There were different kinds of trees lining the rest of the lake, though she could see the twinkle of house lights through the branches.

It's so peaceful out here. If I just slipped under the surface, everything would stay cold and twinkly forever.

She pushed the thought away and spun around.

“Hey, do you want to -” she started to call, but she stopped when she realized Church was no longer standing on the shore.

Had he actually left her? It wasn't unfathomable. Just because he was silent didn't mean his buttons weren't being pushed. She struggled to keep her head above water and her eyes searched the shore line. Then she heard a noise and jerked her head to the left.

A weeping willow was a couple yards away from the dock, and so close to the shoreline its branches were touching the water, creating its own kind of shrouded lagoon. Church was just outside of it, only wearing a pair of boxer briefs as he did his slow methodical stride into the lake. There was nothing ungraceful about his entrance and she would've been embarrassed remembering her own, but she was too busy staring at his *fucking amazing* body to think about it.

She shivered and stared and fought to keep herself up as he simply kept walking. When the water was above his chest, he must've finally lost purchase on the ground, and that's when he started doing a sort of lazy breaststroke, easily keeping his head above water.

“I knew you'd love it,” she said when he finally reached her. He didn't say anything, just got close enough that his legs brushed against her as they both tread water. “I like the cold. The last place I lived was humid. I liked that, too.”

She sunk further down, so she leaned her head back, letting the water cover her ears and block out the sounds of the party. The moon shined above her and she stared at it until water covered her eyes, too. She wasn't shocked to find herself sinking; she *was* shocked, however, when she felt a hand roughly grab her arm and jerk her back to the surface.

She sucked in air and looked at Church. She was in for another surprise – he looked annoyed.

“I asked if *you* could swim,” she reminded him. “I never said *I* was good at it.”

Her arms were tired, she wasn't used to the motions required to keep her afloat. So were her legs. It would be so easy to just give up and sink. She kept her eyes trained on Church's.

He was looking at her with a hint of wariness lurking behind his blank stare. He hadn't let go of

her arm, his grip so tight it was starting to hurt. He used it to reel her in close to him. She didn't dare make a sound, just met him stare for stare as his arms wrapped around her and their legs tangled together. Her own arms eventually went around his shoulders and suddenly he was her own personal buoy. A living life vest, the only thing keeping her afloat.

“You're very beautiful,” she told him through chattering teeth. His eyes moved to look at her lips. Then he sighed and she felt his hands slide up her back.

“*You're not.*”

Church had a way of speaking without say anything, and saying things without actually speaking. For whatever reason, no matter which he chose to do, Emma understood him perfectly. She smiled at his statement.

“You don't scare me. I *see* you, Church Logan,” she whispered. His eyes fell shut, then his head fell forward until their foreheads were touching.

“You're going to break me,” he whispered back.

“*LET'S GO SKINNY DIPPING!*”

A voice roared across the calm lake and they both whipped their heads to the side. A hoard of drunk twenty-somethings were running into the water and jumping off the small dock. Some were wearing their underwear, like Church and Emma. Some were fully clothed, and still others were

completely naked. *All* were being loud and disruptive and crazy.

Church's face stayed completely impassive, but his body was a different story. She could feel the muscles in his shoulders tense up. Wheezed as his arms locked up tight around her body.

“I think this officially stopped being fun,” she sighed. “I wonder if my clothes are still up there.”

He abruptly let her go and started swimming back towards the willow tree, moving in a long, graceful crawl stroke. She dog paddled after him as fast as she could, but by the time she dipped under the branches, he was already out of the water. She got her feet under her and took halting steps in the same direction, having to duck her head till she was clear of the low hanging branches.

“Well, this is convenient for you,” she chuckled as she took in his pile of clothing, sitting neatly folded at the base of the tree. Her clothes were out by the dock. She'd have to go through the crowd of drunk idiots to reach them.

Church was standing in front of his clothes, his back to her as he ran his hands through his hair, shaking out the water. He kept it so neatly styled during the days, it was easy to forget it was actually quite thick and unruly. She moved so she was right behind him.

“You don't have to give me rides anymore,” she told him, clutching her hands together and pressing

them against her chest, trying to keep in any tiny bit of body heat. “You don't have to do things like this – come to parties, go in the water – just because I goad you into them. I know you're fine. You don't have to prove anything to me.”

He swung around to face her, looking at her in that annoying way of his – head barely tilted, eyes looking down the length of his nose. Like he was observing something under a microscope. Something boring and slightly disgusting and altogether not worth his time.

Gets me every time.

She raised up on her toes and kissed him. Didn't touch him anywhere else but his mouth.

The story about him beating up a kid had been true, so it was reasonable to believe the other rumor about him, the one where he'd fucked the chick from her math class. So Emma didn't feel bad about stealing a kiss. She knew other people would find it strange. Weird. Like she was taking advantage of him, maybe. Stacey would gasp. Josh would frown. Her mother would freak the fuck out.

She didn't care. She was taking this moment, anyway. Fuck everyone else. She would have her little bit of greatness.

His hand was gripping her arm, again. Hurting her, again. She gasped and he leaned into the kiss, his tongue diving into her mouth. His other hand

got tangled up in the wet hair at the base of her skull and pulled, hard enough to make her wince.

More. I want more of this. I want all of this.

“Em? Emma? Are you in there?” Stacey's voice suddenly floated through the lust-induced fog in her brain.

Church let her go and she actually stumbled backwards. When she got her bearings again, he had his back to her and was sorting through his clothing. She watched him for a moment, trying to figure out what the fuck had just happened, then she turned and marched out from the cover of the tree.

“Here,” she said when she was back on the grass. “I'm over here.”

Stacey and Josh were maybe ten feet away, watching all the crazy people have fun. Stacey was looking a little wistful, like she wanted to join. Josh was looking a little drunk, like he wanted to watch her join.

“You went in?” Stacey laughed, looking over Emma's matching beige underwear set.

“I was the first one in, I'd like it noted,” she informed them.

“I'm sorry I missed that,” John sighed. He managed to stay on his feet for a second longer, then he fell heavily onto his butt.

“Oh, boo, I miss all the fun,” Stacey said.

“Who says? You know all these people, get in there,” Emma urged while she searched around for her clothes. She finally found them and started wiggling into them.

“Yeah, but I ... I don't know,” Stacey was waffling. Emma rolled her eyes and put on her shirt, but didn't bother buttoning it up. She hated games like this – if she wanted to do something, she did it. She didn't need encouragement or approval from everyone around her, she just *did it*.

“Well, I *do* know – you want to go in, you've got a great body, you've got a billion friends, so you're going in,” she stated, walking around to Stacey's back.

“Oh my gosh, what are you doing? I don't know, maybe I shouldn't -”

One swift yank and the zipper down the back of Stacey's dress was completely undone. The material slid off her shoulders and pooled on the ground. She was wearing a strapless bra and a lacy thong. Her body turned about thirty different shades of red, and from the ground, Josh belched up at them. “*Hot.*”

“You *should*, so just go out there and get it done.”

And with that, Emma all but shoved her half naked friend into the water.

From there, someone else took over. Some guy, one of the rugby players, laughed and grabbed

Stacey's hand. She was yanked off balance and fell face first into the water. When she came up she was smiling, though, so Emma didn't worry.

Now to find my guy so he can yank me into deep water with him.

She got her shorts on and finally buttoned up her shirt, but she couldn't find her shoes anywhere. She had a sneaking suspicion Josh was sleeping on them. She didn't want to wake him up, nor did she think she could. She took her wet hair down from its ponytail and shook it out while she watched him snore.

A twig snapped from somewhere behind her. She turned to see a fully dressed Church emerging from the tree. Gone was any hint of the passion he'd displayed just a couple moments before; his gaze was back to staring into the middle distance. She chuckled and pulled her cigarettes and lighter out of her back pocket. After she had one lit up, she walked over. Got within a hairsbreadth away and stared up at him while her smoke tangled around them both.

“I'm know you now, Church,” she whispered. “You can't hide from me.”

He didn't look at her. Didn't acknowledge her existence one little bit. She smiled big and closed any remaining gap between them, pressing her chest to his, her hips to him, and she shoved her

hand down his pants pocket. That got his attention and he finally shifted his gaze to her her.

“Don't worry,” she breathed, then she yanked his keys free of his pants. “I'll drive.”

They walked back to his car together. Without her shoes, she was acutely aware of how much taller than her he was – with her height, it was a rare occurrence. She skipped the last couple feet to the vehicle, then unlocked the doors and dropped into the driver's seat.

Church was more reserved with how he took his seat, but he did reach over and pluck the burning cigarette out of her mouth. It went sailing out his open window.

She turned on the engine and peeled out of the spot, whipping a tight u-turn to get them pointed towards home. She drove fast and hard, but it could've been a sedate crawl for all Church seemed to notice.

“You can talk to me now,” she informed him. “Use actual spoken words. Your tongue has been in my mouth, so I know it works.”

She wasn't quite sure, but she almost thought he smiled at that one. The corner of his lip twitched.

“I think you like listening to me talk. Is it because no one ever talks to you? Or because everyone else just talks shit?”

The twitch dropped and she nodded her head.

“I can't imagine trying to hold a conversation with Jerry,” she sighed, raking her fingers through her heavy hair, trying to move it over her shoulder. “He means well and all, but he's basically the human form of two-percent milk. And don't even ask about what conversations with my mother are like.”

They were silent the rest of the way home. She liked to think they were both content. The party had been a bust, but the night had been a win.

Maybe she was too confident in her abilities to read him. Emma had a tendency to think she had all the answers. A rough past and a jaded present, how could she not? So she didn't stop and think before she started talking again.

“What made you stop speaking?” she asked as she pulled into their driveway. Church went stiff again, but she didn't notice as she put on the parking brake. “Did someone hurt you? Did someone *touch* you? Or did *you* do the touching?”

He was out of the car and halfway up to the house before she'd even blinked. She gaped after him for a second, then scurried out of her own seat. She stepped on a sharp rock and almost went down. Cursing to herself, she hopped the rest of the way to the door.

Church was standing there, refusing to look at her. *Refusing*, she could actually feel his refusal. She had his keys, though, so he was locked out.

“I'm sorry,” she breathed, struggling with the keys, looking for the right one. “My brain has a mind of its own, you know? Or is missing it. Or I fried it. I don't know. It's none of my business, whatever happened. I don't actually care. I was just ... talking.”

She got the door opened and he barreled right past her, almost knocking her down. She dropped the keys on the floor, then glared at his back as he headed towards the hallway. She quickly shut the door and hurried after him.

“Okay, don't be a little sensitive shit just because I said something you don't like,” she snarled as she caught up with him. “I'm not exactly fluent in *silence*, but I'm pretty damn close, so I feel like I should get points just for that.”

Nothing. God, she was angry. They'd had a good night, she was sure of it. And her stupid mouth and his pitiful attitude were going to ruin it? It wasn't fair. She was being punished for not understanding him, for not knowing how to talk to him. He had to give her a learning curve, a chance to understand him better. A chance to not make mistakes.

Before he could reach his room, she grabbed his arm and yanked him around, forcing him up against the wall between their bedroom doors.

“Knock it off,” she snapped. “You're what – twenty-three? Twenty-four? Fucking pouting like a

goddamn child. Giving everyone the silent treatment. Got everyone in awe of you. *Worshipping* you. No wonder they call you Church. Well, I don't buy into any of this, so cut the bullshit and -"

She would've shrieked next, if she'd been able to – Church's hand around her throat effectively cut off any sound. Their positions were reversed and he slammed her back against the wall. She stared up at him, her eyes wide, her mouth gaping open. His free hand was braced against the wall above her, allowing him to lean down and press his mouth to the side of her head.

"I *chose* to stop speaking because there was never anyone worth talking to," he growled at her. "And I don't speak *now* because it would be dangerous if I did. And they call me *Church* because yes, I *should be worshiped*."

It was the most words she'd ever heard him string together, and he'd said them with the cut of his teeth behind them. He was forcing her up onto her toes, she was having trouble standing. She gripped onto his wrist to help keep her balance, but she didn't fight him. Couldn't even if she'd wanted to, because she'd already lost. She gasped for air and turned into his bite.

"*I want to worship you,*" she breathed against his mouth.

They were kissing again like they had at the lake, but nothing like at the lake. His hand was still

on her throat. Her hands were all over his body. His tongue traced along the roof of her mouth and she moaned, pushing her hips off the wall, rubbing herself against him. She lifted a leg, trying to pull him in tight against her.

There was a soft creak behind them and it caused Church to pull away so fast, she actually fell over into her open doorway. She rammed into a bookshelf just as her mother's bedroom door opened. Church walked through his door at the same time, for once shutting it behind him.

“Emma?” her mom whispered, blinking in the bright hall light.

“Yeah, Margo, who else would it be?” Emma grumbled, rubbing her elbow. It had made hard contact with the shelf.

“How was the party?” her mother asked through a yawn.

“Fine.”

“How was Paul?”

“Who?”

“Jesus, Emma, *Paul*,” Margo growled. “The guy who drove you to the party? Your step-brother? He sleeps ten feet away?”

I don't know anyone named Paul and I don't have a step-brother, but I am pretty sure I just joined a very interesting cult.

“Oh, yeah, step-brother Paul. He was fine.”

“Did it look like he had fun? We're hoping he'll ... normalize a little, while he's here.”

Emma had to work hard not to burst out laughing.

“I think he had a good time, yeah.”

Margo narrowed her eyes.

“Remember what I said – don't mess with him. No drugs.”

“I haven't done any since we moved here.”

“No alcohol.”

“You get a choice, Margo. Either no drugs, or no alcohol. If it's both, I'll really go insane,” she warned her mother. She was speaking fast and talking loose because she was giddy. She didn't want to be in this brightly lit hallway, talking to the woman who gave birth to her.

No, she wanted to be in the darkness in Church's room, learning every secret he ever had.

“Just stay away from him,” Margo groaned.

“He's a smart kid and you're just ... you're just ...”

“Just what? A carbon copy of you at my age?” Emma suggested.

“Shut up and go to bed. In fact, just stay in your room tomorrow, I don't want you fucking everything up for us.”

“Don't worry, Margo. I'm sure you'll fuck it up all on your own just fine.”

She didn't wait to hear what else her mom had to say. She stepped back into her room and

slammed the door shut.

She glared at the cheap hollow core door. If she tried really hard, she was pretty sure she could put her fist through it. Or her head.

Instead, though, she stripped out of her still wet clothing, then climbed between her blankets. The sheets clung to her damp skin, molding to her. She settled in high up on her pillows, then relaxed. Stared up at the wall behind her. Then she reached up and pressed her left hand against the wood paneling. Against the wall she shared with *him*.

“I see you, Church Logan,” she whispered as her right hand found its way between her legs. “Now I just need *you* to see *me*.”

EMMA.



I like sex. A lot. It's fun, it's an escape, it feels good, it keeps you healthy. It makes you feel powerful. It *gives* you power. Especially over stupid boys. Boys with their hard dicks and their bad decisions. So easy. You can fuck them and then you can leave them, and they think they're so bad ass because they got to nail the chick – alright, high five, hoo-rah! And they don't want you contradicting anything they say, so they leave you alone.

I just want to feel good and I want to get lost in someone else's fantasy for a while. Mine are all shit, so why not borrow theirs? Through a boy I can be a princess. A whore. A dirty secret. A sublime moment in time. So many different parts to play, all leading up to the same story. The same act. The same glorious moment. And why shouldn't I want that?

This is different. I swear it is. I don't want to fuck Church. I want to become *a part of him*. I want to get so close to him, he'll never have to speak again, because I'll just be able to read his thoughts. I'll just be *inside of him*.

I always thought in order for someone to fix me, they'd have to be whole to start with. So every boy I ever chased after, every boyfriend who ever used me and left me, they were always normal in some way. Average. Boring. But *safe*. They were arms to gently hold me and hands to delicately touch me and lips to softly lie to me.

Church's arms crush me and his hands bruise and his lips barely move.

But when they do, it's not to lie.

Maybe this whole time, I should've been looking for someone as fucked up as me. Maybe two broken pieces can be glued together to make a whole.

It's too much. It's too fast. Everything I've always done is too fast. I speed along like a car with its headlights off, bound to crash into something at some point. And I *always* crash.

I don't want to crash with him.

If I do, I don't think I'll survive.



Emma avoided Church. He avoided her. She wasn't sure of her reasons, and of course his were a mystery. He spent more and more time away from the house. She tried to sort of casually bring it up to Jerry, asking him where his son went, but he just grumbled into his meatloaf. Margo glared at her and gave her the kill sign.

How could these people not care? It was like since he didn't talk, Church didn't really exist. It was the opposite for her, though, because that quiet, taciturn man had become her whole world.

And they'd only spoken a handful of words to each other.

She felt like was going crazy. She was dead inside about ninety percent of the time, but that pesky other ten percent. It was brimming with life and impossible to control. It demanded. It *commanded*. And what it wanted this time was to know *everything* about Church. Hard to find out when the object of her obsession didn't speak to her or anyone else. Figuring him out would be difficult.

So the first math class after the party, the following Tuesday, Emma came to school a little

late. Not enough to interrupt the teacher, but enough that everyone else had already taken their seats. Stacey gave her a strange look when she finally strolled in, but she just smiled back, then took a seat in the front row.

Right next to Marci MacIntosh.

“Hi,” Emma said brightly, dumping her backpack on the floor by their feet. Marci smiled brightly. She was pretty, in a plain sort of way. Small mouth and eyes, round cheeks. Decent, thick brown hair, but nothing to get excited over.

No, the excitement happened when you looked south of her neck. She had *phenomenal* breasts. Outstanding. She was maybe five-foot-four, barely, but was easily rocking some double Ds. Possibly triples. What was above that? The boob alphabet was so confusing, especially to someone like Emma, who had a couple of mid-size Bs. No excitement there.

Marci's butt was nice and her hips round, her legs short and stocky. She'd probably been a cheerleader in high school. Not captain, but the other one, the one who screwed everyone. She had that dumb, innocent, slutty vibe going on. Super sweet, easy to talk into doing things.

Hopefully easy to talk into *saying* things, too.

“Hi, Emma, right?” Marci chirped. “I saw you at that rugby party this weekend, wasn't it a blast?”

“It was great. Did you go in the lake?”

“Oh, no, I lost at strip beer pong and wound up half naked in the Jacuzzi.”

“Sounds like a blast,” Emma managed a laugh. “I was wondering, I heard -”

The professor started talking right then, so Marci gave an apologetic little smile and turned to face the front.

Emma lost her smile and tried to pay attention. It was hard, though, what with Church sitting so close to her. Looking at her. Not all the time, his gaze often drifted around the room, stopping at different points. But it always came back to her. She could almost feel it on her, like a weight. Like hands. Running all over her body. She stared back at him for a long second and felt her pulse start to gain speed.

He looked like he wasn't feeling anything at all.

The class was mostly boring, they went over equations and formulas. The teacher was desperate to be “hip” though, so he told them to break into pairs and go over some of the problems in the textbook, kick around ideas together. A guy in their row was leaning forward, tapping his pencil on Marci's desk, but Emma ignored him and spun her whole desk to face the other girl.

“Gosh, this stuff is hard!” she burst out. Marci looked a little shocked, then shrugged at the guy and turned to Emma.

“I know. Math kills me.”

“Me, too. I'd rather be doing something fun. I'm still so new, so aside from that party last weekend, my life is dullsville,” she sighed dramatically.

“Yeah, there's not a lot to do here,” Marci agreed. “But the parties are fun, and there are a lot of guys. I heard somewhere that it's like four men to every one woman here. Good odds.”

Perfect. Like sheep to the slaughter.

“That's good to know. I haven't gone on a date in *forever*.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah. Not since I moved here. And it's been even longer since I got laid.”

Her blunt approach seemed to tickle Marci. The girl giggled and turned a little pink, then scooted her desk closer.

“Not me. Let's just say that jacuzzi got *extra* fun,” she said sotto voce.

“Really? Please tell me it was with someone hot,” Emma groaned.

“This guy, Colin Halbert. We've done it before, but never like that. Like we could've gotten caught at any moment, so hot.”

Emma's mind started to race. If Marci had really slept with Church, it certainly hadn't been at his house. He'd never bring a girl back there, she just knew it somehow. And judging by the tiny crucifix hanging around Marci's neck and the “WWJD” sticker on her notebook, Emma assumed

her parents wouldn't approve of her bringing weird kids back to their home for a boink fest.

No, it had to have been somewhere outside of both their houses. They'd been in high school, so they wouldn't have been able to rent a hotel room, not unless they drove far outside of town. Maybe there at the school? Or in Church's shitty car?

She's a sexy cheerleader cliché. Where do cheerleader clichés have sex?

“That's my favorite,” Emma sighed, biting into her bottom lip for emphasis. “So where's the most *exposed* place you've ever done it? Mine was when I was in high school, after a huge rally. We got it on in the dug out box at the back baseball field.”

It was a leap. Marci was easy to lead, but she also wasn't very bright. She might not take the bait.

But then, while Emma watched, the giggling girl cast a glance over her shoulder, right at Church. He was looking down at his desk, grading some papers.

Gotcha.

“Twinsies,” Marci tittered. “Under the bleachers, *during* a football game. I swear to god, it's still – to this day – the hottest sex I've ever had, and I was only sixteen.”

“Wait,” Emma feigned surprise. “You just looked at ... you can't mean ... you and *Church*?”

“Mmm hmmm.”

“How did *that* happen?”

“It was sort of like a game to a bunch of us, trying to get him to talk. He was a senior, I was a sophomore, but I wanted to win. So I'd flirt with him, wear short skirts around him, even flashed my boobs at him once. Then we had this game, and it was like over-time or something, and I saw him going under the bleachers. So I sneaked away and went after him, and we were down there, and I kept teasing him, and then I didn't even think about it, I just started kissing him.”

Emma had literally asked for this, but now that she was hearing it all, she didn't like it. She felt herself growing mad. She wanted to punch Marci in her stupid fucking face. How dare this girl think she was worthy of touching those lips, that body. *How dare she*. Only Emma was worthy.

“And what, you just stripped him down and tackled him?” Emma questioned after Marci had gone off into a moony stare.

“Oh, no. He wasn't kissing me back, so I started to walk away, and then he grabbed me. He started pulling my skirt up, my underwear down, and he's so hot, you know, how could I stop him? He was sitting on one of the railings, so I got on top of him and lost my mind. He was pulling my hair and biting and scratching, it was *nuts*. But you know, we didn't kiss again, which was kind of a bummer. I've always sort of hoped to get a second chance. I'm a lot better now, maybe he'd want to stick

around afterwards,” Marci said in a hopeful voice, looking back at Church again.

Emma followed her gaze. Church was looking right back, but not at Emma for once. He was looking at Marci. Or more correctly, at Marci's body. Emma glared.

They didn't get one bit of work done. Marci made eyes at Church and gave him naughty, flirty smiles. He stared at her tits and legs, for all the world looking like he was staring at a blank wall. Emma stewed in her seat, wondering what was wrong with her. He hadn't tried to peel her clothing off.

But he did keep kissing you ...

Class let out and Emma scurried out of the room, not saying goodbye to anyone. She knew Church needed at least another hour to go over coursework and stuff about grades with the teacher. Normally, she went into the dining hall or the common area to wait for him.

This time, she immediately left the school and caught a bus home.



IT WAS WEIRD, NOT TALKING to him. Which actually was doubly weird, because how could she miss talking to someone who'd barely ever spoken to her?

He was bad news. On her own, Emma was just short of crazy. If she were to delve into his personal brand of psychosis, they might not come out the other side. She might break him. Ruin him. She did tend to ruin things. She was bad luck.

She didn't want him to get hurt.

So she took the mature route of ignoring him. She left earlier in the mornings, catching the bus, and she no longer waited after any of her classes. She caught rides home with Stacey when she could, or on the bus if the timing was right.

Jerry's house wasn't very big, though, so running into Church was bound to happen. The first time was the same day she'd spoken to Marci. He hadn't come home that afternoon and Emma had figured he'd disappeared to wherever else it was he went.

She'd been out for a run, but then it had started to rain, so she'd high tailed it home, just barely beating a down pour. Still wearing her ear buds, she'd gone into her room to strip off her sweaty clothes and get ready for a shower. With a large fluffy towel wrapped around her, she'd gone back into the hall only to run smack dab into a soaking wet wall.

Apparently, Church hadn't beaten the down pour. The short walk from the driveway to the front door had soaked him. She hadn't heard him come in because she'd still been listening to her music. Upon

impact, though, she dropped her phone. It fell to the floor, yanking the buds out of her ears as it went.

They stared at each other for a second. Church with all his clothes plastered to his body. Emma wearing nothing but a towel, her hair all piled on top of her head.

Then he took a step forward. And another. More, until he was touching her, but that didn't stop him. He kept moving until she was pressed against the bathroom door and he was leaning all his weight against her.

Please. Please, I need this. I need to be a part of something greater than myself.

“You said I wasn't beautiful,” she whispered. He nodded his head, then lifted a finger and traced it down her sternum.

“I know.”

The front door opened and noise invaded their quiet moment. Jerry and Margo spilled into the house, infecting it with their stupidity and apathy.

Church slid away from her, leaving her damp and shivering and alone. When he went into his bedroom, he closed the door behind him.

Their next interaction was eight days later. Eight long nights of touching herself when she heard him come home late. Eight endless days of Margo bitching at her.

“When are you going to get a job?” she shouted for what felt like the millionth time. Jerry was out of the house. Margo only ever raised her voice – i.e. acted like herself – when Jerry was out of the house.

“I've been trying,” Emma spoke calmly. “You know I've been. It's not easy in a place like this. *You* moved us here.”

“*I* moved here,” Margo countered. “You didn't have to come.”

“We have a deal,” Emma said. Her mother's face soured at that statement. She didn't like to be reminded.

“I know, I know, but you should be contributing *something*,” she stressed.

“I've put in applications. What else do you want me to do?”

Emma had, literally everywhere. It was a small town, though, there just weren't a lot of options. Also, between her lack of experience and class schedule, she herself wasn't a good option. She didn't foresee any sort of job on her horizon, not in this shitty place, and without money, she couldn't move out. If she'd had her own car at least, she would've gladly lived in it. But she didn't. The only one she'd ever owned, Margo had stolen the title and sold it for cash.

“I want you to stop being a constant reminder of the past!” Margo barked, throwing her hands up.

“You look like *him*, and you act like *I* never did anything for you, like I'm the worst mother ever. It could've been worse.”

“Not by much.”

Oh, her mom really wanted to hit her again, Emma could tell.

“Yeah? Well, I wish I could've had a better daughter. How does that feel? Not some weirdo idiot who was impossible to deal with. Not some *embarrassment*,” Margo hissed back.

She would've gone on, Emma knew. She'd heard this particular sermon before – it was usually quickly followed by the “what did I do to deserve this” lecture, and eventually the “you know deep down I really love you, could you go to the store and get me smokes?” speech.

Thank god there was an interruption. Church walked out of the hallway, startling both of them. They hadn't known he was home. He was like a ghost, half the time Emma wondered if he was imaginary.

Because only I would create an imaginary friend who wouldn't speak to me.

“Oh, Paul, honey!” Margo prattled, nervously fingering her necklace. “I didn't know you were home. Your father is working late tonight. Would you like me to fix you some dinner?”

He didn't say a word, of course, but he did acknowledge Margo. Possibly for the first time

ever. He stared at her as he walked by so close, his chest brushed her elbow. Emma wanted to laugh as all the color drained out of Margo's face. Church stared down at her, making eye contact in that eerie way he had, not blinking, all his movements slow. Like he was thinking about what her insides looked like. Just when she was sure Margo was going to swallow her own tongue, Church moved past her and went into the kitchen.

“Well, okay, then. If you need anything, I'll be in the laundry room. Do you have anything that needs washing?” she asked in a shaky voice.

He ignored her question and opened the fridge.

After Margo had practically ran to the back of the house, Emma wandered into the kitchen as well. Per their pattern as of late, she should've been disappearing, too. But she was happy for his interruption, and curious about what he thought of her little domestic dispute.

“I don't understand how you're so fit when all you seem to eat is garbage,” she said, watching as he took a bunch of lunch meat and tomatoes and bread out of the fridge. He glanced at her, then went about making his sandwich.

After he'd buttered two pieces of bread, he finally spoke. “She doesn't like you.”

Emma nodded and stole a piece of lunch meat from the container.

“No, she doesn't. You're lucky – she's scared of you.”

“*Good.*”

He attacked a tomato with the bread knife. He certainly wasn't a chef, that was for sure. She winced at how aggressive he was with the blade, slamming it down more than actually slicing. When he nicked his index finger, it wasn't a shock. Neither of them said anything as he lifted the finger and examined the wound.

A fat bead of crimson blood balanced on top of his finger, shiny under the kitchen lights. Emma stared at it, then stepped up next to him. He glanced down at her, then did a double take when she grabbed his hand. Stared as she put the injured finger into her mouth and wrapped her lips around it.

An act she'd done a dozen, a hundred, times to herself. Without thinking, without thought, just a natural reaction. So it made sense to her to do it for him.

His index finger was stiff for a second, then pressed down against her tongue. Hard. His free hand gripped her hip – it was still holding the knife. The blade scratched against her side, the tip brushing under her arm.

She looked up at him just as he stepped into her, forcing her against the counter. It dug into the back of her hips. He slowly pulled his finger from her

mouth, scraping it across her bottom teeth, dragging it over her lips and chin.

“You're not beautiful,” he breathed. She nodded as his fingers wrapped around her throat.

“So you've said.”

“You're *not*,” he insisted, his eyes falling shut as he squeezed tighter and tighter. “You're ... *exquisite*. You're *perfection*.”

Jesus, she would do anything for this man. Get down on her knees right then and there, blow him in front of Margo and Jerry and god and anyone else who cared to watch. Split herself open and let him live inside her. Keep him safe and sound while she just disappeared.

She couldn't breathe. She was going to pass out. Fall right on that shiny, sharp knife. She shut her eyes and willed it to happen.

The sudden presence of air in her lungs shocked her. She gasped and opened her eyes. Looked around. What had happened?

He wasn't looking at her. He was staring into the living room. It took her a second to realize the phone was ringing. Yes, of course Jerry had a land line. He also had a flip phone. It was almost impressive. Church stepped away and went back to the fridge, opening it and rummaging around just as Margo strode into the living room.

Emma felt exposed. Vulnerable. Like her mother had just walked in on her having sex. She

realized she had a hand against her chest, clutching her shirt. She glanced at Church once, then hurried out of the kitchen. By the time she got to the hallway, Margo was hanging up, and she turned to her at the last second.

“Good lord, Emma, what's on your face? What were you eating?” she demanded. Emma didn't slow down, just pressed a hand to her chin and hurried into the bathroom.

She panted and leaned hard against the sink. When she lifted her head, she looked at her reflection. Stared at it. Tried to recognize it.

Her hair was a little messy and bushy, she'd been sleeping when Margo had decided to start bitching at her. It was all pushed to one side, her part low on the left side of her head. Her eyes were wild and wide, her pupils so huge they were swallowing the green irises. She didn't recognize them.

Her bottom lip was stained pink all along one side. The stain continued from the corner of her mouth down to her chin, where it disappeared. But not for long. She caught sight of it again, on the side of her neck, alongside a couple fingernail marks.

She looked ... *ravenous*. Like a wild beast who'd just been denied the kill, after she'd already had a taste. She couldn't catch her breath, and started panting harder. There were footsteps in the hall. She kept staring at herself as she listened to

them walk closer. Walk past. Walk into a room.
Then a door slowly creaked shut.

*He's magic. He's the devil. He's inside me now,
in my blood, in my brain. Why isn't he always
talking to me? Why isn't he always looking at me?
Why aren't we together right now?*

He's it.

*He's my moment that I've been waiting for.
He's the greatness I've been missing.*

CHURCH.



