Hope

back, making me cry out.

ANGELA

It was difficult to run with my arms behind me, but I bolted for the open metal doors of the warehouse as fast as I could.

I was halfway to the door when I heard heavy footsteps fast approaching behind me, and then Jacques tackled me roughly to the ground.

My chin hit the concrete floor with teeth-rattling force, and blood filled my mouth.

"Filthy whore," Jacques spat, straddling my waist.

bruised, he would hunt Jacques down until the day he died.

jaw. "But first, we have some unfinished business."

I squeezed tighter.

"You bitch."

I'm sorry, Xavier.

glowed from the inside.

the work yard.

No.

I'm not too late.

He can't win.

I loved her.

This was supposed to be my second chance.

"JACQUES!" My voice rang through the warehouse.

Rolling the sleeves of my dress shirt, I sneered. "We finish this now."

I sidestepped, dodging his blade, swinging my crowbar at him again.

My fist tightened around the crowbar, preparing for his next attack. "Why not?"

He dropped to the ground, scrambling for a knife that lay in a pool of Angela's blood.

We began circling each other—Angela's body between us—like two lions fighting over their prey.

There was nothing left to discuss.

He'd destroyed everything.

with Penny.

knew the hole it left in your heart, in your life.

He stood, hauling me to my feet beside him. "You want to play games? I know a game." He pushed me, sending me flying into a nearby crate. It splintered under my weight. Jagged bits of wood cut into my

Then Jacques was there, pulling me upright again. "Shh now, mademoiselle. Jacques is here."

He dragged me to a beam in the center of the space and tied my hands around it. "You're braver than I thought, not

like Xavier's regular whores." I sagged against the metal pole, knees shaking, and spat out a mouthful of blood.

Assured I wasn't going anywhere, Jacques crossed the room, heading for his forgotten knife.

"He's going to kill you," I found myself saying aloud, surprising myself with my violent words.

Jacques picked up the knife and held it tight in his hands. "Perhaps, but not before I get what I want."

Hope was all I had now. Hope that someone had realized I was missing. Hope that Xavier was on his way to me.

I knew they were true, though. Xavier had hurt people for far less than this. If he found me this way, bleeding and

I just had to hold on a little longer.

Blood dripped to the floor beneath me, blackness beginning to take over my vision as the sharp metal of the blade pressed into my throat.

I wasn't going to last much longer. "I'm going to mark you like you marked me." Jacques hissed, digging the knife deeper into the tender flesh below my

Jacques grunted, and there was the sound of ripping fabric. Cold night air whispered against my newly exposed skin. Scraps of my bridesmaid dress slithered to the floor.

I felt the blade move down, carving over my collarbone, down the center of my chest, between my breasts. Then

what I imagined Xavier Knight would settle for, but you'll do."

Jacques looked me up and down, taking in my white lace panties and braless chest, his head tilting to one side. "Not

Jacques stepped closer. His sour breath fanned across my tear-streaked cheeks as he fumbled with his belt. He dropped his knife, roughly grabbed my breasts in his clammy hands, and pinched my nipples.

I cried out feebly, exhaustion and blood loss making my limbs weak and heavy. Jacques tried to jam his leg between my thighs, spreading my legs. I used my remaining strength to keep them closed,

together. "Don't make me tie your legs too," he hissed.

I'd seen what it had done to my father and brothers, to Brad, to Xavier. I didn't want to do that to them. Didn't want to cause anyone I loved that much pain. Or, even worse, give Jacques the gratification that he'd hurt them.

I didn't have much choice left anymore. Slowly, I could feel the fight draining from my body.

"I do," Jacques said. "He took everything from me. My love. My work. My life. He has to pay."

twisted around the pole, the bindings biting into the already raw skin of my wrists.

It wasn't that I was scared to die. I was scared of leaving everything behind me. I knew the pain of losing someone,

"This could have all been finished if you'd just let me take what I wanted in Paris." Jacques licked up the side of my neck. "Now it will be messy. Now, when I'm done, I have to kill you." "You don't have to," I said, jumping as his rough fingers skimmed along the waistband of my panties.

He kicked my legs apart.

I dropped like a weight to the concrete floor and pulled myself into a tight ball. My shoulders ached, as my arms were

I might not have much strength left, but I would be sure to use the little that remained to make this as difficult for him as possible.

I let my eyes close.