O kay, so maybe I do have a couple issues with women. Blame my mother. She didn't leave me with a very good impression of the fairer sex.

Though to be fair, she didn't leave me with a very good impression of human beings, in general.

Emma, though, she is beyond perfect for my needs. A nudge here, a push there, and she does exactly what I want her to. I wouldn't have to speak at all, and I could still get her to heel.

It's not my fault she led an awful life that made her self-esteem so low, she'd look for love and attention anywhere she could get it. It's not my fault it led her *to me*.

I ignored her that first night. She could have returned the favor.

But now I'm interested. Poor girl.

She does have a certain charm about her, even I have to admit. Beautiful and damaged, like a rose in a vase. Lovely and doomed to die. She looks at me with those eyes. Those big, outspoken eyes of hers. Begging me, all the time. Only me. Everyone else, she looks at with shutters over her eyes. Like she's not really seeing them.

But with me, she lifts the veil. She stares straight at me. Sometimes, I even worry, stares straight *through* me. She seems to know me, to understand me. Almost too well. She just babbles away, making all these assumptions about me, which would be fucking annoying if they weren't all *right*. It's like she can just look at me – *just look* – and *know me*. Know me, and not be afraid of me. Know me, and not care about the monster she sees inside me.

For someone who hardly ever speaks to meet someone who can understand them without words? It's like an answer to a prayer.

I can't get used to this. I can't *want* this. It's just a look. Just a pair of eyes. Just a girl. Just legs to spread and a body to use and a mind to manipulate.

And here I thought my time at home would be boring for the most part. At least I can have fun with her until it all goes to shit.



Blood doesn't stain for too long, especially if it's taken care of right away. By the time Emma had gone back to her room, she'd looked normal again.

Looked being the key word.

She had a new game she liked to play. When Church was gone for those long, unexplained hours, she went into his room. Laid on his bed. Sometimes naked. Sometimes wearing his clothing. She spread herself out on his comforter, hugged his pillows to her chest, rubbed herself against his sheets.

She often wondered what would happen if she ever got caught. She'd violated his sanctuary. There was nothing in the room to show it was Church's, but it was his, nonetheless. She was trespassing. Would he get angry? Would he *punish* her?

She touched herself in his room.

He never caught her.

Her mind was spiraling. She wanted to hurt someone – possibly herself, but mostly someone else. She found herself standing outside of Margo's bedroom door at night. Jerry slept like the dead, and Margo took sleeping pills. She could walk

through playing a bass saxophone and neither would notice. Wouldn't notice if she marched right up to the bed. Probably wouldn't even wake up as she beat her mother to death with the wind instrument. It would be so easy. She would rest her hand on the door knob, let the cool metal chill her hand, and she would picture it. Blood and bruises and an end to so much misery.

She never turned the knob.

She hated school, hated having to interact with other people. She'd never been a fan of it before, but now thinking about Church with Marci – with other women – it was driving her insane. Thinking of him being out there in the world, without her? *Torture*. Obsession was in full swing, and she didn't know how to shut it off. She walked the three miles to school and back every day. Ran three more at night. Lost five pounds from her already slender frame.

Every time Church looked at Marci, looked at *any* other girl, she wanted to die. Wanted to *kill*. And he looked at other girls *a lot*. Almost as if to torment Emma, as if to goad her into reacting. And worse, Marci always looked right back, smiling at him with her inadequate mouth and batting her small eyelashes.

But he talks to me. He understands me. I want him to take me to wherever it is he goes and show me whatever it is he does and scare me and terrify

me and make me fall so in love with him, I'll never see the light of day again.

As her old therapist would've told her – those weren't healthy thoughts. She wasn't stupid. What she felt for Church was moving so far beyond obsession, they hadn't even invented a name for it yet. *Emotional cannibalism?* She wanted to be inside his thoughts. His touches. His every waking moment.

Crazy. Crazy. I always knew I'd go crazy some day. I blame Church. I blame Margo. I blame myself.

“You look like shit, sweetie,” Stacey said in a sympathetic voice. Emma barely glanced at her.

Church thinks I'm exquisite.

“Been feeling a little under the weather,” she finally managed to reply. It was raining again. She stared out the windows of the common area.

“You seem down. Is everything okay?” Stacey asked, sitting next to her. Emma shrugged.

“It's all the same. Good days and bad days, you know? I'm fine, really,” she lied.

She wasn't fine. Her soul was somewhere in the west wing, grading math papers. She hadn't even realized she'd lost it, and now she felt sick without it.

There was a thunking noise, and they both turned as Marci MacIntosh sat at their table, right next to Emma. She groaned and dropped her head.

She'd been nice to the girl *once*, and suddenly they were on friendly enough terms to sit together?

“Hey, chickies!” the girl sang, adjusting her clothes so more cleavage showed.

“Hey, Marci,” Stacey said in a polite voice.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, Emma's just not feeling well.”

“Oh, bummer. I was hoping to ask you about something.”

“What?” Emma asked, finally lifting her head.

“Could you talk to your step-brother for me? Maybe give him my number?” Marci asked, looking into a mirrored compact the whole time.

Emma was confused for a moment, then the light bulb went off.

“You want me to give Church your phone number?” she checked, a little shocked.

“Yeah. I've noticed him checking me out, I think it's finally time to go for round two, if ya know what I mean.”

Oh, Emma did know. This fucking bitch had the *audacity* to think she was allowed to breathe Church's air, and now she wanted to talk to him? Touch him?

I'm gonna fucking kill her.

“Sorry, Church and I aren't that close,” Emma growled. “We're not in the habit of giving each other numbers for fuck buddies.”

“C'mon, be a pal. I'd do it myself but, well, you know how he is.”

“No, Marci, I don't. How is he?” she asked in a patronizing tone, then she leaned forward, propping her chin in her hand.

“Don't get me wrong, he's hot as sin, and he was a good lay, but he's ... you know ... *creepy*.”

“Creepy?” Emma laughed, and the sound came out sharp. She saw Stacey wince.

“That's not nice, Marci,” she snapped. “You're talking about her step-brother, and, like, someone with special needs.”

“He's special alright,” Marci snickered. “Special in the pants department, if you know -”

“*We know* what you mean,” Emma barked. “We're not fucking five. His dick. You're talking about *his dick*.”

“What's your problem? You were talking about all this stuff the other week,” Marci pointed out, glaring at Emma.

“I was casually asking about your sex life – I didn't ask for a detailed description of someone's cock.”

This was ridiculous. She was completely overreacting. Logical Emma knew this, understood it. But Logical Emma wasn't in control anymore. Dark Emma had the reins now, and it had been a *long time* for her.

“Yeah, seriously, Marci,” Stacey chimed in.
“Maybe just go away now.”

But poor, sweet, stupid Marci had got it into her head that she'd been offended.

“You're just jealous,” she said with something that sounded suspiciously like a sniff.

“*Jealous?*” Emma checked, and even Stacey cackled at the very idea. “We're jealous of ... what? You?”

“I've seen the way you look at him.”

Emma stopped laughing. Emma stopped smiling. Emma even stopped breathing.

What happened, or rather, what *didn't* happen, between her and Church was private. Sacred. No one else was worthy of being a part of it.

“What did you say to me?” Emma asked.

“Pretty sick, wanting to sleep with your own step-brother,” Marci spoke about it as if she were an authority on the subject. “You stare at him in class, while *he's* staring at me. Like a puppy dog, it's pathetic. Just because no one here wants you doesn't mean you have to make the rest of us feel bad. You know, like, I tried to be nice to you, even though everyone talks about what a weirdo you are. Makes sense you want Church so bad, two weirdos would be -”

Marci didn't get to finish her sentence because Marci's face was abruptly introduced to the table top. Without a thought or a word of warning, Emma

had grabbed the other girl by the back of her hair and slammed her head down into the table. Once, twice, and even managed a third time before hands started pulling her away.

“Emma! Stop it! *Stop it!*” Stacey was gasping.

Emma did stop. She wasn't sure when it had happened, but she'd stood up. Marci slid out of her seat and fell to the floor as soon as Emma released her. She was crying and her nose was bleeding.

Everyone in the common area had frozen and was staring at them. *Everyone*. Then everything went back into motion all at once. Several students rushed to Marci's aid while several faculty members ran up to Emma, demanding to know what was going on.

“She attacked me!” Marci was sobbing and shrieking. “*She attacked me!* She's a fucking psycho!”

Goddamn right I am.

“She's not feeling well,” Stacey was struggling to stay next to Emma as more people crowded close. “She's been sick, and Marci wouldn't stop talking shit about her step-brother. Please, she's sick.”

Oh, I'm sick alright.

Everyone was talking at her, yelling at her, but she ignored them. She lifted her head and was glad for her taller-than-average height. She glanced

around the room, knowing he was there. She just knew it.

And Church was there, standing in a doorway, his leather portfolio under one arm. His gaze passed over the crowd. Dipped down to Marci, who was only just visible through the sea of legs. Then landed back on Emma.

She stared back, almost defiantly, her chin raised. Two could play the silent game, and she was better at it. She spoke his language, but she was confident that he didn't speak *anyone's* language.

Campus security was called. Before that moment, she hadn't even known they existed. Once all involved were taken to the administration's wing and delivered to someone important's office, the police were called. Stacey stayed with her the whole time, insisting to anyone who would listen that it was mostly Marci's fault.

Emma stayed silent. She didn't speak to anyone or answer any questions. Stacey used this as proof of how sick Emma was – she couldn't even talk, and didn't she just look like she was about to faint? She needed to go home. She needed to lay down. Were they really going to keep a sick girl? It had been *hours* now, it was *dark out*. This was just *inhumane*.

And it worked. God bless small towns. She wasn't exactly a flight risk. No money, no car, no nothing. They were launching an inquiry into what

happened, and it was a very real possibility that Emma could get kicked out of school. Beyond that, Ms. MacIntosh could press charges. Emma could be facing a felony. Did she understand how serious that was?

Stacey drove her home, fussing over her the whole way. Emma still didn't speak when they got to her house, but frowned when she realized they were both getting out of the car. She didn't want Stacey to come in and realized she'd probably have to shut the door in her face. Luckily, her mother solved the problem for her. When they'd pulled up to the curb, Margo had opened the front door and glared at both of them.

“Want me to stay?” Stacey whispered. Emma shook her head and allowed Stacey to hug her, then they parted ways. She watched as her car slowly disappeared around the block.

“Get in here, *NOW!*” Margo snapped.

When Emma walked through the front door, Jerry immediately got up from the table. He glanced at her over the top of his glasses and sighed. Then he took his newspaper back to his bedroom. Margo didn't follow him. Instead, she shut the door and stormed around the living room, picking things up and slamming them back down.

“I've had it,” she kept saying, over and over again. “*I've had it*, Emma. I've really had it.”

So have I, Margo. So have I.

“All you had to do was go to school. I didn't even make you get a job! Just go to school and pass and graduate and go away. That was it! But *no*, of course fitting in was too fucking hard for you!” Margo hissed, not allowing her voice to carry.

News traveled fast in a small town. Margo ranted about how a friend of a friend of a daughter of a co-worker of Jerry's had seen the whole thing. This looked bad on Jerry. On the *family*. The company had wasted a scholarship, as Emma would most likely be expelled.

“We're done,” Margo groaned, finally sinking into a seat at the end of the sofa. “We're just ... *done*. You need to get out.”

But ... we had a deal ...

Emma didn't speak it out loud, but Margo apparently shared her gift. She could hear the words in the silences.

“And *fuck* your deal,” she growled, then she threw a furtive glance at the hallway. “I've been doing some research, little girl, and I have three words for you: *statute. of. limitations*. And as for anything else? *Prove it*. He won't believe you – he listens to everything I say. So get the fuck out of this house.”

This was really happening.

She stared at her mother.

Holy shit, this was *really* happening.

Margo was kicking her out. After years of taunting and torturing and abusing. Of taking advantage and manipulating. Of breaking and ruining and *destroying*. All Emma had asked for was a place to stay. Just a little longer. She wouldn't breathe a word of their past to Jerry, so long as she could stay. Margo had gotten on her feet, Emma just wanted the same. A couple more months, six max, and she could've left on her own. Could've obtained freedom on her own terms.

This was going to happen sooner or later. I should've known. The universe doesn't deliver a man like Church without consequences. I just didn't realize I'd have to pay up so soon.



Emma walked across the living room and stood in front of her mother. In front of the thing that gave birth to her. Margo smirked up at her, her hands primly folded in her lap. Emma felt her bottom lip tremble and she reached out her hand, gently stroking her mother's hair.

“*Momma*,” she breathed a name she'd never once used for her mother. Margo's harsh smirk faltered. Fell away.

“It's for the best, baby,” she insisted, taking a fortifying breath. “You'll see. Pack your things, and I'll have Jerry take you to the bus station.”

Emma's hand smoothed down to the back of her mother's head and got tangled in the dry, over-processed hair. She blinked down into brown eyes that looked nothing like her own. She did notice, for the first time ever, that she and her mother had the same nose. One thing in common between them. Just one.

One too many.

She slapped her mother across the face, just to pay her back. It felt so good, though, that she slapped her again. And again and again and again.

She kept her fingers knotted in Margo's hair, holding her head in place, and she put all her weight into each open handed swing.

Margo screamed and kicked and swung at Emma, but it was no good. She was sitting down, her daughter was standing up, the advantage was clear. So Emma kept swinging away and let all of her damage pour out.

“ ... ugly soulless piece of shit filth disgusting die just die you're dead already ruined before I was born everyone will know everyone already knows disgusting disgusting why can't you just die ... ”

Emma wasn't sure how long she stood there screaming and slapping. She was aware of hands grabbing her arms, trying to pull her away, but they couldn't. She kept hitting, her nails catching the side of Margo's cheeks and scratching her. Then arms were around Emma's waist, picking her up off her feet and trying to carry her away. She just gripped tighter on Margo's hair and dragged the woman off the couch, all while hitting her in the back of the head.

When did I become so violent?

Jerry finally got his arm around her slapping arm and he pinned it to her side. After that, it wasn't hard for Margo to wrestle free from her grip. She pushed herself up and fell back into the couch, shouting and pressing her hand to her face.

“You bitch!” her mother shouted. “*You horrible bitch!*”

“Paul!” Jerry's voice added to the cacophony – Emma was just howling, still struggling to reach Margo. “Paul, get out here and help!”

Church appeared at the end of the hallway. His eyebrows were raised a little, but other than that, he still looked the same. Like he was bored with the whole situation. He glanced down at Margo, who was clearly gearing up to get on her feet and charge her daughter. Then he looked at Emma, who was throwing all her weight around, trying to get free from Jerry and charge her mother.

He took three steps across the room and grabbed Emma's arm. He didn't have the trouble his father'd had – he was able to yank her up against him and hold her tight, squeezing her until she couldn't hardly move. Jerry hurried to his wife and collected her off the floor. She put up the pretense of a fight, glaring and cursing at Emma as she was moved towards the front door.

“I'll take her out for a while, calm her down,” Jerry assured everyone. Sweet, sensible, fucking ridiculous Jerry. “It'd be best, Emma, if you weren't around when we get back. We'll figure something out, I'm sure. I'm ... I'm sorry.”

Church held onto her struggling form until they heard the car pull out of the driveway. Then he let her loose.

“Oh my *god!*” she yelled, walking in a wide circle. She raked her hands through her hair, then down her face. Was shocked to realize she was crying. “*Oh my god.*”

Church didn't say anything, just watched as she zipped around the room, cursing and yelling. She did another circuit of the living room, paced through the kitchen, did a tight circle around him, then made a beeline down the hallway.

“Fuck her. *Fuck her,*” she cried. She hated crying, hated feeling weak and small. Hated feeling that way *especially* in front of Church. He was walking behind her, but she ignored him and went into her room. She started throwing things around, looking for the perfect item.

Ah. There it was. A gift to herself, back when they'd lived in a bad area of Chicago and she'd wanted some protection. It was called a fish thumper – because it was used to thump fish when they were reeled into the boat – and looked like a small, aluminum, baseball bat, about the length of her forearm. She spun it around in her hand, feeling the weight of it. Good enough. She yanked her hair up into a ponytail and strode back out into the hall.

This time she glanced at Church, who was looking at her with some interest, but only a little. Then she kept moving, heading straight into Margo and Jerry's room.

It was so ugly. Floral bedspread that had somehow escaped from 1993. Shitty needle points hung on the wall – Margo claimed she'd made them, but Emma knew they'd been purchased at a Goodwill in Des Moines. A fake diploma from a fake cosmetology school was in a frame above the bed, and a picture of good ol' Jer and Margo at their wedding was next to it.

They'd gotten married in a VA rec hall. A ping pong match had been happening on the other side of the partition. The justice of the peace had gotten nailed with a ball during the vows and Emma had laughed so hard, she'd been asked to leave.

“Perfect,” she whispered, marching up to the night stand and raising the bat.

She never got to swing, though. It was painfully ripped from her hands. She cried out and turned around. Church had her weapon of destruction and was looking at it intently, as if he'd never seen one before. She held out her hand.

“Give it back.”

He didn't respond. Just carried the bat out of the room. She gaped after him for a moment, then ran out of the master suite after him. He was standing near his bed, still staring at the mini-bat.

“Fuck you!” she shouted, and she planted her hands on his chest and shoved.

He didn't move, which just made her angrier. She shoved him again, then hit him.

“Do you have any idea? Do you!? Do you know what I've gone through for her? What she's put me through?” she sobbed, shoving and hitting, hitting and shoving. “Jesus, the things she said to me. The things she let them *do* to me. I just wanted to leave on my own terms. Why couldn't she let me leave?”

Emma fell away from him and her back landed hard against the wall behind her, next to his door. She pressed her hands over her face and screamed. She couldn't stop. The monster was out now, and she wasn't sure she could put it away again.

She felt rather than heard movement, and when she looked up, he was standing in front of her. The bat was gone. She grimaced and tried to push him away, but he just got closer.

“You don't get it!” she yelled. “Just fuck off, leave me alone, go away. Can you hear me in there, Church? Are you listening? *Go away!*”

He didn't go away. He leaned down and kissed her, which just made her sob harder. She growled and shoved at his chest hard enough to move him, to break the kiss. She kept pushing him, slapped him across the face. Screamed at him to let her go. Slapped him again.

The next time he kissed her, the dam really broke open. She sobbed into his mouth and held onto his t-shirt for dear life, pulling him as close as physics and their clothing would allow. Their

tongues swirled together, dancing, fighting, all of the above.

When he'd successfully sucked all the oxygen out of her lungs, he finally pulled away. She panted and gasped and looked up at him. He was breathing hard and staring down at her with an odd expression, one she hadn't seen on him. He was *curious*. He lifted a hand to her face and she flinched, but didn't move away. He pressed it against her head and smoothed his thumb over the trail from a tear. Wiped it away. Then he lifted his hand and examined his thumb for a moment before putting it in his mouth.

I'm inside him now.

What happened next, she thought, could best be described as *insanity*. They were kissing and biting and tearing. His shirt was gone and she didn't even remember pulling it off him. Her blouse was ripped open, buttons scattering around them like confetti.

Yay! She just *loved* a party!

His hands were everywhere, they were a part of her. Squeezing her breasts, yanking at her bra, giving up on it and moving down to her shorts. He actually snarled as he jerked on them, jerking her hips away from the wall so the material could slide to the floor. She was still wearing panties, but he couldn't see what he was doing because her tongue had to be inside him again. So while she kissed him, he introduced his fingers to the inside of *her*.

He wasn't gentle. He dove into her the same way he'd cut into the tomato. Forceful and aggressive. Wanting something even willing fruit couldn't give. She cried out and dug her fingernails into his shoulders. Begged him for more. Begged him to never stop.

“Don't ever stop.”

He'd just gotten his pants undone when she pushed him away. He stumbled backwards and she followed, helping him shove the denim past his hips. When he fell into a seat on the bed, she went right with him, straddling his lap.

Normally, Emma liked to play. She'd tease and nibble and lick and suck, touch and laugh and tease some more. Examine and memorize. Possibly, even, *worship*.

But she wasn't here to play. She was here to take communion. To save her soul. To have *divine intervention*.

Church understood what she wanted, what she *needed*, because they'd always understood each other without words. Her cheap cotton panties were gripped between his fists. Another growl and they were shredded down one side of her hip. Pushed aside. Ignored completely.

Stupid cotton, who does it think it is, anyway?

She touched him once. Just once, as she raised herself up on her knees. Her fingers danced down

taught skin and smooth veins, and she almost smiled as his eyes fluttered shut. *Almost.*

He was beautiful in all the ways that counted, and it was the palm of her hand that smoothed its way back up his length. There was a lot to work with, they would be having a lot of fun together.

Just not tonight.

“Yes,” he breathed while she held him in place and slid down on top of him. Such a simple word for such a momentous occasion.

Why am I still crying?

When she was fully seated on his lap, she felt like she couldn't breathe. His dick was causing a communication delay between her brain and ... everything else. She held onto his neck for dear life and willed the shaking to stop.

“It's okay.”

She realized he was whispering to her. She opened her eyes to find him staring at her. No, not staring. *Looking.* He was actually looking at her for once. He had soft eyes, sort of bedroom eyes. In repose, they looked bored. When he was smiling, like he was now, they looked flirty. Naughty. *Sexy.*

“*Nothing* is okay,” she whispered back, and he chuckled, then ran his teeth over his bottom lip. She almost died.

“No,” he agreed, smoothing his hands over her back. “but that's the best part. When he got to her shoulders, he started pushing at her shirt, so she let

go of him and let it fall to the ground. “When something isn't okay, it's in its purest form. It's moldable. Changeable. It can get worse, or it can better. It can *evolve*.”

Holy shit. Who knew philosophy could be so sexy? While he removed her bra, she experimented with lifting her hips. Both of them groaned, and the sound coming out of him almost killed her twice over.

It was too much. She was still crying and she couldn't breathe and she was over flowing with him and she *could not stop shaking*.

“I think,” she gasped for air. “I think I need you right now, Church.”

He nodded, and suddenly she was on her back. He dropped her hard on the mattress, startling her, and gave her no time to get her bearings. Just rammed into her, all hard length and driving force. She screamed and her hands went to his chest, clawing at his skin. His perfect skin.

“I think you've *always* needed me,” he grunted, slamming into her again and again, over and over, forever and always. “It just took you this long to realize it.”

“Yes,” she agreed, having no clue as to what he was saying. “Yes, yes, yes, all of it, *yes*.”

Sweet Jesus, he was incredible. He'd been keeping this all to himself? Not. Possible. And yet, how could he possibly share it with anyone else?

He was perfection in a body, and he'd just thrown it away on someone like Marci MacIntosh.

Pain lanced through Emma's heart. She hadn't even known Marci and Church had existed when they'd had sex, and she still felt betrayed. She dug her nails in deeper, wanting to draw blood from him. Wanting to see it again.

He hissed in pain, then stopped moving long enough to grab her wrists. He forced them down against the mattress, stretching her arms out above her head, then held them down with one hand. He squeezed them painfully together while he continued thrusting into her.

“Holy shit, Church,” she was shaking for entirely different reasons now. His free hand was on her breast, holding it in a tight grip, then he lowered his head. She cried out when she felt his teeth on her skin.

The bed was screaming and the walls were shaking and she was pretty sure the earth was moving. The bedroom door was wide open, Jerry and Margo could come back at any time. Wouldn't that be a perfect end to her day, to be caught fucking Church.

Wouldn't that be amazing.

The punishing thrusts slowed down. He rolled his body against her, sacrificing violence and speed for depth and build up. Both were equally good, in her opinion, but having them back to back had

caused her brain to short circuit. She was babbling and she was smiling and she was crying.

“I have waited,” he was sighing in her ear. “A long, long time for you, *Emma*.”

It was the first time he'd ever said her name. She hadn't even realized it till that moment. It shouldn't have been a big deal, but it was. Hearing something so personal, something that belonged only to her, coming out of his mouth ... well. It wasn't hers anymore, was it? It belonged to him now.

“Church,” she whispered his name through chattering teeth. “Please ... I can't anymore ...”

“Good,” he said, slamming his hips against hers once again. She squeezed her eyes shut tight and felt the trembling start in her thighs. “I've been wanting to see this.”

“See ...” her voice trailed off as she sought out words.

“What you do ... every night ... when you think everyone is sleeping .. and you're thinking of me,” he grunted. “I've made you come a dozen times already. Now I want to experience it in person.”

Oh, he knew. Of course he knew. Did he sit against the wall and listen to her scratches? Listen to her soft moans? Stand outside her door? Did he touch himself? He did, she was sure. All this time they'd been apart, and they'd already been fucking each other.

What a waste.

She came with a shout, her back arching off the bed, her arms straining against his hold. His mouth was once again on her breasts, seeing as how she'd offered them up so nicely. His thrusting became chaotic. Enraged. Menacing. Her orgasm intensified and when she started to scream, he covered her mouth with his own.

When he finally came, there was no warning, no heads up. He just buried himself inside her, as deep as he could go, hitting that spot that somehow made pain feel like pleasure. He let go of her arms and instead held onto her hips, keeping her as tight against him as possible. She gritted her teeth and bore it, the tension causing her body to writhe and twist in his hold.

By the time he was done, she was halfway to another orgasm.

They were both on the brink of suffocating in the open air. He collapsed next to her, laying on his back, one of his hands on his chest. His eyes were closed, his mouth open, gasping for breath.

Emma's eyes were open, and she stared at the ceiling, her arms still stretched out straight above her head. Her legs still stretched out wide below her waist. After a second, she finally glanced down the length of their bodies. Her ruined panties had somehow shaken free of her leg and she was completely

nude. Church, however, still had his pants wrapped around one ankle.

Jesus, if that's how he performs with one leg caught up in something, I really will die next time.

She licked her lips and went back to staring at the ceiling. She'd finally stopped crying.

“Are you okay?” she panted.

She wasn't looking at him, but she could tell he'd opened his eyes.

“Fan-fucking-tastic.”

His response shocked her so much, her jaw dropped and she turned to stare him. He had a wolfish grin, and his bedroom eyes were setting the room on fire.

“I may be strange,” he told her. “But *certain* parts of me are down right normal.”

She rolled onto her side and kissed him, long and hard. She got to do that now, she realized. Whenever she wanted. Next time he was cooking in the middle of the night or coming home late or driving to school or ...

“I have to leave,” she suddenly remembered, and she attempted to untangle herself from him. He started pulling her back.

“No, you don't,” he said against the side of her neck, then she felt his sharp teeth threatening to break her skin.

“Not this second,” she agreed. “But soon. They'll be home soon. She said I couldn't stay. *Shit.*”

I can't be here when she gets back.”

Not because she was afraid of her mother. No, Emma was afraid of what *she* might do to *Margo*.

She slid to the edge of the bed and grabbed her blouse off the floor, slipped it on. Didn't bother with anything else and walked out of the room.

When she got into the office, the first thing she did was put on a pair of underwear. Next, she dropped to her knees and started pulling open drawers on the desk. Out came all her socks and panties and bras and tank tops.

“You don't have to go.”

She glanced up to find Church in her doorway, his hands gripping the door frame above his head so he could lean forward. He'd pulled on a pair of sweatpants, but nothing else. She watched the muscles along the sides of his ribs stretch and pull taut and look delicious.

I bet they have a sexy name, whatever they're called.

“I do,” she finally replied, and she went back to pulling out all her clothes. When she'd finished, she stood up and went over to her shitty rack and started yanking things off hangers. “I can call Stacey, probably crash with her for a night or two. Josh lives alone, he might let me stay with him for longer.”

She could practically feel Church's distress, and sure enough, when she looked over her shoulder, he

was frowning. She tried to remember if she'd ever seen him frown before.

“You'll stay here.”

“Church, I told you, I can't -” she started to argue, but he stood upright and held up a hand. Silenced her with a gesture.

“You're staying *with me*.”

CHURCH.



I don't owe her anything.
I don't owe her anything.

But she needs something, doesn't she?

I knew she was broken. I knew she was desperate for attention. For affection.

But I didn't know ... I didn't know it was going to be like this. I didn't count on her *needing* me the way she does – i.e., so badly, it's driving her to violence.

It's almost beautiful ...

I don't think I've ever had anyone truly *need* me. Like me, yes. Adore me, yes. Obsessed with me, yes.

Need is a different beast. Need implies she can't survive without me. Somehow, I've become responsible for her. I didn't want that. Just a little obsession. Just a little cooperation. That's it. That's all. Fall in love with me, be with me, *worship me*.

But those dewy eyes of hers, always staring at me, pleading with me, begging me. Telling me that I'm the first person she's ever felt this way about. Sure, I'm sure she's thought she's been in love

before – but oh, this time, it's real, she's convincing herself.

It all happened so fast, with such little effort. Is it real?

Do I want it to be real for her?

It makes everything so much more difficult. A finer line has to be walked. She expects something back from me now, and if I don't give it, I could upset this delicate balance. Drive her away from me, or push her over the edge into insanity. Either way, then I won't have her. I won't have my “disciple”.


So I owe her *something*.

What happens if I give in? I've never given any of myself to anyone. Not really. Sure, I've let them believe I have. Tell a woman what she wants to hear, and she's yours for the night – I've convinced dozens that they've seen inside me, gotten to know the real me, gotten me to open up. All a game, all a lie.

It won't work with Emma, though. She's been told so many lies, she knows how to recognize them. The only way to make it all convincing is to coat my lies in the truth. Give her something true, so she'll believe the lie that follows.

But then she'll have a piece of me. A *real* piece of me. With her all the time, out there in the world. Now. During. After. A part of me will belong to her, *forever*.

And I'm not sure how I feel about that.



After his statement, Church disappeared back to his room. Emma could hear him doing something. Moving things around in his closet. She was confused, but she didn't dwell on it. She didn't have time. She finished getting the rest of her clothes together, then she folded everything up.

She and Margo had lived in a lot places, moved around a lot. One husband to the next to a new boyfriend to a new town to a new job to a new fucked up situation. Jerry was supposed to be the end of the line, but Emma knew rides like hers never ended until lights out, so she'd always kept her belongings sparse. All her clothing and personal items fit into one backpack and one duffle bag. She stared down at them for a second, then turned away before a wave of depression could overwhelm her.

When she got to Church's room, she was surprised to see everything had been cleaned up. Her discarded clothing had been picked up and folded, left to sit neatly on his computer chair. He'd even made his bed, and was in the act of turning down the covers when she walked into the space.

“I stopped talking because my parents were fucking idiots.”

She blinked rapidly in surprise. Well, that had certainly come out of nowhere. Here she was, getting ready to do a runner, and here he was, getting ready to give confession.

Church. Confession. Makes sense. Jesus, I'm losing it.

“So were mine,” she spoke slowly, watching as he sat on the mattress and propped his back against the headboard. He had something in his left hand, curled up, out of view. It made her nervous, but when he patted the empty space next to him, she got into bed.

“I stopped because they were idiots, *and* because there was something wrong with me,” he continued. She didn't respond at first, just held still while he grabbed her legs and gently adjusted her position so her knees were bent and her feet were in his lap.

She was absolutely shocked, though, when he unfurled his closed fist. He'd been holding a bottle of nail polish. Bright red. She gaped while he unscrewed the lid and pulled out the brush, stroking it over her big toe. His hands were amazingly steady, he quickly moved onto the next toe in line. He could've been a surgeon. Something about that thought, though, Church handling a scalpel. It scared her and turned her on, all at once.

“What was wrong with you?” she finally whispered. He moved from her second toe to her third.

“I didn't like people.”

She snorted.

“Please. I don't like most people. People fuck you, in any and every way they can.”

“No, you don't get it. I *don't like* people. I think they're ...” he paused and concentrated on his work, then went onto the next toe. “*Not worthy.*”

She slowly lowered herself until she was laying on her back, her head hanging off the edge of his bed.

“I can see why you'd think that.”

He finished and switched to her other foot.

“So fucking stupid, everyone. I would get so mad. Here I am, this little kid, not understanding why adults couldn't understand *me*. I got tired of explaining everything, explaining myself, so I just stopped trying. That made my mother angry. She didn't like the embarrassment of having an *unusual* child,” he said. He was even more sure of himself with this foot, his strokes were faster, more confident. “When she started hitting me, I started thinking up different ways to kill her. I was only six, though, I knew I wasn't big enough. I'd have to wait to get bigger.”

“And when you got bigger, you realized you couldn't,” she whispered. He finally glanced at her

and nodded.

“Apparently, it's not okay to plan the death and dismemberment of family members.”

“It's not okay to plan it for anyone, in general.”

“What if you're a dictator?” he asked. “Or a vigilante whose family was brutally murdered in front of you?”

She thumped her foot down on his stomach, making him wheeze.

“Well, since you're neither of those, they don't apply.”

“No, they don't.”

“So ... what, you're a sociopath?”

“The term is *anti-social personality disorder*, and yes, I was tentatively diagnosed as such.”

“*Tentatively*,” she echoed. He finished painting, then put the cap on the bottle before tossing it off the bed.

“That's what the psychologist's notes said. I never went back to him for proper testing.”

“Why not?”

“Because I thought about killing him, too.”

Did you ever think about killing me?

She swallowed the question. She wasn't sure which answer would upset her more.

“So you removed yourself,” she said. He lifted her foot, the first one he'd painted, and he gently blew on her toes. Her eyes fluttered shut.

“Yes. That's why I can't be a true sociopath. I recognize my mental illness for what it is, and I take steps to keep myself as healthy as possible, in order to protect those around me.”

“Like not talking to people,” she guessed, and she felt him nod. One foot was exchanged for the other.

“Yes. It makes things ... easier. I can't manipulate, can't lie, can't *hurt* if I can't speak. Or at least, it's a lot harder. And I never care. I never at all feel like I'm missing out. People assume there's something wrong with me, so they talk freely in front of me. Nothing anyone says is worth anything. Why would I want to talk to any of them anyway?” he sounded exasperated.

“If that's true,” she ventured. “Then why do you go to parties? Why did you fuck Marci MacIntosh?”

“God, I love that you're jealous about that,” he breathed, squeezing her ankle.

“You're welcome.”

“I fucked her because she has amazing tits and she was offering them up. She's so stupid, she's basically sub-species, so I didn't care about using her. I don't care about any of the women I've used and fucked over the years.”

“The multitudes,” she joked, but he nodded his head. “If you've fucked so many women, you must talk *sometimes*.”

“Of course I do. Like I said, people are stupid – they assume just because I don't talk to them, I must not talk to anybody. I go to fucking Columbia, of course I talk. I just do it as little as possible.”

“Gotcha. And what about the parties, when you were in high school? Why did you go to them?”

“I ...” he faltered then. She was surprised. She sat up and pulled her feet away from him so she could look at his handy work.

“Not bad,” she commented, wiggling her toes. He laid his hand flat over her feet, smoothed it back and forth.

“Can't pretend to be human if you don't know how they act,” he whispered. She looked up and found him staring hard at her.

“You think you're not human,” she clarified, cocking up an eyebrow. His stare turned into a glare.

“During puberty, my number one fantasy was killing the girls in my class. Marci for being such a stupid slut. Janna for wasting oxygen that could be better devoted to plants or slugs. Kelly for having a perfect smile and giving it to all the wrong people. *All of them* for being gorgeous,” he explained in his blunt way.

Logical Emma wondered if she'd jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire. Dark Emma wondered where this beautiful creature had been her whole life, and she dared to ask what Logical

Emma had been too scared to even whisper in her own mind.

“Did you fantasize about killing me?” she asked.

His smirk was back in place and those bedroom eyes wandered over her. She still hadn't buttoned her shirt and was essentially sitting there in just her underwear. Pants were overrated, in Emma's opinion.

“The first time I saw you,” he started, and he moved up onto his knees. “Was in that dark hallway. Jerry had told me his wife had a daughter. A girl. *Emma*. So I expected a *little* girl. I was going to stay very, very far away from you.”

“But I'm not so little, and you didn't stay away,” she finished that part of the story. He nodded and slowly pulled off her shirt, tossing it into a corner.

“I couldn't figure you out. You were so completely unassuming, almost unaware. I didn't talk. You wouldn't stop. You were half naked, you didn't even know it. Didn't even care.”

“Hey, I had on a shirt.”

He grabbed her knees and pulled them apart. Lowered himself down between her legs.

“You were close to death,” he whispered, leaning over her and gently biting a nipple between his teeth. She took a deep breath and wrapped her arms around his head.

“Did you ever fantasize about it?”

“What do *you* think, hmmm?” he replied, pulling free and propping himself up. He jauntily walked his fingers up the center of her chest, his gaze following their path. “Do you think I stood outside your door with a knife? That I hovered over you while you slept, a pillow in my hands? Do you wonder if there are garbage bags and duct tape and a saw in my car right now?”

Emma closed her eyes again and tried to push away the pain.

“No.”

“No,” he agreed. “I didn't think about you again for the rest of the night. Forgot about you until you walked out the next morning. You babbled in the car. You do that a lot, you know. It kind of ruins your tough girl act.”

“Not an act.”

“That's what all the damaged girls say. You spoke to me. You understood me. You made me *curious*. Nothing piques my interest. You did.”

“So not even later ... ?”

“No. Well, maybe a little, somewhere in the middle there, when you wouldn't shut up. When you kissed me. I knew you were ruining things, knew you would break me. I wanted to strangle you. Just a little. Just enough to make you fear me. It's the best thing, fear. It creates focus. It creates drive. 'Necessity is the mother of invention', but what creates necessity? *Fear*. No one loves you

more than when they're afraid of you. When they're looking at you because you hold their life in your hands. You become their whole world. You become their *god*," his voice dropped to a breath and he kissed her chest.

"*Church*," she whispered his name, finally getting it. He nodded.

"My mother gave me the name. She tried to beat the strangeness out of me. She found my journal. That's when she started calling me Church. Then she left."

"Because she was scared of you."

"Yes, because she was afraid."

"What if ..." Emma stopped herself before she could say it out loud. They were soulmates, she was already pretty sure, but certain things shouldn't be said out loud.

Or maybe I don't have to speak the words out loud for him to know them.

"*I'll never kill you*," he whispered, then he delivered a long, slow lick, starting at the base of her breast bone and going up to her throat. "No matter how much you beg me to."

"Why?"

"Because, you've already given me what I want most. You're afraid of me *and* you're falling in love with me. You're the best thing I've ever seen in my life. How could I let that go?"

A tear rolled down the side of her face. His tongue took care of that, too.

“Do you love me back?”

“Emma,” he sighed, leaning away. “Have you been paying attention at *all*?”

“Sometimes I think you're the only thing I've ever paid attention to,” she replied.

“Of course I don't love you. I *can't*. I don't know what love is.”

She squeezed her eyes shut tight. Why did she always love people who didn't love her back?

At least his blows will never hurt.

“But I *want* you,” he continued, and she felt his hand smoothing down the side of her face. “I want to be with you and watch you laugh and witness your tears and be your everything. It's better this way, I promise. It's better.”

You make everything better, Church. Just keep speaking. Keep touching. And either you'll learn to love me, or you'll kill me. Either way, I'll be happy.

EMMA.



I spent my whole life learning to be a certain way. Quiet when necessary. Aggressive when cornered. Manipulative when it suited.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I had a shitty childhood. Blah blah, abusive dad, bloo di bloo, molested by step-parents, mlarg blarg, used by my mother.

Sometimes I think about that time I ran away when I was fifteen. Ended up at a bus station in south side Chicago at two in the morning. Fuck that. I thought the security guard who rescued me was nice, until he called Margo. She read me the riot act on the way home, then husband number three beat me with his belt until I couldn't stand anymore – which I still think was preferable to that bus station.

I'd learned my lesson.

Sticking around wasn't so bad. Those times between husbands and boyfriends, when I learned from Margo, they weren't so bad. I learned how to not be like her. How to be *better* than her.

So I grew up and I got tough and I decided I didn't care and I didn't need anyone or anything and I would walk alone in this world and I would be


independent. It was safer, that way. I didn't want to be scared. People were scary. Remove people from the equation, simple.

I didn't need anyone.

Then I spend *one night* with Church, and a whole lifetime of history is erased. My personality is shredded. Where's Emma, what has he done with her? That strong girl with her chin stuck out and her shoulder permanently chipped?

I'm gone, now. Disappeared. And you know what that means? I don't have to worry about anything anymore. No one can hurt me, no one can *scare me*, because I don't exist.

It's wonderful.



The next morning was awkward, to say the least.

Emma sat on one side of the table. Her right hand felt bruised, damaged from beating up both Marci and Margo. Various other parts of her body hurt, as well, but the good kind of hurt – pain inflicted by hands seeking to give her pleasure.

Margo sat on the opposite side of the table, glaring at her daughter. Well, maybe glaring wasn't the right word – could a person glare with only one eye able to squint properly? Margo's left eye and cheek were a little swollen from Emma's attack. Three red scratches lined her cheekbone, a lovely little memento from their *bonding* moment.

Jerry sat at the foot of the table, for once without his newspaper. He was glancing around at everyone, though surprisingly his gaze actually looked a little ... *happy*. He gave Emma soft smiles when he thought his wife wasn't looking. Margo got warm eyes and pats on her hands. Saint Jerry, keeping the balance, ensuring the peace.

Before, no one had ever sat at the head of the table. Jerry usually took a seat at the foot or at the

side. Margo always sat to his left. Emma tried to never sit with them, so it had never been an issue. She supposed if she'd ever thought about it, it would've seemed a little odd, neither the master nor the mistress of the manor taking the seat at the head of the table.

But it made sense now, because Church was sitting at the head. He'd taken his spot thoughtlessly and effortlessly, as if he'd always been sitting there. As if the seat had been left vacant specifically for him.

Maybe it had.

"I'm proud of everyone," Jerry interrupted the awkward silence. Well, awkward for the mortals in the room. Church had tucked himself back into his silences and was concentrating only on his breakfast. He didn't even seem to be aware that other living, sentient beings were sitting at the table with him. "Yesterday was ugly. Real ugly. But I had a long talk with Margo and Church early this morning." Well, that explained Margo's unusually docile attitude – Emma had expected to be choke-slammed into her breakfast. "I'm glad we were able to work this all out, as a ... uh ... as a *family*."

He choked on the word family like it was a sharp bone in his throat.

"Well, I don't know if -" Margo started to interject, laying one manicured hand gently against her face.

“I understand that women are temperamental by nature,” he just kept going. Emma stared at him. Was this real life? “Mothers and their children, they fight. Why, Paul and his mom, they went round and round. It's natural. So I'm real proud of everyone for being able to lay it to bed and sit at a table *together.*”

Had it been laid to bed? *Had it?* Emma had spent the night in Church's room, learning a new religion. She hadn't even heard when Jerry and Margo had come home. She glanced at her mother, wondering if they'd heard her having sex. Wondering if anything had been resolved, or if it all just gotten a lot worse.

I wonder if he's ever fantasized about killing her ...

“Well, honey, I'm ... I'm glad you're glad. And *Emma,*” her mother spat out her name. “I want you to know I forgive you. For everything. And you should thank Church for speaking on your behalf.”

Emma glanced at the head of the table. Church still wasn't acknowledging the situation, just munching away at his Cheerios while he read a textbook. The man from last night, the one who'd been a live wire full of energy and chaos, he was gone. Silence had taken his place again.

Could they possibly be the same person? Could I have imagined it?

Of course she couldn't have. Emma had woken up in Church's bed. He'd been gone, the sheets and comforter on his side of the bed actually straightened and made up. When she'd poked her head into the hall, it had been to hear bacon sizzling in a pan and to see Church sitting at the table. She couldn't be sure when he'd gone out there, but she'd gotten the impression he'd been up for a while – which Jerry and Margo had just confirmed.

So she'd snuck back into the shitty little office and she'd taken a moment for herself. The first one in over twelve hours.

Holy shit.

The sex had been explosive. *All* of it – their first round, and then the other times which had occurred later in the night. Each time had been less frenetic, more controlled. More about *feeling* everything he wanted to do and say. His hands, they spoke all the words he held inside. Pinned her down and ripped her apart and shed her blood. It was *glorious*.

More than that, though, had been the actual talking. Church knew how to speak, it turned out, and once he'd gotten started, it had been hard to stop him. It had been exhilarating and terrifying and a lot like falling in love. She'd learned a lot of things about him, and about herself. Things she'd been too scared to explore or admit before him.

But Church, he was so self-assured, it was impossible for it not to rub off on her. He knew

exactly who he was; *what* he was. And while he knew he wasn't good, he also wasn't ashamed. In fact, he was almost *proud*. He knew his flaws, he recognized them, he took steps to control them – all impressive feats, all things worthy of being proud of, so he was. The bonus part about being a semi-sociopath, it seemed. Not hurting anyone, not killing anyone, those were accomplishments to him. He deserved praise. He deserved *worship*.

Emma wanted to be his disciple. She hated herself for her flaws. She buried her fucked up thoughts. Punished herself for her bad feelings. It wasn't fair. Why shouldn't she revel in them? Hadn't she earned it?

Ridiculous. She would learn to be like Church. Embrace her dark side, recognize it for what it was, and appreciate herself for not giving into it.

And maybe, just maybe, learn to know when it was *okay* to give into that side.

Maybe he could learn that, too.

“So, Emma,” Jerry started again, apparently not done with feeling like the great peace keeper. She slowly drew her gaze away from Church and looked at his father. “My boss is friends with the dean of your school. I can ask for them to have a meeting, if you'd like.”

She stared at him like he was speaking a different language. Huh? Jerry had barely noticed

her existence for the past couple weeks. Why did he want to take care of her now?

“I ... I don't know what to say,” she managed to babble. No one was ever nice for no reason – what would Jerry want in return?

“Well, I spoke with Paul last night, and he said how well you've been doing, how hard you've been studying. He spoke with the administration this morning, arranged a meeting for when you get in, and he's also even offered to tutor you, to get your grades up. I think between the three of us, we might be able to keep you in school, but you have to promise – *no more fighting*,” Jerry stressed.

Emma ignored him for a moment, back to staring at Church. He'd spoken to his father? The her school? First their parents, and now this – he hated speaking to anyone, and yet he'd done it. For her. A small thing from anyone else, but a huge deal coming from him.

This has to be love.

“I promise,” she finally managed to respond.

“Good. That's a good girl, Emma. I'm sure this will all blow over.”

Then Jerry was patting her hand, and Emma wanted to throw up a little bit.

I fucked Church, and now I'm eating pancakes with Margo and Jerry is comforting me. Did I die last night?

Abruptly, Church stood up. The chair legs screeching across the cheap tile floor seemed to fill the entire house. Everyone went silent and stared at him. He didn't look at anyone, just carried his bowl to the sink, then went back to his room. They could hear him collecting things, and Emma had long since memorized his routines – he was getting his stuff so he could leave.

One mind blowing night together and she'd already started thinking of him as a different person. Of course he wasn't, though. Words didn't really make that much of a difference. Not to a person like him, not at his core.

Emma quickly got up and put her own plate away. She exchanged glares with her mother, but avoided looking at Jerry at all. She still wasn't sure what to make of his niceness. Soft touches were very rarely ever a nice thing in Emma's world.

She hurried around her room, not sure what all she should grab. She'd beaten someone up yesterday – should she even bother going in with him? Should she wait for the dean to call her in? When Church paused for a moment outside her door, she knew she should. She grabbed her backpack, ran a brush through her hair, then rushed to catch up to him just as he was going outside.

“Keep us posted on how things go today,” Jerry called out just as the front door was shutting behind them.

It was pouring down rain outside, they were both soaked by the time they got in the car. She wrung out her hair while they drove down the street, then she went about rolling some more cigarettes, anticipating a stressful day.

“Your father,” she finally broke the silence. Church flicked his gaze to her and she paused for a moment, waiting for him to respond. Apparently, things were well and truly back to normal.

I can't handle normal, not anymore.

“Is your dad really a *nice* guy?” she kept talking. His eyes were back on the road and he seemed to be smiling to himself. Mocking her. “I mean, beyond his milquetoast exterior. You told me about your mom, but what about Jerry? Was he always white bread?” Church's smile was gone. He looked bored with the conversation. “Did *he* ever fantasize about hurting people?”

A broad question, for sure, but she knew he'd understand. She watched his fingers clench and unclench around the steering wheel. Then, just as the college came into view, he took a deep breath.

“No.”

Ah. That voice. She'd almost wondered if she'd dreamed it. Low and serious, reverberating through her chest.

“Not ever?”

“I could light Jerry on fire and he would smile and say 'thank you'. I'm almost positive he's not my

real father.”

“Really?”

It hadn't ever occurred to her, yet now that he'd said it out loud, it actually made a lot of sense. Church looked nothing like his father, whatsoever. Jerry had dirty blond hair, was pudgy and paunchy, and *maybe* average height, in shoes. His droopy washed out blue eyes matched his dishwater hair. His dishwater *personality*. He had nothing of the electricity that crackled in his son's gaze and mind.

They pulled into the parking lot and he took his usual spot, in front of the windows at the end of the row. Then they sat in silence for a while as Emma packed up her cigarette making paraphernalia. After she was done, she waited while Church seemed to take a couple moments to work something out in his head.

“Emma ...” he sighed her name, and her heart soared on his breath. “Everything is different now. You understand that, right?”

All at once, she was scared. This could be very good, or very bad.

“I'm sorry, what?”

“It's simple for you – you never shut up. It's just ... not for me. Every word I say out loud, it costs me. A piece of my ... my mind, whatever, my sanity. Something. I'm going to need you to help me now.”

Okay, phew. He wasn't ending them before they'd even really begun. The mere thought of it, the hint, had almost sent her into a tailspin. The actual act ...

*This is beyond falling for someone. This is obsession. This is wrong. **This must be love.***

“Okay, so ... you don't want to talk anymore?” she checked. He frowned.

“I want to tell you things I've never said to anybody,” he corrected her, and her body instantly filled with flames.

“Sounds good to me.”

“But you have to understand ...” his hands were gripping his wheel so hard, his knuckles had gone white. “The things I want to say ... they're not ... I'm going to ask you to do things. To understand things. This isn't up for debate – you get what I'm saying? You're either with me, or you're not.”

Emma wasn't entirely sure she did get what all he was saying – but one thing was coming through crystal clear to her. Whatever was starting between them, if she said no to the things he asked, if she didn't understand the things he said, it would be over. And she didn't think she would handle that very well. So she gave him the only response she could.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I'm with you. I understand.”

“Don't say these things lightly,” he said, his gaze snapping to hers. She felt like he hadn't looked at her all morning. It stole the breath out of her body. “Don't be like everyone else.”

“Trust me, Church. I won't be like *anyone* else you've ever met.”

He shocked her once again by leaning across the car and kissing her. Fast and hard. Then he was getting out of the vehicle and slamming the door. She scrambled to follow after him, but he was halfway to the entrance before she'd even gotten her feet on the ground.

“I'm counting on it, Emma!” he called back without looking, and then he disappeared through the doors.



WHEN EMMA FINALLY GOT inside, she was soaked all over again. Worse, when she finished shaking out her jacket, she realized everyone was gaping at her. She looked around for a minute, then realization sunk in. She was standing in the common area. Just the day before, she'd broken Marci's nose against a table in front of half the school and faculty, in that very same room.

Whoops.

“Oh my god, what are you doing here!?”

A squealing voice had Emma turning around, but before she could finish the rotation, Stacey was slamming into her. She squeezed her arm in a sort of sideways hug, then dragged her down a hallway towards the science wing.

“Where are we going?” Emma asked, glancing around.

“I thought you were suspended! I didn't want security to come and kick you out,” Stacey hissed. “What are you doing here? And am I going crazy, or did it look like you and Church were *talking* outside his car?”

Fuckity fuck fuck. Things were so much easier in Church's bed. Maybe, if she asked very politely, he would tie her to it and leave her there.

“Yes,” she said, then kept going before Stacey could squeal again. “He's helping me so I can stay in school.”

“Wow. That's so nice of him, I guess. He must really like his new step-sister,” Stacey laughed, and Emma grimaced. She didn't like that term, not at all.

“Stacey, we're adults who only met a couple weeks ago and whose parents got married right before that. We're not siblings, in any kind of fashion. Now I gotta go and see if I can even keep going to this school.”

Before the other girl could argue, Emma hurried off towards the hallway where the administration offices were located. Jerry had mentioned

something about a meeting that morning – might as well get it over with. When she finally reached the dean's office, his door was shut and there were people inside, but his personal secretary assured Emma he was expecting her.

She sat nervously in a chair and tried not to think about anything. She didn't want to get kicked out of college – graduating had been something of a goal, and Emma did like to try to accomplish her goals. At the same time, though, things at school hadn't exactly been going well. She got okay grades, sure, but after Church had arrived on the scene, she hadn't really been able to pay attention. Was it worth going back? Couldn't she just sort of stay home and ... well ... wait for him?

That's ridiculous! You just met him, and you want to sit at home and pine away for him!?

Yes. Yes I do. Pine and breathe and live and die for him.

Whoa there, Dark Emma, let's just calm the fuck down, you barely even know him

Shut up, Logical Emma, all you do is ruin everything.

Now she was arguing with *herself*, awesome. The office door finally creaked open and there was the dean, saving her from another psychotic break. She jumped to her feet.

“Ms. Hartley,” he spoke in a gruff voice.
“Come in.”

His office was already small and cramped, but seemed even more so with all the people in it. A security officer, a school counselor, Marci, Marci's mother and father, and Church. All of them turned to watch her as she entered the room. Church's eyes bored into her soul and once again, she read his body language loud and clear.

“Don't fuck this up.”

She wouldn't. There was one chair left, some fold out from the cafeteria, and she sat in it, trying to look meek and mild.

HA HA HA! That's a good one.

“Ms. Hartley, we're here to discuss whether or not you have a future at this school. The incident between you and Ms. MacIntosh yesterday was disgraceful. It was also assault – you are very lucky she declined to press charges.”

Emma was surprised. She'd sort of been waiting for cops to show up at her house. Now she knew why they hadn't. She glanced at the other girl. Marci had a bandage strapped across her nose and two black eyes that did nothing to hide her glare.

Frankly, it's an improvement on her looks.

“I'm very grateful,” she amended the dean's statement. “I'm just ... I'm so sorry, Marci. I was sick, I wasn't in my right mind. I had no right to do what I did, and I've felt just terrible about it ever since.”

Terrible shame I didn't knock out a tooth while I was at it.

“Good,” Marci grumbled, giving an indignant sniff. “It was all very traumatic.”

“We've already agreed not to throw her in jail,” Mr. MacIntosh started barking. “But how can we be sure this hooligan won't attack our daughter again?”

“I won't, I promise,” Emma spoke quickly.

“Your word means nothing to me.”

“I promise.”

It was Church's voice ringing through the room, startling everyone. Everyone except, Emma noticed, little Miss Marci. No, Marci not only looked like she recognized it, she looked ... *smug*.

“And just exactly who are you?” Mr. MacIntosh glared at Church.

“I'm a teacher's assistant, I work in the classroom your daughter shares with Ms. Hartley. I am also Ms. Hartley's step-brother, we live in the same household. I will be keeping a strict eye on her.”

“I'm not sure that's good enough for me.”

“Daddy, we already discussed this. She doesn't scare me, I'm fine with her being here. But if you touch me again, I'll kick your ass, and then I'll sue you,” Marci threatened her.

“Marci!” her mother gasped. Her father looked proud. Emma was almost impressed.

“Sounds fair to me. I won't touch you.”

“I'm glad you and Ms. MacIntosh have come to some sort of understanding,” the dean interrupted. “I've gone over your file, Ms. Hartley. You're a bright girl and you show a lot of promise, I'd hate to see you throw it all away. For your sake, I hope the incident really was a result of being sick. We will be watching you very closely, and if there are any other problems – *any* – you will be expelled immediately.”

“Understood.”

“*Good*. Now, on top of a three day suspension, you'll also have to agree to counseling once a week to ...”

Emma blanked out for a second. Counseling? As in ... therapy, basically? No. Just no. She'd dealt with therapists before, fuck that. She'd rather get kicked out of Jerry's house.

When she went to open her mouth to argue, though, something caught her attention. Church, standing at the opposite corner of the large desk. He shook his head, almost imperceptibly. She pressed her lips together and glared at him, but that only caused him to smirk some more.

“Do you agree?” the dean asked. Emma had no clue what he'd laid out, but declining wasn't an option, not if Church said it wasn't. She sighed and shook her head.

“Yes, of course. Clearly, I've got some anger issues I need to work on.”

“I think this is going to be a really good thing, Emma,” the counselor, a Ms. Cutler, finally spoke. “Admitting you have an issue is the hardest step. We're going to do great things together!”

Emma stared at the counselor for a moment, then finally managed a lukewarm smile.

“I'm already excited.”

There was more chattering, more lecturing. She said all the right things in all the right places. Emma was no sociopath, but growing up exposed to Margo's lifestyle, she was no stranger to manipulation, either.

Eventually, it was agreed upon that she could return to school the following Monday. She was not to interact with Marci or bother her in any way – to do so would result in immediate expulsion. The MacIntosh's grumbled, Marci batted her eyes at Church, and everyone got up to leave.

They all started filing out of the room, but Ms. Cutler held Emma back. She was dying for a cigarette and she didn't want to be speaking to this cookie cutter person, but she managed to stand still and listen. Agreed to meet at the end of the day Monday to set up weekly appointments.

When she was finally able to escape, Emma practically bolted. She was moving so fast around a corner, she didn't see the person standing there until

she was ramming full force into him. She started falling backwards when strong arms brought her upright again.

“You don't pay attention very often,” Church's voice murmured. She chuckled and shoved her hair out of her face.

“Yeah, and you're talking. Don't you have a rule about that?” she teased. He rolled his eyes, then turned and walked away. She trotted to keep up with him. “You did all this, didn't you? Got Marci to not press charges, got everyone to meet here, talked them into keeping me. Why? It's not like I was gonna go on to become a brain surgeon or anything. Why do you care?”

He stayed silent as they moved through the halls. She noticed people staring at them. She guessed it made sense – they were the town weirdos. She knew that look in their eyes, she'd seen it enough in her life. Embarrassment mixed with amusement mixed with disgust, or some sort of similar combination. She made direct eye contact with several people, holding their gaze until they looked away.

“Maybe,” she picked up their conversation again, just as they reached the common area. “You like being around me, Mr. Logan. Maybe the idea of me being out of your sight for too long makes you nervous. If I'm here at school, you can keep an eye on me.”

She glanced up at him and was pleased to see a smile hiding in the corner of his mouth. She was close to the truth, she knew. If she'd gotten kicked out of school, it would've been impossible for her to stay at home. She'd have left, been homeless, or gone to stay with other people. Out of his reach. Whatever spell he was weaving, it might get broken.

And we couldn't have that, now could we?

They stepped outside the main entrance, and before she could think more on the issue, Church was pulling her to a stop. Gently turning her to face him. To her surprise, he pulled her close. Her breasts pressed against his chest. When she felt his hand on her butt, she held her breath. He was going to kiss her. Church was going to kiss her, in broad daylight, in front of other people, in front of witnesses and the rain and everything and ... and ...

And he pulled her cigarette case out of her back pocket. Stared straight at her as he opened it and pulled one out, sticking the end between her lips. He used one hand to slip the case back into its place, and with the other he flicked on her lighter.

“You think too much,” he whispered, and she didn't respond, too shocked.

He was right, of course. He was always right about everything.

While Emma inhaled a deep lungful of burning smoke, Church turned away without another word.

When he disappeared inside, the door closing loudly behind him, her brain finally started working again.

She was alone, in the rain, with no ride home.

Mother fucker.



Emma had to lower her head to her hands in order to scratch her nose. The handcuffs didn't allow for a lot of movement, even with a twelve inch chain between the actual cuffs.

The chain was wrapped around a post connecting the headboard to the bed frame. Impossible to get free. Not that she'd tried, though. She sat on the floor with her back against the wall, humming a tune to herself. She pulled a pillow off the bed using her teeth, then laid down on the floor with it, her arms stretching up above her.

He could've put a tv in here for me, that would've been nice. I could operate a remote like this.

Of course, that was impractical. Church didn't watch tv, the noise would surely draw attention. Margo would come sniffing around, and that just wouldn't do.

Emma suddenly heard the front door open and she sat upright, holding still and listening. She'd quickly become very adept at figuring out where everyone was in the house, just based on sound.

Footsteps walked across the living room, into the kitchen. The fridge was opened and closed, then there was the sound of a bottle cap popping off. It didn't tell her enough – she knew it couldn't be Jerry, it was too early for him to be home from work, but Margo had been in and out of the house all afternoon.

She sighed and leaned against the bed, her cheek pressed to the soft white sheet.

That morning, Emma had woken up on her shitty pull out couch bed to the feeling of arms under her. Church picking her up, gently, and cradling her against his chest. He'd carried her to his room, then he'd sunk down and deposited her on the floor. Hadn't said a word while he'd pulled the handcuffs out of his back pocket. She hadn't spoken, either. Just watched as he'd looped them through the post and attached them to her wrists. Afterwards, he'd stared at her for a long moment. Kissed her quickly. Then he'd nodded, stood up, and left.

That had been seven hours ago.

I have to pee so fucking bad.

It was Sunday afternoon, she started school again on Monday. Church had told her that just a few sweet words dripped into Marci's ear had gotten her to drop the charges. At first, Emma hadn't been quite sure she believed him – surely it would take more than that. But then she'd realized

all Church ever had to do to get her cooperation was open his mouth. He could read the dictionary off to her, call her names, speak in Latin, and she'd do anything he asked her to, just to keep hearing his voice. So maybe it had worked on Marci.

The actual days leading up to Sunday had been boring. He'd worked all day Thursday and Friday. Emma hadn't known what to do with herself. She and Margo moved around the house like wary cobras, always walking along opposite walls, glaring and snarling at each other. Thankfully, Margo was too nervous about upsetting Church to do anything to Emma. Upsetting Church would only result in upsetting her cash cow, er – *her husband* – and she couldn't have that, not when she was so close to that retirement fund.

Emma was in a similar boat. Fighting with Margo might result in another conversation between father and son. Church wouldn't be happy, and since her new goal in life was to *always* make him happy, she would play nice with her mother as best she could.

Church.

If her days were spent in boredom, then her nights were spent in worship.

Everything always drifted away in his presence. It was like the moment Church walked through the door, the rest of the world stopped existing. *She* stopped existing. She was just a mannequin, holding

still, waiting for him to touch her and bring her to life.

And touch her, he did.

That Church, he was a wily one. She wondered where he'd learned all his dirty little tricks. He knew exactly how to keep her placated; knew exactly what to do to stop her from asking too many questions. To keep her from making him talk too much.

He tied her arms to the headboard, stuffed her panties in her mouth, and fucked her hard. Left her like that for hours, coming and going as he pleased, seemingly uncaring of the fact there was a chance – albeit a small one – that Jerry or Margo would come in the room and find her.

He spanked her, used a paddle brush, left bruises. Choked her till she had rings around her neck, branding her. For a man who didn't speak very much, who seemingly wasn't very active, it was like he suddenly couldn't shut off. Not when he was around her. He was suddenly a fountain of sexual energy and aggression and possession, and it was all directed at her.

It was *amazing*. When he was done, she was always a different person. A little less Emma, a little more him. She thanked him. Asked him for more. Begged him. Told him she'd stay forever and ever, never had to see the light of day again, if he

would just please – *please* – keep on being the center of her very small universe.