I love you. **XAVIER**

I found the warehouse, a long, one-story building along the shore. There was a panel van out in front of it. Lights

I cut the engine of the Lamborghini and jumped out of the car.

This had to be it. But had I made it in time?

I didn't know what awaited me inside. It didn't matter anymore. My time was up.

He was there: Jacques. In blood-flecked clothes and with red-stained hands, he stood over a body.

Squinting against the harsh, synthetic light, I stepped through the warehouse doorway.

Gravel crunched under my shoes as I sprinted for the warehouse doors. They were flung open, light pouring out into

This can't be it.

A wave of fury washed over me, my hands curling into fists at my sides. I wouldn't accept this. Couldn't.

Below him, limp on the concrete floor, lay Angela, fuchsia silk and crimson blood pooling around her.

I love her, for fuck's sake. Could fate really be so cruel?

"Xavier." He smiled. "What a surprise. I think there are some things we must discuss." I pulled off my Armani suit jacket, let it fall to the warehouse floor, and grabbed a crowbar off a nearby crate, advancing toward him.

Still hunched over Angela, Jacques turned to face me, a sickening smile spreading across his lips.

"C'mon," I taunted. "C'mon, you filthy French bastard! Come at me. This is what you wanted, wasn't it?" Jacques snarled and dove toward me, and I swung the crowbar at his head.

I risked a glance over my shoulder at Angela, tried to see if she was moving, breathing. "You took everything from me!" Jacques shouted, pushing himself to his feet. "Why?"

There was a sickening crunch as the metal connected with his flank. Jacques grunted, falling to his hands and knees.

It was true. There was no good reason. Nothing that would make him feel better. This had all started because I'd slept

I'd done it because I could. Because I hadn't cared about repercussions for anything I did. Because I had been wrong.

But now it was too late. "You already had everything," Jacques cried, charging.

I wasn't fast enough this time. Jacques's shoulder crashed into me, knocking me to the ground.

Finally, I managed to pin Jacques beneath me and pushed myself up so that I was sitting on his chest.

I hissed as a sharp pain sliced across my upper arm.

I wanted to hurt him like he'd hurt me, like he'd hurt Angela.

across the warehouse floor and dropped to my knees beside Angela.

"Late," I shouted at myself. "You're too fucking late."

Slowly, Jacques stopped fighting, stopped moving.

This time, I would choose differently.

many times.

arms, wrecked me.

more time.

Relentless, I attacked him. I let the pain wash over me. Fuel me. Drive me.

I threw my right fist into his face. Then my left. Again and again as he struggled beneath me.

Then we were rolling. Legs kicked, and fists flew as we fought for dominance.

I knew I could keep going. I could punch him until his final fucking breath left his body, but as I glanced up, I caught sight of Angela, and my fists began to slow.

It wasn't worth it. Hurt wouldn't fix this. Anger wouldn't make it better. I'd lived this before, been down this path

Knuckles covered in blood—both Jacques's and my own—I stood and stepped over his unmoving body. I staggered

She lay on the floor, nearly naked, arms twisted behind her at a terrible angle. I quickly pulled at the ropes that bound

I couldn't remember the last time I'd cried. Couldn't remember the last time I'd let myself hurt this much. For years,

I'd locked the pain deep inside me. I couldn't hold it any more, couldn't bear it. The sight of Angela, bloodied in my

I pressed my cheek to hers, waiting—hoping—to feel her breath on my skin. It came, but it was too fucking faint.

The sirens grew louder. I held her against my chest, hoping her eyes would open. Hoping I could see her smile one

her to the beam Jacques had tied her to. Nails ripped, fingers bled, and then she was free. Sirens played in the distance as I gathered Angela into my lap.

With shaking hands, I brushed golden strands of hair from her face, letting sobs overtake me.

I was losing her. "I'm sorry," I whispered, rocking her back and forth. "I'm so sorry, Angela."

I blinked and then, with a shaking voice, asked, "Angela?"

My breath caught in my throat. I was scared to move. Scared to breathe.

I looked over my shoulder just in time to see Jacques standing behind us, the crowbar in his hands, swinging straight for my head.

Suddenly, Angela's face fell, her sweet smile replaced with terror.

Impossibly slow, Angela's eyes opened.

Angela frowned for a moment, and then the corners of her lips quirked up as her eyes focused on me. "You came," she said, voice weak.

"I choose again," I told her. "I choose you." A small line appeared between Angela's eyes. Impossible.

I kissed her forehead. "Of course, my angel."