It turned out it was him moving around the kitchen. There were no clocks in Church's bedroom, she had no clue how long he was home before he came into his room. Long enough to make her fear she was going to have an accident. As he strode through the door, she climbed up on her knees and licked her lips, staring up at him eagerly.

That afternoon, that whole weekend – he hadn't said it out loud, but it had all been a test. He was testing her, making sure she was worthy of him. If she could keep quiet when she wanted to scream, if she could sit still when she was afraid, then she could be strong enough for him. Good enough for him.

Surely, she'd passed his tests.

He dropped into a crouch, just out of range for her hands to reach him. He studied her for a long moment, his eyes moving across her face and down her arms. His lip twitched when he got to the handcuffs. She hadn't struggled against her bonds, but her wrists were still red and a little raw. He traced a finger over the marks and her breath caught in her throat.

“You look so good in these,” he murmured, standing up again.

“Beautiful, even?” she teased. He shook his head and started undoing his belt buckle.

“Never beautiful, Emma. You could never be anything so common.”

Her heart soared and her wrists throbbed and his dick was hard and demanding against her lips, his fingers scratching and twisting in her hair. He braced a hand against the wall behind her and punished her mouth. Gave it a gift. Fucked it long and hard. She tried to stare up at him the whole time. Willing him to see how much love she had for him, if he would just accept it.

Willing him to give some back to her.

CHURCH.



Well. You know when you're craving something? Like the perfect steak. So you go to a restaurant and you order a steak. Order it rare, and you know what you're expecting, and then you get it and it's just ... perfect? From first bite to last, it's succulent and explodes with flavor and is so much more than anything you even thought you were craving, you're beyond fulfilled. So amazing, you want to order it all over again, even though you couldn't possibly fit anything else inside of you.

That's how Emma makes me feel. She's exactly what I always hoped and prayed for, yet at the same time, she's so much more. She's *too much*.

I didn't know it would be like this. I thought I could just fuck someone and use them and when I was done, drop them.

But this girl. Her mind. She can hear me even in my silences, and she's not scared of anything I say or do – her only fears concerning me are that I'll leave her.

Yet for the first time ever, *I'm* scared. Scared of the thoughts I'm having, scared of the way she

makes me feel. Like maybe she's not just someone else to play with. Maybe she's more. Maybe she was meant for me.

I thought I had to do this all on my own.

But maybe we were meant to be great *together*.

I don't like that thought. Not one little bit. I don't want to care about someone. Caring about people means eventually sacrificing yourself in some way for them. Emma is a perfect example – she cared about her mother, and all it ever got her was molested and beaten. She cares about me, and all it's gotten her so far is manipulated and lied to.

I don't want to be that person. I *refuse* to be that person. If I did, I think it would ruin me. I think it would *tame* me. I wouldn't be Church anymore, I would just be ... Paul, though and through, all the time.

I can't let that happen.

I know my purpose.

I know what I want.

And how Emma fits into that ... well, she has a role, and she'll play it. I set out to see if I could convince her to do anything I wanted, and I'm going to succeed. And when it's all over ...

I guess we'll see.



E*mma.* She blinked to attention and glanced around. It took her a second to realize no one had said her name out loud. It was Church – he was staring at her, practically burning a hole through her with his look. His face looked impassive to the casual observer, but she knew him so much better now. He was *annoyed*.

When his stare finally softened to a glance, which finally slid away from her, she looked around the room again. She was missing something, she knew it. What was different? What was he annoyed about?

While Monday had been interesting – lots of gawking and staring on her first day back from suspension – Tuesday was plodding along in its usual fashion. Nothing exciting had happened all day, yet Church was up to something. She noticed his gaze was bouncing around the other people in the room. She craned her neck around, trying to see whatever it was he was seeing.

“*What are you doing?*” Stacey hissed from next to her.

“I don't know,” Emma was honest. “Did we get a new student or something?”

“Yeah, a couple weeks ago, some loony from Alabama,” Stacey teased. Emma narrowed her eyes.

“I lived in Alabama – I'm not from there.”

Stacey rambled on, but Emma ignored her, still trying to figure out what it was Church was trying to communicate to her. He wasn't looking at her at all anymore. No, his eyes were on a row beneath her. If he was looking at Marci, she would set him on fire.

But no, Marci was in the very first row, like always. Church's gaze was about three rows up from her, and maybe two down from Emma. A totally different girl had caught his eye.

Another? I almost killed the last one just for talking about him. I'm not mentally stable enough to deal with this.

Her little inner joke would've been funny if it hadn't been so true.

Of course, she couldn't technically be positive it even was a girl – maybe Church was staring at some dude. The person had long, soft brunette hair, and a slight build. When class finally ended, Emma stayed seated while the person stood up and turned to collect a backpack from the floor. It turned out it was a girl, with pale skin and luminescent blue

eyes, amazing looking even in profile. Very striking, actually.

While Emma watched, the girl gathered her belongings. She seemed nervous, like it was her first day at school. She dropped a folder full of papers everywhere. She'd barely collected them all when she tripped over her bag's strap. Her cheeks turned bright red and she finally got herself together enough to scamper out of the room.

Interesting.

“Did you need help with anything, Ms. Hartley?” the teacher asked, his voice crisp.

Jeez, you beat up one local, and suddenly everyone doesn't like you.

“Not really, just some questions for Ch-, er, Paul,” she said, finally getting out of her seat.

“Right. Lock up when you're done, Paul,” the teacher instructed, then he grabbed his messenger bag and headed out of the room. By the time Emma reached Church, the door had swung shut with a heavy thud.

“Pretty girl,” she commented. He nodded, not looking up from the tests he was grading.

“Yes, she is, isn't she.”

She sighed and sat on the edge of his desk.

“I'm not into threesomes, sorry to say.”

“Sorry to hear it, but I don't want to fuck her.”

“Oh.”

“I have much more interesting plans for her.”

“Oh.”

“And you're going to help me.”

“And what exactly am I helping you with?” she questioned.

“You're going to prove your loyalty to me.”

So this is what he'd been talking about the other day, in his car. When he'd said he'd be requiring her to *do things*. She would've thought all those days spent in his bedroom would've satisfied him. Apparently they hadn't.

“Can I ask why that girl?” she asked. He still didn't look up at her.

“Do you need a reason?”

“No.”

She could *feel* his smirk.

“How about *she exists*. Because she's pretty, and her life is simple, and she's never known the kind of bullshit you and I have had to deal with.”

That actually did kind of make Emma feel better.

“So because she's privileged, she deserves your wrath,” she clarified.

Church finally dropped his pen and sat back in his chair. He stared at her for moment, then grabbed her wrist and pulled her around the desk. She made herself comfortable in his lap.

“Let's just say it's because she's had the very unfortunate luck to catch my eye.”

“Okay.”

“Okay? Just like that, okay? Okay, you'll jump into the unknown with me? Okay you'll do anything I tell you to do?” he asked, combing his fingers through her long hair, brushing it back from her face.

“Just like that, okay.”

“You are simply stunning,” he sighed, moving his fingers to trace along the bridge of her nose.

“You're just saying that because I'm even crazier than you are,” she forced out a laugh. His finger was now outlining her lips.

“I'm saying it because it's true. Because all my life, I've waited to meet someone as perfect as you. Someone I can share these kinds of moments with. Someone who goes beyond fantasy. You, Emma Hartley, are stone cold reality. Being with you is like being *alive*. It's *invigorating*.”

His finger was in her mouth, pressing down on her tongue. She was sucking on it, then it was gone and she was sucking on his tongue.

Something was different. His tone of voice, his eyes, his touch. He was always intense, always too much, but this was something else. He'd been looking at her like it was the first time he'd ever really noticed her. Like he was *really* seeing her. Now he was kissing her like he wanted to devour her, his fingers leaving flames in their wake as they raced across her skin. It almost felt like maybe, just maybe, he was starting to feel something for her.

Maybe even starting to fall for her. Before her heart could soar, though, Logical Emma tried to rear her ugly head.

No. He said he'd never love you. He said he didn't know what love was. He doesn't love you. He can't.

But Logical Emma was no longer in charge. Dark Emma was, and Dark Emma gave absolutely zero shits about anything beyond the man in front of her and the hope that he could someday learn to love her. He filled the gaping holes in her broken shell of an existence. So who cared if he didn't quite love her yet? Whatever he was starting to feel, it was good enough *right now*, and right now was all that mattered.

“I'll do it,” she breathed against his mouth as his hands forced their way into her pants. “I'll do anything you want, Church. Just don't ever stop talking to me.”

“Never. I'll never stop with you, Emma.”



“HI, I'M EMMA.”

The dining hall. Half the people in the room were making it a point to ignore her. The other half wouldn't stop staring at her. Stacey looked confused, and though she couldn't see him, Emma

knew Church was watching from the shadows in the hallway.

“*We're going to have some fun,*” he'd whispered in her ear.

“*Fun?*”

“*Yes. Go. Be her friend. Make her like you.*”

“*Why?*”

“*Because I said so.*”

And then she'd been gently shoved into the room, a bright, sunny smile plastered on her face. Emma Hartley, the girl who was oh-so-good at pretending to be normal. She'd marched right up to the pretty brunette girl, who'd been sitting alone at the end of a long table.

“Oh, hi,” she stammered, then dropped her pencil. Both of them bent down to grab it.

“Sorry to startle you,” Emma chuckled, handing the writing utensil over before taking a seat.

“You didn't, not really. I'm just a little flustered today,” the girl chuckled.

Today? I'm willing to bet every day.

“Oh yeah? How come?”

“I just moved here this summer, and it's my first time living away from home. I haven't quite settled in yet, and the course work is harder than I thought it would be.”

“Sounds an awful lot like my life,” Emma laughed, keeping her voice light and gentle. Non-threatening. The girl smiled back at her.

“I'm Lizzie.”

Elizabeth Renny. She was twenty years old. She'd gone to a community college in St. Louis, where her family lived, but she'd transferred to Emma's quaint little school just that summer. She'd received some promotional emails about the college's excellent botany program, which had led her to several scholarship applications. She'd actually qualified for several, so the switch had been a no-brainer.

She was average height, but thin. Slender, even. She had large, beautiful blue eyes, and soft, dark brown hair. Even though she wasn't particularly tall, she was long limbed, giving her a lanky, coltish look. She looked young, and she acted young. Absurdly, Emma's first instincts were to protect the girl. The world would chew this one up and spit her out, first chance it got.

And I'm going to help.

“Well, I'm sure you've heard of me,” Emma decided to get the elephant in the room out of the way. Lizzie struggled to hold onto her smile.

“Yeah, something about a fight, I guess? I don't really listen to gossip.”

“Good for you. And I promise, I don't beat up everyone I sit down with,” she teased.

“That's good to know.”

“Hey, so, I figure us new people have to stick together,” she thought quick. “I haven't seen you

out and about at all. Why don't you give me your number and address, and if I hear of anything going on, we can go together.”

Perhaps a little bold, but Church wanted Emma to be friends with this girl. He had plans for this girl. Most likely nefarious ones. Emma had to become the non-threatening bridge between the two.

“That would be fun, Emma, thanks. I haven't made very many friends,” Lizzie seemed relieved as she scribbled her info down on a scrap of paper.

“It's hard in towns like this. But I have a friend or two, we can share them,” Emma assured her, tucking the piece of paper into her back pocket. “I gotta go, but it was great meeting you, Lizzie. I'll talk to you this weekend, for sure.”

“Thanks Emma.”

She waved goodbye and casually strolled back out of the cafeteria, waving at Stacey, as well. When she got to the hallway, though, Church wasn't standing there anymore. He wasn't at his car, either. She sighed and looked around.

Well, I hoped you liked the show, Church. See you at home.

But she didn't. Not that afternoon, not that evening, and not even the next morning.

He stayed gone for the whole night.

EMMA.



The problem with obsession is absence. When the object of your obsession disappears, what are you? Do you even exist?

I spent my alone time in absolute panic. Church and I had spent almost every moment of five days together – that's a lot of time for two lonely people. Practically a life time's worth of touching and learning and growing. The only times we spent apart were when he was at work, and I knew he was there. I knew where he was, I knew in theory I could go there and see him and be with him.

This, though, this not knowing bullshit ... I felt like I'd been abandoned, and like he'd taken all my oxygen with him.

I understand our relationship, or at least I thought I did. I know I'm the obsessed one. He's the crazy one. He's definitely in the power position. I'm the one who stands to lose the most if one of us just walks away. I'm the one with the addictive personality problem.

When I was around eight years old, Margo and I were on the move. We actually lived at a KOA campground for about a month – she was between

men. The school I was going to found out, I was assigned a social worker. They didn't really think the campground living was that big a deal, but they were concerned about me.

I had this thing. A Halloween decoration, a vampire prop made to float from a ceiling, that I would carry around like a doll. I'd had it for as long as I could remember. And I know, I know, lots of kids have special toys or blankies or whatever. Things they can't stand being separated from.

But I guess at eight, it was a little unusual to be so attached to something, and something so strange, at that. And I was *beyond* attached. I lost my shit whenever someone tried to take it away. The social worker locked it in her desk and I guess I had to be sedated. I screamed and hit and kicked and threw up and pissed myself.


Apparently that's not normal behavior, so they launched an even bigger investigation into my mother's parenting skills. Of course she wasn't happy about it, but no one can sell "everything is fine" better than Margo Hartley, so she dealt with it all.

When it was all over, Margo set fire to the vampire prop and made me watch while it burned. Taught me a lesson that just because you love something, that doesn't mean it's safe from harm. Doesn't mean it can't be ripped from your heart and destroyed forever. Doesn't mean the one person

you trust to take care of you won't hurt you at any chance they can get.

So yeah, I guess you could say I've always had issues with obsession and abandonment.

But this time, I have a feeling I'll be the one who ends up getting burned.



The next morning, Emma watched Church walk into the college like he did every day. She sat in the commons area, listening to Stacey ramble away, but not hearing a word she said. He didn't glance at her once, just carried his case down the hall and disappeared from view.

Did I do something wrong? He told me to talk to her, he told me to get to know her. I did what he asked.

Emma didn't have math that day, she didn't have any excuse to see him. No excuse to even be in that area of the college. She went to her civics class and then her English class. It was early afternoon, by then. Stacey invited her to go downtown and get lunch. Her new friend Lizzie asked if she wanted to study for the midterms coming up. Emma decided it was time for the girls to meet.

“Let's kill two birds with one stone – we can all work on math together while eating lunch. I'll meet you in the parking lot, I forgot something in one of my classes.”

Emma lurked outside the door to Mr. Harker's room. There was no class in session, but the teacher was in there. He and Church were bent over the desk, going over something together. After what seemed like an eternity, they finally broke apart. Mr. Harker was laughing about something, but his assistant remained straight faced as they headed out. Emma kept her back pressed up against the wall.

“See you tomorrow, Mr. Logan,” Mr. Harker was chuckling.

Church wasn't saying anything. Emma didn't speak either. He got a couple steps, then he stopped walking. Held still. Then he turned around and went back into the classroom. She followed quickly behind him, shutting and locking the door behind her.

“I was hoping this could wait until we got home,” he sighed, putting his case on the desk. She glared at him.

“Were you actually going to go home? I wasn't sure,” she snapped.

“Don't be childish, Emma. It doesn't suit you.”

“You treat me like a child, so why not?” she replied. “I get it, Church. Whatever this is between us, it's on your terms. Fine. I've accepted that. I've done everything you've ever asked me to do. I'm even going to lunch with your little girlfriend. At the very least, I'd like some respect in return.”

He barked out a laugh, and the act seemed to startle him as much as it did her.

“Respect? Explain to me what I've done to disrespect you.”

“Where were you yesterday?” she hissed, finally marching up to him. “You were gone all night! I had no clue what was going on, Jerry kept asking me about you.”

“I've probably spent more nights away from that house than I've actually spent in it. Why is it suddenly a problem?”

“Is that a joke? Uh, it's a problem now because – using your own words – *we're together now*. You can't just disappear and not let me know,” she stressed.

“I have to check in with you before I do anything?” he clarified, one annoying eyebrow arching up.

“That's not what I'm saying, and you know it. Where were you?” she demanded. Now his eyes narrowed on her.

“I don't have to explain myself to you, Emma. You just have to trust me.”

“Oh, okay, fine then. Maybe I'll go out all night. Maybe tonight. You can come home to an empty house and wonder where I am or what I'm doing or who I'm with and if -”

She let out a startled shriek when he grabbed her roughly by the arm and started propelling her

backwards. The door to the supply closet was yanked open and she was shoved inside.

“I guess when I asked if you understood me,” he was growling as he turned on the light. “You were lying when you said you did.”

“No, I -”

His hand suddenly clamped down over her mouth, his thumb hooking under her jaw to hold it shut.

“You didn't,” he spoke in a low voice, leaning down close to glare at her. She felt she was going to drown in his blue gaze “You don't get to fucking breathe unless I say so, *understood?* You don't question the things I do, *understood?* When I tell you something, you believe me, *understood?*”

Oh, she understood, alright. She hoped Church understood when she kicked his balls up into the back of his throat. Before she could pull back her leg, though, he was leaning against her. Pressing her into the wall.

“I talk to you,” he breathed. “You're practically the *only* person I talk to, the only one I let *really* hear me. The only person I spend any real time with. Why is that not enough for you? I've given you more of myself than I've ever given anyone, and it's not enough for you. This is all new for me, too, Emma. Give me time. Do as I ask, and give me time, and let it all just be enough for now.”

Well, then. She blinked back tears. She'd never really thought of it that way. Church was giving her pieces of himself. He'd said speaking cost him, and apparently she was the one collecting. He'd been gone all night, but he'd been gone plenty of nights before, he was right. He hadn't known it would upset her, and instead of explaining that to him, she'd just launched into him.

I just want to know everything about him. Every day, every minute, every breath. Is that asking so much?

When he finally moved his hand, lowering it to squeeze around her neck, she tried to vocalize her thoughts.

“You didn't come home,” she whispered. “You don't ... I understand you, Church. I do. Or I'm trying to. But ... you also have to understand *me*. I don't know how to be like this, either; everyone I've ever known has hurt me. I'm just waiting for you to hurt me, too.”

“That's silly,” he said, and his gaze dropped down to her lips. “If you know it's going to happen, why are you worrying about it?”

She'd never thought of it that way, before. Should she really be scared of the inevitable? It sounded ridiculous when put into that context. She might as well be scared of taxes, or the rain, *or death*.

“Because I can't handle it from you. Not from you.”

He sighed and for a moment, his hand squeezed tight. Cut off her link to the air in the room. She stood completely still, willing herself to pass out. She didn't.

“So what exactly do you want from me?” he finally asked. She gasped, a little surprised at his candor. A tear slipped out the corner of her eye, and she took a long time to really think about it.

“I want to know why you didn't tell me you weren't coming home. Why you didn't even think about calling.”

Now it was Church's turn to look pained.

“Honestly? I didn't think about it. For years, *forever*, I've been the only one I've needed to be concerned about – I guess I have to learn to think of you, now.”

“I guess so. Where were you?”

He took a deep breath.

“Somewhere else.”

“But that's not ...” her voice drifted off as he loomed closer. His lips brushed against hers.

“*And now* you're going to tell me everything I want to know about our new friend.”



THAT NIGHT, EMMA SAT cross-legged on Church's bed, his laptop balanced in her lap. She chewed on a strand of her hair while she scrolled through different social media sites. He was in the kitchen, getting them something to drink.

“I still don't understand,” she started speaking when he entered the room. “Why do you have your sights set on this girl? I mean, honestly Church – I don't like most people, but this chick ... she's nice. Simple. She almost seems wounded. I don't think she's had the easy life you think she's had.”

“Trust me, she has,” he grunted, walking over and handing her a tumbler. She took a large gulp of the water, then nearly spit it all out when she realized it was mostly vodka, with just a hint of mineral water.

“What makes you say that?” she coughed, wiping at her chin.

“I know.”

“But *how* do you know?”

“Haven't you figured it out yet?” he sighed, putting his own drink on a night stand. “*I know all.* Lizzie Renny was born and raised in St. Louis. She went to a private all-girls Catholic school until she was sixteen. Then she switched to a public high school. After graduation, she attended St. Louis Community College. This last summer, she moved into student housing here, and has been attending classes at our college since it started.”

Emma was a little surprised. Church knew an awful lot about this girl. Why did he need her to pretend to be her friend, then?

What the fuck is it about this girl? That's the real question.

“Oookay,” she drawled out, and she took a healthy swig of her drink. “Yeah, I pretty much learned all that at our little lunch date today. I also found out she's had somewhat of a sheltered upbringing – thanks Catholic school – and a strict mother. Living in the dorms here is the first time she's ever lived on her own. She's also scared of her own shadow. I don't get it. What exactly is it you want to do with her?”

There was a long pause. He was standing at the side of his bed, staring at the wall. He disappeared sometimes, off into his own thoughts, to a place she couldn't reach. After about thirty seconds, he blinked to attention, glanced at her, then picked up his drink.

“You really don't get it,” he agreed. “I grew up with a woman who thought beating me was the best form of education. This girl ... she had everything. *Everything*. She's pretty and she's happy and she's loved. Are you loved, Emma? Has anyone *ever* loved you?”

She shrunk back into the pillows, as if she'd been struck. She frowned down into her glass.

“No,” she whispered.

“Exactly. She's been given love her whole life, and she takes it for granted. Loved and adored, and she whines and she whimpers. Can you imagine the kind of person you'd be if someone had just loved you while you were growing up? You're goddamn amazing right now – you'd be fucking unstoppable if you'd just been loved. And she pisses on that opportunity. Cries over it. *Fuck her*. She doesn't deserve it. So I'm going to take it away.”

Wow. Church had a lot more hang ups than he let on. Emma finished her drink, then leaned over to put her glass on the floor.

“So because you got fucked out of a proper childhood, poor little Lizzie gets to pay the price.”

“Someone has to – why not her?”

“Doesn't seem fair.”

“*Life* doesn't seem fair, Emma. Why did she get parents who loved her? Why was I born with a superior intellect and inferior empathy? Why were you stuck with a mother who hated you and men who ... well, I guess we haven't covered that yet, have we?”

Emma sat upright again.

“Okay, so you got screwed while Lizzie got blessed, fine. What exactly is it you want to do to her? I'm somewhat of an expert at ruining lives – Margo has done it enough to me. Wanna make it so she can never rent an apartment? Wanna get her kicked out the dorms? Kicked out of school? Out of

town?" she started babbling. Church smirked and folded his arms across his chest. He wasn't buying it.

"I already know what I want to do to her. What I want to know right now is what happened to *you*."

Noooooo, that was not okay. Emma pulled her lips between her teeth and bit down. She wanted to know everything about him, but she wasn't quite ready to share all of herself.

Church was simple, really. Easy. A quasi-sociopath who wanted to hurt people. A lone wolf who for whatever reason saw fit to grace her with his attention.

But Emma was difficult. She was truly fucked up. Truly broken. And most of the time, when simple met difficult, it didn't end well.

Yet he was staring at her in that way she already knew all too well. "No" would not be an acceptable answer. She looked away from him.

"Am I allowed to smoke while we talk?"

"No."

"You'll have to deal with me taking smoke breaks, then."

He sighed and crawled onto the bed next to her.

"Hold off for as long as you can," he suggested.

"Now. Tell me all your dirty secrets, Emma Hartley."

She took a deep breath.

"My mother used to tell me I was ugly."

“Everyone is entitled to their opinion.”

“She said I looked just like my dad,” Emma kept going. “But she said it like it was an insult. He wasn't that ugly. I mean, she did fuck him, after all.”

“You look nothing like your mother.”

“No, I don't.”

“So you must take mostly after your father.”

“I do.”

“And you're exceptionally good looking,” Church continued his break down. “So he must have been attractive, as well.”

“Exceptionally?” she asked, grinning at him.

“Sometimes,” he amended his statement.

“Mostly when you're not talking.”

“You're the one who wanted to know all this,” she pointed out. Before she could continue on with her story, though, they were interrupted.

“Awww, isn't this nice?”

They both looked up to see Jerry tapping on the door. Emma stared at him. She wasn't wearing any pants and was sitting cross-legged on Church's bed. She hadn't realized Jerry was even home.

Jerry was easy to forget.

“Yes,” a voice grumbled from the darkness, and Margo appeared at his side. “It's so ... *nice*.”

She glared into the room. Emma grinned back at her.

“You're looking particularly lovely this evening, Mother. Big plans?”

“We're going into the city,” Jerry answered.

“It's so good to see you two helping each other. I think this is a really good thing, kids. Paul can help you with your grades, Emma, and maybe in return, you can introduce him to some of your girl friends.”

HA HA HA dee HA HA.

“Maybe, Jerry. Maybe.”

When their parents finally walked away, Emma quickly grabbed her jeans off the floor. She started clawing at her pockets, but Church pulled the material out of her hands. He wrestled her cigarette case free and tossed the denim back onto the floor. Then he held her cancer sticks hostage in his hands.

“I hate to be rude,” she spoke in a low voice.

“But I think your father might be the stupidest men I've ever met.”

“Jerry'll surprise you.”

“He wants me to introduce you to my 'girl friends', you caught that part, right?”

“Well, I am a catch, and he is my father.”

“Church ... we fuck on a regular basis. How could he not know that?”

“Because I only fuck you when he's not home or not awake or when I'm sure you won't make any sounds. Stop trying to get out of this – finish your story.”

Emma groaned and raked her fingers through her hair. When the front door slammed shut, she finally started speaking again.

“I don't really remember my father very clearly. He would be nice to me sometimes, then hit me other times. Then he started hitting Margo, which I guess was crossing the line. She left him in the middle of the night. We've never spoken to him since. That's pretty much it.”

“Like hell that's it. How did he hit you? What all exactly did he do?”

“I don't want to talk about all that.”

“Pity, because I do.”

She struggled to breathe. She knew he wanted to hear all this, was happy he wanted to know more about her, but that didn't make it any less hard for her. Church was like a computer. Things went in, he collected data, and he could read it all, interpret it. But he didn't necessarily understand all of it, and especially not when it involved feelings. He was very good at mimicking emotions when he wanted to – he could smile, laugh, probably even cry, on command. That didn't mean he knew why other people felt the need to do those things. She was scared he wouldn't understand her. Scared he would realize she was even crazier than he already thought.

“I'll tell you all about it when you start reminiscing about mommy dearest beating you with

a wooden spoon,” she snapped.

Silence. Then a creak. A shift. He looked down at her.

“It wasn't a wooden spoon,” he finally said. “It was a cutting board.”

Hmmm, now there was an interesting twist. Emma couldn't decide whether or not she was impressed. What kind of cutting board were they talking about? Like one of those decorative ones you serve cheese on? Or the big mother fucker you pull out on Thanksgiving? She supposed neither was good.

Still, cutting board or no, she was pretty sure she'd had a worse childhood.

“Sounds like a real charmer, your mom,” she sighed, glancing around. Looking at her hands. She wished she'd painted her nails. Her toes were midnight blue, he'd painted them again the night before; he never offered to do her hands.

“Yeah. It worked, though.”

That statement surprised her. Was he endorsing his own abuse? She looked back at him.

“What do you mean?”

“I was fucked up before she started hitting me,” Church said, staring up at the ceiling. “Sometimes I wonder what I'd be like now, if she'd never done it. How many people would I have hurt? The louder I'd scream, the harder she'd hit. When I learned to be silent, the beatings stopped.”

“She taught you to hide it,” Emma whispered, understanding dawning.

“She taught me to *bury* it. Bury everything. Because if one thing gets loose, then who knows what's next, and suddenly I'm burying co-eds instead of my thoughts and emotions.”

She frowned, mulling over his statement. There was something wrong with it.

“But ... you talk, now,” she pointed out. “You smile with me. You've even laughed once or twice. You touch me.”

His hand reached out to her and a finger traced down the side of her leg. It was cool in his room, the heater wasn't working very well. Her skin was a little cold and clammy.

“I want to touch you right now,” he whispered.

“You can.”

“I know.”

She thought he was going to say more, for a moment. The way he stared at her leg. At her breasts. That look was back in his eyes, like he was really seeing her. Like he was ... *appreciating* her. Then his hand fell away and he turned his gaze elsewhere.

“You've fucked things up. Kind of ruined them,” he sighed. “That's why I made sure you wouldn't get kicked out of school – so I can be close to you as much as possible. You hold all the

bad parts of me now. When you're out there just walking around, they're out there with you, too.”

Wow. She hadn't realized that. All his bad parts? What a gift.

“Now,” he kept talking. “Back to you. Make me understand you, Emma. Why are you the way you are? What did Daddy do to you?”

“What if ...” her voice trailed off.

“What if what? Are you afraid?”

She nodded. “If you understand me, you might get bored with me. Then you won't want to be with me anymore.”

“What if I promise you that won't happen?”

Church didn't lie. At least not to her. She nodded again.

“Okay.”

He leaned over her and cupped her face in his hands. Ah, she loved these kisses from him. She loved anything she could get, really, but these were the best. So gentle, allowing her a glimpse of the heart he pretended didn't exist. She was seeing more and more of it. Soft lips pressed against her own, with the tiniest hint of bite behind them.

“I promise if I ever get bored with you, you will never, ever know it,” he whispered against her mouth. It was the best she was going to get from him, she knew, so she took it.

“My father used to hit me,” she whispered, lifting her eyes to meet his baby blues. He kept his

hands on her face and held her stare. “First just a light slap here and there. Then he back handed me. After that, it was anything. He'd beat me up for any reason. For no reason. Sometimes, he'd just hit me. Other times, he'd get me on the ground and kick me. One time he used his belt. Another time his shoe.”

“And which was your favorite?” Church asked in a breathy voice. She could practically hear his excitement.

How does he know I had a favorite? How does he know me so well?

“His hands. When he used his hands,” she replied.

“When did you know you liked it?”

Emma chewed on her bottom lip, desperately wanting to change the subject. To hide away. But she couldn't move, and he wasn't letting her go, and she was already so far gone with him, she didn't have a choice.

“The others,” she managed to cough out. “Husband number two. Then a boyfriend. They would ... touch me.”

“And you didn't like that.”

“No, I did not.”

“But you liked the hitting,” Church answered for her. She nodded. “Why one and not the other?”

She couldn't take it anymore. His stare was always so unnerving, even after all the time they'd

spent together. It was like she was naked, but not in a good way. He stripped down her soul to its ugliest parts, then made it dance for him. She finally looked away.

“When someone ...” she struggled to find the right words. “When you fuck someone just to fuck, it's all about you. Not them.”

“Of course.”

“You want to get off, you want to come. You're only thinking of yourself,” she stressed. “So when those other guys would touch me or fuck me or make me touch them, they were doing it to feel good. To feel pleasure. *To come*. I was just something that was there to help them feel good, just a vessel. If we'd had a dog, they probably would've fucked it, too. I didn't like that, I'm not some fucking dog. Not some fucking animal.”

“But the beatings,” he said, and she could see his chest rapidly rising and falling.

“When my father hit me,” she whispered. “It was because he wanted to hurt me. He was only thinking about me. He was completely focused on me. It was like nothing else existed but us. For those moments, he was the center of my universe.” She thought back on what Church had said about fear, and she suddenly understood why they got along so well. “He was my everything. He was *my god*.”

Emma had never told anyone that, not any of her therapists or social workers. She knew how awful it was to think that way, knew how bad it sounded. She was fucked up, *clearly*. But she was functioning, and up until she'd found Church, she'd needed to keep on functioning.

Now that she had him, though, she didn't have to worry about functioning anymore. She probably didn't have to worry about her further descent into madness, either. If she held all his bad parts, well then, she would give him all of hers. He could take them and play with them and dissect them and put them back together any way he wanted, because they belonged to him now. He could just think for her, and she wouldn't have to worry about anything ever again.

“Jesus,” he breathed, and his forehead fell to hers. “It's like I invented you. Where have you been all my life?”

“In the deepest parts of hell, waiting for you.”

“Thank you, Emma. Thank you for being perfect.”

She squeezed her eyes shut tight and tried not to cry. This was all wrong. Logical Emma knew it and was kicking and screaming. But all Logical Emma had ever done for her was keep her locked in shitty situations. Dark Emma had been the one to make the best of those shitty situations, had been the one to learn how to survive – and even thrive –

in them. So *fuck* Logical Emma. Dark Emma deserved this moment.

A single tear slid down her cheek.

“Please,” she whispered. “Please love me back.”

Silence. Then she felt him move. Pull away from her.

“No,” he responded to her in a loud voice. “But I can give you the next best thing.”

Emma opened her eyes to find him lighting a cigarette. She was a little stunned for a moment, watching him inhale deeply, then breathe out a huge cloud of smoke. He dropped his free hand onto her bare thigh, rubbing it up and down.

“What's the next best thing?” she finally asked him.

“I will be the brightest sun your little universe ever saw.”

The hand on her thigh suddenly clamped down, holding her leg immobile. With his other hand, he ground the tip of the burning cigarette into her soft flesh.

Emma let out a shriek and jerked forward involuntarily. It took everything she had to stop herself from yanking away from him. She bit down on her bottom lip so hard, she tasted blood, and she gripped onto his wrist, digging her fingernails into his skin.

When he finally lifted the cigarette away, she was sweating and shaking. Still, though, she didn't pull away. She sagged back against the headboard and tried to catch her breath while Church pulled her leg out, stretching it awkwardly across his lap.

“I knew it,” he breathed. “The cigarettes. I fucking knew it.”

“I always wondered,” she panted, shakily pulling her fingers through her hair. “You never said anything, but you must have seen them. I wondered what you thought.”

Marching down the inside of her right thigh, in an almost perfect line, were eight circular burn marks. Well, nine, now. The original eight were all healed, just puckered pink circles. She hadn't burned herself in over two years, so the new one really stood out, very red and angry against her creamy skin.

She'd started right after her fifteenth birthday. She'd gotten into an epic fight with Margo's latest boyfriend. He used to come into her room late at night and would try to get his hands down her pants. On one particular night, she'd decided she'd had enough, and she'd ground her cigarette out on his eye lid.

He'd hit her so hard, she'd needed to have her jaw wired shut.

He dumped Margo, which had just made life all that much worse. Emma had locked herself in her

room, but that hadn't stopped her mother from screaming through the door at her. A lit cigarette had worked to distract the boyfriend, why couldn't it work the same way in a different, yet equally annoying, situation? So she'd lit up a fresh one, then immediately pressed it into her thigh, and it had been like magic. Pain blossomed and blocked out everything else in her world. Her whole being, shrunk down into one tiny pinpoint on her body. It had been *glorious*.

She only did it on special occasions. Truly desperate situations. Too many burns would get her too much attention – she'd been in group therapy sessions, she knew how the Cutters were treated. She wouldn't go down that road, she refused. She would have to limit herself.

So just eight. Eight little burns, hallmarking eight different supremely fucked up situations in her life.

And now the ninth, and her first given to her by someone else.

“They're beautiful,” Church sighed, his fingers smoothing over the burns, though careful not to touch the fresh one. “I had wondered if someone else had given them to you.”

“No. I would never let someone else scar me,” she told him, shaking her head. He glanced up at her.

“Except for me.”

“Except for you.”

“I won't do it again,” he promised, which made her laugh.

“I *hope* you do it again.”

“You're crazy, Emma,” he stated, which scared her. But only for a moment, because in the next, he was leaning down and kissing her burns. “And I absolutely love it.”

Close, Church. So close to actually loving me. Maybe even close enough.

CHURCH.



Fuck.
Could anything possibly be more beautiful than that night together? I knew Emma was damaged, but Jesus. She'd been broken down so she could be rebuilt *just for me*. She's literally been trained her whole life to prepare her for a man like me.

I could do anything to her. Truly anything. She loved the burn, she *adored* it. I could do it again, do it every night, and she would just continue loving it. Continue loving *me*.

I thought I knew what real power was. Making someone fear me, that was the ultimate. Love was ridiculous, love was for saps. Love was for using and abusing people.

Except now when I look at Emma, my heart beats a little faster. My eyes see a little clearer. I recognize her a little more. She's no longer a tool. I can never, ever look at her like that again.

She's something else.

Something that *terrifies* me.



Emma resisted the urge to scratch at her leg. The burn on her thigh was healing, so it was itching like crazy. Scratching would cause more pain, and inevitably an infection, so she had long since learned to leave them alone.

Didn't make it anymore bearable, though.

Things were different. At times, it was like Church was more distant than before; his silences lasted longer, he disappeared into his head more often. He stared at her in that strange way, like he hadn't been able to see her clearly a moment ago, but now she was in focus. He didn't burn her again, but his touches became more aggressive. He bruised her from holding onto her so tightly, onto her hips, her arms, her neck. Like he was scared to let her go, like she might get away.

Yet he was also still obsessed with Lizzie Benny – if anything, almost more so. Emma got the feeling he was using the other girl as a distraction of sorts. Whatever was going on in his brain, he was using Lizzie to get away from it. It upset her to see him struggling, so Emma tried to help. Tried to think of different things to do to make him smile, to make

him happy. She felt a little bad that he'd set all his evil thoughts onto such a nice girl, but ultimately, Lizzie was just a test – who she was didn't matter, she only existed for Emma to prove herself to Church.

So she kept following her around, kept learning more about her. Learned her class schedule. Learned the route she took home. Ms. Renny volunteered at an old folk's home, checked out a library book every day, and was a die-hard fan of the tv show *Friends*.

Emma also discovered that Lizzie was afraid of her own shadow. A handy bit of information. Church loved fear, so Emma decided to give him what he loved best. Frightening notes shoved under Lizzie's door. Scary texts sent from a burner phone. Pictures taken of her at night, while she was walking home from work. By the end of the week, the girl was a nervous wreck. She barely left her dorm room, except to go to her volunteer job and classes.

Emma told Church about all her accomplishments. He'd seemed a little stunned at first – she'd done all this without his direction, just in the hopes he would like it. And like it, he did, very much so.

Still. As fun as terrorizing Lizzie was, Emma started to feel ridiculous. It was tantamount to bullying, really. Beneath her, and certainly beneath

Church. She knew he must have had bigger ambitions, and she was ready for them. She wanted to get them over with, wanted to move to whatever next level was waiting for them.

Desperate times called for desperate measures. Church fucked her, whispered his perfect words, and Emma did her best to grant his darkest wishes. Rinse, repeat. Every day. Something had to give. So in between following Lizzie everywhere, Emma started following another target.

Him.

Mr. Harker, her math teacher, had a private office in the administration wing of the school. Church's key card gave him access to all the school's entrances, as well as Harker's particular rooms. She came back late one evening, just as a night class was ending. In the semi-darkness, she made her way to the office. The door was slightly ajar, and after establishing that Church was alone, she pushed her way inside.

“I'm on to you,” she said, shutting the door behind her. Church was at a computer at the back of the room. The sound of the keyboard clicking didn't stop at the sound of her voice, so she went on. “I know what you've been up to.”

That finally got his attention. Only silence came from his side of the room now.

“Did you think I wouldn't find out? I mean, I know you think I'm stupid, Church, but Jesus, I'm

not a complete fucking idiot.”

His breathing picked up. She was really getting to him.

Ha ha.

“You strike me as a blade kind of guy. I keep waiting for you to bring them out so we can play with them. But you never do. Are you saving them for *her*?”

Ah. Finally. The squeak of the chair as he got out of it.

“Let's cut the theatrics, Emma – what are you talking about?” he asked, turning to face her.

“I know what you were up to, all those nights away from home. What you didn't want me to know.”

“Oh really. Enlighten me.”

“You've been stalking her.”

It was true.

Church did work late on occasion, grading papers and writing up questions for pop quizzes, but not very often. Not enough to account for all his late nights away from home. And certainly not enough to explain away those nights when he'd disappeared entirely.

He'd asked Emma to follow Lizzie Renny, to learn everything about her she could, and Emma was an excellent student. Stupid man, had he really thought she wouldn't notice him? Because learning about Lizzie, of course, meant learning about him.

He really was obsessed with her. He watched Lizzie when he thought no one was watching him. He also kept notes on her – a nail file and a hammer had gotten Emma into a locked drawer in his desk at home. He had pictures that only could've been taken by himself, from outside her window. Outside her job.

It had hurt. God, it had hurt, at first. Fear was an aphrodisiac for Church, he lived for it. If he wanted to scare someone, if he wanted to hurt them, in his own way it was like he wanted to love them. He wanted to *feel* something with them. He'd never talked to Lizzie as far as Emma could tell, yet he wanted to share all these things with her. Wanted to be the center of her universe, even if from a distance.

It drove Emma insane. *She* wanted to be the only planet revolving around him. Who was this girl, and what right did she have to captivate Church? Why couldn't he be obsessed with Emma? What was so wrong with her?

Thinking like that, though, wouldn't get her anywhere, she knew. She couldn't exactly complain about it to anyone. Only Church would understand her, and he would laugh at her. She wouldn't handle that so well. So she had to approach him sideways. Casually. As if it didn't bother her at all.

*Even though it really, really, **really** bothers me.*

“Okay,” he finally spoke, and he sat down at Harker's desk. His portfolio case was sitting on top of it. “Okay, so I've been watching her. I told you I knew everything about her, why are you surprised?”

“I'm not surprised, I just don't get why you didn't tell me. I don't get why we're wasting your time with this juvenile bullshit. It's beneath you,” Emma said.

“And you think you know what it is I really want to do,” he spoke slowly.

“I think you want to hurt her.”

His eyes drifted shut.

“And if I did? How would that make you feel?”

Terrible. Awful. Like you love her too much and me not enough.

“I don't know,” she finally whispered. “Like I'm wasting my time, too.”

“It wouldn't scare you?”

“Nothing you do could ever scare me.”

“What if I wanted to kill her? Would *that* scare you?” he asked. She frowned.

“No. Is that what you want?”

“It's all I think about,” he breathed.

“Why her?” Emma moaned. “She's ... nobody. Why do you want to be *her* god?”

There was a long silence. Then he opened his eyes and sat upright.

“I have to start somewhere, don't I? Call it practice. You really wouldn't care if I killed her?”

Emma thought about it.

“I would care very much. But I wouldn't stop you.”

“No, you wouldn't. Would you help me?”

“I ... I don't know. If you asked me to ... maybe. I don't know.”

He stood up and reached for her. Hooked his finger into the top of her pants and pulled her close to him.

“Would you help me commit a felony, Emma?” he breathed, twisting and turning them, pushing her up against the desk, forcing her to sit on it. “Would you help me end someone's life?”

“I don't know,” she repeated herself. “How many other people have you asked to do this?”

“No one. Just you. I haven't spoken all these years because I was waiting to say these words to you.”

She closed her eyes and allowed him to push her back until she was laying flat on the desk.

“For someone who doesn't talk a lot, you seem to know how to say all the right words to me.”

“Because I know you, Emma. I know your *soul*. Just like you know mine.”

She could hear him fiddling with something, so she finally looked to the side and was surprised to

see him fumbling with his portfolio. His hand was inside it, feeling around for something.

“Do I, Church? Do I really?”

“Yes. My soul *and* my mind.”

The biggest knife she'd ever seen was pulled out of his bag and laid on the desk. She stared at it for a second, then she sat up and grabbed it. Pulled it out of its sheath and stared at the shiny blade.

“I knew it would be a knife,” she whispered.

“This is impressive.”

“No, it's not. It's cliché. It's a Bowie Knife, probably the most popular blade amongst serial killers and losers who collect knives.”

“And yet you own one.”

“I took it from Jerry.”

Now that really was interesting. She raised her eyebrows and looked at him in surprise, and in doing so, she fumbled with the knife. Just barely, and she caught it, but not before nicking herself on the thumb. She hissed and pulled back.

“What the fuck is good ol' Jerry doing with a big ass knife? And a sharp one, at that,” she grumbled, looking at the wound. Blood was already beading on the tip of her thumb.

“He hunts,” Church explained, standing between her legs and grabbing her hand. “Just like everyone else around here.”

“He hunts with a knife?” Emma asked, then her breath caught in her throat as he put her thumb into

his mouth, pressing his tongue against the cut for a moment.

Just like I did when he cut his finger. To take care of him. He's taking care of me.

“No. He hunts with a shot gun. The knife is just extra,” he replied when he finally let her go.

“So this is what you plan to use to kill her with some day?” Emma asked, holding up the blade in front of her face. It was so shiny, she could see her warped reflection in it.

“I wasn't planning anything,” he corrected her before he took the knife away.

“Sure you weren't. You just stand outside her house night after night wondering if you'll ever get to see the finale of *Friends*,” Emma snorted. He glared, then gently shoved her so she was laying down again.

“I wasn't,” he repeated, and he started pushing at the hem of her t-shirt, forcing it up under her breasts. “I don't want to kill her.”

“Bullshit.”

“I want her to *suffer*.”

Emma's breath hitched as she felt the dull edge of the knife against her stomach. She went back to staring at the ceiling.

“So why don't you make her suffer?” she whispered.

Before he could answer, footsteps interrupted them. Someone walking down the hall. The blade

flipped over and it was now the sharp edge delicately resting against her flesh. The footsteps paused outside the office door. Just for a moment. Then they were walking across the hall and a different door was groaning as it was closed.

“Because I can't ...” Church sighed, dragging the knife up her skin. One more ounce of pressure from him, one sharp breath from her, and there would be blood.

“I think you're scared,” Emma dared to call him out. The knife stopped moving.

“Excuse me?”

“You're scared. All your life, you've been hiding from who you really want to be. Who you're meant to be. I know, because I'm the same way. I'm always hiding. But now I don't think that's such a good idea. What's the point of life if we're not living it the way we're supposed to? Fuck it. Do you, Church. I won't judge you. I'll help you. I want ... I want you to be happy. I want you to be the best version of yourself.”

She'd spoken the truth. She was too wrapped up in him now to think any other way. Dark Emma was laughing in the wind, throwing her life away for this disturbing man. If he asked her to do this for him, then she would do it.

She would do anything for him.

There was a long pause. Then, suddenly, the blade was slicing. Sharp and quick, but shallow.

Hardly a cut at all. So fast, she barely had time to gasp before it was over.

“Even if that 'best version' of me is a monster?” he whispered as blood trickled across her stomach and ran down her side. She let out a shaky breath.

“*Especially* if that,” she replied.

His lips were against her skin, kissing the cut. Then they were against her mouth, kissing her lips. She tasted copper and salt and her hands were in his hair, holding him close to her.

“You would really do it, wouldn't you,” he sighed into her ear as he pulled her t-shirt up and over her head. “You would help me kill her. Just like that, so easy.”

“I would,” she promised, yanking and tugging at his shirt. “I would do anything for you.”

“I believe you. I really, really do.”

“Good.”

Emma had never in her life wanted someone as much as she wanted Church. It was a constant ache, something she felt all the time. When he wasn't touching her, wasn't inside her, she was uncomfortable. Void.

As for him, she'd never gotten a similar impression. He clearly liked fucking her, and he did it as often as convenience allowed, but up until that night, she hadn't really been able to tell either way.

Now, though, it felt different. There was a desperation in his touch, an eagerness in his kiss.

He was already breathing hard, like he couldn't catch his breath. Like his heart was speeding out of control, just like hers.

“I can't believe you let me do this,” he breathed, lowering his lips back to her wound while he pulled her jeans away from her body. Emma quickly unbuttoned her shirt, then stared down at his head as he kissed his way along her hip bone.

“Only you. I'd only ever let you do that to me,” she assured him, combing her fingers through his hair. He dragged his tongue between her legs, making her eyes roll back in her head, and then he was kissing his way back up her body.

“Only me,” he repeated, pulling his pants apart and shoving them down.

“Because I love you,” she breathed. He nodded and she felt his fingers curling around hers, squeezing her hand and guiding it to his very hard dick.

“I know you do, Emma. God, I think it's my favorite thing about you,” he whispered. “I want you to always be in love with me.”

“I will, Church. I think I always have been, from that very first moment in the hallway,” she confessed.

She would've confessed more, would've told him anything. Everything. But while he stroked her hand up and down his erection, he started kissing her again, his tongue taking up her whole mouth.

She'd come into the office expecting some sort of confrontation. Possibly a fight. She never would've guessed they'd wind up fucking on her teacher's – and his boss's – desk.

“You make me feel ...” he was whispering, then surprised her by abruptly sliding inside her. She held onto him until her hand was pressed against her own wetness. “Like maybe there's a home for me. Inside of you. When we're like this.”

Tears, immediately. Making her vision swim, spilling out the corner of her eyes. It was more than anything she'd ever expected to hear from him.

So close to love. Maybe just as good as love?

“You're the only home I've ever known,” she whispered back, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and hugging him close. “And I will do anything it takes to keep us from losing this.”

“Anything at all,” his voice was barely above a breath. She nodded and squeezed her eyes shut tightly.

“Anything.”

It was different than any other intimate moment they'd shared together. He rocked against her, causing the desk to shake and move across the floor. She moaned and ran her hands all over her body, all over his, leaving bloody hand prints behind.

And the entire time, he kept his eyes locked on hers. Watching her – *seeing her* – for every single

second they spent together.

“Oh my god, Church,” she moaned when he lifted one of her legs, bracing her calf against his shoulder, giving him even more depth.

“I want to do this again,” he was panting again, and she felt his fingers trail over the cut he'd left on her stomach.

“Okay,” she nodded and licked her lips, having trouble thinking straight. “But first ... but first ...”

“I want to do it whenever I want,” he started speaking fast as his hips picked up speed. “I want to see you *covered* in me. I want you to be *mine*.”

“*I am*,” she replied in a shout as a tremor ripped through her body. “I already am. I always was, I always will be. *I am*.”

“Christ, Em, you're gonna make me -”

“*I'm coming!*” she shrieked, pressing her hands over her face. At home she usually wore some kind of a gag, or had something shoved into her mouth, whenever they had sex. Church took precautions against their parents listening in on their dirty little secret.

Apparently here, he didn't care.

“You're so *perfect*,” he hissed, and when he drove into her for the last time, she swore she could feel him exploding inside her. Coming so hard, he groaned and dropped his head to her chest, dragging his sharp teeth across her breasts.

“Perfect. You're perfect. So perfect. We're perfect,” Emma was gasping for air as electric currents from her orgasm continued racing through her nerve endings.

“We are,” he agreed.

Her tremors had barely stopped when he collapsed on top of her, driving all the breath from her lungs. She didn't care. She didn't have to breathe anymore. Not when life was so perfect in this moment. She should just go ahead and die right now, because surely, it wouldn't get any better.

“If I had known you'd be like this,” she managed a chuckle. “I would've visited you at work before.”

He snorted and she felt his fingers against the backs of her thighs, lightly tickling up and down.

“I wish you had.”

There was another long silence. She traced her fingers up and down his back, sliding across his sweat slicked skin. He caught his breath on top of her, his face between her breasts.

“I'm happy in these moments,” he suddenly whispered, catching her off guard. She stopped her fingers.

“You're what?”

“These moments with you. They almost feel ... happy. When I'm inside you and I know even after we separate, I'll still be inside you. I always want to be there, always inside you.”

Emma held her breath. If she'd thought he'd been candid before, she didn't know what to call this. It was beyond her wildest dreams.

If I pray very, very hard, maybe St. Church will grant my greatest wish and finally love me back.

“And you always will be,” she whispered back, hugging his head tightly to her and kissing his soft brown hair. “*Forever.*”

She'd only been trying to reassure him, but it seemed to break the moment. He went still in her arms, then slowly pushed himself upright. He stared down at her for a second. Brushed an errant lock of hair away from her face. Then he glanced around them.

“Shit,” he grumbled. “This is gonna be a bitch to clean up.”

She looked around, as well, and started laughing again. Papers were scattered all over the place, along with bloody hand prints marking the top of the wooden desk.

“Yes, but at least it was a really fun mess to make.”

He helped her up and they both put their pants back on. Church found her a first aid kit, and while she bandaged up her stomach, he started cleaning the room. The desk washed up fairly easily, but they had to throw away a large desktop calendar and several ungraded tests.

When they were done with everything, they looked at each other. A window was open to the courtyard outside, letting pale moonlight spill into the room. Red lines and fingerprints and palms marks and scratches covered both their chests, and Church had one long swipe down his right cheek. He looked wild and dangerous, like he'd just done something *bad*. It caused her to pause and blink up at him. He looked like ... himself. Like how he should always look.

She liked it. Liked seeing him stained in her. Liked seeing it all swirl down the drain later on when they showered in the gymnasium locker room.

“You were made for me, Emma,” he whispered under the roar of the shower, so softly she barely heard him.

“I think I was,” she agreed.


“Alright then. We'll plan this. You'll help me. We'll be ... partners.”

He said the word like it was foreign to him. Like it was the first time he'd ever used it.

“Yes.”

“There's no going back from something like this, Emma. You help me kill someone, you'll belong to me forever,” his voice was almost a hiss. She shuddered, then leaned into his body.

“Too late, Church. I already do.”



JUST BECAUSE THE EVENING had been going too perfectly, the universe decide to throw in a tiny monkey wrench. Church's car wouldn't start. She thought maybe he would call for a taxi, but he didn't even try. Just locked the vehicle up and started walking away. Emma skipped along next to him.

“You're quiet,” she pointed out. He glanced down at her and she laughed. “Well, quieter than normal.”

“Lots to think about. It was a heavy night,” he replied, surprising her a little. This was a man who casually talked about murdering people and then ate breakfast with his father. Then fucked her silly on top of his boss's desk.

“Are you mad I caught you?” she asked. “I'm sorry, but you told me to watch her. So I watched her. You had to know I was bound to catch sight of you.”

“No, I'm not mad at you, Emma.”

Then he did the most shocking thing she'd ever witnessed from him.

He reached out and grabbed her hand. Gently squeezed it, then held on to it.

“What's going on?” she whispered, starting to shiver. It was freezing out, but it wasn't the cold making her shake.

“Do you ever wonder ...” he started to speak, then seemed to lose himself to his thoughts. His stared off into the distance for a moment, but didn't let go of her hand. “I'm always right. Every test, every paper, every grade.”

“Yes, yes, you're a genius, we're all beneath you. I've heard this speech,” she teased him.

“You're wrong a lot of the time,” his voice kept dropping lower and lower. “How does it feel? When you do something, and then later realize it wasn't the right thing to do?”

Emma almost laughed, but then she realized he was serious. He was actually asking her opinion about something he was struggling with; her *honest* opinion. She was touched.

“I guess I think about it,” she answered. “Like how exactly was I wrong? Was it because I wasn't paying attention? Or was it just happenstance? Was anyone else affected by whatever I got wrong?”

“Any of it. All of it,” his words were clipped. She frowned.

“I don't know. I mean, I feel bad, but sometimes shit happens, so I don't let it get me down too much. I try to learn from it. Where did I go wrong, and how can I keep it from happening again. That's the best anyone can do when they're wrong about something – just try not to be wrong again, I guess.”

Silence again for a long moment. She shivered once more and glanced at her watch. They were

about three miles from home. It was going to be a long walk.

“Thank you, Emma. For talking to me.”

She looked up at him, and was surprised to find him staring down at her. The air was cold and crisp, making his pale skin look almost luminescent.

He is so beautiful.

“Of course, always. So what is it you think you're wrong about?” she asked.

He frowned and stopped walking, forcing her to stop, as well. He pulled her around so she was standing in front of him, then raised his free hand. His finger traced down the side of her face, and by the time it reached her chin, snow began to flutter down all around them.

“What if I'm wrong about you?”

Emma was pretty sure her heart stopped beating.

“No, no, no,” she spoke fast. “You're not wrong, Church. *You're not*. We're perfect for each other, you got that right. You're perfect for me, I know it, and I know I can be perfect for you, if you'll just -”

He silenced her with a kiss. A soft one. Gentle. Completely unlike him.

“You are perfect for me,” he whispered. “I promise. I'm just babbling. Don't worry about it, okay?”

She nodded, but she was lying. It wasn't okay.

And she was worried.

CHURCH.



W*rong.*

As an adjective - “*Not correct or true.*”

As an adverb - “*in an unsuitable or undesirable manner or direction.*”

Of course I've been wrong before; it would be impossible to get through life without being wrong at least once in a while.

It's just that usually, I have everything planned so carefully. Everything I do is a little house of cards, one little piece stacked perfectly on the next. It's hard work, but it can be done, with enough time and concentration and patience.

The problem, I'm discovering, is what if you've been stacking them all wrong?

What if you think you want something. You've wanted it your whole life, wanted it more than anything. And it's right in front of you, so close you could touch it.

But suddenly now, getting it means losing something else. Something new and scary and wonderful.

Something you're not sure you can live without.
If it all went wrong ...

Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I just haven't thought of everything from every angle. Maybe there's a way to get what I want, and to keep her. Maybe if I can just get through this, I won't want her anymore.

Though I don't believe that.

Emma's got me all figured out. I do know all the right words to say to her.

I guess I just didn't realize that somewhere along the way, they started becoming the right words for me, too.



“Emma?”

At the sound of her name, Emma lifted her head. She was sitting cross-legged on the pull out couch in the office. She had a textbook opened on her lap and she quickly shut it. It wasn't one from any of her current classes.

“What do you want?” she snapped as her mother wandered into the room.

“Can't I just check on my only daughter?” Margo sighed. “I barely ever see you anymore.”

“I thought that would make you happy.”

“It would, if I didn't see you *at all*.”

“I'll love these little pep talks, *Mom*,” she said.

“Look, we don't like each other,” Margo got to the point. “Never really have, and probably never really will.”

“Why are you coming in here to state the obvious to me?” Emma asked, glancing around. Margo frowned, but didn't leave. She moved and sat on the arm of the couch.

“Can I give you a little advice?”

“*No*.”

“I know you hate me and think I'm the worst thing on the planet, but I haven't gotten as far as I have in life by being stupid. I'm smart about some things, and one of those things are men. Whatever you're doing with Church, whatever is going on between you, *stop it.*”

Emma groaned and rolled her eyes.

“I know you don't like it, but don't worry, I'm not planning on breaking up your happy home. Church and I are just -”

“That's not what I'm worried about,” Margo snapped. “I'm worried because this boy is going to use you and break you and leave you without looking back, and I don't think you can handle something like that.”

Emma blinked up at her mom. What the fuck was going on with everyone? First Church gets all emotional on her the night before, now this!? She cleared her throat and moved to sit on the edge of the mattress.

“Why would you say that? What makes you think he's going to do those things?” she asked. Margo sighed again and rubbed her fingers against her forehead.

“Because as much as you hate to admit it, we're more alike than you think. I know what's in that stupid brain of yours, and I know how you get around boys. That's why ... that's why I left your daddy.”

Emma went completely still.

“Bullshit. You left Dad because he started beating you.”

“No, I left because you were becoming obsessed with him. It was ... unhealthy. Sick. I had to stop it. That's how you are, Emma. How you've always been. Some people get addicted to alcohol or drugs, you've always had issues with people. That's why it's so easy to take advantage of you. Church, he's a very smart man, he's figured that out. Don't be an idiot,” Margo urged.

Emma was so angry, she felt herself starting to vibrate with the tension from it.

“Is this real life?” she hissed. “I was *sick*? I was *unhealthy*? Because I loved my dad? Yeah, that's fucked up, and he was fucked up, but *I* was the sick one!? I was a little girl! I didn't know any better, and you allowed it to happen! And what about all the other men? Huh? Whose fault was that?”

“Shhh!” Margo hissed, waving her hands in the air. “Watch your mouth, Jerry is in the living room!”

“Do you think I give a shit?” Emma climbed to her feet and loomed over her mother. “You allowed grown men to touch me and fuck me and beat me, and you have the audacity to sit here and tell me *I'm sick*? Well, mother dear, if I'm sick, it's because I caught this disease *from you!*”

She was really yelling now. Margo stood up, and normally that would mean she was looking for a fight, but this time seemed different. Maybe it was because Emma was more unhinged than normal now. Margo actually looked scared.

“Emma! Stop!” she begged. “I'm just trying to help!”

“You want to help me? Then stay out of my goddamn way,” Emma swore. “Don't talk to me. Don't even *think* about me. If you ever talk about Church and me again, I swear to god, I'll ... I'll ... *I'll kill you.*”

She was breathing heavy, almost panting. Margo had turned pale.

And there, standing in the doorway behind them, was Church. Watching both of them with a bored expression on his face.

“I just ...” Margo glanced over her shoulder and then her gaze bounced between the two of them. “I wanted to help. She's my only daughter, Church. Please don't -”

He abruptly grabbed her by the arm, startling a shriek out of her. He yanked her into the hallway while at the same time stepping fully into the room. By the time Margo turned to face them, he was slamming the door in her face.

“God, I hate her,” Emma really was panting now. “I hate her so much. Can you believe that?”

“Yes,” he responded, cupping his hands around her neck. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah. Jesus, I really meant it, Church. I'm gonna fucking kill her some day,” she breathed. He frowned, then smoothed her hair away from her face.

“Okay,” he finally said. “But me first. We take care of Lizzie. Then I'll help you with your mom.”

“Is this real life?” Emma laughed, staring up at him. “We just kill everyone who bothers us? Are you gonna wake me up tomorrow and tell me this has all been a joke?”

He stared at her for so long, she almost wondered if she was right. Then a shadow fell over his eyes, like he was trying to block out the moment, and he smirked at her.

“No, I don't think that'll be happening,” he chuckled, taking a step back.

“Pity. I've been following this chick so much, I almost like her.”

“Seriously?” he asked, quirking up an eyebrow.

“She's ... nice, Church. She never does anything to anybody. I think she had a really sheltered upbringing. She mentions her mom a lot, I think the woman kinda smothers her,” Emma explained.

He was suddenly frowning again. Almost grimacing. He was annoyed.

“Are you saying you can't do this?” he snapped. “Because she's *nice*? Because she had the

upbringing you and I were denied? Tell me now if you can't do this, I don't want to waste my time.”

“Jesus, calm down, I didn't say I wouldn't do it. I told you I'd do anything you ask, and I will. I'm just saying I think there are more deserving people out there,” she tried to explain. He narrowed his gaze.

“And I think you shouldn't talk about things you don't know anything about. You need to think about whether or not this is something you can do – not everyone was meant for greatness, Emma.”

Greatness. That special word.

“You think murdering someone equals greatness?”

“Do I think having power over life and death is equal to greatness? Yes. Yes, I do.”

Okay, that was a stupid question.

“Well, yeah, I get that. I guess I just don't understand why -”

“Killing the bad guy is easy,” Church sneered. “The guy coming at you with the gun, the bad man who's hurting other people, that's the *easy* way out. *Anyone* can do that.

“But does a hurricane ask for a background check on all the people it kills? Does a tornado? Does an *earthquake*? No, because they're forces of nature. *They don't have to*. So you need to decide how you want to live life, Emma. You can either

take the easy way out, or you can be *a force of nature.*”

Emma stared at him. God, it was really perfect. A force of nature, that's exactly what Church was. Just swooping into her life and destroying everything and leaving a freshly wiped slate in his wake.

“I get it,” she breathed. “I really get it now. And I'm sorry.”

“Good. You'll understand,” he assured her. “When it happens. When you do it. You'll understand everything.”

He walked out of the room, softly shutting the door behind him. Emma continued staring at the wall. He had this way of ripping every thought out of her head and leaving her empty when he walked away. The only cure was to fill herself up with more of him. Every nook, every cranny in her brain, it would be overflowing with thoughts of Church. With his wants and needs.

So she sat on the bed and crossed her legs and opened her textbook and stared at the pages. Went over every picture and diagram, committing different things to memory.

A force of nature. We will tear through this life and we will leave destruction and we will make people remember us.



“Hey, ladies!”
Emma spoke in a happy-peppy voice as she took a seat in the dining hall. It was breakfast time, but she didn't bother getting anything to eat. She just smiled at Stacey and Lizzie, who were both sitting across from her. A friendship had formed between the two of them, they actually spent quite a bit of time together.

Stacey would miss Lizzie after she was gone.

“Hey, haven't seen much of you,” Stacey commented, giving her a weird look. Emma decided to tone down her smile.

“Yeah, after the whole Marci incident, I've been keeping a low profile,” she chuckled. “Just studying and catching up.”

“Sounds boring,” her friend laughed. Emma forced out a laugh, as well, then turned her attention to her victim.

“So what've you been up to, Lizzie?” she asked casually.

“Not a lot,” she replied, not looking up from her plate.

Emma's little campaign of terror had taken its toll. Lizzie looked even thinner and more pale than normal. Her hair was stringy and lank, like it hadn't been washed in a while. And possibly thinner. Could it be falling out? Or was she pulling it out?

“She's got some stupid stalker,” Stacey said. “You know, someone sending weird pictures and texts. I told her she should just ignore it, it's probably just some idiot who's got a crush on her.”

“Yeah, I'm sure that's all it is,” Emma agreed.

“I told her she should come to a party this weekend,” Stacey started, and Emma's ears perked up. A party, huh? A big gathering of people, things would get crazy, anything could happen. Before she could get her hopes up, though, Stacey continued speaking. “But she's refusing to go.”

“Oh really?” Emma asked. “You should go! Show this dude he doesn't hold any power over you.”

“I don't know,” Lizzie sighed. “I don't feel safe outside of my room.”

“What could be safer than being in a building full of people? I heard the rugby team is gonna be at this one – you literally couldn't be safer anywhere else.”

“You think? I just ... what if *he's* there?” she whispered. Emma frowned, then leaned across the table and put her hand over the other girl's.

“Then hopefully you'll catch him and those other dudes can beat him to a pulp,” she said, and Stacey barked out a laugh.

“That really does seem like a good plan. Oh! Maybe you can like lure him there!”

Yes yes yes, let's lure him there, girls. What a fun party it will be.

“No,” Lizzie shook her head fast. “No, I won't do that.”

“Okay, okay, fine. But please, come?”

“Maybe ...”

“You haven't been to one party since you've been here. It's probably your best chance at meeting someone. Maybe even someone who knows who's doing it,” Stacey suggested. Emma nodded her head.

Yeah, right. The only other person who knows never speaks to any of you, so good luck with that theory.

“Okay,” Lizzie finally capitulated. “I mean, maybe.”

“Yes! I'm taking that as a yes,” Stacey laughed. “Want me to pick you up, too, Emma?”

“Who, me? No, I can't go,” she replied, thinking fast. She didn't want to commit to anything, not without talking to Church first. Not without establishing an alibi.

“Why not? You have to! It's Lizzie's first party here, she'll need support,” Stacey insisted. Emma

shook her head.

“Can't. I promised Margo's husband I'd let Church tutor me – it's the only reason they haven't kicked me out yet. So I get to do some family bonding time. You'll have to drink all the alcohol for me,” she said.

“That is so lame. When are you off from house arrest?” Stacey asked.

“Sometime next century? Or after midterms,” Emma chuckled. “Look, have an awesome time at the party, Lizzie, okay? When I see you on Monday, I want to hear *all* about it. Let me live vicariously through you. Promise me you'll go.”

Jesus, Emma wasn't sure whether to be ashamed or proud of herself. She so easily slipped back and forth between torturer and advocator. How easily lies spilled from her lips. It was almost more like she was a puppet. The amazing talking girl doll! She opens her mouth, and presto, Church's words spill forth! Of course he didn't need to speak – she could just do all his talking for him.

But if I do this for him, then it won't be my voice, or his, it'll just be ours. Together. All the time. Such a little price to pay.

“I'll go,” Lizzie said, with something like the ghost of a smile on her lips. “But Stacey, you have to promise to stick by my side the whole time.”

“Oh, of course, of course! This is just the thing you need, I promise. We have to pick out an outfit

for you! What do you think about ...”

While the conversation devolved into talk about clothing and makeup, Emma tuned them out. Eventually said her goodbyes and walked away from the table.

She couldn't believe how easily she'd maneuvered them into the perfect situation for her. Church hadn't been lying, Emma had really been made for him. Who else could've lured in his victim so sweetly for him?

No one else. Just me. And he'll see that, this weekend. He'll see that I'm a tornado, that I'm a tidal wave, earthquake, hurricane ... that I'm everything he could ever possibly want.



EMMA KNEW EXACTLY HOW many minutes it took to drive from Lizzie's student housing to the party. She knew the average amount of alcohol it took to get someone of Lizzie's height, weight, and age drunk.

And thanks to her new textbook, she also now knew where the choicest arteries were on the human body. Of course, the jugular was a popular one. If cut, the brachial artery could kill in just a few pumps of the heart, as well. But it was on the inside of the bicep, would be hidden from view. Hard to get to. Not flashy enough. If she was going

to help Church do this, if she was going to end a life, well then – it was going to be goddamn spectacular.

The thighs had some nice big arteries. The femoral in particular was responsible for supplying blood to the entire leg. Gruesome, gory, and inappropriate. She figured that would cover all Church's bases.

It would also be quick and relatively painless – which covered Emma's own personal bases.

When she told Church about her idea, he'd seemed pleased, but distracted. He seemed distracted a lot of the time, anymore. He'd commanded that they do this, told her the act would bind them together forever. Nothing like a felony to act in place of vows. But more and more, it felt like he was pulling back.

Was he doubting her? Paranoia began to taint every emotion, and she worked double time to prove herself to him. She was basically taking a second course in anatomy, all on her own. She cleaned and sharpened his knife, became familiar with it.

Part of her wondered if maybe he was doubting himself. She hated that thought. He was amazing, he just needed to realize it. She wouldn't allow him to be scared. She promised that when the time came, she would make sure everything was done correctly. She would do it all. He wouldn't have to

lift a hand, just stand and observe. Take in all he had wrought.

“So you've really never done this before?” she whispered into the darkness.

It was Friday, potentially less than twenty-four hours before she irrevocably committed herself to him. They didn't quite have a solid plan, but if a moment presented itself, they would take it.

Church stepped out from behind a tree. They were in the woods alongside the house where the party would take place.

“I've never murdered anyone, no,” he whispered back, folding his arms across his chest. She walked up close to him.

“I bet you've tried, though,” she said, wrapping her arms around herself and rubbing her hands up and down.

“What makes you think that?”

“Your academic suspension,” she said, smiling big. Church never spoke about what had gotten him suspended, but it was easy enough to assume. Clearly he'd gone off the rails at school before being sent home. Then meeting Emma, well, that had just derailed him completely.

Good thing we both love a crash.

“What about it?” he asked.

“You must have done something *bad*,” she said. “Jerry told me you were dean's list, on some big scholarship. They just don't send people like you

away without a good reason. Was there someone else? Was she as pretty as me?"

He took a deep breath and stared over the top of her head.

"No, Emma. There's never been anyone else for me. Just you."

"Awww, sweet words, but I think you lie," she laughed. "Was there another poor girl who caught your eye back at Columbia? Maybe one with rich parents and a privileged life? Did they find you spying on her? Stalking her?"

"Emma, I didn't -"

"Did you hurt her?" she whispered, suddenly worried. The excitement Church got from doing bad things, the rush ... she didn't want him experiencing that with anyone else. It was hard enough allowing him to share it with Lizzie.

"*I didn't do anything,*" he growled. "It ... it wasn't like that. I was burned out. My grades started slipping, I was in danger of losing my scholarship. So they told me to take a break."

Emma scowled at him.

"I don't buy that."

"Why not?"

"Because what are the chances? You just happened to get burnt out and had to take a break just a couple of weeks before you found the perfect first sacrifice? I think something happened there that caused you to come here looking for more of

the same. You can tell me, Church. I won't judge you," she assured him.

"You wanna know what happened to bring me to this moment? I took a breath, and then I ran into *you*. I was *fine* until you. You with your fucking mouth that never quits, making me feel like I can do all these things I've always wanted to do. Just you, okay? *Nothing* happened at Columbia – *you* just happened here."

He'd spit the words out quick, as if they'd been poisoning him. She felt a little strange, as well. Was he blaming Lizzie's upcoming death on Emma? Like she'd somehow goaded him into talking her into doing this? That didn't even make sense.

Yet on the other hand ... she made him feel like he could do things. Made him feel like himself. She gave him a small smile.

"Okay. I'm sorry. I believe you."

This just seemed to make him more upset.

"Whatever. Fuck this. Are we done here?" he snapped, then started walking out of the treeline on his own. She hurried to keep up.

"Hey! You're the one pushing for this!" she snapped back. "You're the one acting like this murder is a train you need to catch."

"Because," he groaned, raking his fingers through his hair. He looked distraught – an emotion she'd never seen him express before, so she couldn't tell if it was real or not. "If we don't do it now, it

won't happen, and this *has* to happen. Just ... I need you to do something else for me.”

They came to a stop beside a rental car. His own car was still sitting outside the school, for all the world like he'd forgotten it existed.

“Something else?” Emma laughed, though it sounded more like a cackle. “Sure, why not. What is it?”

“Just ... promise me you'll keep loving me,” he said, shocking her. “No matter what happens. Okay? You said you love me – that means forever.”

She blinked her eyes rapidly in surprise.

“Of course, Church. Of course. No matter what.”

“We're in this together,” he whispered, leaning down close to her.

“We are,” she assured him.

“And you love me.”

Why was he suddenly so nervous about that? Emma reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“We're in this together,” she breathed. “And I will love you no matter what happens. I will do everything in my power to do whatever it is you want, I promise. I promise you, Church.”

He sighed and his eyes fell shut.

“I don't deserve you, Emma.”

And that was the most bizarre thing he'd ever said to her.

“Maybe not,” she managed to tease him, trying to lighten up the tense, scary moment they were having. “But now you're stuck with me.”

“Jesus, I hope so. Look – are you good to walk home? I've got some stuff I've gotta take care of,” he said, pulling away from her. She gawked at him.

“*Now?* Church, I don't know if you remember, but we're supposed to be plotting and carrying out the murder of another human being. Is now really the time for you to disappear?” she asked.

“I'm not disappearing. I just need to ... talk to someone. Figure something out,” he told her. “*Do not* do anything without me.”

Emma stared at him. Was this a test? Was he testing to see if she'd really go through with it? Maybe he wanted her to act on her own, stand on her two feet. Prove her worth without him. Was that it?

“If we don't do this soon,” she spoke slowly. “We might not get to at all. Thanksgiving break is coming up, and thanks to our little campaign of terror, she may not come back. Is that a risk you're willing to take?”

Church stared off into the middle distance for a moment. Then he nodded his head.

“I know. Don't do a thing till you hear from me.”

He abruptly dropped into the driver's seat and turned on the car. Emma stepped out of the way

when he shut his door, but before she could leave, he was rolling down the window.

“Something else?” she asked, leaning down. He reached out and combed his fingers into her hair, pulling her closer to him.

“Say it one more time,” he whispered.
“Please.”

Emma smiled.

“I love you, Church Logan.”

He didn't smile.

“Sometimes ...” he started, then paused for a moment. “Sometimes, I almost believe you really do.”

Before she could question that statement, he was gone, peeling out of his spot, and she was left all alone in the cold dark.

CHURCH.



It's so easy. She'll do everything. Her fingerprints on the knife, her holding it, her covered in blood.

And because she loves me, she'll take the complete blame for it. Might even *actually* blame herself for it.

It's beautiful, my house of cards.

So why do I want to tear it down?

Emma loves me. Through everything and despite everything, she really does love me. How did that happen? And worse still, she *understands* me.

I've been alone in the dark for so long, I actually thought I was the only person who could exist within it. Then in walks Emma, with her beautiful smile hiding her jagged soul. Just destroying everything around me, taking me by surprise and sweeping me off my feet.

I'm an idiot. She doesn't need to do anything. She doesn't need to prove anything. Emma already *is* a force of nature. A goddamn earthquake, reducing me to my foundations.

And when I rebuild, I want to do it with her.

I want us to be more. Braver. Better versions of the monsters we were. She was right, bullying is beneath me. *Revenge* is beneath me. It's tainted me, made me unclean. I have to purge those thoughts, those feelings, and start over again. Start from a blank canvas.

After all, a tornado doesn't kill because the air wants revenge on the earth.

A tornado kills because it can. Because it's there. Because it exists.

Now all I have to do is put a stop to this train wreck I started.

EMMA.



I'm a crazy girl.

I've known this for a long time.

Depression. Borderline personality. Addictive personality. Probably a healthy dose of PTSD in there, too.

It's cost me friendships and relationships over the years. Some I jumped into too quickly, took them too seriously, gave them too much of myself.

Others I pushed away, wanting to avoid the mistakes of the past.

I should probably be on a whole bevy of drugs. I blame Margo. She never took me to a real psychologist, and besides, even if she ever had, she probably would've stolen the drugs and sold them for money.

I've thought about it a lot. Yes, Church holds some sort of power over me. Yes, I know he sometimes uses that power to his advantage. Manipulates me. Uses me. I'm aware of all this.

But you see, I still don't care. I'm still his missing puzzle piece. I'm still the only person he wants to talk to, still the only one who makes him feel alive. I hold all his pieces, he belongs to me.

Without me, he wouldn't really exist.

Or maybe I'm just fucking crazy, and nothing is what it seems.



Something wasn't right.

Of course, considering what she was planning on doing with her evening, Emma figured nothing should feel right.

But still. *Something* was off.

Church never came home the night before – something he hadn't done in a while. He didn't respond to text messages. She never bothered with calling him. Church wasn't exactly a phone kind of guy.

So she paced around Jerry's house, wringing her hands, wondering what she should do. His absence always left her empty, at loose ends. Church had told her not to do anything without him, but had he meant it? The hours were slipping by, should she at least go to the party? Maybe he was already there, waiting for her.

“Something wrong, dear?”

Emma stopped pacing long enough to look around. Jesus, Jerry was sitting at the fucking table. How long had he been there? He blended in so well with the all beige décor.

“Just ... a stressful week,” she responded, going back to her pacing.

“I'm sure. Want some advice, Emma?”

She glanced at him, then stopped and stared. He was watching her. Making eye contact with her.

Who is this guy, and what has he done with Jerry?

“Relax,” he said. “Paul has always been a free spirit, he comes and goes as he pleases. I learned long ago to let him do as he wants – he eventually always comes home.”

“I'm not ... Church can do what he wants,” Emma said, forgetting to use his real name with his father.

“I know how you feel about him, Emma.”

“You do?”

“Yes. You and I,” Jerry slowly pulled himself to his feet, stunning her. “We have a lot more in common than you think. We both speak his language. I saw it right away with you. You *understand* him. You have no idea what that means to me. His mother hurt him, as a child, I don't know if he's told you. I didn't know for a long time. And ever since then, he's been sort of leery of women. Doesn't let them get too close. So to see you taking care of him, watching out for him, and him allowing it? Well, I don't care what your mother says. I'm glad you two have each other. I think you were meant for each other.”

When he stopped speaking, he stopped moving, just a few feet shy of her. Emma gaped at him.

I think we've all been underestimating ol' Jerry.

“What makes you say that? That we're meant for each other?” she whispered. He shrugged and closed the distance between them.

“The way he looks at you. Speaks to you. He lives inside his head all the time. You bring all his thoughts out into the real world,” he said. She frowned.

“What if that's not a good thing? What if his thoughts are ... bad?” she asked, then immediately felt guilty. Like she was betraying Church. She tried to make up for it. “What if I'm just making everything worse? What if I'm making *him* worse?”

“Oh, Emma,” Jerry chuckled, then he moved to step past her. “My son is perfection. There is nothing you could do to him to make him less than what he is right now. You can only build him up. You're exactly what he needs in his life right now – someone to get him through this rocky patch. I'm so glad you came into our lives.”

With an awkward pat on her shoulder, he was past her and shuffling down the hallway.

She stood still for a second. Then snorted and headed down the hall, as well. For a moment there, she'd thought Jerry had known more about his son than any of them had realized. But *rocky patch?*

Really? Church had probably never known a rocky day in his life. He planned everything, he didn't allow for "rocky patches", so that was just ridiculous, what could Jerry possibly -

Emma froze in place.

Church didn't have rocky patches.

He did not have rocky patches.

Yet something rocky must have happened in order to get him put on suspension from school. A break? His grades had slipped and he'd been ordered to take *a break*? This man who'd lived his entire life by schedules and plans, suddenly *now* he couldn't keep his shit together?

I questioned it the night before. He turned the conversation around. I let it go.

Emma didn't want to let it go anymore. She wanted to know what the fuck had brought someone like Church back to his home town, back to his father's house.

She found herself in his room, rifling through his computer desk. A pointless act, she'd already been through it before, even the locked drawers. He'd laughed at her when he'd seen the broken locks, then told her she could've just asked him to open them.

He didn't lie to her. He didn't even really keep secrets, he just didn't divulge information unless she specifically asked. So he didn't care if she went through his stuff. Wouldn't care right now ... right?

Right?

She stood with her hands on her hips. If she wanted to find something out about a guy who didn't keep secrets, she probably shouldn't be looking in places where a person would hide things. Anything he had, he probably hadn't thought it was worth hiding.

His portfolio case. It was sitting on the floor next to the door. She'd never rifled through it, but she'd seen him pull papers and textbooks and other school related stuff out of it. She'd never thought much about it. Even the knife hadn't really been all that shocking. She'd barely spared the bag any thoughts.

Once she had it in her hands, she turned it over, dumping out the contents. Papers went everywhere, along with the coursebook for her math class, a set of keys, his scary knife, and a beat up copy of *The Fountainhead*. Just some light reading for ol' Church boy.

Emma found herself on her knees, sifting through the paperwork, glancing over everything before she shoved things back into the case. Most of it was a bunch of tests he'd apparently brought home to grade. Some notes on classes for next semester. Nothing very exciting.

What the fuck am I even looking for?

She didn't even know, yet still managed to find it. Folded in half, tucked in between pages 301 and

302 of the thick paperback book, there was an envelope. The fancy Columbia letterhead was on the upper left corner, and typed neatly in the center was an address in New York she didn't recognize, right beneath Church's full name – Paul E. Logan.

E ... I don't even know his middle name. Does he know mine?

The were two letters inside – one was old, dated last May, long before he'd moved home. As she read it, Emma could tell it was one letter in a long line of communication between Church and his university. She muddled through it, piecing together all the information.

Mostly, the school was thanking Church for his outstanding work, and telling him how much they were going to miss him. Asking to take a sabbatical with only one year left in his masters' program was virtually unheard of, but since he had a perfect GPA and had always been an exemplary student, they had decided to permit it. He would be welcome back to Columbia next year to finish, or even sooner should he decide to return before then.

Emma frowned and read the letter again. And again. Everyone had been wrong, Church hadn't been put on academic suspension, no one had sent him home. He'd *asked* to leave. He'd *requested* the time off. He'd sent a fake fucking letter to his own father, informing him that his son had to leave school.

*Why would he lie about his reasons for coming home? Why the fuck did he **want** come home?*

The second letter was much more recent, just a couple weeks ago. He'd gotten it right after she'd first met him. It was a confirmation letter, stating that one Paul E. Logan was re-enrolled in courses at Columbia University. The school thanked him for returning, and expressed how happy they were that he had decided to cut his gap year short. He was scheduled to start next semester, just after New Year's.

*As in barely a month away. As in he's leaving here. He's leaving **me**.*

The dates were there, in black and white. He'd requested to start taking classes again, and they'd accepted him. There were no other letters, so he still planned on going.

He still planned on leaving.

The papers fell out of her hands because they started shaking. She felt sick to her stomach. She somehow knew that if she searched the other pockets in the portfolio, she would probably find other disturbing things. A renewal on his New York apartment's lease. A one-way plane ticket. A letter to her stating that he'd had fun for a while, but now he wanted to go live his real life – the one *she* wasn't a part of.

“How could he do this!?” she hissed through clenched teeth, crumpling up the letters in her fist.

This wasn't right. They were striving for something great together. Committing the ultimate sin. They were two parts of a greater whole. He couldn't leave her. What the fuck was he thinking? That they would murder someone together, and then go their merry separate ways?

Or really, it would be YOU murdering someone – you already offered. It was YOU terrorizing her. YOU doing everything, ensuring that if anything ever got discovered, it would all point straight back to you, and Church will be long gone. Jesus, fuck, that cannot be right. Please, god, don't let me be right.

Emma jumped to her feet and raked her hands through her hair. Fuck this. He couldn't do this to her. Despite what he thought, Church was not god, and he could not giveth and taketh. Not from her, not anymore.

He had a reason for everything, she knew. She believed that. He was also clearly not infallible – she'd just figured out some of his secrets. That meant she could figure them *all* out, if she tried hard enough.

You know, those things he doesn't keep. I'm such an idiot.

Think. *Think*. It was all connected. According to one of the letters she'd read, Church had requested to take a gap year last winter. Why? Why would he do that? School was an escape for him.

Something must have happened to make him want to leave. To make him want to come home.

Okay, so why home? Church was a smart guy – why come back to this shit hole? There must have been something he wanted here. Clearly not family time with Jerry, and he hadn't even known Emma yet, so something else. Something big enough to make him want to leave school.

He wanted to kill somebody.

He'd always wanted to, but why now? Why hadn't he ever tried before?

Emma paced back and forth, fighting back tears. Of course, maybe he had tried before – he'd been lying to her about a lot of stuff, so who knew what was true anymore. Maybe she wasn't as important to him as he'd been claiming. Maybe she was nothing at all.

Emma stopped pacing.

He'd focused on Lizzie Renny so quickly. Emma had assumed that day in math class had been the first time he'd noticed her, but of course he'd been watching her for weeks before that moment. Why? What had drawn him to her in the first place? He'd claimed it was because she was pretty and came from a good family, had a good life.

But now that Emma was really thinking about it, that didn't make sense – lots of girls in town could make the same boast. Stacey even fit the mold. In fact, she was prettier than Lizzie, and

Church had already fantasized about killing her before, so why not do it to her?

Why Lizzie? Why didn't I ever think of it this way before? He knows her. He must know her from somewhere. But she doesn't know him. How does he know her?

Emma turned into a tornado after that moment. She tore Church's entire room apart. Jerry walked by and paused in the doorway at one point, but didn't say anything. Didn't try to stop her. She simply nodded her head at him and he nodded back before continuing into the living room.

Church was good, but he wasn't perfect. She could see that now. He made mistakes, just like everyone else. He'd been stupid enough to believe Emma would never question him. So much so, he'd left his case alone with her, knowing it held his secrets. So it was only a matter of time before she found something else.

It was on the shelf in his closet, tucked into the very back, in a corner. She had to stand on his nightstand to even reach. It was flat, a wooden frame around glass. A picture. Covered in what felt like years of dust.

When she pulled it out, though, she could see someone else had touched it recently. Finger marks in the dust were all around the frame, and he'd stroke three fingers down the center of the glass.

Emma studied the picture. It was a family photo. A very young Church, maybe four or five, stood in the center. He was squinting at the camera, and even though he was so little, he still had the exact same expression as he did all grown up. Boredom, with a hint of disdain. Like picture taking was so beneath him.

Jerry stood behind him, on the left side. A lot thinner, but still the same. She was pretty sure he was even wearing the exact same shirt he wore every day now – it was a lot looser on him back then, but she could just barely make out the telltale coffee stain on his pocket.

On the right side was a stranger. A slender, leggy woman. Very beautiful. For the first time, Emma wondered what it was about Jerry that attracted these women – for all her faults, Margo was good looking. And this woman in the photo, the lady who had to be his ex-wife and Church's mother, she was downright stunning. Church had obviously taken after her. She was a littler taller than Jerry, with thick dark hair curling around her shoulders. She glared at the camera like she didn't want to getting her picture taken, but even squinting didn't hide the brilliant blue of her eyes. She was gorgeous. Beyond. She was ... she was ...

She's so familiar.

Emma squeezed the picture so hard, the glass cracked under her thumbs. Yes, Church's mom

looked a lot like him, but she looked like someone else, too. That pale skin, those big beautiful eyes. If she was just a bit skinnier, and a tad more nervous looking, she would be a dead ringer for *Elizabeth Renny*.

Emma dropped the frame and walked out of the bedroom.

“Hey Jerry,” she tried to sound casual, but failed miserably. “Can I ask you something?”

He was sitting in an easy chair in the living room, reading an old copy of Reader's Digest.

“Of course,” he said, not putting down the magazine.

“What was your wife's name?”

“Excuse me?”

“Ex. Your ex wife. Church's mom. Her name?”

The magazine lowered a smidge and he glanced at her over the tops of his glasses.

“Clarice. Any special reason you want to know?” he asked. She shook her head.

“No. Clarice what?”

“Clarice Logan, of course.”

“No,” Emma resisted the urge to groan. “Her maiden name. Did she go back to it after you divorced?”

“You know, I'm not sure. We didn't keep in touch. She pretty much disappeared on us, which was probably for the best,” he sighed, then he

rubbed at his chin. "I guess it's possible she went back to it."

"What was it?"

"Renny. Clarice *Renny*."

Emma stumbled backwards until she was leaning against the wall by the front door.

Of course. God, she was stupid. Church must have thought she was so fucking stupid. They fucking looked alike. Practically twins. Same eyes, same hair, same lanky limbs. Church had gotten all the brains, and Elizabeth had gotten all the anxiety. Poor girl.

"Church is your only child, right?" she breathed. Jerry had gone back to his magazine.

"Yes. Honestly, I didn't want anymore after him. I figured perfection couldn't be achieved twice."

So Lizzie was Church's *half*-sister. Raised by the mother who'd abandoned him, given all the love and affection he'd never been privy to. His mother, the woman he hated most. She hadn't wanted a child like Church, so apparently he'd decided she didn't deserve to have any children, *at all*.

Why hadn't he told Emma, though? He'd already talked her into abandoning her own free will, stalking someone, harassing someone, *killing someone*. Did he think she wouldn't understand?

No. The less you knew, the better. The easier it would be to get you to do whatever he wanted.

Commit the crime he'd planned while he flies off to another state, leaving you alone to take any blame that may come along. So smart, Church. Get a willing disciple to do your dirty work. It's the perfect plan.

“Perfection,” she breathed, then she cleared her throat. “I have to go now, I'm late for a party.”

“Oh, is Church meeting you there?”

“I don't think so. Goodbye, Jerry.”

“Have fun, dear.”

Emma slipped out the door. She was wearing a drapery flowing skirt and a long sleeved top, not at all suitable for the cold weather. Her shoes were even worse, a cheap pair of sandals.

But she kept walking, and the tears started falling, and she kinda hoped she would freeze before she got to where she was going.

CHURCH.



I think it's grossly unfair that we can't control our emotions. Virtually everything else, it comes naturally to us. We can stave off hunger, we can keep ourselves awake against our will, we can hold our urine, all kinds of things.

Yet when it comes to feelings, they're virtually impossible to control. I never wanted to like Emma, and I sure as shit didn't plan on falling for her in any capacity. It happened to subtly, so slowly, I was already gone before I even knew it had happened. I mean, how could I have ever guessed that something like me could fall for someone?

Monsters can't love, and I'm worse than anything hiding under your bed.

But I realized something. I don't want these feelings to go away. I don't want *her* to go away.

Everything is different now. From here and out, we'll be together.

Which means I have to tell her everything.



By the time Emma reached the party, it was in full swing. She should've been there hours ago, looking for an opportune time to lure Lizzie away. Now everyone was drunk and stumbling around.

She didn't lurk around outside this time, she walked right into the house. Her teeth were chattering and her whole body was racked with shivers, but she ignored everything. She moved straight through to the kitchen, looking for her prey.

"*Emma, you came!*" Stacey squealed, running around a butcher block to hug her. "Wow, you are freezing!"

"Yeah," she managed to reply. "Where's Lizzie?"

"Oh, you should've seen her. She was so uptight when we got here, but then I finally got one drink down her, and it was like a whole different girl."

"Sounds wild."

"You have no idea. She was dancing on the coffee table," Stacey laughed. "After shot number five, though, she was looking a little green. I've got

her stashed away in one of the bedrooms, I was gonna take her home in a minute.”

“I'll just go check on her.”

“Do you want something to drink before you-”

Emma turned and walked away.

It wasn't a very big house and it was packed to the brim with college students. She elbowed and forced her way down the hall, checking every door. The very last one opened into a bedroom, it looked like a guy's room. Soccer player posters taped up on the wall, a pair of panties stretched over the top of a lampshade, beer cans and pizza boxes on the floor.

What drew her attention, though, was the bed. Lizzie was passed out on top of it, lightly snoring.

Emma stepped into the room and shut the door behind her.

When she reached the edge of the mattress, she stared down at the other girl. Took in her long, curly lashes. Her soft pink lips. She was wearing a short, somewhat shapeless, black dress, which really set off her pale skin.

She was very pretty, in that same ethereal way Church was. Emma could understand why he was so obsessed with her. A more delicate, lovely version of himself, receiving all the love and adoration from a mother who'd shunned him.

Who'd beaten him. Who'd *forgotten him*.

Unforgivable.

Killing Lizzie would teach their mother a lesson. Punish her for everything she'd ever done to Church. Would finally give him some peace. Maybe it would actually soothe the monster in his chest. Maybe he could learn how to harness it, use it, turn it on and off at will. Maybe he could become that best version of himself.

Maybe he could become greatness.

Maybe if I got rid of all that hatred he has, he would have enough room in his heart to finally love me ...

No. It was pointless. She started crying. Crying because she realized Church had never felt anything for her. All of his passion, all his pretty little words, they'd all been a lie. Every ounce of his attention and energy, it had all been on this girl. Every moment spent with Emma had been to get one step closer to killing Lizzie.

Emma was obsessed with Church.

Church was obsessed with Elizabeth.

When does it get to be my turn?

“I hate you,” she gasped, her voice barely audible over the thumping music coming from the living room. She stared down at the sleeping girl. “I hate you and I hate him but most of all ... *I hate myself.*”


She was straddling Lizzie before she even knew what she was doing, her knees on either side of the girl's stomach. She stared down at her, struggling to

breathe. It wasn't fair. She'd done everything Church had ever asked of her, *every single thing*. She *deserved* his attention. She *deserved* to be his obsession. If she could just get rid of his distractions, he could finally see her for what she really was – his other half.

Emma picked up a pillow from off the bed.

*I'm sorry, Elizabeth, but I'm willing to do **anything** to make him love me. If you'd been raised the way we had, you'd understand.*

She put the pillow over Elizabeth's face, then pressed all her weight down behind it.



Church had gone to spy on Elizabeth after leaving Emma, just like she'd guessed.

He couldn't figure it out. How could he share DNA with this person? Elizabeth Renny was like a dish rag. Barely a personality to speak of, not very smart, timid. Boring. Nothing special.

He still didn't care about her. Much like Emma, Elizabeth was just a tool. A way to get back at his mother. His mom had created Church, she'd molded him into this monster, and then she'd abandoned him. She deserved to die, but he felt death at his hands was too good for her. No, she deserved *worse*.

Once he'd discovered Elizabeth's existence, Church's entire world had virtually stopped. Most of the time, he didn't think about his mother. She'd left, she was gone, she didn't matter. But the discovery that she'd had another child, and she'd chosen that child over him, it had been too much to handle. *No one* was better than him.

Enter obsession. He learned everything he could about both of them, and as he did, the plan had begun to take shape in his mind. Lure Elizabeth

away from her mother and end her life, then ship pieces of her back home. Poetry.

And since she wasn't very bright, Elizabeth had indeed been easy to lure away. A couple well placed messages from a fake email account led her to the community college in his home town. Once he got her communicating with him, it became even easier. Her “scholarships” were entirely funded by him – some well placed and timed investments had given him a very comfortable nest egg, so it was nothing to pay for one semester of community college for her.

It wasn't like she'd be needing the full year paid for.

And then Emma. Goddamn Emma, entering from stage left. Exciting him and confusing him and fucking *ruining everything*. Because if he used her like he'd originally planned, he'd lose her. Even if they never got caught by the police, it would drive her insane, knowing she'd only been used as a tool. She was already highly unstable, she wouldn't be able to handle knowing he'd just used her for his own goals. Before, he hadn't cared.

Now, he couldn't stand the thought. Above all, even at the cost of giving up on his dream of revenge, he could not lose Emma. Not now that he recognized her as his other half.

After spying on Elizabeth, he took a drive into St. Louis. Wound his way through the suburbs till

he ended up in a less than glamorous neighborhood. It felt odd, parking his rental car at the curb and walking up the driveway. He'd been to this house dozens of times, but had never actually stepped foot on the property. No, normally, he was in the empty lot behind it, staring through binoculars.

No more of that – it was time to confront his own personal monster. Time to put old grudges to bed. Time to get his life back.

He knocked on the door.

There was a long pause and he glanced at his watch. It was dinner time, she was always home for dinner. He frowned and knocked again, almost pounding on the wood. It finally got him a response.

“I'm coming, good lord!”

That voice. It actually sent a shiver down his spine and he let his eyes fall closed. He hadn't heard it in so long. He tried to remember the last time.

“I found this under your bed. What is this drawing, Church?”

“It's a fire, Mother.”

“What's supposed to be burning in it?”

“Our house.”

*“**Our** house? Why on earth would you draw our house on fire?”*

“Because I think flames are pretty, and they destroy everything.”

“Is that what you want? You want to destroy everything?”

“No, Mother. Just you.”

“That’s it. Get my belt, Church.”

By the time the front door opened, he'd collected himself. He schooled his features back into their normal expression of boredom.

“Can I help ... you ...” his mother's voice started to drift off as she looked up at him.

“Hello,” he said simply. Her hand raised to her mouth.

“Oh my god ... *Paul*,” she gasped. He smirked, then stepped over the threshold, pushing her out of the way.

“Please, no one uses that name for me,” he said, walking past her. It felt strange to be in her living room, after all those weeks of staring at it from across the road. “Just say Church.”

“People still call you that?” she asked, slowly shutting the door.

“Why wouldn't they? It's all you ever called me,” he reminded her.

Her furniture was cheap, second-hand. She was in desperate need of new carpeting, as well as fresh paint for the walls. Things he could easily take care of for her, if he were her doting son. He turned to fully face her.

“How did you find me?” she asked. She still seemed shocked by his presence, like she'd thought

he was dead, or like maybe he'd never existed in the first place.

“As you may recall, I'm kind of smart. It wasn't hard to track you down.”

She frowned, then shook her head and gestured to her couch.

“You can sit down, if you want. Would you like a drink?”

“No, I won't be staying long.”

“Oh. So, uh, why are you here, Church? Now? After all this time?” she asked, nervously fiddling with a strand of pearls she was wearing.

This was the woman from his nightmares? This was the monster hiding in his closet? In his memories, his mother was a huge woman, always towering over him, her hand always raised, ready to strike. Like an avenging angel, or a demon sent from hell, she'd terrified him.

Now, though, he was realizing she wasn't very big at all. She bore a striking resemblance to her daughter, average height, slender, long limbed, petite bone structure. He could snap her like a toothpick. Just pick her up and squeeze.

I've been haunted by her my entire life, and she's barely more than a shadow.

He'd never really articulated his thoughts so well on the matter before; Church was angry at his mother, so he'd wanted to get back at her. For the

years of abuse, and worse, for abandoning him. For treating him like he was nothing.

It was more than that, though – he'd been *scared* of her. His whole life, he'd been battling her in his mind. It was almost humbling to admit it, that she'd held so much power over him. He'd taken great pride in being self sufficient, in having control over himself. Really, though, he'd had very little control. His fear and anger had warped and twisted into petty revenge. For years now, he'd been fueling himself on that need for revenge. He'd lied to everyone he'd ever met, he'd left school, he'd been willing to destroy multiple lives – even potentially his own, all in the name of that revenge.

Pathetic, really, when he thought about it. Especially after looking at the ghost of a woman standing in front of him.

Fear is the most powerful thing in the world, and I gave so much of it to this woman. To someone so undeserving. No more. Time to practice what I preach.

“I'm here to talk about your daughter.”

Sheer terror washed over her face, then she hardened it. Glared up at him. Some of the old fire seemed to come back into her eyes, and he saw a little of what he'd seen as a boy. But only a little.

“How do you know about her?” she hissed.

“Public records,” he waved his hand through the air. “I can't believe you let her go to school

back home.”

“Believe me, I tried to talk her out of it, but she's twenty, she can do what she wants. After I made sure you weren't living there anymore, I let her go. Clearly that was a mistake,” she said.

“Look, if it's revenge you're after, I understand. I wasn't ... I was a horrible mother to you. I didn't know how to deal with a special needs child. I was too young, too stupid. I thought I ... I thought maybe ...”

“You thought you could beat it out of me,” he finished her statement for her. She winced.

“I don't know. Maybe. It wasn't right, and it wasn't working. You scared me. So we ... I left. I'm sorry. But don't take it out on Elizabeth. She didn't ask to be born.”

“Neither did I, yet here we are.”

“Are you going to hurt her?” his mother asked. He smirked again.

“I haven't quite decided yet.”

“I swear to god, if you touch one -”

Her words ended in a squeak as he wrapped his hand around her throat. He gripped hard and pulled up, forcing her onto her toes.

“You swear to *who*?” he hissed. “And what exactly would you do to me? What *could* you do to me? I could kill you right now, and there's nothing you could do to stop it.”

Panic filled his mother's eyes and she slapped at him, hitting his arms and his chest. He didn't budge, just increased the pressure on her throat.

It was just as amazing as he'd always imagined. The fear in her eyes as she stared at him. She couldn't speak, but her lips were moving. *Please*. She was saying it, over and over again. *Begging him*. All thoughts about his upbringing or her daughter were now gone. Her sole focus was him.

It would be so easy to end it. I kill her now, Elizabeth gets to live.

He frowned and loosened his grip. No. It would destroy Emma. He'd built her entire mindset around this one act, around him. If he experienced it without her, it would almost be like cheating on her.

“*Please*,” his mother finally got enough air in her lungs to speak. “Please don't do this. I'm sorry, Church. I'm sorry for everything.”

He snarled and let her go. She fell to her knees, gasping and choking on air.

“You're not sorry for any of it, you're just sorry I found you,” he called her out. “I came here tonight to tell you that you don't scare me anymore. I won't allow you to have that kind of power over me.”

“I never ... never wanted ... to scare ...” she stammered. Before she could finish, he ground the heel of his foot into the back of her hand.

“But don't fucking push me. You convinced me I couldn't be normal without regular beatings, and then you fucking left me. Do you know what that did to me? You're lucky your daughter's not on a fucking pike outside. You meant to scare me, and you did it often. I may be a monster, mother dearest, but if I am, it's because I learned it *from you.*”

She shrieked when he finally lifted his heel off her hand. She sobbed and fell back against a wall.

“I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. Please, don't hurt me. Please, don't hurt my daughter. Please,” she cried. Over and over again, she said that word he usually loved – *please*. He rolled his eyes and headed for the door.

“Begging isn't nearly as fun when there isn't a life on the line.”



AROUND THE SAME TIME Emma was setting off from Jerry's house, nursing a wounded heart, Church was just getting back into town, and his heart was feeling pretty good.

Even when absent, his mother had been dictating his life for him. She'd told him he was a monster, so he'd believed her. Then he'd been angry at her, so he'd wanted to punish her. Wanted to take a life because of her.

Power. His constant quest for power, and this whole time, his mother had wielded it over him. He'd let her. Realizing that was almost embarrassing. Well, no more. He'd freed himself.

Church was feeling so good when he finally pulled up to the house, he almost skipped up the walk to the door. He glanced at his watch and for the first time realized how late it was. Shit, Emma was going to be pissed.

Still, it was for the best. He was going to call everything off, then he was going to confess everything to her. His plans to use her, using murder to get back at his mother, all of it. She would be upset, for sure. He'd lied to her. A lot. Trust would be an issue for a while. She'd only ever known ugliness in her life, and so far, he'd only contributed to it.

But he was going to change that. He believed in her love for him, and bizarrely enough, he was beginning to believe he could really love her back. Out loud, in real life, with actual words.

Once that was out of the way, they could work on figuring out what they wanted to be together. Exactly what kind of monster they'd like to turn into.

When Church walked into the house, Jerry was asleep in his recliner. He came to with a snort, dropping a magazine to the floor.

“Hey there, son. What've you been up to?” he asked through a yawn.

“I went to see my mother.”

Jerry's eyebrows raised, but that was the only reaction he gave.

“That must've been an interesting conversation.”

“Not really. She's not nearly as intimidating in real life as she was in my memories.”

“I'll let you in on a little secret, Church – no one ever is,” Jerry chuckled.

Church was almost to his room before he realized his father had called him by his nickname. Jerry never did that, he always called him *Paul*. Always. It made him pause and glance over his shoulder.

Maybe there's more to Jerry than I thought ... maybe he is my real father.

“Emma,” he barked out as he turned the corner into his room. “I have to tell -”

He stopped talking as he looked over the space. It looked like a cyclone had hit his bedroom. He was somewhat obsessive-compulsive, he kept everything neat and tidy, so it was a bit jarring to see it so messy.

Drawers had been completely yanked out of his dresser. The mattress had been pulled off the box spring and left to sit at an awkward angle against the floor. There were books and papers

everywhere, covering every inch of the floor. Clothing had been yanked out of the closet. His work case had been overturned and emptied.

Yet it didn't seem like simple, mindless destruction to him. If she'd wanted to destroy his shit, she would've just thrown things around. Slashed the mattress, put holes in the walls. Yet there was nothing like that, it was more like things had simply been flipped over and yanked around.

She was looking for something. Ah, clever girl. I never give her enough credit.

Church sunk down into a crouch and picked up his copy of *The Fountainhead*. He was almost halfway through with reading it. When he shook it, though, there was no sign of his makeshift bookmark. He sighed and dropped the book.

“Oh, Emma. One step ahead of me.”

Which could also mean ...

Church hurried back into the living room, yanking his car keys out of his pants as he moved.

“Where did she go?” he snapped. Jerry had fallen back asleep.

“Huh? What?” he grumbled, slowly coming awake.

“Emma. Where is she, did she talk to you?” he demanded.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jerry yawned. “She, uh, I think she had to go to a party.”

“Okay, good, thank you,” Church grumbled, and he yanked open the door. He barely made it one step before Jerry started speaking again.

“And she asked me about your mother.”

The drive to the party took forever, even though he broke every speed limit.

She couldn't have done it without me. She wouldn't have. Maybe she was going to tell Lizzie about me. Please let that be all she did.

He wished he'd asked Jerry when she'd left. She'd most likely walked, and it would've taken her about an hour to get from the house to the party. She'd probably gone through his stuff because she'd gotten tired of waiting, which meant she'd left the house late. Would he see her walking along the road? He turned on his high beams.

He didn't see her anywhere. She'd either been picked up by someone, or had gotten enough of a head start on him. He pulled up in front of the party house, parking haphazardly on the lawn. Then he hurried out of his car and into the building.

“*Chuuuuurch*,” some guy near the door bellowed. “Glad you could make it, man!”

He frowned and shoved past him. Emma was a drinker. She'd probably be an alcoholic if she weren't so broke. So he went straight for the booze station in the kitchen. There was no Emma, but Stacey was in there, mixing up shots.

“Hey, you *are* here! I was surprised when you didn't come in with Emma at first,” she said.

In his own weird way, Church had always liked Stacey. She always talked to him like he was normal. Like it was no big deal that he didn't respond.

So he hoped she would continue acting that way.

“Where is she?” he asked.

Everyone in the kitchen completely froze. Stacey's jaw was hanging open, and he belatedly realized she'd probably never heard his voice before – growing up, they hadn't shared any classes where she might have overheard him talking to a teacher, and that would've been her only opportunity.

“Holy shit, he speaks!” someone gasped. He glared around the room.

“Stacey,” he growled, and she shut her mouth. “Where is Emma?”

“Uh, she, uh ...” she stuttered for a moment. “She just got here a minute or two ago, she went to check on of Lizzie, in one of the bedrooms. Is, uh, everything okay?”

He didn't bother responding, just immediately cut through the living room and made his way towards a long hall.

The first door he tried led to a bathroom full of people smoking joints. The second door was a

bedroom, which contained a couple having some very vigorous sex.

When he got to the third and final door, he thought it was more of the same. A woman riding some guy, her hands on his chest. He almost shut the door. But something stopped him, and he took a step closer. It wasn't a guy on the bed, it was another girl. And the girl on top didn't have her hands on his chest – she was holding them against a pillow. A pillow that was over the other girl's face.

“*Christ,*” he grumbled, and he slammed the bedroom door shut behind him. “Emma, stop.”

She didn't seem to hear him, though. She was struggling with her task, fighting to keep the pillow over Lizzie while she bucked and moved, fighting for oxygen. He hurried up to their side.

“Did you hear me? I said stop, this is over, we're not doing anything,” he stated. She didn't even look at him.

“I can do this,” she whispered. “I can be anything you want. I can do anything you want.”

She sounded ... strange. Like her voice was coming from far away. Like her mind was somewhere else entirely. He grabbed her arm and yanked her upright.

“Then do what I say right now and fucking stop it!” he yelled. She shrieked and pulled at his grip.

“No! It doesn't matter anyway, right?” she shouted right back at him. “You're leaving me

anyway! So this is my parting gift to you!”

She was crying, he realized. Sobbing. He was a little shocked, and in that moment, she leaned forward again, smothering Lizzie. He looked down and saw that the other girl had stopped moving. Stopped struggling.

Fuck, that wasn't good. There were over a hundred people on the other side of that door, neither of them were going to walk away from this if Lizzie died.

“I said stop!” he yelled, and he grabbed Emma around the waist and picked her up, tossing her to the floor. She crashed into a dresser, banging her shoulder against it.

“What are you doing?” she gasped.

He ignored her, throwing the pillow to the ground and leaning over Lizzie. Her nose was bleeding and her lips were a little blue, but she was coughing and breathing, her chest rising and falling rhythmically. She was alive, she would be fine, and best of all – she was unconscious.

“What the fuck were you thinking!?” he hissed, whirling around just as Emma climbed to her feet.

“I was thinking exactly what you wanted me to think!” she shrieked. “That's all I ever do! I was doing what you told me to do!”

“Bullshit!” he pointed his finger in her face. “I told you this was something we were going to do together, I told you I -”

She burst out laughing, stunning him once again.

“*That's* bullshit, and now we both know it. You *wanted me* to do this on my own. You wanted my fingerprints all over this. You wanted someone else to commit your perfect crime. I was only trying to do what you wanted,” her voice fell into a whisper. “That's all I want. To do whatever you want. You want me to kill someone? Want me to go to jail for you? Want me to let you go? If it makes you happy, Church, fine. Then fine. If it'll make you love me, I'll do it. I'll do anything.”

Church wasn't sure what the pain was he was feeling. Like sick and feverish and his chest hurt. Were these feelings? Jesus. Normal human beings could keep them.

“That's *not* what I want,” he slashed his arm through the air.

“But you got those -”

“I don't give a fuck!” he roared. “Are you fucking listening to me? I'm telling you right now, I don't want *any of this!*”

Emma shrank away from him. At the same time, the bedroom door slowly opened. Stacey peeked her head in, and beyond her, he could hear that the party had gone quiet. Apparently, he and Emma were putting on quite the show.

“Is everything alright?” she asked, but they both ignored her.


“You don't mean that,” Emma whispered, staring up at Church.

He couldn't control his emotions. He wasn't used to them. They were all over the place, causing his heart to beat fast and his head to hurt. He just wanted it to stop. He wanted Stacey to be gone and to not be there and for everything to just be dark and quiet. So he squashed the panic in his chest and he reverted back to his old stand by. Manipulation.

“I wanted to do this together,” he said. “And you tried to do it alone. My moment, my fantasy, *my life*, and you were going to do it without me. And then when I told you to stop, you wouldn't listen. *You're not listening to me*. I can't handle this, Emma. I don't want this anymore. I don't want to be like this anymore.”

He hadn't even known he felt that way, yet there were the words, pouring out of his mouth. He didn't want to be angry. He didn't want to hate his mother. He didn't want to lurk in the shadows.

He wanted this silly game to all be over.



Emma's vision went blurry with tears and she could only watch as Church stormed out of the room. Stacey stared after him for a moment, then she rushed across the space.

“What the hell was all that about?” she asked, wrapping an arm around Emma's shoulders.

“I think ... I think ...” Emma was trying to remember how to breathe.

“I think you need to go home and go to bed,” Stacey urged. “Talk to him tomorrow, when you've both calmed down.”

“No. He said it was over. It's over. He ended it. I can't ...” Emma couldn't even finish the thought.

“It's late, things are heated. C'mon, I'll give you a ride home.”

Stacey got some guys to help carry Lizzie to the car. She was snoring again, and no one seemed too worried about her bloody nose. She'd been very drunk, who knew what else she'd gotten up to – all sorts of drugs were floating around the party. Stacey had simply cleaned her face, then instructed the guys to lay Lizzie in her back seat.

Emma sat quietly in the car the whole time. A night that should've ended in murder, and yet she felt like the one who'd been stabbed. She pressed her forehead against the window and stared at the sidewalk as it rushed past.

“Are you sure you're gonna be okay?” Stacey asked when they finally came to a stop.

“No. Nothing will ever be okay.”

“Stop. Please, take a warm shower, and go to bed. I'd come in, but I gotta take Lizzie home, she's a wreck.”

“Good night, Stacey. Thank you for ... everything.”

“Of course, Emma. We're friends, that's what we -”

Emma shut the car door on her and slowly walked into the house.

The living room was dark. There were no cars in the driveway – Margo had been attending some function in St. Louis, Jerry must have gone to get her. And of course Church wasn't home. Why would he be home? He didn't want anything to do with Emma anymore. It was over. *They* were over.

Thinking it and hearing it had been two completely different things. Despite the lying, despite the letters from Columbia, a tiny part of Emma had hoped she could still win him over. Could still convince him to love her.

But it was impossible. He'd told her in the beginning he'd never love her. He didn't know how. And apparently, she was incapable of teaching him.

She wandered back to his room and started tidying up. Church hated a mess, and she couldn't deprogram her need to make him happy. She stacked the books and papers on his desk. Shoved the clothing into the closet and shut the doors. Put the bed back to rights. Then she took off all her clothes, except for her panties, and she put on a white tank top of his.

The next time she blinked, Emma found herself sitting on the edge of the bath tub. She didn't really remember going into the bathroom, but there she was; Stacey had suggested a shower. Emma leaned over and opened the tap. But she didn't get under the spray.

No, she stayed sitting and staring down at her thighs. At her scars, marching down her thigh like a line. The last one was still tender and raw, much like her heart. It was a mark that would be there forever. A little piece of him, burned right into her flesh and blood.

Emma had gotten lost before, many times in her life. She'd fallen down more than a few dark holes. This time, though, it was different. She'd always held onto a piece of herself before, but not now. She'd given every single bit of herself to Church. He owned her. Without him, there was no her.

*There is no anything. No point. I'm unlovable.
Ruined beyond repair. Broken.*

She thought of all their careful plans. All the talking they'd done, all the anatomy books she'd studied. All those big beautiful veins, just waiting to be split open for him.

She sat upright.

Where was that knife, anyway?



WHEN CHURCH LEFT THE party, he'd pulled out of his parking spot so fast, he backed over their mailbox. Then he'd gunned the engine and surged forward, leaving burned rubber on the pavement. Hopefully his rental insurance covered worn tires.

God, that had been close. So fucking close. A couple minutes later, and Elizabeth would have been dead, and as exciting as that was to him, it was also terrifying. Emma would've gone to jail, for sure. And in that moment of realization, when he'd been standing there and watching her, he'd known true terror. The idea of her being somewhere he couldn't reach, he couldn't stand it. She belonged to him, he couldn't let someone take her away.

God, it was so unfair. To have to choose between his greatest fantasy and the first girl he'd ever loved.

So it was really over. He didn't want his life anymore, at least not the way it was right now. Like Emma had said the other night, he didn't want to hide who he was. With her, he didn't have to. Pretending to be something he wasn't, that was over. Keeping the monster locked inside, that was over. Focusing all his energy and attention on getting revenge on some silly woman? Most definitely *over*.

He would let it all go, *for her*. To start something new and amazing, *with her*. Emma had never cared who or what he was – with her, he could finally be that best version of himself. He could let her teach him how to be free, how to be himself. *How to love*.

There would be other plans. Other chances. Other sacrifices. Plenty of time to learn how to be a monster.

Church drove around for a while, giving her enough time to walk back home. He couldn't talk to her in front of all those people, that's why he'd run out of the party. It was bad enough not understanding all these new feelings inside him, he couldn't handle witnesses.

So after about half an hour, he turned around and cruised back by the party, which was still raging. He took his time driving home, looking for her on every street. He frowned as he turned into Jerry's neighborhood, realizing Emma must have

beaten him home. Maybe she'd gotten a ride from someone, or maybe she was still at the party.

No. I know her. I've been learning about her this whole time, too. She wouldn't stay. I asked her to stop, I told her to leave Elizabeth alone. She would listen to me.

The house was dark and quiet when he walked inside. He stopped to use the bathroom and could feel moisture in the air. She must have taken a shower. When he came out, he peeked his head into the office. The couch was still folded up, and he smiled to himself before continuing on to his room.

His smile got even bigger. The hall light splashed into the room, illuminating it just enough to show that she'd cleaned up. The mess was gone from the floor and the mattress was back on the bed. Best of all, she was between the covers, fast asleep.

Church stood over her for a moment, watching her. She was a lovely girl. Stunning, really. She looked like what would've happened if Alberto Vargas and Norman Rockwell had ever teamed up to paint a girl together. All-American and all sex. Her lips were parted, her breathing slow and heavy, and her gorgeous hair was a damp mess all over his pillow, making him think of the fun times they'd had in that bed.

“Emma,” he whispered her name as he crawled on top of the bed. She didn't stir, though, so he picked up a strand of hair and brushed it against her cheek. “*Emma*. Wake up.”

Her eyes slowly opened. She was looking away from the open door, so the light was at the back of her head. He couldn't clearly see into her green depths. She blinked a couple times, then kept them closed while she smiled.

“I'm in heaven,” she whispered, which actually made him laugh.

“Close. How did you get home?”

“Someone ... drove ...” she let out a heavy sigh.

“Good. Look, we have a lot to talk about,” he said, smoothing his hand over her hair.

“We already talked. I hear you, Church. I hear everything you say. Everything ...” her voice drifted away.

“I know you do, Emma. I know,” he said, then he leaned down and kissed her quickly. When he stopped, though, she pulled her arm out from under the covers and grabbed him by the back of his neck.

“No. I'm not ready to go yet. Just a little longer,” she pleaded, reeling him in for another kiss.

Her hand was damp, like her hair. She must have gotten out of the shower moments before he'd walked in the door. He kissed her again, breathing

in deeply through his nose. Enjoying her clean scent. When he tried to pull back, she held on tight.

“I thought you'd be angry with me,” he chuckled against her lips, all while smoothly slipping between the covers without disturbing them.

“Never angry,” she breathed. “I love you.”

“I know you do, Emma.”

“But you can't love ...”

“Shhh,” he urged, and when he kissed her that time, he meant it. He poured everything he had into it. His pressed his tongue against hers, then bit down on her bottom lip, sucked it between his own.

“I'm going to miss this,” she moaned when he moved away to kiss along her jaw line.

“You won't miss anything,” he promised, brushing his hand over her breasts and down her stomach.

“And your voice. I love your voice. It's my favorite,” she told him. He chuckled as his hand slipped between her legs.

“I'm pretty sure I have a couple other features you're a fan of,” he teased, then he almost moaned when he felt her. “Goddamn, Emma, you're soaking wet.”

“I did it for you.”

Well, shit. Here he'd thought she'd be angry at him for ruining their plans, for yelling at her, all while she'd been at home touching herself.

“Things are going to be different,” he promised, taking his hand away so he could shrug out of his jacket. “They're going to be *amazing*. We'll go back to New York. We'll go anywhere you want. And when we figure out how to do this right, this thing between us, we can figure out how to be dark together. How to be *great*.”

He was babbling, he knew. A bad habit he'd probably picked up from her. He paused while taking off his belt buckle and leaned over her, kissing her again while cupping one of her breasts.

When he leaned back to finish taking off his pants, he noticed it. A mark on her shirt. Funny, he hadn't noticed it before. The tank top had looked white before, pristine. Now, over her right breast, there was some sort of stain. Dirt? Were his hands dirty?

He looked down at his left hand, and sure enough, there was something on it. It was too dim to tell. He frowned, trying to think. He'd only been driving and touching her. He reached across her and turned on a lamp.

“*Oh my god*.”

Church jerked back, staring down at both his hands. His right hand looked normal. His left hand, though, was stained in a reddish substance. Light on his palms, but darker around his fingers. The fingers he'd just had between her legs. He remembered a moment ago, when he'd noticed her

touch was damp. With his right hand, he touched the back of his neck. When he looked at his fingertips, they were red now, too.

“What the fuck, Emma?” he asked, leaning over her and looking at her body. The hand she'd had around him was coated in blood, but he couldn't find any injury. “What did you do, Emma!? Tell me what you did!”

Church leapt over her and off the bed, then grabbed the covers. He violently yanked them back, then gasped.

She was laying in a pool of blood. The sheet under her butt was heavy and sticky with the substance. Her panties had once been white, but now the entire right side of them were blood red, as was the hem of the tank top she was wearing.

“What the fuck did you do!?”

He was shouting. He didn't know why he was shouting at her. He dropped to his knees and pushed her, rolling her onto her side, checking her back. Her underwear was completely soaked through with blood, but he still didn't see where it was coming from. Was she hemorrhaging? Was she having a miscarriage?

Silly man, this is something much, much worse. You always wanted to be a monster – Emma Hartley is making your dream come true.

“Emma,” he snapped when he let her fall onto her back. “Emma, wake up, we have to go.”

“I can't,” she sighed. “I'm already gone.”

“*Don't say that!* We're going to the car, I'm going to -”

He'd been sliding his arms under her so he could pick her up. One under her shoulders, and the other under her knees. When he started to lift, her legs fell open. Just for a moment. But it was enough. He sat her back down and spread her legs.

“Emma,” he moaned her name. “God, what did I do to you?”

She giggled, a grossly inappropriate sound, and answered him.

“I cut along the dotted line. I knew it would come in handy some day.”

Her beautiful scars were gone. Ripped open in a gash that ran clear from the top of her thigh almost to her knee. Blood was oozing out. He hadn't realized one leg, one vein, could hold so much blood.

*Correction – it **used** to hold so much blood.*

“C'mon, we've gotta get you help,” he said, and he picked her up again.

“I helped myself. I just want to sleep,” she complained, nuzzling her head under his chin.

“*Do not sleep.* Do you hear me, Emma? That's an order. Don't you fucking sleep!” he yelled.

She didn't answer. They were almost out of the hallway. He dropped down to his knees again and let her go so he could gently tap her on the cheek.

“You wake the fuck up right now!” he was shouting again. Panic was strangling the beast inside him, turning it into a whimpering, sniveling child.

Please, don't let her die. Please, don't let me destroy her. Please, but I love her.

“Be quiet, you'll scare the angels,” she whispered.

He was in the act of picking her up again when the front door swung open. Margo and Jerry walked in the room, the bleached blonde babbling away. Church was standing again and stepping forward before she noticed him.

“Oh my god!” she shrieked, dropping her purse. “What did you do to her?”

“I didn't do this, *she* did this,” he replied through gritted teeth. “I'm taking her to the hospital.”

“Don't you touch her!” Margo shouted, and absurdly, she started yanking on Emma's arm.

“Don't touch my daughter! Jerry, call 911!”

“Are you fucking crazy!?! She's going to bleed to death before an ambulance can get here! Now back the fuck up!”

She didn't, though. Margo yanked again, and his grip wasn't secure because of all the blood. One minute Emma was in his arms, the next she was tumbling to the ground.

His vision went red. He had both hands around Margo's neck and he was forcing her across the room. Bending her backwards over the breakfast bar.

“All you've ever done is use her for your own profit,” he growled, squeezing as hard as he could. “I won't let you use her death in the same way.”

Again, that look of fear. Panic. *Sheer terror.* Margo was shaking her head, her mouth open in a silent scream. He wanted to bathe in the moment. Wanted to extract payment for every shitty thing this woman had ever done to Emma.

But this isn't my moment. This is something she should be doing, and she can't, because she's dying in a heap on the floor.

He let Margo go at the same time Jerry touched his shoulder.

“Take her,” his father urged. “I'll stay here with Margo.”

Margo was coughing and rubbing at her neck, smearing Church's bloody hand prints around. He glared at her for a second longer, then went back to Emma and picked her up.

“If you ever touch her again,” he said as he moved towards the front door. “I will fucking kill you. You know I mean it. He knows I mean it. *Don't test me.*”

He didn't wait for a response.

It was an awkward drive. After getting her into the car, he'd taken off his belt and tightened it around the top of her thigh, hoping to staunch some of the blood flow. Then he drove with her feet in his lap, her knees bent, hoping gravity would help, as well.

He didn't think it did, though. By time they were pulling into the emergency bay at the hospital, her skin was ashen, and her lips almost looked blue.

“Don't you die on me,” he growled as he got out of the car. “Hey! *Hey!* I need help! She's going to bleed to death!”

He yelled and waved at the glass entrance while he moved around the vehicle. He could see nurses running towards him, so he turned his back and opened the car door. Emma started to fall out of the vehicle, so he dropped to the ground, catching her.

“Hey,” he said, combing his fingers through her hair. Amazingly enough, she opened her eyes. Those soft green jewels, he'd never appreciated them enough before; now he just prayed he'd get to see them again after tonight.

“Hey,” she whispered.

“Please don't die, Emma,” he whispered back. She smiled and her eyes fell shut.

“You love death. It won't be so bad,” she told him. He shook his head, then dropped his forehead to hers.

“It will be awful. I don't love death, Emma. I love *you*.”

That got her attention. It looked like it took her a lot of effort, but she finally opened her eyes again.

“You don't know how to love,” she croaked out.

“But you're such a clever girl,” he chuckled.

“You taught me how, and I didn't even realize it.”

To his amazement, she started laughing. At the same time, nurses and orderlies started surrounding them, yanking Emma out of his arms. Strapping her to a gurney.

“I told you,” she laughed maniacally. “You'd either learn to love me, or I'd die. Looks like we both got our wish.”

“She's delirious!” a nurse barked out, and they started rolling the gurney into the hospital.

Church watched after them, not listening as another nurse asked him questions. He looked on as Emma passed out again. Stared as a doctor rushed up and started pumping oxygen into her. Then the gurney wheeled around the corner and he couldn't see anything.

She's not delirious. She's smarter than I ever realized. She knew exactly how this was all going to end, and I never believed her.



The first time Emma woke up in the hospital, she ripped out her IV, then promptly fell out of bed.

The second time, she did the same thing.

The third time, she awoke to find herself strapped into her bed.

The sunlight coming into the room was harsh. Glaring. She blinked her eyes rapidly in it, then was finally able to focus. She looked down at her side and saw padded cuffs around her wrist, which was attached to the bed rails. She yanked and pulled at them.

“Uh uh, they're on to you now. You're not going anywhere.”

She lifted her head sharply.

Church was sitting at her feet, painting her toe nails.

“I thought I dreamed you,” Emma whispered, and he gave her a big smile.

It actually scared her a little.

“Do you think you could dream up something as perfect as me?”

*I died. I didn't survive my suicide, and I died.
Now the question is – am I in heaven, or hell?*

Before she could get an answer, a nurse bustled into the room. Church's game face was back on, no hint of a smile anywhere around his mouth as he brushed the charcoal black lacquer onto her nails. The nurse nodded at him, but he ignored her.

“You remember what the doctor said – you only get fifteen minutes,” she said in a stern voice. He didn't respond, didn't even acknowledge her, so she turned to Emma. “How are you feeling, Ms. Hartley?”

“Like I'm a prisoner. Take these off,” she grumbled, yanking at her restraints. The nurse shook her head.

“I can't do that, you'll have to talk to your doctor about them. I'll be back in fifteen minutes to take you to the bathroom.”

“I don't need to be -”

The nurse held up her phone, showing off a timer. Then she turned it towards Church, practically shoving it in his face. This woman meant business. Once she was sure they got it, she left the room.

“What the fuck is going on?” Emma demanded. Church cleared his throat, then slowly put the brush back into the bottle of nail polish.

“Well, generally when people try to kill themselves, they're put on a psychiatric watch,” he

informed her, leaning over her toes and gently blowing on them. She frowned.

“With restraints?”

“No, you earned those with your multiple escape attempts. Also ripping out your IVs, they took that as a sign of more self harm.”

She laid flat and stared up at the ceiling.

“If I was going to do it again,” she spoke slowly. “I wouldn't use an IV needle.”

“What would you use? Another blade?”

She shuddered.

“No. Clearly that was a bad idea. I should've used Jerry's shot gun instead of his knife.”

She was stunned when she felt Church's hand clasp hers. He'd moved up the side of the bed and was standing beside her.

“If you had, then you wouldn't be here,” he breathed.

“Here doesn't seem like such a good place to be,” she whispered back.

“Why did you do this, Emma?” he asked. “We had so much greatness ahead of us.”

“What greatness? You said we were over.”

“I never said that.”

“You did, you said -”

“I said a lot of things,” he snapped. “I didn't choose my words very carefully that night, but I never said 'we'. When I said I wanted 'this' to be

over, I was referring to the situation. Not you and I. *Never* you and I.”

Emma struggled to swallow.

“So it's just another thing I screwed up,” she whispered. He moaned and dropped his lips to her hand, kissing the back of it.

“No. No, you never screwed anything up. You were perfection, just like I always said.”

“Just like you always *lied*.”

“I did, about some things. But never about that. *I* screwed things up, because I was too stupid to really see you, to really hear you. Well, I'm looking now. I'm listening. I won't screw up again,” he promised her. She glanced at him.

“Does that mean we get to be together?”

When he didn't answer right away, her mind immediately turned to sharp objects and things that go *bang*.

“Not right now,” he said slowly, and he pulled his hand free of hers so he could grip the railing of her bed.

“Why not?” she asked.

“Because you're a very sick girl, Emma.”

“Says the boy who dreams of murder.”

“Hey, you're the one who tried to smother someone to death and then filleted your own leg.”

Ah, Church. It was nice to know that a little something like suicide didn't dull his razor sharp edges.

“Filletted?” she cleared her throat. “Is that a medical term, Dr. Church?”

“No, but suicide is. You're lucky. You were aiming for the femoral artery, but you only hit the vein. Still impressive, I wish you could've seen all the blood. I had to throw away my mattress. I'm very glad you never took anatomy, otherwise we might not be having this conversation right now.”

“I thought it was what you wanted. I thought it would make you love me,” she said softly.

“You did that all on your own, Emma.”

She closed her eyes. She refused to listen to those words. Words like that had landed her in this situation.

“I ... it's fuzzy. Did I do it? Did I kill her?” she asked. A finger traced down the side of her jaw.

“No. You gave her a bloody nose and a black eye, you must have been pushing really hard. No one but me knows anything happened, she thinks she fell at the party.”

“Lucky you.”

“Lucky *us* – if anyone thought any different, we wouldn't get a chance to ever try again.”

Emma opened her eyes.

“You want to try to kill her again?” she asked. Just the idea of it exhausted her.

“No. Like I said, that time is over. Going after Lizzie ... I should've listened to you, it was a bad

idea. Killing her won't change the fact that I'm the fucked up product of some fucked up parenting.”

“So ... Christmas at your mom's house next year?” Emma asked. He laughed, and for the first time since she'd woken up, she felt her heart race a little bit.

“I don't think so. I still haven't even officially met Lizzie. I don't know if I ever will. I told Jerry about her, but I don't know, I kinda think he already knew about her, somehow.”

“Wouldn't shock me. Jerry is ... a wonderful surprise.”

“That he is.”

“So when do I get to go home? Maybe I can introduce you and your sister,” she chuckled. Church didn't laugh, though. He frowned instead.

“Emma, it's not that simple. While you were unconscious, you were declared mentally unsound,” he told her. “Unfit to make your own decisions.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means Margo is now your legal conservator. She makes all your decisions.”

“Oh god,” she whispered, and he nodded.

“And she's going to keep you in here for as long as possible. I'm banned from seeing you,” he continued. “She spoke to the counselor at the college, the one you were meeting? Apparently you mentioned me once or twice or *a thousand times*.”

They think you have an 'unhealthy obsession' with me.”

“So do I,” she managed a chuckle.

“Me, too. It's what I love best about you,” he said. “Margo's blaming this all on me. The only reason I was allowed in to see you today is because I convinced them you wouldn't stop trying to escape until you spoke to me.”

“So you told them the truth,” she translated. He let out a deep sigh.

“Emma, this is serious. Unless you can convince your doctor that you're completely psychologically normal, your mother will retain control over you. *Complete* control. She could keep you in here indefinitely.

Emma figured it out. This was definitely hell.

“I just wanted to get away from her,” she said in a shaky voice, one tear escaping her eye. “Why can't I ever get away from her?”

“You can,” Church whispered, leaning down close to her. “And you will. You just have to continue being clever. You have to convince these people you're normal.”

She barked out a laugh.

“Have you met me?”

“I have. You're one of the most amazing people I've *ever* met. You can do this.”

“Will you be able to visit me?” she asked, feeling small and afraid.

“No. I ... I want to, Emma. I do. But not only will they not let me, I don't think it's a good idea,” he explained. She opened her mouth to argue, but he held up his hand. “Everyone is worried, and not just about you, but about both of us. So many eyes looking at us means we can't get be our true selves. So first, you have to get all better.”

“So if I get 'all better', then we can be together?” she asked, unable to keep the hope out of her voice.

“Oh, Emma,” he tsked. “Still so silly. We're *always* together. Nothing can keep us apart. This is just a momentary pause.”

“What happens when we push play?”

His smile was back. The grin that both excited and scared her.

“*Anything we want.*”

The nurse bustled back in, loudly proclaiming that time was up. Church lingered, squeezing Emma's hand once more, then kissing her on the forehead.

“Don't forget me,” Emma whispered.

“How could I forget my other half?” he whispered back. “Don't *you* forget that we're greatness. Just have to get through this, and then we can really see just how great we can become.”

The nurse started getting mouthy, so he finally backed away. When he got to the door, he paused once more.

“And Emma – when you talk to your mother? Tell her I’ll be seeing her again real soon.”

He disappeared after that, without so much as a glance back or a wave.

While Emma was unshackled and led to the bathroom, she thought over his words. Tried to remember everything. That whole night had been a blur, she'd been so distraught. He'd been lying to her, he'd been planning to leave her. It had shattered her.

But what had changed? It was like he was really seeing her now. That look in his eyes, the one that had started a week or so ago, it had been there the whole time he'd been in the hospital room. The shutters were gone, his soul was open to her now. Did she dare believe it?

Once she was back in bed and cuffed to her railings, all alone with nothing to do, she kept thinking about that. About belief and trust and love. So many different things. All of her time had been spent worshiping Church. Trying to be the perfect girl for him. And all it had gotten her was lied to and a bunch of stitches in her thigh.

Of course, it had also possibly gotten her his love. But it wouldn't be so easy for him this time. Words wouldn't be enough. It was his turn to prove himself. He could be the one jumping through hoops, he could be the one doing the convincing.

Just the thought of it fortified Emma. She could do this. She'd literally died for Church to love her. She could do *anything*. She would listen to these doctors and she would learn from them and she would use them to get her freedom back.

Then she would get out, and she'd be free. Free of her mother, free of crippling self doubt, free to be with Church in whatever capacity they could manage.

*Nine little burns replaced by one big scar.
Something small became something great. I paid
for his love in blood.*

Now I want some in return.

To Be Continued ...

MORE FROM THE AUTHOR



THE KANE TRILOGY

"... thanks to Stylo for getting me lost, breaking the rules, and "going there". This was fresh and dark ..." - *Penelope Douglas, NY Times and USA Today*
Bestselling author of the Fall Away series and
Corrupt

[Degradation](#)

[Separation](#)

[Reparation](#)

[Completion](#)

[Reception](#)

STANDALONES

"I could not fault one moment of this story, I devoured every word and every beautiful depraved page. Days later I am still thinking about it and I know that it will be one of those books that will be etched into my soul, I honestly loved it that much."

- I Love Book Love blog

[The Bad Ones](#)

[My Time in the Affair](#)

[Just a Little Junk](#)

[Muscle Memory](#)

THE MERCENARIES

[Best Laid Plans](#)

[Out of Plans](#)

[The Mercenaries: Boxset](#)

TWIN ESTATES NOVELS

*"... only one author I know continues to blow my ever-loving mind with the sheer gutsiness and uniqueness of her stories ... Stylo Fantôme continues to write with such intelligence and verve ... once again, she delivers with a book that is hot sexy escapism at its finest." - **Natasha is a Book***

Junkie

[Neighbors](#)

[The Neighborhood](#)

[Block Party](#)

[Neighborhood Watch](#)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are these movies just give you a sort of haunting, chilling, eerie feeling. Byzantium, The Berlin Syndrome, virtually anything starring Michael Pitt. You watch them and they're strange and you shouldn't like them, but you do, and they stay with you for unknown reasons. I'm always chasing that feeling, which is an almost impossible feeling to put into words.

When I started this book, I wanted a hero who didn't speak a lot, and I was sort of hoping it would be dark. That was it. I have no clue where Emma came from, she is a force unto herself, with a very loud voice. And it steered away from dark and went well into the realm of eerie. So hey, if it ever becomes a movie, maybe Michael Pitt could have a role in it!

Lots of people to thank, of course. Thank you Ratula, for a long friendship and a lot of laughs along the way and for always being the first to read my ramblings.

Big thanks to Jennifer, Nanci, and Rebecca for A LOT of help with this story – it wouldn't have Church's chapters (i.e. the best parts of the whole book!) without these ladies. Thanks for late night talks and keeping me sane during this difficult book. And thank you, Barbara, for letting me escape with you ever Thursday into Drag Race.

Thank you to Najla Qamber Designs for this AMAZING cover! Such a simple idea, and you quite literally spun it into gold, it came out even better than anything I had imagined. And to Champagne Formats, for the paperback interior formatting, you always make an interior that matches the beautiful exterior, you have an incredible eye. Of course, thank you to Give Me Books for handling all my promos and my late requests and always being on the ball.

ALL my beta readers, who are quite possibly – half of them were new betas this time, which I always feel like introducing new ones makes for a better story. Deanna, Teri, Pam, Paige, Andrea, Alexandra, Ursula, Elizarey, Pavlina, Kolleen, Jennifer E., and Trisha, your notes helped immensely. Thanks for being so thorough and generous with your time.

Thanks to EVERY blog who has ever supported me, thank you for giving this story a chance and for understanding its weirdness. Thank you for inviting me to signings and allowing me to travel and be a part of this community.

Thank you especially to all my readers, new ones and long term ones. Thank you for taking a chance on my strange stories and sticking with me through genre changes. Thank you for the laughs and the friendships and the reviews and anything and everything.

And of course, to Mr. F – thank you for being my rock this year. Thank you for understanding all the work this book took, and for giving me the time and space to do it all, and for taking care of the dogs and for taking me to my favorite place in the entire universe.

But especially for the puppies.

SOUNDTRACK



Songs that I listened to while writing, songs that made me think of the story, and a couple that inspired actual scenes.

- Nobody Speak – DJ Shadow ft. Run The Jewels
- Black Sheep – Clash at Demonhead
- Take Me To Church – Hozier
- Church – Fall Out Boy
- Believer – Imagine Dragons
- Back To You – Selena Gomez
- Live Like Legends – Ruelle
- Murder By Numbers – The Police
- Serial Killer – Lana Del Rey
- Make Me Wanna Die – The Pretty Reckless
- Ain't No Sunshine – Terra Lopez
- In Love With A Psycho – Kasabian

Book Two



Coming in October 2018

“*“You're so hot.”*”

Emma clenched her jaw tightly, bearing her teeth, and pushed with all her might.

She'd never been very strong, though.

“Yeah, yeah, so I've been told,” she grunted.

“This isn't fun anymore. Get off me!”

“Oh, c'mon, it's okay,” Casper cooed. Actually *cooed*. She wanted to vomit. “It'll make you feel better. I have a healing touch.”

“I don't want your healing touch. Get off! *Get off me!*”

She was thrashing around in earnest now, just trying to break free of him. But he had all his weight against her, pinning her to wall while his hands roamed any and everywhere. While his lips trailed up and down her neck.

“Trust me, you'll love it,” he assured her.

She started screaming. Not out of fear, though, or because she was upset. It was primal anger and hatred and *pure evil* pouring out of her now. She bellowed and shook and raged, managed to get an arm free to beat at his shoulders.

“I'm going to fucking kill you!” she promised. “I'm going to cut you open just so I can see what your insides look like! I'm going to make you feel so much pain, you'll regret every single fucking girl you ever fucking -”

She let out another shriek as Casper's head seemed to sort of explode. She'd squeezed her eyes shut out of reflex as his blood splattered all over face. She could feel the liquid on her lips, so she kept her mouth closed, too.

Now his body was the one moving around. Twitching and shaking, his fingers clawing at her. Nerve endings making their last stand, realizing life was leaving their host. He let out a grunt, then something that might have been a word, then a sigh before he fell against her.

Emma finally opened her eyes. He wasn't quite dead yet, but he certainly wasn't a threat anymore. Not with a crowbar sticking out the back of his head. She struggled with his weight for a moment, not sure what to do with his not-quite-dead-yet body, then she looked beyond him. Her mouth dropped open and she let go of him. The twitching body fell to the floor, fingers blindly clawing to get away from something that had already happened to them.

“*You,*” she breathed, her word a visible puff of air. It was cold in the house. The front door was

open. He hadn't shut it behind him when he'd come in.

“Were you expecting someone else?”

That voice. That *voice*. Like an angel. Like the devil. Like everything she'd ever wanted, but could never quite get.

“*Church.*”

He stepped out of the shadows of the hallway.

It felt like it had been forever since she'd seen him. He was even more imposing in person than he was in her memories. His height making her feel small, his broad shoulders making her feel petite. Those blue, blue eyes, snatching her soul right out of her body.

Silly girl, can't snatch away what he already owns.

“You came,” she finally managed to say. He stared at her for a second longer, then looked down at the body at their feet.

“Of course I did. Almost too late, by the looks of it,” he muttered, kicking at Casper's leg.

Seeing the corpse – and it was truly a corpse now – snapped Emma back into reality.

What the fuck. *What in the ever loving fuck.* This had been her battle. Her war to fight. *Not Church's.* This was something she should've done on her own, and he'd just swooped in and stolen it from her. Nothing from him this whole time, and

then suddenly *bam*, he's there and he's stealing her moments.

Same shit, different day.

“What the fuck did you do!?” she shouted. Her outburst seemed to surprise him a little.

“What the fuck do you think I did?” he asked calmly while he pulled off his gloves.

“You killed him!” she continued. He nodded and dropped into a crouch, looking closely at the blood pouring out of the head wound he'd created.

“I certainly did. Pity.”

“You didn't want to?”

“Not like this,” he sighed, poking at the crowbar. It made a sickening squelching sound and for a moment Emma really thought she was going to vomit. “I wanted to see his face when it happened. I wanted to see him ... *suffer*.”

Ah, yes. Always about Church. His ultimate fantasy, to make someone fear him. To torture them. To *end* them.

“This isn't okay!” she shrieked, startling him again. He stood upright. “You don't just get to do this!”

“Excuse me? Have you already forgotten everything I worked so hard to teach you?” he chuckled. “I get to do *anything I want*.”

Emma stepped across the body. She slipped in the blood, but didn't let it deter her. She shoved Church hard in the chest.

“Not anymore, you asshole! You lost that privilege! This was *my* moment, and you just took it!”

Now he looked angry.

“And what do you propose I should've done, Emma? Just let him rape you? Sit in a corner and politely watch while he fucks you? Someone had to do *something*.”

“Maybe I had a fucking plan, Church!”

“I give less than zero fucks about your plans, *Emma*. Your plans involved him touching you. *Unacceptable*. So I put an end to *your plan*. It was fucked, anyway. You were in over your head.”

“You know, I don't care for this attitude,” she growled. “I'm not that same little girl Emma, hanging on your every word. You broke her, so now you have to deal with *this* version.”

“I don't have to deal with shit,” he responded, stepping up close to her. “And this version is just as broken as the last.”

It was too much. So much time had passed between them, so many fucked up moments. And now tonight.

Worst of all, she knew he was right. She had been in over her head. The night had not been going as planned, and she had been well on her way to getting raped.

But she didn't want him riding in like some white knight, saving her. She didn't want *anyone* to

save her, except herself. He wouldn't be able to understand that, at least not yet.

So now the evening was ruined and both their dreams were a half realized bloody mess on the floor, and she couldn't even process her feelings about seeing him again because she was just *fucking angry*.

Emma stumbled away from the mess, and she was thankful when she didn't hear his footsteps following. She walked up to the front door and slammed it shut, then she stomped back down the hallway, refusing to look at him as she went.

When she got to the bathroom, she shrugged out of her heavy jacket and kicked off her shoes, but she didn't bother with anything else. She was a mess, so what would be the point? She turned on the shower and stepped under the spray, still wearing all her clothes.

The water turned pink at first, then a beautiful rusty red, swirling around her socks. She stared down at it for a moment, then lifted her face to the spray, keeping her eyes shut tight. Letting the water wash every thought and feeling and emotion, stripping her down to her core.

He came for me. He knew where to find me. It was all real. We don't need words. We don't need anything. We're connected. Connected in every single way possible, now.

She wasn't sure when she'd started crying, but when the shower curtain was ripped down, she didn't try to hide her sobs.

“Would you like me to tell you how I know you're still broken?” Church asked in a gentle voice.

“Yes,” she whispered, staring at him while he let his jacket slide to the floor.

“If you weren't broken anymore, then I wouldn't be able to love you the way I do.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” she managed to ask, her voice barely above a breath. Her hope barely sparking back to life. His boots were unlaced and kicked aside.

“It means in order for us to fit together, we already have to be in pieces. My pieces can't exactly fit if you don't have any edges. If you're already whole.”

He spoke to her as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. As if it made sense, and she was silly for not realizing it on her own. He was slowly stepping into the tub, overwhelming her with his presence once again. Reminding her of every moment they'd ever shared together.

What a beautiful jagged edge he is.

His mouth fell and she caught it and it tasted better than any of her memories. He speared his hands into her hair, holding her head at the perfect angle, tracing his tongue along her molars. She

moaned and the water rained down on them and blood swirled around the drain.

“I missed you,” she sobbed, pulling back from him so she could touch his face. Confirm that he was real.

“Not as much as I missed you,” he groaned, his hands squeezing her ass before picking her up.

“God, I've never missed someone before. What an *awful* feeling.”

“And I didn't think you would come, I couldn't be sure you'd know,” she babbled, kissing along the side of his jaw while he stumbled out of the tub.

“How could you ever doubt me, Emma?” he groaned as she bit down on his ear lobe.

“I don't know. I'm ... crazy. Broken. I don't work well without my other half,” she managed a reply.

They fell across the hall, landing hard against a wall. He managed to get them upright, but she stayed leaning back and she pulled her soaking wet sweater over her head.

“I know,” he breathed. “I know *exactly* how you feel.”

There was a bedroom just a couple doors down the hall. Maybe ten feet away, if that. But she couldn't take her mouth away from his long enough to tell him. He took a couple steps towards it, but then dropped to his knees.

Too far. It was simply too far way. After all the time they'd spent apart, *any* distance was too much.

“You finally did it,” she gasped when he ripped her t-shirt down the middle. He moaned when he realized she wasn't wearing a bra. “You did what you'd always wanted.”

“No,” he replied, yanking his own sweater over his head. Her hands immediately found their way beneath his undershirt, smoothing across firm muscles and taut skin. “No, *this* is what I've always wanted.”

One hand was down the front of her pants, two fingers already thrusting inside her. She cried out at the intrusion, bucked her hips and slid across the floor on her wet clothing. He caught her, though, because of course he would. He'd *always* catch her.

Everything turned into a frenzy. A fight to get to that place they'd both felt happy in, even if only for a moment. Her pants were jerked on and pulled away, sending her sideways across the hall with her efforts. Church's pants were shoved and pushed down his hips, but that was as far as they got.

Her hands balled into fists against his chest, clutching at his t-shirt. She screamed as he drilled inside her, demanding entrance to the only home he'd ever known. To the only place he'd ever been barred entry to.

And as they fucked and cried and remembered each other and made love in the only way they

knew how, the pool of blood slowly crept out of the living room and into the other end of the hall.

The Kane Series



DEGRADATION

Available Now

Tatum plucked at her shirt in a nervous manner. She had tucked it into a tight pencil skirt and even put on a pair of sling back stilettos. If someone had personally requested her, she wanted to make an effort to look nice. She had blown out her hair and put curls in the ends, and toned down her make up. Even she had to admit it, she looked presentable.

For once.

Men in expensive business suits began to file into the conference room and she stood still, giving a polite smile to everyone who entered. A team of lawyers was meeting with their client. Six chairs were lined up on one side of a long table, with just a single chair on the other side.

Tate had been positioned at the back of the room, next to a sideboard filled with goodies and coffee and water. She fussed about, straightening napkins and setting up the glasses. When all six chairs were filled on the one side, she stared at their backs, wondering who the big shot was that got to

stare them all down. The person who would be facing her. A door at the back of the room swung open and her breath caught in her throat.

Holy. Shit.

Jameson Kane strode into the room, only offering a curt smile to his lawyers. His eyes flashed to her for just a second, then he looked back. His smile became genuine and he tipped his head towards her, almost like a bow.

She gaped back at him, positive that her mouth was hanging open. What was he doing there!? Had he known she would be there? Had he been the one to request her? Impossible, he didn't know what temp agency she worked for – but what would be the chances? She hadn't seen him in seven years, and now twice in two days.

Tate felt like swallowing her tongue.

“Gentlemen,” Jameson began, seating himself across from the lawyers. “Thanks for meeting with me today. Would anyone care for any coffee? Water? The lovely Ms. O’Shea will be helping us today.” He gestured towards Tate, but no one turned around. Several people asked for coffee. Jameson asked for water, his smile still in place. It was almost a smirk. Like he knew something she didn't.

She began to grind her teeth.

She delivered everyone's drinks, then carried around a tray of snacks. No one took anything. She

moved to the back of the room, refilled the water pitcher. Tidied up. Felt Jameson staring at her.

This is ridiculous. You're Tatum O'Shea. You eat boys for breakfast.

But thinking that made her remember when he had said something very similar to her, and she felt a blush creep up her cheeks.

She was pretty much ignored the whole time. They all argued back and forth about what business decisions Jameson should, or shouldn't, make. He was very keen on dismantling struggling companies and selling them off. They tried to curb his desires. His tax lawyer explained how his tax shelter in Hong Kong was doing. Another lawyer gave him a run down on property law in Switzerland. Tate tried to hide her yawns.

They took a five minute break after an hour had passed. Tate had her back to the room, rearranging some muffins on a tray, when she felt the hair on the back of her neck start to stand up. She turned around in slow motion, taking in Jameson as he walked up to her.

“Surprised?” he asked, smiling down at her.

“Very. Did you ask for me?” she questioned. He nodded.

“Yes. You ran away so quickly the other night. I wanted to get reacquainted,” he explained. She laughed.

“Maybe I didn't,” she responded. He shrugged.

“That doesn't really matter to me. What are you doing tonight?” he asked. She was a little caught off guard.

“Are you asking me out, Kane?” she blurted out. He threw back his head and laughed.

“Oh god, still a little girl. *No*. I don't ask people out. I was asking what you were doing tonight,” Jameson replied.

She willed away the blush she felt coming on. He still had the ability to make her feel so stupid. She had been through so much since him, come so far with her esteem and her life. It wasn't fair that he could still make her feel so small. She wanted to return the favor. She cleared her throat.

“I'm working.”

“Where?”

“At a bar.”

“What bar?”

“A bar you don't know.”

“And tomorrow night?”

“Busy.”

“And the night after that?”

“*Every* night after that,” Tate informed him, crossing her arms. He narrowed his eyes, but continued smiling.

“Surely you can find some time to meet up with an old friend,” he said. She shook her head.

“We were never friends, Kane,” she pointed out. He laughed.

“Then what is it? Are you scared of me? Scared I'll eat you alive?” he asked. She stepped closer to him, refusing to be intimidated.

“I think *you're* the one who should be scared. You don't know me, Kane. You never did. *And you never will,*” she whispered. Jameson leaned down so his lips were almost against her ear.

“I know what you feel like from the inside. That's good enough for me,” he whispered back. Tate stepped away. She felt like she couldn't breathe. He did something to her insides.

“You, and a lot of other people. You're not as big a deal as you think,” she taunted. It was a complete lie, but she had to get the upper hand back. He smirked at her.

“That sounds like a challenge to me. I have to defend my honor,” he warned her. She snorted.

“Whatever. Point to the challenger then, *me*. Defend away,” she responded, rolling her eyes.

He didn't respond, just continued smirking down at her. The lawyers began filing back into the room and Jameson took his position on the other side of the table. She wasn't really sure what their little spar had been about, or what had come out of it. She was just going to try to get through the rest of the conference, and then she would scurry away before he could talk to her again. She didn't want anything to do with Jameson Kane, or his -,

“Ms. O’Shea,” his sharp voice interrupted her thoughts. Tate lifted her head.

“Yes, sir?” she asked, making sure to keep her voice soft and polite.

“Could you bring me some water, and something to eat,” he asked, not even bothering to look at her as he flipped through a contract.

She loaded up a tray with his requests and made her way around the table. No one even looked at her, they just threw legal jargon around at each other – a language she didn’t know. She stood next to Jameson and leaned forward, setting his water down and then going about arranging cheese and crackers on a plate for him. She was about halfway done when she felt it.

Are those ... his fingers!?

Tate froze for a second. His touch was light as he ran his fingers up and down between her legs. She glanced down at her knees and then glanced over at him. He was still looking down, but she could see him smirking. She tried to ignore him, tried to go back to setting up his food, but his hand went higher. Daring to brush up past her knees, well underneath her skirt. He couldn’t get any farther, not unless he pushed up her skirt, or sunk down in his chair. She dumped the rest of the cheese on his plate and started to scoot away. She had just gotten back to her station when she heard a thumping noise, followed by groans.

“No worries. Ms. O’Shea! So sorry, could you get this?” Jameson’s voice was bored sounding.

She turned around and saw that he had knocked over his water glass. He was blotting at the liquid as it spread across the table. The lawyers were all holding their papers aloft, grumbling back and forth.

Tate groaned and grabbed a towel before striding back to the table. She glared at him the whole way, but he still refused to look at her. She started as far away from him as she could get, mopping everything up, but eventually she had to almost lean across him to reach the mess. She stood on her toes, stretching across the table top.

As she had assumed it would, his hand found its way back to her legs. Only this time he wasn’t shy, and her position allowed for a lot of access. His hand shot straight up the back of her skirt, his fingertips brushing against the lace of her panties.

She swallowed a squeak and glanced around. If any of the other gentlemen lifted their heads, they would have been able to see their client with half of his arm up his assistant’s skirt, plain as day. He managed to run his finger under the hem of her underwear, down the left side of her butt cheek, before she pulled away. She stomped back to the food station, throwing the towel down with such violence, she knocked over a stack of sugar cubes.

When she turned around, Jameson was finally looking at her. She plunked her fists on her hips, staring straight back. His smirk was in place – as she had expected it would be – and he held up a finger, pointing it straight up. *One*. Then he pointed at himself. One point. *Tied*. He thought they were playing a game. She hadn't wanted to play games with him, but she hated to lose at *anything*, and she never wanted to lose to a man like Jameson Kane.

An idea flitted across her mind. Tate wanted to make him as uncomfortable as he had just made her feel. She coolly raised an eyebrow and then took her time looking around the room. The lawyers all still had their backs to her – not one of them had turned around the entire time she'd been there. Blinds had been drawn over every window, no one could see in the office, but she knew the door wasn't locked. Anyone could walk into the room. She took a deep breath. It didn't matter anyway, what was the worst that could happen? She would get fired? It was a temp job, that Jameson had requested her for – he didn't even work there. Did she really care what happened?

She dragged her stare back to meet his and then ran her hands down the sides of her skirt. He raised an eyebrow as well, his eyes following her hands. When she got to the hem of the skirt, she pressed her palms flat and began to slowly, *achingly*, slide the material up her legs. Now both his eyebrows

were raised. He flicked his gaze to her face, then went right back to her skirt. Higher, up past her knees. To the middle of her thighs. Higher still. If anyone turned around, they would be very surprised at what they saw. One more inch, and her skirt would be moot. Jameson's stare was practically burning holes through her.

Taking short, quick, breaths through her nose, Tate slid her hands around to her butt. She wiggled the material up higher back there, careful to keep the front low enough to hide her whole business, and was able to hook her fingers into her underwear. She didn't even think about what she was doing, couldn't take her eyes off of Jameson, as she slid her underwear over her butt and down her hips. As the lace slid to her ankles, she pushed her skirt back into place. Then she stepped out of the panties and bent over, picking them up. When she stood upright, she let the lace dangle from her hand while she held up one finger. Point.

Winning.

Jameson nodded his head at her, obviously conceding to her victory, then returned his attention to the papers in front of him. Tate let out a breath that she hadn't even realized she was holding, and turned around, bracing her hands against the table. She leaned forward and took deep breaths. She had just started to gain some ground on slowing her heart rate, when a throat cleared.

“What is that, Ms. O’Shea?” Jameson called out from behind her. She spun around, balling up her underwear in her fist.

“Excuse me, sir?” she asked.

“That,” he continued, gesturing with his pen at her. “In your hands. You have something for me. Bring it here.”

Now everyone turned towards her. Tate held herself as still as possible, her hands clasped together in front of her legs, hiding the underwear between her fingers. All eyes were on her. Jameson smirked at her and leaned back in his chair. She took a shaky breath.

“I don’t know what -,”

“Bring it here, Ms. O’Shea, *now*,” he ordered, tapping the table top with his pen. She glared at him.

Fuck this.

She turned around and pulled one of the silver trays in front of her. She laid her panties out neatly on top, making sure the material was smooth and flat. She was very thankful that she had gone all out and worn her good, expensive, “*I’m-successful-and-career-oriented!*”, underwear. She balanced the tray on top of her fingertips and spun around, striding towards their table, a big smile on her face.

“For you, Mr. Kane,” she said in a breathy voice, then dropped the tray in front of him. It

clattered loudly and spun around a little before coming to a rest, the panties sliding off to one side.

As she walked away, she could hear some gasps. A couple laughs. A very familiar chuckle. When she got to the door, she pulled it open before turning back to the room. A couple of the lawyers were gawking at her, and the rest were laughing, gesturing to the display she had just put on; Jameson was looking straight at her, his smirk in place. She blew him a kiss and then stomped out the door.